READER BEWARE

This short course on moral theology is still in preparation. This file contains the first 5 chapters, which are presented in a not yet final version.

Angel Rodríguez Luño

16-II-2023

Angel Rodríguez Luño

Theology of Christian existence

2023

General index

1. HOW TO REFLECT ON CHRISTIAN EXISTENCE?

1. TWO GREAT OPTIONS

Before we properly begin our reflection on Christian existence, it is worth noting that there is not complete agreement about the modality in which this reflection should be exercised. Throughout history there have been various ways of understanding the purpose of moral reflection, both philosophical and theological. An example taken from real life may help to understand the problem.

It is something that happened to me quite a few years ago. She was a woman about 65 years old. She told me that she had married quite young, and that at that time she and her husband were very determined to improve their economic and social position. They worked a lot, gave up a lot of things, little rest, few vacations, few social relations, little family: they had only one child, since they had their minds on other things. After finishing his university studies, their son brilliantly passed a difficult competitive examination. They gave him a high-powered motorcycle, with which one day the son crashed, losing his life. To make a long story short, I will go over what this fatal incident meant for the parents. Now retired, husband and wife were in a somewhat better economic position than others who had worked in the same company, but they were alone, having given up many things, while their former work colleagues are at home enjoying the company of children and grandchildren. This woman was telling me that if she could go back to the time when she got married, she would look at her life very differently, as she now saw clearly that the economic position alone had not given her life all that it seemed to promise.

When it came up in the conversation that I was engaged in the study of ethics, this woman asked me: "Couldn't you write books that would help young people not to make the mistake that I made, and that I can no longer correct? I told her that for many centuries ethics had set itself precisely that task:

to teach how to live well, so that there would be no need to regret the way one's life had been approached when, with the passage of time, the error could no longer be remedied. That is what the Greeks and most philosophers and theologians did until the fourteenth century: they conceived their task as an investigation of the overall good of human life, which the Greeks called *eudaimonia*, happiness. What does it consist of? How is it achieved? And, consequently, how is it good to live? Not everyone gave the same answer to this question, but they all agreed that this was the question to be asked, and they discussed among themselves, comparing and evaluating the lifestyle that each one proposed as the best. But, I added, nowadays ethics is almost always conceived in a different way, as an exposition of the norms that regulate individual actions, and it is not easy that, by studying it in this way, someone learns towards which objective it is convenient to direct his or her life.

Indeed, there are two main approaches that have followed one another throughout the history of moral thought: one that sees moral life from the *point of view of the first person*, and a second that sees it from the *point of view of the third person.*

The first approach assumes the point of view of the person who works, a free subject who has his own life in his hands, and who asks himself: What do I want to make of my life? How can I make my life good and satisfying? To answer this question, he must first answer another: what is the overall good of human life and of my own life? What is a good life for man? The subject, aware of the freedom he has to live in one way or another, adopts a reflective attitude, that is, he separates himself through reflection from his immediate needs and desires, and tries to think of his own life as a unitary whole. He wants to know what lifestyle he will be satisfied with as the years go by, so that he will not find himself in the situation of having to say: "If I were young again, I would approach my life in a completely different way, but now I can no longer return to my youthful years.

In the 14th century, a second approach began that would become predominant in the modern and contemporary era, and which has been questioned only in the last 40 or 50 years. This second modality of ethical research assumes the point of view of the third person, because it thinks that ethics fundamentally has to resolve questions such as the following: "that man has done such and such a thing; is it lawful or unlawful to do so? and by virtue of what law is it lawful or unlawful? how do I know that such a law is valid and obligatory?" The mission of moral knowledge is not to say what good I will seek with my life, what good I have to desire, but to judge singular actions, to say what is licit and what is not licit, and to found the norms according to which we judge actions. It is a point of view external to the subject, which is not interested in the desires of the one who acts, but only in his actions, and these seen from the outside, as a judge might do.

It is an ethics of acts, an ethics of laws and obligations. What is good for me is replaced by what is obligatory, and what is obligatory presupposes a legislator who obliges. In the civil sphere the State obliges, but in the personal moral sphere who obliges? In a non-religious, secularized context, this ethic does not stand up. But even in a religious context it creates quite a few problems, because it replaces the good with the obligatory, and people think that morality does not lead us to our good, but to fulfill obligations, some of which we do not understand the meaning of.

Why did ethical reflection change its purpose? Explaining the motivations and consequences of the complex voluntarist and nominalist crisis of the fourteenth century is beyond the scope of this book.[1]. Suffice it to say that later the breakdown of religious unity in Europe made the question of the ultimate meaning of life a cause of division and, in some cases, even violence. On the other hand, in a secularized context, it became increasingly difficult to give a satisfactory answer to this question with the sole resources of reason separated from faith. And above all there is the fact that the concept of autonomy characteristic of modernity led one to think that giving meaning to one's own existence is an option of the freedom of each individual, that is to say, that it is an unquestionable personal choice, because there is no criterion for evaluating it. It is true that it is a personal choice, but it is also true that reflection can illuminate and guide these personal options. Everyone can make of his life what he wants, but many, as time goes by, feel that they have failed, as was the case with the woman I referred to earlier, and a careful reflection made in due time could have prevented failure.

My conviction is that it is appropriate to reflect on the moral life from the point of view of the first person, because it is the one that reflects what we really do. Human decisions presuppose the choice of a lifestyle, they presuppose a conception of the overall human good. This point will be discussed further on. Ethics is limited to making reflectively explicit the personal mental processes that give rise to these profound choices, in order to control them critically and correct them if necessary.

2. What does Christian revelation tell us about the meaning of life?

Since our theme is Christian existence, and we are going to reflect on it from the point of view of the first person, the first question concerns the conception of the human good that Christianity assumes on the basis of Revelation.

---

[1] The interested reader may consult G. ABBÀ, *Quale impostazione per la filosofia morale? Ricerche di filosofia morale 1*, LAS, Rome 1996, chap. 2.

What does Revelation tell us about the good of man? Revelation tells us that God freely willed that other beings could enjoy his infinite fullness and happiness. But God cannot create other gods. The perfect and full communication of the divine nature and happiness can only take place within the intimate life of God, by means of the intra-trinitarian processions: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit possess in different ways the same and identical divine being, and therefore they are distinct Persons "within" the one God. Nevertheless, God can, and we know that he freely willed to do so, communicate his nature partially, in part, and thus he willed that men should be sharers in the divine nature.[2]. This is magnificently expressed in the brief prayer that is said while adding a few drops of water to the wine in the chalice: "through the mystery of this water and this wine, grant that we may share in the divinity of him who has deigned to share in our humanity.

This partial communication of the divine nature to men (participation) is what we call sanctifying grace, which is much more than a help to do good. It is an action by which the Father prolongs his generative power, begetting new children associated with his Son, assimilated to him and loved in him. The Holy Spirit, the bond of love between the Father and the Son, moves the Christian to identify himself with the Son in order to live like him, entirely for the glory of the Father, so that we too can say with Christ: "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to carry out his work" (Mt. 28:19).[3]. Here we have in summary the core of Christian existence: a vital process of identification with Christ: with his attitudes before the Father and before men, with his virtues, with his teachings, with his sentiments.

In short, what Revelation tells us is that living in this world associated with Christ for the glory of the Father through the Holy Spirit, with a view to seeing and enjoying God in the next life is the ultimate object of the Christian's desire and will, his full good and happiness. This is the Christian answer to the question of the good of our life as a whole, beyond the immediate needs, which obviously also have their proper place in this "kind of life," as we will say later when we see how all this is concretized in the daily life of a Christian. For the moment it can be said, leaving aside for a moment the level of reflection, that from the point of view of the subjective spiritual experience, the Christian life is centered on the person of Christ, whom we meet, follow and love, while at the same time each one of us, just as we are, knows that we are loved by Him. For this reason, the Christian lives profoundly at peace with himself.

---

[2] We use the usual abbreviations to refer to the books of Sacred Scripture. In this case it is the *Second Letter of St. Peter*, chapter 1, verse 4.

[3] *Jn* 4:34.

3. LOVE, THE DRIVING FORCE OF CHRISTIAN LIFE

The Christian life, like all life, is movement and action. We could take as an example the movement of an automobile. The movement is given by the engine, and with the steering wheel, the brake and the accelerator we determine the direction and intensity of the movement. Knowing what the meaning of the Christian life is, and knowing all that it entails in practice, is like the steering wheel, the brake and the accelerator. But the instruments for directing the movement fulfill their function only if the engine works and gives propulsive force, and the engine of the Christian life is the desire and love for the good that God offers us as a gift: to live as his children in Christ through the Holy Spirit. If this good is not given and is not loved, there is neither life nor movement. Reflections, knowledge of the commandments and Christian instruction are of little use. If the engine of a car stops working, we can push it, but not for long, because the effort exhausts us. If there is an engine, on the other hand, we move without effort. He who loves does not tire, and always has the strength to go on.

The love of the end of the Christian life, which we described a moment ago, is what theology calls charity, which is to desire and love God as our ultimate and total good. This love is given to us as a gift of the Holy Spirit; a gift that we have to accept freely and with which we have to collaborate. Love is free and cannot cease to be free. However much God gives us, we must respond, beginning with the most basic form of love, which is to believe in Him, to trust in Him, to open our hearts to His Word and to accept His saving Love. In synthesis: the driving principle of Christian existence is not a theory, a doctrine, but the desire and love of a Good, which is a Person (or rather three: the Father, the Son - Christ - and the Holy Spirit), whose love we accept and to whose love we freely respond. It is true that one cannot love what one does not know, so knowledge of the faith is necessary, but not sufficient: it must be completed with the free response of love.

4. HUMAN MATURITY AND CHRISTIAN LIFE

We have said that the Christian life is a vital process of identification with Christ, who is perfect God and perfect man. His saving message is a marvelous novelty, which exceeds all that we men could have imagined, but which is built in continuity with all that is humanly good and noble, without ruptures. The Lord has not come to abolish, but to perfect and bring to fulfillment.[4]. Christian morality is the fullness of human morality, inasmuch as it completes and perfects all the good that is proper to man as such.

[4] Cf. *Mt* 5:17.

This means that Christianity holds in high esteem the human virtues, which strengthen love and embody it in desire. Virtues such as justice, loyalty, generosity and industriousness are part of the Christian life. For this reason, a good part of the works that St. Paul considers as opposed to the Kingdom of God are acts that contradict human virtues: "Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are: fornication, impurity, lust, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, quarreling, disputes, divisions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like. Concerning which I warn you, as I said before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God."[5]. From a logical point of view, the virtues proper to the Christian presuppose the virtues proper to man, although in practice there is a circular relationship between the two: charity leads the Christian to grow in the human virtues, to the point that St. Paul can consider some of the human qualities that exist as fruits of the action of the Holy Spirit in man: "But the fruits of the Spirit are charity, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, meekness, continence" (1 Cor. 5:16).[6]. The life of those who want to follow Christ, therefore, also includes human formation, that is, the acquisition and consolidation of forms and habits that perfect man as man.

The consequence of what we have just said is that reflection on Christian existence requires knowledge of the good of man and of his activities: work, social life, economy, etc., which is why moral theology is of no little complexity, as we will see below.

5. CHRISTIAN MORALITY, BETWEEN PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY

In order to systematically expound the faith, theology needs philosophy. John Paul II noted that this need is particularly felt in moral theology: "Moral theology needs philosophical input even more. [...]. The Gospel and the apostolic writings propose both general principles of Christian conduct and concrete teachings and concepts. In order to apply them to the particular circumstances of individual and social life, the Christian must be able to make full use of his conscience and the power of his reasoning. In other words, this means that moral theology must draw on a correct philosophical view of human nature and society as well as on the general principles of ethical decision-making ."[7].

Using a philosophical instrument is inevitable for a theologian. But not just any philosophical approach is suitable for an adequate reflection on Christian existence. John Paul II presents the need for a "correct philosophical vision both of

---

[5] *Gal* 5:19-21.
[6] Gal 5:22-23.
[7] JOHN PAUL II, *Encyclical Letter "Fides et ratio"*, September 14, 1998, n. 68.

human nature and society as the general principles of an ethical decision". We have begun this chapter by presenting two major options that moral reflection has before it, and I have said that the first seems to me to be more suitable, which does not mean that the second must necessarily be incorrect, among other things because throughout history it has appeared in different versions. In my view, however, it is not a good way to understand the Christian life.

In addition to the way moral knowledge is approached, there are other philosophical questions that are of great importance, and on which we will dwell. The understanding and correct interpretation of the Christian faith has its philosophical preambles, which today are perhaps somewhat different from what they once were, because we live in a different cultural context. Some theologians, and perhaps not a few Christians as well, experience the distance between the principles of Christian life and the dominant culture in an increasingly insufferable way. In order to shorten this distance, we Christians would have to become more "modern. I am not conscious of having appeared in this world as if I had arrived directly by parachute from the heights of the thirteenth century. I consider myself purely a man of my time. But this does not oblige me to accept uncritically intellectual presuppositions that were born in a philosophical context that was negatively or at least in conflict with the Christian faith. To cite just a few of the most relevant aspects, let us think of the autonomist conception of intelligence and freedom, the thesis of the complete historicity of our categories, or the alleged identity between knowledge and interpretation, which we will briefly discuss below.

For the autonomist conception of intelligence, God, out of respect for the dignity of our intelligence, completely disregards the ordering of our behavior and our social life, renounces knowing anything about it, and entrusts it entirely to our natural capacity to reason. Consequently, Revelation can contain nothing about our personal and social good, since the God who reveals himself does not concern himself with the things he has entrusted to our inventiveness as mature men of the West. The truth that man can attain would not be a participation in divine truth. To put it graphically, it is as if when Christopher Columbus arrived in America, we Europeans had acquired a truth that God did not possess, because he does not deal with human discoveries. The Christian faith presupposes, however, that the intellectual light by which we know is a spark of the divine mind, so that all human truth is a human truth.[8]Therefore, all human truth is a participation in divine truth.

Only with a large dose of anthropomorphism can one think that God can announce a knowledge that in Him is one and the same thing with love, freedom and being. There is no totality similar to a circle crossed by a line that divides the part of God and the part of man, in such a way that the more we attribute to God, the more man is inscribed, and the more we attribute to man, the more God is taken away. No

[8] Cf. SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, *Past Const. "Gaudium et spes"*, December 7, 1975, n. 15.

There is a closed circle, because God's freedom always remains open, so that to speak of totality as the sum of the divine and the human is an inconsistent idea. For this very reason God and man are not complementary (the two parts of a closed whole), but incommensurable, so that the wisdom of God does not hinder the work of our intelligence. Rationalism does not see it this way, because it absolutizes what is thinkable by man (which would be the whole, the totality of the real), but the intelligence of the Christian does not have to be weighed down by rationalist dross.

A similar problem arises in the sphere of freedom conceived as pure autonomy. If the convictions by which man determines himself were not exclusively -and exclusively- of our own making, there would be heteronomy, and our freedom would be injured. To this conception we can respond: no one denies that each one must decide according to the known truth, but what we have reached, if it is a truth, is also in God, and for this reason we can speak of divine law. And therefore it is admissible that this law can be contained in Revelation.

Another problem is that of the historicity of knowledge, and more specifically that of the historicity of the truths revealed by God. We know that revelation has been realized through a gradual and historical process (the Old Testament) until it reached its fullness in Christ, and that the correct interpretation of the biblical text requires a certain hermeneutical caution. But faith in Christ as the true Son of God is not compatible with the idea that the validity of his teachings is circumscribed to a historical period, as those who claim that if Christ had lived today he would have said substantially different things, for example, about marriage, while at the same time claiming for themselves the authority to say what things Christ would have said today and how he would have said them.

These problems are driven by the underlying desire to adapt the Christian message to what popular culture considers politically correct in the West. In this operation, recourse is often had to post-Hegelian hermeneutic philosophies, which have increasingly acquired an ontological and constitutive character: being is reduced to the sense of being that we attain in each historical moment. Therefore, knowledge is not an operation that is adapted to reality through an intentional means (the concept), since the "reality" of the present moment depends on an interpretation that follows the fusion of two horizons: that of the text or the teaching of Christ and that of the reader of each historical moment. As a great connoisseur of hermeneutic theory wrote, "it seems to me that the obvious weakness of the hermeneutic method proposed by Gadamer consists in this, in that it does indeed permit an understanding between the text and the reader - that is, a correspondence between the meaning of the text that is presented as apparently obvious and the subjective and personal conviction of the reader - but it in no way guarantees the accuracy of what is understood; for this would require that the understanding reached correspond in a fully adequate way to the reader's own personal conviction, but it does not in any way guarantee the accuracy of what is understood; for this would require that the understanding reached correspond in a fully adequate way to the reader's own personal conviction.

The objective meaning of the text as an objectification of the spirit".[9]. It is true that some precautions are necessary for the understanding of texts coming from the past, but this does not mean dissolving the truth in the game of possible interpretations, and even less so if we are dealing with divinely inspired texts.

There is no doubt that the Word of God must be read and applied to each historical moment. This is precisely the function of the Church's magisterium. "The office of authentically interpreting the written or transmitted word of God has been entrusted solely to the living Magisterium of the Church, whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. This Magisterium, evidently, does not stand above the word of God, but serves it, teaching only what has been entrusted to it, by divine command and with the assistance of the Holy Spirit, hears it with piety, guards it with accuracy and expounds it with fidelity, and from this one deposit of faith he draws all that he proposes as God's revealed truth to be believed."[10]. The philosophical instrument used for reflection on Christian existence must be consistent with the deposit of faith as proposed by the Church.

[9] E. BETTI, *Die Hermeneutik als allgemeine Methodik der Geisteswissenschaften*, Mohr, Tübingen 1962, p. 92 (my translation).
[10] VATICAN COUNCIL II, *Dogmatic Constitution "Dei Verbum"*, December 18, 1965, n. 10.

2. THE CHRISTIAN MEANING OF LIFE AND MORAL RULE

1. THE CHRISTIAN MEANING OF LIFE AS A FUNDAMENTAL POINT OF REFERENCE FOR PRACTICAL REASON.

When moral reflection is carried out from the point of view of the first person, it becomes clear that every deliberate decision presupposes and is coherent with a concept of the overall good or good life of the Christian who makes the decision. This good is the ultimate object of desire, and as such is present in particular decisions: those who, for example, sacrifice their family on the altar of their professional occupation, do so in virtue of a precise idea of what their happiness is. To understand how this conception of the good is present in our daily lives, it is useful to examine closely how the conception of the global good plays its role as the fundamental point of reference of moral intelligence, which philosophers call practical reason. The overall good of man is what the Greeks called happiness, and for the Christian it is the following of Christ to the fullness of divine filiation, as was mentioned in the previous chapter.

The expression global good of life is used to mean that the objects of our desires and our actions are articulated in a unitary horizon, in which all goods are contained and in which each good occupies the place that corresponds to it. At the same time it can be understood that the life of each one is a unity in a bio-graphical sense, in which the "vital project" that is considered best for each one is realized through many actions. This vital project will be more or less difficult to realize. It may be that in its realization one advances or regresses, it may even change more than once, abandon it and then take it up again, giving rise to various stages that are nevertheless part of the life of each person. At every moment of life, a project is present and operative that gives meaning to what is done and what is desired. In this sense, the expression "global good" means what is here and now the ultimate object of desire, because it is thought that in this good all our desires are fulfilled, insofar as it contains everything that is important to each person without the need to refer to a higher good. It is therefore a good willed for its own sake.

Since Aristotle, the thesis that it is not possible to proceed to infinity in a series of goods subordinated to one another is well known.[1]. To admit an infinite series of essentially subordinate goods would entail affirming that there is a desire without an object, which is not possible, because desire must always be desire for something, just as to act is to do something. This does not say what the global good of man and of the Christian is. It only shows that at each moment the moral subject has a conception, explicit or implicit, of his global good.

2. THE UNITY OF CHRISTIAN LIFE

An important objection could be raised to what has just been said. It could be objected, in fact, that experience seems to suggest that people, including Christians, do not seek a single good, but that life has different spheres-work, family, health, religion, etc.-each of which has its own ultimate good, independent of the ultimate good of the other spheres. In other words, experience would seem to show that, in carrying out our various tasks, we do not consider our life as a unitary whole, but rather act in view of the specific end of the activity that occupies us at any given moment. Is this objection true?

It seems to me that the answer is negative. If the ends of the various spheres of our life were truly ultimate goods, they would be goods that cannot be articulated or articulated in a single horizon, they would be incommensurable goods. Experience shows, however, that only by articulating and commensurating them can we make a reasonable decision when these goods come into conflict with each other.

Let's take as an example an engineer who works full time from Monday to Friday. He spends Saturday mornings doing sports to help him keep physically and mentally fit, while Saturday afternoons are spent shopping for his wife, children and household needs. He usually attends Mass on Sunday morning, using the afternoon of that day to go for a walk or, in bad weather, to go to the movies with his wife and children. Due to a reorganization of the electrical company where he works, the following proposal is made to him: work full time from Monday to Saturday, and two Sundays a month per shift; in exchange, his salary initially increases by 60%, with the possibility of successive increases in the future. Since the current employment contract cannot be changed without your consent, you are also offered the possibility of continuing as at present, but with the consequence of foregoing future salary increases and any type of career advancement. Those who continue with the current employment contract are left in a deadlock that will be extinguished when the last one retires.

---

[1] Cf. ARISTOTHELS, *Nicomachean Ethics*, I, 2: 1094 a 18-22.

The problem facing the engineer in our example is clear. If he accepts the new work plan, he will have to give up sports, which may have a negative impact on his health, and he will also have to give up or significantly reduce the time he can spend with his family, which will no longer grow, and he will not always be able to fulfill the religious practices to which he feels attached. In exchange, he and his family will have a much better economic position, and he will be able to move up the career ladder. How can a decision be made in this regard? If the decision has to be reasonable, that is to say, based on reasons and not left to see if heads or tails come up when the coin is tossed in the air, he has to consider these goods in the whole of his life, and try to understand what sport, being with his family, fulfilling his religious practices, and having a much higher salary give to his life, to his happiness. The decision will therefore be made according to the idea that this man has of the good of his life, in the light of his life project, which includes all the aforementioned goods (family, sport, economic position, religion, etc.) and assigns them a certain importance. The solution to this type of problem, which frequently arises in our lives, depends on the life project of each person.

The proposed example also makes us understand that the global good of man is not a good that excludes other goods, but rather an inclusive good, that is, a good that allows us to order all the other goods (family, work, economic position, etc.), assigning them a place and articulating them in a life project that seems to us to be the most desirable. The expression "good life" is often used to refer to it, which shows that it is not a question of an object, a state of mind or a feeling of satisfaction, but of a type or style of life, projected in function of what is considered the supreme good; for the Christian, life in Christ. With reference to the example presented above, he who has no objection to sacrifice his family, his health and his religious practices on the altar of a better economic position, has a different life project than he who does not consider this sacrifice convenient.

To order our different activities according to our concept of the good life is to determine and assign to each one the place and importance that is coherent with that concept. But this does not mean "instrumentalizing" some activities in function of others. The relationship between our activities and the global good is not that between the means and the ends, but that between the parts and the whole. The different dimensions of our life are parts of the good life, provided that each of them occupies its proper place in it, is desired with the appropriate intensity and is exercised or possessed in an adequate way.

Tacitly or reflexively, we all order our activities and our goods according to the kind of life we want to live. What ethical reflection does, whether purely rational or in the light of Christian revelation, is to bring this ordering activity to a reflective level, considering it with the greatest objectivity.

The aim is to review it critically, to analyze the illusions that structure it, to correct its possible errors. In this reflection, past experience is taken into account, the future is imagined as far as possible, and the possible consequences of one decision or another are evaluated. Ethical reflection does no more than formalize and evaluate what we all do. And so ethical reflection is born in a free conscience, and its conclusions are proposed to other equally free consciences. They are "proposed" and not "imposed," because ethics has no more force than that of the greater or lesser evidence of what it tells us about the good life.

In order to understand more concretely how the conception of the good life, which for the Christian is life in Christ, is the fundamental point of reference of moral intelligence, it should be noted that human intelligence is practical (practical reason) insofar as it interacts with the will and with desires. Speculative intelligence knows, but does not move. Intelligence can point in a direction, but it is not a mover. The starting point of practical intelligence is therefore the desire for a good, and not only the knowledge of a good, although such knowledge is presupposed by desire. And the fundamental desire is the desire to live in a certain way, the desire of what for each one is the good life.

Understanding how practical intelligence proceeds on the basis of this desire requires consideration of three elements: goods, virtues and norms.

3. The assets

I understand by goods all that we can desire, seek, realize or possess through our actions: health, work, knowledge, freedom, economic position, family, time (having time), instruments for work and for moving around (an automobile, for example), etc. The deprivation of these goods are the evils: ill health, unemployment, ignorance, coercion, economic hardship, etc.

As we have already said, from the conception of the good life that each of us has, we derive an idea about the place and importance that we should give to each of these goods, the effort with which we should seek them, and how we should possess and enjoy them. It could be said that from the good life we derive a scale of priorities that should inspire our behavior or, to put it another way, the attitude we have towards the various goods and evils. To give an example, let us think of a person who is convinced that human existence ends in this world. This person is diagnosed with a serious illness, which will lead to death in two or three months, which will be lived with severe pain and limitations. If this person does not feel bound by particular emotional ties, he may see no reason not to ask the doctors to put an end to his life now. A Christian will reason in a different way.

rent. He sees sickness as coming from the hand of God, even if it is difficult for him to accept it; he understands that union with the passion of Christ gives meaning to suffering, which certainly will not make suffering cease to be suffering; he may also think that pain can purify his soul and be a source of merit for himself and for others. Finally, he may consider that the passage from this life to the next is something unknown to us, with aspects and steps that we cannot imagine, which is why he prefers that it is God who chooses the moment to take this step. In short, the Christian's idea of life determines a different attitude towards the sufferings of a terminal illness.

The Christian lifestyle thus entails a way of valuing the goods that we can possess or of which we can be deprived. This valuation has a certain margin of variability, according to the different life situations possible for a Christian. A parent, a student and a priest, for example, are not the same. But there are attitudes that are not compatible with the Christian lifestyle. Think, to give just a few examples, of narcissism, the desire to get rich at any price, the lust for power, insensitivity to the needs of those close to us, empty or superficial interiority, arrogance and lack of respect for others, the false security of those who consider that they know everything and have nothing to learn, sexual promiscuity....[2].

4. THE VIRTUES

The moral virtues are, in the first place, the criteria regulating the desire for, possession and realization of the different human goods appropriate to the importance and role that these goods play in the life that is considered good. Thus, for example, temperance regulates what concerns food, drink, sexuality and, more generally, what concerns goods that arouse feelings of pleasure, a pleasant feeling that can lead to desiring those goods with more intensity than is desirable. Justice refers to actions related to other people, to exchanges, etc., in which the difference between "mine" and "yours" must always be respected, taking special care to respect what belongs to others (their rights), whether these are rights related to their economic goods, to their spiritual goods (freedom or fame, for example), to their bodily integrity, etc. Truthfulness regulates communicative actions (language, gestures, etc.), and the same can be said of the other virtues: they regulate goods and desires.

---

[2] The New Testament abounds in enumerations of attitudes and behaviors inconsistent with the Christian way of life. For example: "strife, envy, anger, rivalry, malice, backbiting, murmuring, conceit, sedition" (*2 Cor* 12:20); "Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor rapacious will inherit the kingdom of God" (*1 Cor* 6:9-10).

that the goods give rise to. The moral virtues are an "open system", because to the extent that progress makes new goods available to us (internet, cell phones, social networks), the person will have to understand what place and importance they have in the lifestyle he or she considers good. A Christian, and basically any reasonable person, realizes that he cannot spend the time he should be devoting to work or to his family playing games or watching videos on his phone. There is a virtue that regulates the use of these instruments.

It is the virtues that best define the Christian lifestyle. Certain behaviors are an expression of one or more virtues in a specific context and circumstances. But only the virtues express in a profound way the Christian way of being in society, in the family, at work, in the world. They are the exact portrait, although variable in their concrete manifestations, of the Christian man and woman.

The regulation of goods and of their desire is only one dimension of the moral virtues: the intellectual-normative dimension, by which the virtues are practical principles of moral intelligence. The virtues have two more dimensions: the affective and the dispositional or predispositional.

The affective dimension corresponds to them insofar as virtues are operative or moral habits. This dimension consists in "imprinting" the regulatory criteria on our tendencies or desires, so that the virtuous person spontaneously or almost spontaneously desires goods in the exact measure in which they are to be desired in accordance with the idea of the good life. The virtue of justice, for example, leads one to desire to respect the goods of others. It is not limited, therefore, to restraining or repressing desires to seize what belongs to others. It does much more. It commands desire, so that the goods of others are not desired. The moral virtues introduce a good order into the whole affectivity of the person, making it coherent with the kind of life one wishes to live.

It is also proper to moral habits to predispose the person to quickly understand the demands that virtue has here and now, even in new or unforeseen situations, while at the same time helping to find the actions with which such demands can be realized. This is the predispositional dimension of the virtues, which explains why the virtues have an important cognitive function at the level of the concrete: they help us to understand what it is convenient to do, and not only to do with ease what we already knew beforehand that it is convenient to do. In a negative sense, the absence of virtue always results in blindness and insensitivity, even in the face of obvious values.

5. THE STANDARDS

Moral norms are the linguistic expression, by means of short universal propositions (do not steal, do not lie, etc.) of the main requirements of the virtues. See

They have a very important pedagogical value, because they are an indispensable tool for the simple transmission of moral knowledge, especially to younger people, who are not yet in a position to assimilate complex reasoning.

With these brief propositions it is not possible to express all that the moral virtues entail in the most varied situations. In addition, there are some limits to the brief expressions, which sometimes make it difficult to understand where the essence of the issues lies. Take lying, for example. Even small children understand that one should not lie, and they feel that something breaks inside them when they lie. But it is not easy to know what is lying and what is not lying. If they are told that lying lies in the intention to deceive, they will immediately notice that soccer players try to deceive the goalkeeper of the opposing team when they take a penalty kick, and something similar is done in other games, without anyone thinking that the players are lying. If they are told that the lie lies in not telling the truth, or what is thought to be the truth, they will also notice behaviors in which this is done without anyone thinking about the lie (for example, when the doctor hides a very negative diagnosis from a young patient and initially communicates it only to her parents). Fuller explanations are necessary, but they will be longer and more complex, and certainly cannot be summarized in a short sentence or, if this is done, the matter will be even more obscure.

These facts, together with the universality with which the rules are expressed, can give the false impression that there are many exceptions to moral requirements, when in fact this is not the case. It is true that sometimes one should not return what has been entrusted in deposit (for example, because in some circumstances to return the deposited weapon would be to become an accomplice to a crime), but on the other hand it is not true that justice has exceptions or that injustice is admissible in some cases. The reality is that returning what was received in deposit is not always required by justice; indeed, justice sometimes asks not to return what was deposited.

There is also the even more important fact that, except in the case of some human laws (civil or ecclesiastical), the morality of a behavior does not depend on its relation to the moral norm, but rather the opposite. Any act of adultery is immoral not because there is a norm that says "thou shalt not commit adultery", but it is possible to formulate such a norm because each and every act of adultery contradicts the virtues of chastity and justice. Immorality is constituted by the relation of the act to the virtues, that is, to the practical principles of reason, and the norm simply expresses this intrinsic relation of an action to virtue. As was said before, this does not happen with some civil and ecclesiastical norms: in countries where it is commanded that cars drive on the right, it is this law that makes it wrong to drive on the left, since in these countries this way of driving would endanger one's own life and that of others. In these cases, exceptions would be possible and

dispensations in very particular circumstances, which is not possible with norms that express essential, and therefore invariable, requirements of the virtues.

On the other hand, the immediate function of the norms is to authorize or prohibit actions, but they do not succeed in introducing order into desires or in indicating the importance that the different goods have for the good life. It is true, however, that by learning to respect the norms, if one succeeds in understanding their meaning, one can gradually form virtue. This is why we said that norms have a very important pedagogical value for moral education, which cannot be renounced.

We can say, in summary, that the idea of the global good of man, the goods, the virtues and the norms, are the elements that allow us to understand the functioning of moral intelligence. It should be noted that among the moral virtues there is prudence, which will be discussed later, and which presides over the search for and the realization of suitable actions on the concrete level, with its particular circumstances and in some cases perhaps unrepeatable. In the sphere dominated by prudence there is also moral conscience, as we shall see.

Finally, it should be noted that the virtues of which the Western moral tradition has spoken (prudence, justice, fortitude, temperance and the other virtues that revolve around them) are congruent with an idea of the overall human good, already incompletely expressed by much of Greek thought, and which reaches its fullness of meaning with Christian thought. In the absence of or in contradiction with this thought, the content of the virtues may not be completely recognizable, but only partially, that is, only in some fundamental demands that are quite evident. In my opinion, it is not surprising that a certain culture today does not understand moral requirements that in another cultural context would be quite clear.

6. A QUESTION OF MORAL PEDAGOGY

From what we have said in this chapter, it would seem that once a Christian has the idea that living in Christ is the good of his life, it would be easy and immediate to behave in all the circumstances of his life in a way that is coherent with this ideal, as if the knowledge of one's own good in general terms already meant being able to practice all the Christian moral virtues.

In reality, it is not so simple. The sincere desire to follow Christ does not entail the knowledge of everything that in the course of life, in the most varied circumstances, this following will concretely entail, nor does it mean that it is always easy to be coherent. When someone sets out to follow Christ, perhaps he does not imagine that this will later entail renouncing an unjust professional procedure that, without any doubt, will be a very difficult task.

However, it would have been easy for him to obtain a great economic advantage, or else his consistency of life will mean accepting criticism from people who do not understand his ideals. For this reason, in practice it is necessary to follow a double path: on the one hand, adherence to the ideal of the Christian life must become ever deeper; on the other hand, it is necessary to exercise oneself to realize what here and now are the concrete demands of this ideal. These two paths form a virtuous circle. Stronger adherence to the ideal makes coherence on the concrete level easier, and co-inheritance in the concrete helps to better understand and strengthen adherence to the ideal.

For this reason, it is common in Christian circles to propose a method that helps both to reinforce adherence to the idea of life and to be consistent with this ideal in daily life. A method of this type can recommend certain daily practices and ways of approaching the various activities (work, family, rest, etc.) that experience has shown to be useful if they are followed with constancy, with adequate motivation and without forgetting their character as means, which for this reason should not be absolutized as if they were autonomous values.

3. FREEDOM

1. INTRODUCTION

Freedom is a question of capital importance for moral reflection. A reality appreciated by all, at least apparently, it is a necessary condition for Christian existence. We have said before that love, charity, is the motor of Christian life, and love is and cannot not be free. A love that is not free is not love, it will be something else, but not love. Therefore, without freedom there is no love, there is no charity, there is no Christianity, there is no God, because God is love.[1].

Freedom is understood as "the natural faculty that man has to act in one way or another, and not to act, so that he is responsible for his actions".[2]. If we want to go deeper into this definition, which as such is commonly accepted, we find problems that are not so easy to solve. For this reason, we will proceed first to examine some conceptions of freedom (section 2), and then to explain what, according to what seems to me to be the correct conception, is the Christian vision of freedom (section 3). We will then reflect on a particular problem, which is very important in practice, namely, whether finite freedom can be true freedom (section 4), and finally we will consider a consequence of freedom, namely pluralism (section 5).

2. CONCEPTIONS OF FREEDOM

Freedom as finitude and contingency

Freedom can be thought of as essentially a choice between alternative courses of action (I choose between going to Seville or going to Cáceres) made in a context of finitude and of

[1] *1 Jn* 4:8.

[2] REAL ACADEMIA ESPAÑOLA, *Diccionario de la Lengua Española*, 2014[23] , voice "Libertad".

imperfect knowledge (with the data I have, I cannot know with certainty whether I will be able to do my work better in Seville or in Cáceres). Freedom would essentially be choice, exercising a preference.

The approach would be more or less the following. We are finite beings, we live in a finite world full of contingency (a world of things that can be one way or another), and we move guided almost always by an imperfect knowledge of the reality that surrounds us and of ourselves. Since things can be one way or another, and since we do not know for sure what is best, and there are different ideas about it, it is logical that each one chooses what seems most appropriate. It seems to me that this is true (or almost always true) in the economic, social and political world, but it does not touch what is the essence of freedom, that is, that without which freedom ceases to be freedom and which freedom can never lack.

We can describe the same approach in another way. If we had perfect knowledge of the social and economic world, and we could predict with complete accuracy the consequences of our actions, and we knew that by taking certain measures we would all be rich, there would be no unemployment, the country would run like clockwork, and we would all be happy, there would be nothing to choose, we would do what we know is best and that would be enough. But since we do not have that perfect knowledge, let each one choose what he thinks is best.

It seems to me that this approach, although it undoubtedly has some truth in it, is not acceptable if we are to understand the essence and value of freedom. Freedom is not a consequence of imperfection, but is the highest natural perfection of the spirit, and the more perfection, the more freedom. Nor is it identified with continuity or with the existence of alternatives. Some of these points we can clarify now; the others, a little later.

It is undoubtedly true that the economic and political world is to a large extent the world of the contingent, in which it is also very difficult to have a perfect knowledge of the consequences of alternative courses of action. But it is also true that throughout history there have been, and there are now, political and ideological movements that think they possess the whole political and economic truth, and therefore feel authorized to impose their prescriptions with violence (for example, the Marxists), trampling on the freedom of all, which clearly shows that they do not understand the meaning and value that freedom has in itself. Even if we were to know with absolute certainty what is best, man chooses and must choose what is best freely, and not by violent coercion.

On the other hand, if freedom were what that approach claims (choice among alternatives in a context of finitude and imperfect knowledge), freedom would be a power that is self-destructive to the extent that it is exercised. The choices that are made

The alternatives available in the sentimental, professional, religious and sporting spheres are limited, and as the years go by, the possible alternatives become more and more limited. And with death, freedom would be completely extinguished. This approach does not seem to me to be adequate. The engineer who loves his profession is no less free because he can no longer be a lawyer. The choice and continued exercise of his profession presuppose a personal position that was and remains fully free. And we Christians think that in Heaven there are no alternative courses of action, but there is full freedom. There are those who love God, and he who does what he loves, does what he wants to do, and he who does what he wants to do is free.

Freedom and autonomy

There is a second concept of freedom, inspired by the Kantian conception and nowadays quite widespread, in which freedom is understood as autonomy, and therefore as incompatible with the concept of heteronomy.[3]. In some respects the concept of autonomy responds to the truth: we adhere freely to what we know or recognize as good. We cannot freely adhere to what we do not know or fail to recognize as good. But the Kantian concept of autonomy also contains other rather problematic aspects.

Kant starts from the assumption that "all practical principles that presuppose an object (matter) of the appetitive faculty as the determining motive of the will, are empirical in their totality and cannot give practical laws. I understand by matter of the appetitive faculty an object whose reality is willed."[4]. What Kant says, in simpler terms, is that if we act to attain something that seems good to us (a good, an end) this means that we seek something whose attainment promises pleasure (Kant does not admit the knowledge of an intelligible good). Two disadvantages follow from this: the first is that what pleases one does not please others, so that no universally valid moral precepts can be founded on this basis; second, that the will is determined by pleasure, which is a hedonistic way of acting, which does not suit human dignity. If, on the other hand, we seek a good because God or some other authority that has power over us commands it, then we are determined by fear of punishment or by desire for reward; in any case, we would not adhere to what is right because it is right, and freedom disappears. Therefore, human freedom and morality require autonomy and the rejection of heteronomy, the latter being understood as determination by a law other than the intrinsic law of pure rationality.

Nowadays, when Kant's analytical rigor is a little far from us, and his assumptions are unknown to many, the concept of autonomy comes only to

[3] In section 5 of the first chapter we mentioned it briefly.
[4] I KANT, *Critique of Practical Reason*, Losada, Buenos Aires 1961, pp. 25-26.

to deny that laws, divine or human, customs, the opinion of persons enjoying moral authority, etc., can be an adequate means of knowing and indirectly recognizing something as good, to which freedom can adhere without losing its dignity. Autonomy would be respected, according to this way of seeing things, only when each one decides according to the ideas he has managed to form.

I do not find acceptable the Kantian idea that all possible content (matter) of the appetitive faculty is sensible (empirical), an idea that was widely refuted by Max Scheler.[5]I think that sometimes laws, customs, persons endowed with moral authority, teachers, allow us to recognize indirectly goods whose direct understanding we do not reach at a certain moment, and if we think of the moral evolution of man, which goes a long way from the most tender childhood to adulthood, the indirect recognition of the good (sometimes recognition of the good on the basis of the faith or trust we have in someone), plays an essential role. On the other hand, the driving force of Christian existence is love, not fear, so I do not consider admissible either the idea that the appearance of God or Christ in our conscience can arouse only fear or selfish interest, and therefore it does not seem true to me that the presence of God in conscience prevents deliberate adherence to the good because it is good, that is, the exercise of freedom. Of course, this is not the Christian teaching, even if at times the hand has been too much laid on fear, which perhaps for a certain type of person may have been the only way of perceiving evil.

Freedom as deliberate adherence

There is at least another way of understanding freedom, which presupposes the distinction between the natural way of acting and the voluntary way of acting, which is always free, even if the operation were not contingent....[6].

The natural way of acting is an operation that is taken for granted, almost automatic we might say, because it takes place without a subject having to take a position. A hen lays an egg from which a being of the same species emerges, just as a woman generates a human being, without this presupposing any decision on her part. She may decide to lay the acts that will lead her to become pregnant or not to lay them, but once the process of generation has begun, a human being generates another human being. Similarly, the senses and the intelligence itself know the object that is presented to them, without seeing what there is in it.

---

[5] Cf. M. SCHELER, *Der Formalismus in der Ethik und die materiale Wertethik. Neuer Versuch der Grundlegung eines ethischen Personalismus*, Francke Verlag, Bern 19544 (English translation: *Ética*, Revista de Occidente, Buenos Aires 1948).[2]

[6] I draw very freely on the distinction established by John Duns Scotus. Cf. E. GILSON, *Juan Duns Scotus. Introducción a sus posiciones fundamentales*, EUNSA, Pamplona 2007, pp. 567 ff, and L. BUCH RODRÍGUEZ, "La afirmación de la libertad en el pensamiento de Duns Escoto", *Anales del Seminario de Historia de la Filosofía* 39/2 (2022) 317-331.

The fact that a person knows that there has been a crime, for example by reading the newspaper, does not mean that he is a murderer. Whoever knows that there has been a crime, for example through reading the newspaper, is not a murderer for that reason, nor does he commit any guilt. He commits guilt if he takes a position, approving the crime, but approving is no longer a natural operation, but a voluntary one.

Indeed, voluntary action always involves taking a personal position before the object, even in situations that we cannot change. He who is sent to prison by a judicial sentence has no alternative but to go to jail, but he will take a position before it: he can recognize his crime and accept the penalty, or he can rebel before the penalty and not accept it internally, because he knows he is innocent or because the penalty seems to him exaggerated in relation to the small offense committed. There are no alternative actions, but the freedom of adhesion remains (although not the freedom of coercion). Voluntary action is never the automatic result of having known something as good. It always involves taking an affirmative or negative position, adherence or non-adherence, affirmation or negation, even in the face of situations that cannot be changed. John Duns Scotus exemplifies it as follows: "If someone falls voluntarily and, on falling, continues his will, he necessarily falls with the necessity of natural gravity, and yet he freely wills the fall.[7].

In short, according to this conception, *it seems to me that the essence of freedom (that which cannot be lacking without freedom disappearing) is the deliberate affirmation of the known good. But it is the affirmation of the good because it is good, and not for any other reason: .*[8]This does not exclude that one has an interest in the good; indeed, it includes it. What is excluded are interests unrelated to the goodness of the good (economic advantages, of power, etc., which could also be derived at times from the affirmation of what is known as evil).

3. THE CHRISTIAN VISION OF FREEDOM

In ordinary language we use the term freedom in various senses, which are opposed to different forms of coercion. In its most immediate form, and most common in legal and political language, freedom means that we are not prevented from doing what we have decided to do; in this sense, we speak of freedom of assembly, freedom of expression, freedom of religion. Freedom is the absence of external coercion. This freedom is lacking, for example, in those who are imprisoned, or who are prisoners.

---

[7] J. DUNS ESCOTO, *Quodlibetal 16*, n.50, quoted by L. BUCH RODRÍGUEZ, "La afirmación de la libertad en el pensamiento de Duns Escoto", cit. pp. 324-325.

[8] In this sense S. Anselm defines freedom as "potestas servandi rectitudinem voluntatis propter ipsam rectitudinem" (*De libertate arbitrii*, III; ed. Schmitt, I, 212).

In a deeper sense, freedom is the absence of coercion in the psychological process by which we make a decision. It is the freedom to decide, and not simply to do what we have decided. I decide to eat fish and not meat, but I could have decided to eat meat and not fish, or not to eat at all. No inner element makes the decision to eat fish necessary. From this point of view we speak of freedom of choice or free will.

There is a third sense, particularly frequent in an ethical context, which refers to the absence of internal elements that, although they do not suppress freedom of choice, condition it in practice. We say, for example, that such a person is a "slave to his pride" or a "slave to alcohol". The virtuous person, on the other hand, enjoys the freedom of one who is not conditioned by evil passions, by vice or by sin. Thus arises the idea of freedom as moral freedom, which is freedom from the "dominion" that vice and sin can exercise over man. This freedom, more than a psychological characteristic of our being, is a moral conquest. The Christian considers that the redemption brought about by Christ has given us back this freedom: "for this freedom, Christ has set us free ".[9].

These three meanings we give to the idea of freedom are at bottom negative. They tell us more what freedom is not than what it is. They tell us that for there to be freedom there must be neither external coercion, nor internal coercion, nor conditioning from inner vices that in practice can sometimes be stronger than we are. If there is external or internal coercion, there is no freedom. If there is neither one nor the other, there is freedom. So then, what do we do? What is it to exercise freedom? We have to look for a positive notion of freedom, which shows us its meaning.

Christianity sees freedom as a divine good that is ours because we are created in the image and likeness of God: freedom "is an eminent sign of the divine image in man," says the Second Vatican Council.[10]. If human freedom is a sign of the image of God, it follows, in my opinion, that God is free, and not only insofar as he freely decides to create, a contingent decision that he might not have made, but that he is free in himself, which can only be understood along the lines of the third conception of freedom set out in the previous section. If freedom were necessarily linked to contingency and to the imperfection of knowledge, as the first conception above supposes, it would not be possible to understand that God is in himself free, since God has infinitely perfect knowledge, and in his being and in his intimate life there is no contingency.

As has already been said, God is love, and not only as Creator, because God has a will that deliberately adheres to the good that is Himself. In his own life

---

[9] *Gal* 5:1; cf. SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, *Pastoral Constitution "Gaudium et spes"*, n. 17.
[10] *Past Const. "Gaudium et spes*, n. 17.

In this sense, John Duns Scotus maintains In this sense, John Duns Scotus holds that the procession of the Holy Spirit, being a procession according to love, is free, although necessary, not contingent. The generation of the Son takes place according to knowledge and is a natural action, the procession of the Holy Spirit is according to the will, and involves an act of the divine will of complacency in the divine good that manifests itself as an effusion of love between the Father and the Son, and in that sense it is a voluntary and free operation (not in the sense that it is contingent). The fact that this act of complacency in the divine Good cannot not occur does not detract from the fact that there is an act of adherence to the known good, which is the substance of freedom, which is naturally predicated of God and of man in an analogical sense, that is, in a sense that is partly the same and partly different, but what is the same is the deliberate adherence to the known good....[11].

If we understand that the essence of freedom is the deliberate affirmation of the good because it is good, and for no other reason, we can understand that Christ is fully free when he lives entirely for the glory of the Father, considering the will of the Father as his nourishment. The freedom of the Christian who wants to follow Christ and imitate his availability to the Father's will, as we said in the first chapter, can also be well understood. He who does what he loves, works freely.

4. FINITE, BUT TRUE FREEDOM

Freedom is on everyone's lips, but not everyone understands and respects it. There are people who talk a lot about freedom, but then are unable to respect the views of their relatives and friends, on whom they would like to impose their own. In spite of what has been said in the previous section about the Christian vision of freedom, it is not always properly understood and appreciated among Christians as well. For this reason, it is worthwhile to dwell a little more on the question.

Some consider that if the general plans of providence and divine government are taken into account, in the end few things depend on man. As is often said, and not without some truth, God can write straight with crooked lines. But the popular saying is not so true if it leads one to think that human decisions are little more than indifferent to the progress of society and the world. On the other hand, it is true that from a theoretical point of view, it is not easy to understand as free and definitive a power of decision and action that has been received from Someone who is above us. The debates that have taken place throughout the history of Christian thought about the contest between the action of God and man, or about the power of God's action and the action of man, or about the power of God's action, or about the power of man's action, or about the power of God's action.

---

[11] On the procession of the Holy Spirit as a free procession according to J. Duns Scotus see the brief explanation of M.J. SCHEEBEN, *The Mysteries of Christianity: their essence, meaning and connection in the prospective of their supernatural character*, Herder, Barcelona 1960[3] , pp. 116-118.

of the relationship between freedom and grace, are an eloquent example. From different presuppositions, but in the same line, there is the aforementioned difficulty of Kant to understand that human freedom is compatible with the presence of God and his law in our moral behavior.

In reality, every Christian knows that the history of his life is the history of a constant collaboration between the grace of God and human freedom. But now we will not dwell on this important aspect, but rather on the understanding of one of the terms of this collaboration, the scope of human freedom, which requires further explanation. Indeed, it is not always easy to understand that within a relative and dependent context, such as the human context in relation to the Creator, freedom can exist as a point in a certain sense absolute. In other words, there is the difficulty of understanding that, God being the creator and preserver of all creation, it is nevertheless true that it is due to our freedom, and to it alone, that some things do not exist that could have existed if we had made other choices, just as it is due to our freedom that some things exist that might not have existed if our choices had been different.

The Christian theology of creation can help us understand why our freedom, although finite, is true freedom, with all the consequences that this entails. In creating man in his own image and likeness, God wanted to place before him not puppets, but true interlocutors, capable of receiving a participation in his own divine life so that they could enter into a beatifying communion with him. But for this to happen, these interlocutors had to be truly free, that is, capable of deliberately adhering to the good because it is good, which for finite and fallible beings entailed the possibility of denying the good and affirming evil. To blindly obey the laws that the Creator has given to the cosmos there are already the stars and the planets, which manifest his wisdom and greatness. But only with freedom does the image and likeness of the divine Being appear, because man can freely know and love the divine Good, just as God does. This is worth so much, to the point that God thought it worthwhile to run the risk represented by our misuse of freedom. The suppression of freedom, or the attenuation of its scope, would have avoided so much evil and so much suffering, but it would have made impossible so great a marvel as the participation of other intelligent beings in divine love and happiness.

That human freedom is true freedom has important consequences, which we sometimes find difficult to understand. The wisdom literature of the Old Testament expresses this beautifully: "It was he who made man in the beginning and left him to his own free will. If thou wilt, thou shalt keep the commandments, that thou mayest remain faithful to his good pleasure. He hath set before thee fire and water, whither thou wilt, thou mayest take thy

hand. Before men is life and death, whichever each prefers, it will be given to him."[12]. Man is free to prefer life or death. Whatever he prefers, he shall have. That is why God respects human freedom, and allows the consequences of our actions to unfold in time. Certainly God's providence takes care of men, but it takes care of us by giving us the capacity to know good and evil, so that we can take care of ourselves. The Creator does not neutralize our actions: if we adopt a behavior capable of damaging or even destroying the earth's environment, we will damage or destroy it; if we put ourselves in a position to harm ourselves or lose our lives, we will harm ourselves and lose our lives. What is at stake here is not God's mercy, which is very great, but our dignity as free beings: we are not dolls, and life is not a game.

It is true, however, that God's mercy has given us a second chance: it is the Redemption, which makes possible a second and better beginning. At the same time, the very painful way in which Christ carried it out shows us that the Redemption allows us to understand the seriousness of what we have done. God takes our freedom very seriously, it is not a game of children, who spoil and stain everything, but then comes the father who fixes what is broken and puts in order what is disordered. God's providence and mercy cannot be conceived in a way that removes human responsibility and makes us eternal infants. A good father loves his child, but he wants him to grow up and become an adult, he does not want to infantilize him for the rest of his life. Fortunately God helps a lot, but we have to do our part: "we know that all things work together for the good of those who love God", says St. Paul, mentioning in one sentence the two sides of the coin.[13]Paul says, mentioning in one sentence the two parts: God's and ours. St. Augustine says the same thing in another way: "God, who created you without you, will not save you without you".[14]. True freedom entails true responsibility, and this is the point that we so often find difficult to understand, giving rise to a childish vision of divine paternity. It is true that in practice it will often be better to insist on God's mercy, but to do so should not be a denial of the value and the wisdom of human freedom, but rather a help to avoid the discouragement that paralyzes and to make it possible for man to grow and attain the great good to which God has destined him.

4. FREEDOM AND PLURALISM

Freedom brings with it pluralism. Pluralism of opinions and options. Freedom and pluralism for some centuries, and also today, have had their mortal enemy in rationalism.

---

[12] *Si* 15:14-17.
[13] *Rm* 8:28.
[14] SAINT AUGUSTINE, *Sermo CLXIX*, 13 (PL 38, 923).

For rationalism, human intelligence is the only principle of knowledge, and it is considered capable of reaching an exact and exhaustive understanding of reality, as if it could contemplate it from outside reality itself with complete objectivity. To achieve this exact understanding, the intelligence must proceed with a rigorous method, the first step of which consists in demolishing all received knowledge, that is to say, all knowledge in whose genesis the intelligence itself has not actively participated. It is necessary to start from zero, without admitting any presuppositions. As is well known, Descartes thinks that *cogito ergo sum*, that is, the indubitable self-consciousness of thought, is the first truth that enjoys absolute certainty.

The thinkers who moved along these lines soon realized that for their project of perfect science it was not enough to begin with the first truth. Knowledge had to begin from the absolute beginning, that is, from the first being, from the absolute first on the ontological plane; from God, therefore, and from there to accompany step by step the production of the whole of reality, establishing the necessary logical connections between God and things. This was the attempt first of Spinoza and then of Hegel.

For Christian thought this project is not acceptable. Even admitting as a hypothesis, without conceding it, that human reason could situate itself by its own capacity in the divine point of view, the problem of the freedom of God's creative action is posed, which is equivalent to saying that between the Origin and what proceeds from it *ad extra* (the created) it is not possible to establish a logical and necessary connection. If there were a necessary connection, the world would be part of God or, if one prefers, the Absolute would be the sum of God and the created universe. For Christianity, on the other hand, between God and the world there is only God's freedom and love.

It is a commonplace of conventional philosophical historiography to affirm that the rationalist project failed, and now we are fully immersed in post-modernity, in the world of post-truth. This seems to me to be true in the sense that today we no longer propose great metaphysical narratives in the Hegelian style (although Marxism is a great ontological narrative that is not dead). However, this historiographical interpretation does not seem to me to be true in the sense that the idea of a perfect knowledge of reality is still alive under another form, which could very well be called social engineering and cultural .[15]. It is about people and movements that seem to be completely sure that they have a perfect knowledge of reality.

---

[15] In this sense, Lersch's description of the rationalist attitude still seems valid to me: "In rationalism, reason, with its acute power of conceptualization and its analytical dissection of phenomena and events, is constituted as a universally valid organ for orienting us in the world and in life, Rationalism considers that in the rational, methodical and calculated understanding of the world and of life lies the authentic task of man and the purpose of his existence on the planet. Approached from the dynamics of the human position, rationalism appears to be based on the will and the determined confidence to dominate the world by means of reason and to be able to organize life with its help. According to the different spheres of life in which we

They feel entitled to impose without the slightest scruple political lines, social systems, economic recipes and cultural fashions (the "politically correct"), without listening to anyone or admitting dissenting opinions, destroying in an instant the achievements acquired with great effort throughout history. They leave no more freedom than to applaud what they propose and do, and whoever does not submit is socially stigmatized. Suffice it to think, for example, of the culture of cancellation and other similar dynamics of the Woke, the pressures of the LGTB culture or the "trans law" being debated in Spain as I write these pages.

For Christianity the only knowledge that reflects, in a limited way, God's point of view is that which comes from God Himself by revelation, and which we accept through faith. It comprises the dogmas of faith and the truths held by the Church as Catholic doctrine (what is in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*). In what remains outside of this, there exists for Christians a legitimate pluralism, because God has revealed what was necessary and many other things He has left to free discussion among believers. Unfortunately, a kind of "religious and pastoral rationalism" sometimes creeps in among Christians, sometimes also among ecclesiastical authorities, that is to say, an attitude born of the conviction that one possesses the absolutely true line and strategy to achieve infallibly the ends of the Church, to avoid all the errors and to overcome all the obstacles that evangelization encounters in our day. Those who do not submit are unfortunately mistreated. And sometimes those who mistreat the most are those who are least willing to move within the scope of what is revealed, thus arriving at the great paradox of Catholicism today: pluralism where unity is necessary, and forced uniformity in what is in itself free, opinionable or debatable, which from time to time translates into a strange practical behavior and - in the second part - not very compatible with charity: "friend of enemies and enemy of friends". That is to say: an enemy is someone who, while sharing the same convictions in what is necessary and fundamental, holds different opinions on debatable issues, and a friend is someone who holds different or opposing convictions on what is necessary, but agrees on debatable opinions and issues. It would be better to adhere to the maxim attributed to St. Augustine: "unity in necessary things, liberty in doubtful things, and in all things charity.

In my opinion, it would be worthwhile to reflect seriously on the human and Christian value of freedom, to accept others as they are. It is a great reason why God has made us free.

This happens, we can speak of a political, economic and cultural rationalism" (PH. LERSCH., *El hombre en la actualidad*, Gredos, Madrid 1979[2] , p. 18).

4. AFFECTIVITY

1. PRESENTATION OF THE SUBJECT

In this chapter we will deal with feelings, which play a very important role in our lives. In order to understand what they are, how they arise, what meaning they have, how to behave when faced with them, etc., it is necessary to know, at least in broad terms, how the personality is structured and, in particular, to know what the tendencies are, the forces of our psyche from which feelings originate. In the final part of the chapter we will deal with the subject of the education of affectivity, a difficult but essential task for the moral growth of the person.

2. THE GOOD OF THE WHOLE PERSON

We have spoken in previous chapters of the good life, and particularly of the Christian concept of the good life. We now add that this life is good for the person *considered as a whole*, which is why he or she will seek it with the totality of his or her being. This clarification is necessary because the person has parts, although the word "part" is used in this context rather metaphorically.

Philipp Lersch proposes a description of the personality distinguishing three levels. Using technical terminology, he calls them: vital background, endothymic background and personal superstructure.[1]. Let us take them in turn. Regarding the first level, he points out: "The vital background is the set of organic states and processes that take place in our body".[2]. It is a set of processes, which includes the functioning of the brain, endocrine glands, metabolic processes, etc. Most of the time these processes remain in the realm of the pre-psychic, but from that obscure zone for the consciousness they support, and sometimes condition, the higher strata of the personality.

The second level is already psychic. Lersch calls it endothymic background, from the Greek *èndon* = within, and *thymós* = sensation, feeling. This level is formed by a combination of drive experiences, which we can call instincts and tendencies, which are

[1] Cf. PH. LERSCH. *La estructura de la personalidad*, Scientia, Barcelona 1966[4] . In this chapter we follow broadly, and quite freely, the theory of personality proposed by this author.
[2] *Ibid*., p. 84.

constitutive of our being. Not only have we not given them to ourselves, but they are also set in motion in a deep sphere not controlled by the conscious self. From this background come processes and states of mind, which we call emotions, feelings or moods. Philosophers call them "passions," because they are processes that the I undergoes, before which the I is initially passive: that is, they are not things that we do, but things that happen to us. Thus, for example, we become reddened unintentionally before a situation, a movement of anger comes over us, or a sensation of sadness or repugnance invades us, etc.

Finally, the personal superstructure is formed by the processes and actions that the self actively and deliberately sets in motion, after having assessed their desirability. They are the acts of the intelligence and the will, or at least actively governed by the will. Some examples could be to start studying, to decide to go for a walk, to make the effort to remember a situation from the past, etc.

Using a spatial metaphor, we can speak of strata of our personality, because some are "below" or "above" others, depending on how you look at the whole. But they are not simply superimposed, but interconnected, forming an almost circular structure. What is below supports what is above, but at the same time benefits from the good functioning of what is above. A heavy digestion, for example, can hinder the intellectual process in our work, but it also happens that an unpleasantness causes a bad digestion. Here enters the great chapter of the psycho-somatic phenomena.

We will deal briefly with this whole subject because many of our free decisions and actions are motivated by an impulse coming from the endothymic fund, which is seconded, elaborated (transformed) or rejected by the conscious I. In other words, our free decisions are not a pure choice, unconnected to the bodily sphere and to the feeling sphere. In other words, our free decisions are not a pure choice, unconnected with the bodily sphere and that of feeling. On the contrary, there is a continuous movement from the involuntary to the voluntary, from non-freedom to freedom, so that it would not be possible to understand ourselves and others if we did not take these processes into account. If a person regrets because he or she has frequent angry outbursts, it is of little use for us to say "it is not good for you to get angry", or "it is not good to get angry". She already knows that. What we can do in her favor is to help her understand why she gets angry so often, making her aware of processes coming from the endothymic background that she should learn to modify. And modifying them is not an easy or immediate task, because with our actions we can contain or repress anger, so that it does not give rise to inappropriate words or actions, but we cannot prevent it from arising in our consciousness. The modification of the drives of the endothymic fund is only achieved through moral habits; specifically, this correction of drives is what we have called the affective dimension of the moral virtues.[3].

[3] See above chapter 2, section 4.

Another reason why this question should be addressed is that human intelligence does not become practical (the practical reason of which philosophers speak) except insofar as it interacts with the will and desires, illuminating them and guiding them toward their goals. Hence, knowledge of the basic structure of human desire is of capital importance for understanding the moral life.

A third convenient reason for dealing with this topic is that the good life, including that of the Christian, can only be realized if we bring into play the totality of our person. It cannot be realized by feeling alone, nor by will alone, nor by intelligence alone. It requires the integration of all our psychic resources in the same direction, and such integration requires knowledge and education of the different forces in our being.

3. TRENDS AND FEELINGS

The tendencies are the drives or forces of the endothymic fund; for example, the instinct of self-preservation, the sexual impulse, the desire to work and to know, etc. They are a psychological reflection of the vital law of communication between the person and the world. In the tendencies our needs manifest themselves as a deficit accompanied by restlessness (hunger, thirst, desire for esteem, etc.), aiming at a satisfaction, perceived in advance in a still obscure and confused way. Each tendency points towards a goal (food, knowledge, possession of an object, etc.). This goal represents a value, a good in the broad sense of the term, because it responds to a need. Tendencies always have the character of something given. They do not come from an initiative of the individual, just as the need to feed oneself or to live in society does not come from a free choice. Tendencies are also a principle of selection of significant objects, so that our world is shaped in some way by our interests. What does not interest us, what does not respond to what we are looking for, goes unnoticed. This explains, for example, why people who have a prodigious memory for some subjects can retain almost nothing for others.

The distinction and classification of human tendencies is a difficult problem, and it will probably not be possible to work out a classification that will satisfy everyone. It is not a simple task to express the richness of life in a scheme. On the other hand, I am not an expert in this matter, nor do I have any interest in making one proposal or another. I do think it is necessary to know the role played by the tendencies, because it helps to understand what affectivity is and what problems the moral virtues have to solve.

Lersch distinguishes, and the distinction seems reasonable to me, three groups of tendencies. In the first group are the *tendencies of vitality*, which are those that lie in the deepest strata of life: the impulse to activity, the tendency to enjoyment, the tendency

sexual and experiential drive. The second group is that of the *tendencies of the individual self*: the instinct of self-preservation, the tendency to possess what is necessary for the expansion of individual life, the desire for power, the need for esteem from others, the desire for vindictiveness, the desire for self-esteem. These are impulses that aim in one way or another at the consolidation of the individual self. The third group are the *transitive tendencies*, which represent the different directions of the self-transcendence of the person. They are the social tendency, the tendency to be-with-others and those of being-for-others (aspiration to live in communities with closer ties, such as the family), the tendency to work and creativity, the desire to know, the amatory tendency, the normative tendencies and the transcendent tendencies.

It may seem like an abstract classification, but it is actually very concrete. Who has not experienced, for example, the desire to live intense experiences? Who does not realize that they wish to be esteemed? Or that they are not satisfied that a wrong they have suffered should go unjustly unpunished? Who does not wish to be with others, and even to care for others, to give their life for that person or that ideal? All these inner movements are irreducible to a single one; they express the multiplicity of goods whose absence or whose presence has an inner resonance that we call sentiment. The classification we have proposed affirms that our deep psychic life has several independent themes, and in this respect it differs from those who think that all inner experiences have their root in a single impulse, be it the libido (Freud), or the desire for power, or the desire to be independent, etc.

Considered in general, without paying attention to the particular forms of expression in this or that person, these tendencies are natural, and aim at objectives necessary for the balanced development of the personality. Their satisfaction or non-satisfaction has a subjective repercussion, which are what we commonly call *feelings*, which are always positive or negative (happiness - sadness, sympathy - antipathy, feeling of security - insecurity, etc.), never neutral. Feelings are stimulating experiences. In Lersch's words, "by highlighting these stimulating experiences, the endowment experiences a new clarification and enlargement precisely in the sphere that we usually call *feelings*. This term has a broader meaning than that of the experience of "feeling stimulated". The set of experiences to which we apply the denomination of feelings is divided into two great groups according to their mobility or stability. On the one hand we have the *movements* of feeling or emotions [...] and on the other the sentimental *states* or permanent feelings. The one is a form of the stimulated feeling, the other of the state of mood".[4]. Feelings are transitory, while moods are permanent. Thus, for example, since we have a natural tendency to receive a reasonable esteem from the people around us, if someone treats us badly, a *feeling* of "bad feeling" automatically arises.

[4] PH. LERSCH, The *Structure of Personality*, cit. pp. 184-185.

anger, which lasts for a certain time, and then disappears. *Moods* are permanent states of mind, and so we see, for example, people who are always optimistic and jovial, others melancholic and rather pessimistic; some enterprising, others passive .[5]. This whole complex world of affectivity is linked in one way or another with the plane of tendencies. Knowing this level, it is possible to understand which tendency or tendencies are involved in each feeling, and to evaluate the truth or falsity of the estimative perception ("I have been treated badly", "I have been treated well") that triggers the emotional reaction.

4. Personal and socio-cultural configuration of affectivity

Psychology can show quite precisely what are the goals toward which the tendencies are directed and, in this sense, can indicate what are the reasonable ways of satisfying them. It must be borne in mind, however, that in real people the tendencies are not found in *a pure state*, but with modifications due to multiple factors: the education received, the socio-cultural context, the moral temperament of each person, and above all the moral habits (virtues and vices) that each person has acquired.

In many cases, individual modifications of tendencies have a positive or negative character, because they contribute to or hinder the realization or attainment of the good of the person and the good of the Christian. It is negative, for example, to habituate oneself to eating and drinking much more (or much less) than is necessary for good health: anorexia, bulimia, obesity, alcoholism, gluttony, and other excessive expressions of the natural tendency to eat can represent a serious problem. It is positive, on the other hand, to have a realistic view of one's own value and capabilities, so that one's self-esteem is neither higher nor lower than is reasonable in each case. Realistic self-esteem avoids pride, continuous conflict in the family and professional work environment, insecurity, the anxious search for recognition and approval from others, and many other problems that hinder relationships and social collaboration.

In somewhat more general terms, it should be noted that the more or less pronounced deformation of the tendencies that tend to protect and consolidate the individual self (tendencies of the individual self), limit and condition the expression of the transitional tendencies, that is, those that express the self-transcendence of the person. This gives rise to selfish or even egolatrous life attitudes, for which work is mainly a means of personal self-affirmation; others are simply a means to achieve one's own purposes.

---

[5] The origin of permanent moods is not easy to determine, but it is certainly different from that of feelings. In good part they depend on the psycho-biological constitution, on the temperament. But they can also originate from the consolidation or fixation of repeated feelings that cannot be assimilated or neutralized.

knowledge, an instrument of power. People incapable of loving, although they may generously reward those who submit to them.

Sometimes, it is the dominant culture in the social milieu that can lead to a certain configuration of the tendential sphere. At least in the Western world, there is nowadays talk of a widespread "psychological individualism" and "narcissism".[6] and narcissism[7]This has many manifestations: excessive self-importance, high levels of conflict, excessive concentration on the self, an attitude of control over one's spouse, the creation of virtual profiles that have little to do with reality, difficulty in establishing healthy real (not virtual) relationships. Perhaps the most problematic characteristic of individualistic psychology is the distinction between the "inner or felt self" and the "outer self," whereby personal identity is determined exclusively by what each individual feels, by the feeling coming from the endothymic background, completely disregarding objective parameters. In some respects this distinction is not commonly made: for example, in any country, the date and place of birth is recorded as the exact date and place where one was born. In other aspects, for example gender, in some countries the gender that each person "inwardly feels" is recorded, which leads to the introduction into social relations of certain elements that lead to very problematic situations. [8].

Naturally, there are other cultural and social factors that help to configure affectivity correctly. Here I have dwelt on aspects that in my opinion are negative, in order to make understandable the importance for the individual and for society of the education of affectivity.

5. EDUCATION OF AFFECTIVITY

What has just been said allows us to understand the importance of feelings in the development of our relationships with others and with the world. Feelings show that others and the world are not indifferent to us. On the contrary, they cause inner reactions in us that allow us to evaluate their impact on our life and our tasks. The joy felt on meeting a loved one, the fear of facing a new situation, the shame caused by a mistake, all respond to the way we feel and experience the encounter with the world and with others. We have already said that the feelings we experience in the world and with others are a response to the way we feel.

---

[6] I use the expression "psychological individualism" to distinguish it from another meaning of the term "individualism" in the Spanish language, that is, from the adoption of an anti-colectivist principle in the social sciences.

[7] Cf. J. M. TWENGE - W. KEITH CAMPBELL, *La epidemia del narcisismo. Living in the age of pretension*, Ediciones Cristiandad, Madrid 2018.

[8] A careful study of the issue can be found in J. ERRASTI - M. PÉREZ ALVAREZ, *Nadie nace en un cuerpo equivocado. Éxito y miseria de la identidad de género*, Ediciones Deusto, Barcelona 2022.

They are never neutral: they have a positive or negative tonality. Thanks to them, I know not only what this is or who this person is, but also whether I consider them to be good or not. In other words, feelings show us the world in the value perspective. In this way, feelings play an important role in the perception of good and evil in the moral sense, by giving us a first value, which arises from ourselves, although we may not know how to justify it in a different way: this is the value of "first impressions".

Now, although feelings are a first guide, it is a morally ambiguous guide. Its moral ambiguity responds fundamentally to two reasons:
1) that the resonance that feelings have in the person depends on the degree of education of affectivity: a given situation provokes a different sentimental resonance in the proud and in those who have a realistic estimate of themselves; 2) that the feeling refers to one or more tendencies, without being able to express in its value content the function that these tendencies have in the integral good of the person: one tendency leads me to enjoy a good meal, but another reminds me that it is preferable to eat lightly if I want to dedicate the afternoon to that work that I am so enthusiastic about. Feelings are not integrated by themselves; they require the proper activity of the reason and the will, which is capable of understanding the importance of the goods sought by the tendencies and the role they play in the overall good of the person, and can therefore determine the intensity and the way in which they are to be desired.

The right configuration of affectivity, which is the task of moral habits, is necessary not only to do what is good, but also, and before that, to know what is good in a concrete situation; this has its anthropological foundation in the anticipatory character of the questioning contained in the tendencies and in the evaluation contained in the sentiments. The virtues benefit from the capacity for anticipation and the penetration of a well-ordered affectivity. Mature people do not need to think long before acting or before giving sound advice to others. An affectivity ordered by virtue leads him to quickly find the best solution, and to desire to put it into practice. In the words of Aristotle, the virtuous man "indeed judges all things well, and in all things the truth is shown to him. For every character there are peculiar beauties and pleasures, and surely in what the good man is most distinguished is in seeing the truth in all things, being, as it were, the canon and measure of them."[9].

Now let us go a step further, to approach the subject of affective education. The very idea of education of affectivity presupposes that having certain feelings is a positive or negative fact. Although from a strictly moral point of view, moral good and evil appear only when the free will intervenes, there are at least two reasons why feelings, in themselves considered, can reasonably be regarded as positive or negative.

[9] ARISTOTHELS, *Nicomachean Ethics*, III, 4: 1113 a 28-32.

The first is that feelings presuppose a perception or a judgment, suggest a position and incline toward a line of conduct. If a feeling presupposes a true perception, suggests an adequate position and inclines towards a good line of conduct, having that feeling is positive, it helps to realize the good life. If the perception is false (as it is usually, for example, the perception that originates the anger of the proud person, who always feels he is treated badly), the taking of a position is not adequate (the antipathy caused by pride) and the line of conduct towards which it inclines is not good (the insult that comes to the mouth of the proud person), having that feeling is negative, it is an obstacle to living well.

The second reason is that although it is possible to contain negative feelings with the will, it is not easy (perhaps not even possible) to live having to constantly contain or re- primate negative feelings, which make living well mean always walking up a steep uphill slope. Even with all the limits of human frailty, about the cause of which theology offers further explanations, what is desirable, and normal, is not to find a constant and strong opposition of the tendential sphere to the kind of life one wishes to live. The contrary would be unsustainable, and even the best moral energies would end up being exhausted.

The education of affectivity, which is often a slow task, requires the ability to interpret affective phenomena. Interpretation is sometimes easy, just as it is easy to know the reason why a person who has been unable to sleep because of a toothache sees everything black the next morning. Other times feelings of insatisfaction, sadness or unhappiness arise, the cause of which cannot be found, even after reflection, because apparently everything is going well (family, work, health, etc.). In these cases it is necessary to deepen one's knowledge of oneself and to review the ideals that give meaning to life, while a detailed knowledge of the subject of the pulsations of the endothymic background is useful.[10]. When it is possible to know what these feelings are telling us, it is possible to proceed to their evaluation and, if necessary, to modify the drives that cause them.

In this chapter we have only wanted to point out the importance of this subject, and to provide the basic elements that allow us to frame the more specialized studies .[11].

---

[10] A brief description can be found in E. COLOM - A. RODRÍGUEZ LUÑO, *Elegidos en Cristo para ser santos. I: Fundamental Morals*, Rome 2011[2] , pp. 128-130, available at https://www.eticaepolitica.net/corsodimorale/Fundamental05.pdf. A much more extensive description can be found in the book by PH. LERSCH, *The Structure of the Personality*, cit. pp. 99-183.

[11] Cfr. for example E. ROJAS, *El laberinto de la afectividad*, Espasa Calpe, Madrid 1987; A. MALO PÉ, *Antropología de la afectividad*, EUNSA, Pamplona 2004; A. LÓPEZ QUINTÁS, *El descubrimiento del amor auténtico. Claves para orientar la afectividad*, BAC, Madrid 2012.

5. THE THEORY OF MORAL ACTION

1. INTRODUCTION

Those who are determined to lead a certain lifestyle will often ask themselves whether this or that action is coherent with the life they want to live. The answer to this question presupposes the ability to understand what it is that identifies an action and makes it possible to distinguish it from another, which may produce very similar results. The death of a person can be the effect of the decision to kill or also of the decision to defend oneself. Both actions end up producing the same effect, but they are two completely different actions: the first is incompatible with the Christian way of life; the second is not, as long as the defensive reaction was necessary and proportionate.

2. VOLUNTARY ACTION AND ITS CONSTITUTIVE INTENTIONALITY

In order to understand what a moral action is, there is a first element, apparently basic, but of fundamental importance, and which needs clarification, because our way of speaking tends to hide it. This element of fundamental importance is that actions are moral insofar as they are voluntary actions and to the exact extent that they are voluntary. The common use of language tends not to take this into account. If we ask: "What is John doing?" we will be told: "John is buying a book." If we ask again, "What is the object of that action?" we will be answered: "The book". If we want to describe exactly what John has done, we should say: "John *wants to* buy a book". And to the question about the object of the voluntary action we have to answer by indicating the object of *wanting*, and not the object of the purchase. The answer to the question about the object of John's action must be: "to buy a book", because that is what John wants to do. If we did not take this into account it would result that the object of the action "to buy a book" would be the same as that of the action "to steal a book", i.e., the book, and having the same object "to buy" and "to steal" would be two morally identical actions, which is evidently false. If we concentrate our attention on the action of the will, then we clearly see that "wanting to buy a book" and "wanting to steal a book" are two completely different actions, regardless of the reason for wanting to buy or steal a book. What is done with the hands, with gestures, with words or with silence has to do with morality only in the case of the will.

as these are realities willed by a person. For this reason, we should concentrate our attention on the will, that is, on voluntary action.

Voluntary action is action that proceeds from an inner principle (volition) and is accompanied by explicit and formal knowledge of its end, that is, by explicit and formal knowledge of what one wants to do. The origin of an inner principle distinguishes voluntary actions from actions imposed by an external principle, for example violence. Explicit and formal knowledge of the end means that the person who acts voluntarily knows what he is doing, deliberates on the advisability of acting and plans the way to carry out the action. There can be no voluntary action if one does not know what one is doing. If in my absence and without my knowing it, a person leaves among the papers on my office table a 50-euro bill, in order to settle a debt, and when I return to my office I tear up those papers, which are no longer of any use to me, without realizing that among the papers there was a bank bill, the moral action I perform is "tearing up some old papers and throwing them in the wastebasket". My hands also tore up a bank bill, without anyone forcing me to do so, but the voluntary action of tearing up a bank bill did not exist. What is done unknowingly is not done voluntarily.

From what has been said, it is clear that the essential element of moral action is volition, which is the conscious, deliberate, and valued directing of the will towards an objective, which we generically call an end: wanting to buy a book, wanting to go for a walk, deciding to start studying. "Buying a book", "going for a walk", or "going to study" is the end to which the person voluntarily directs himself, not only knowing what he is doing, but also having assessed the convenience of doing it and having planned the way to do it. Voluntariness is the intentionality proper and constitutive of the voluntary action, which makes an action such an action and not another ("buying", "stealing", etc.), and that is why we consider it as *first level intentionality*, to distinguish it from other ulterior intentionalities (*second level intentionality* or *intention*) that are not constitutive of the being of the action. An action that by its first level intentionality is a theft, continues to be a theft whatever the second level intentionality may be: that one steals out of hatred, or because one lacks money, or in order to be able to give a gift to another person, etc. It does not change the substance of the action, which is in all three cases theft.

The object or end of a voluntary action (of wanting) cannot be expressed only with a noun. It must also be expressed with a verb: to buy, to steal, to give, to lend, to rent, etc., even when it is a question of actions that are not manifested externally: to love, to hate, to envy, etc. This necessity also follows from the fact, already mentioned when speaking of freedom, that the exercise of the will involves taking a personal position. While other faculties, in the presence of their object, can only do one thing (hear a sound, see what is in front of them, etc.), the will can adopt various positions before its object, be it a person or a thing: it can love or hate, envy, etc., and so on.

The will can approve, reprove or remain indifferent; it can desire or reject, etc. That is why it is not possible to describe the object of a voluntary action without mentioning the position that the will adopts before such an object, a position that we can only express by means of a verb.

Voluntariness is like the soul of the action, which generally also has a body, visible external gestures. Not every soul can live in any body, nor can a body be vivified by any soul. A punch that breaks two teeth or a stabbing cannot be a manifestation of affection. But there are many cases in which the vision of the "body" of the action is not enough to know what the action is. If a person riding a motorcycle raises his right hand, he may indicate that he is turning to the right, or he may protest against a car that has almost passed him. If to the question: "What is this person doing?", the answer should not be: "He raises his right arm", because this answer does not clarify what the voluntary action is. This is why the encyclical *Ve- ritatis splendor* clarified that "in order to grasp the object of an act, which specifies it in a material way, one must place oneself in the perspective of the person who is acting. [...] one cannot take as the object of a given moral act a process or an event of a physical order alone, which is evaluated insofar as it gives rise to a given state of affairs in the external world. The object is the proximate end of a deliberate choice that determines the act of will of the person who acts."[1].

3. OBJECT OF THE WILL AND COLLATERAL EFFECTS

The object of the action of which we have spoken so far is what is properly called the direct object, which is what the person wants: "to buy a book", "to give a watch as a present", etc. It can be wanted because it is something that is of interest because of its importance (to obtain an engineering degree) or because it is pleasant (to have a good ice cream). One can also want directly something that in itself is of no interest, but is the means to obtain something that is of interest; for example, to take an unpleasant medicine in order to stop a strong pain.

It often happens that the action that is carried out, in addition to what interests us, has collateral effects, consequences that do not interest us, but that we know and accept, although we cannot properly say that we desire or want them. An example of this is chemotherapy treatment against a tumor. We are interested in its action to eliminate or reduce tumor cells. The side effects, which do not interest us, but which we know and accept, can be: loss of hair on the head, extreme weakness, immunosuppression, etc.

---

[1] St. John Paul II, *Encyclical Letter "Veritatis splendor"*, August 6, 1993, n. 78.

The presence of significant negative side effects often raises difficult moral issues. Can a pregnant woman take a drug that may have the side effect of harming or even causing the death of the child she is carrying? I will answer this type of question a little later. Suffice it to say for now that while it is never morally admissible to directly desire an action that fundamentally injures a virtue, in certain circumstances it is, on the other hand, admissible to indirectly tolerate negative effects.

4. THE TWO LEVELS OF INTENTIONALITY OF THE WILL

We have spoken at some length about voluntariness or first level intentionality, and we have alluded to the existence of a second level intentionality. Now we have to go deeper into this question.

There are at least two levels of intentionality because the will has different acts, although related to each other, each of which has its own intentionality, because all acts of the will are intentional, that is, they consist in directing oneself or opening oneself towards an object. More concretely, the double level of intentionality responds to the superposition of the intentionality of the act of *choice* and that of the act of *intention*.

The voluntary act known as choice consists in the decision to do something that can be done immediately (go out in the street, write a letter, etc.). The intention is the effective desire, not a simple whim, of an end that cannot be reached immediately, but through other actions; for example, a young man who has finished high school and decides to become an engineer. To realize this intention, many intermediate actions are necessary: choosing an engineering school, enrolling, buying books, studying for several years, etc. The intention will therefore inspire many acts of choice, and in each of them will be decided actions ordered to the object of the choice, that is, to become an engineer.

From an analytical point of view, there is always a distinction between choice and intention, although in reality we are dealing with a unitary chain of voluntary acts, which can be described from the side of choice (one decides to enroll in this faculty of engineering to become an engineer) or from the side of intention (because one wants to become an engineer, one decides to enroll in this faculty). For this reason it is normal that intention and choice are coherent from the point of view of efficacy and from the ethical point of view, although it can sometimes happen that such coherence does not exist, which raises a moral problem: what happens when one does something bad with a good intention or, also, when one does something good with a bad intention?

5. MORAL ASSESSMENT OF THE ACTION

From all that has been said in this book it is clear that the morality of actions must be evaluated according to their coherence with the lifestyle determined by the moral virtues. The question that arises is: when this coherence is to be assessed, what elements of the action are to be looked at? In general terms, the moral quality of the action depends on its object or, more precisely, on the relation of its object to the virtues. The choice of a good is a good choice, just as the intention of a good is a good intention. In a complex behavior, in which a decision is made in a specific context inspired by an intention, all the elements must be considered: decision, intention and context. But what is decisive?

Catholic doctrine summarizes its position as follows: "The act is morally good when it presupposes, at the same time, the goodness of the object, the end, and the circumstances. The chosen object alone can vitiate an action, even if the intention is good. It is not licit to do evil in order to achieve good. A bad end can corrupt the action, even if its object is in itself good; likewise, a good end does not make good an action that is in itself bad, because the end does not justify the means. Circumstances can attenuate or increase the responsibility of the one who acts, but they cannot modify the moral quality of the acts themselves, because they never make good an action that is bad in itself ."[2].

When a concrete action must be evaluated, the determining element is the moral quality of the object of that action, that is, the morality that the object of the action has because of its relation to the virtues. Returning to an example proposed earlier, if "John steals a book," the determining factor is that the object of the choice, "stealing a book," contradicts a fundamental requirement of the virtue of justice, which prevents appropriating the property of others if the owner is reasonably contrary. No element coming from the interiority of the agent (intention, motives) can change this contradiction or justify it. Even if hypothetically the intention were just, it is not admissible to want to promote justice by means of unjust acts.

In a sense this is not denied by anyone. No reasonable person says that a good intention can justify a bad action. What some do say is that, in certain circumstances, the action inspired and required by a good intention is not bad in itself, and therefore need not "become good". How can such a way of reasoning be justified?

Those who reason in this way usually describe human action in a purely physical way, depriving it of what we have previously called first-level intentionality. The result is a body without a soul, a movement without voluntariness, which it is not possible to evaluate morally.

---

[2] *Catechism of the Catholic Church. Compendium*, 28-VI-2005, n. 368. This doctrine is proposed in greater breadth and depth in the encyclical *Veritatis splendor*, nn. 71-83.

mind. If we are to proceed to a moral evaluation, we need an intentionality. And if the first level intentionality has been suppressed, we must resort to the second level intentionality or to the evaluation of the consequences that follow from the action. If, for example, we understand that to kill is to do something that results in the death of a person, it is clear that it is not possible to attribute a positive or negative moral value to the killing thus described. Indeed, in this description of killing there is room for actions of very different moral value: intentional homicide, self-defense, the surgeon who, without negligence on his part, has a patient die in the operating room, the surgeon who performs an abortion, the soldier who dies in a defensive war, the policeman who is involved in a shoot-out with some terrorists, etc. With this approach it would not be possible to formulate a rule such as the fifth commandment ("thou shalt not kill"). It would only be possible to evaluate actions on a case-by-case basis, that is, examining in each case the action performed, how it was performed, for what reason it was performed, under what circumstances, etc. It would never be possible to formulate negative moral norms of universal validity (do not kill, do not steal, do not commit adultery, etc.).

In my opinion the error of this approach lies at the basic level of the theory of action: a physical movement plus a second level intentionality or plus some consequences is not a voluntary action, because without first level intentionality, which is constitutive, there is no voluntary action. There remains only a body without a soul. Something dead that one tries to resuscitate by adding elements coming from the interiority of the subject or from the development of the consequences. Left out of this approach is what is instead determinant of moral evaluation: the relationship of first-level intentionality with the practical principles of right reason, which are the virtues.

If we return to the previous example, the physical description of "killing" actually encompasses a multiplicity of completely different actions. Self-defense, for example, is not an "intentional homicide justified in the context of an aggression. Intentional homicide can never be justified; self-defense, on the other hand, is a different action, which is in itself just. Intentional homicide is an action determined by the practical judgment that it is a good to take the life of a person. The first level intentionality constitutive of this action "intentional homicide" is the tendency of the will, conscious and deliberate, to the "good" represented by taking the life of a specific person. In self-defense, the first level intentionality is exclusively to defend one's own life. The practical judgment that sees it as a good to take the life of a specific person does not exist either when a surgeon's patient dies while he is operating in the operating room, or when a policeman tries to counteract a terrorist action, or when a soldier participates in a battle to defend his country. If we consider intentional homicide as we have described it, the universal validity of the rule "thou shalt not kill" can be affirmed without any problem.

A case that could give rise to confusion, and is therefore particularly illustrative, may be that of abortion. If a woman decides to have an abortion because having one more child would create

If there is a serious economic or psychological difficulty in managing one's own life and that of one's own family, could it not be considered that the first level intentionality, which is constitutive of the action, is to ensure the serene management of one's own personal or family life, so that the action could be assimilated to self-defense? The answer is negative. "To ensure the serene management of one's own life" is the second level intentionality, which is added to the first level intentionality, which is to take the life of the child, although this is desired directly, not because it is of interest in itself, but as a means to something else. In self-defense one does not want to take the aggressor's life, neither as an end nor as a means, because the only thing one wants is to save one's own life by doing the minimum necessary so that the aggressor moves away. If he moves away or is otherwise restrained, the aggressor will not lose his life. If, for example, the life of the aggressor who moves away were to be taken, it would no longer be neither defense nor legitimate.

Finally, we address the problem of moral responsibility for the collateral effects and consequences of the action. We can synthetically enunciate the following criteria of valuation[3]:

1) We are responsible for the foreseeable negative consequences of our actions, even if they were not foreseen. They could have been avoided with correct conduct. If a person is thrown to the ground to steal, and as a result of the fall the person dies, the thief is responsible for his death, although he only wanted to steal and not to kill.

2) The good consequences of bad actions cannot be ascribed as merit. The action of a thief who, wanting to steal in a place, prevents a terrorist from leaving an explosive device in that place that could cause many victims, cannot be considered morally good.

3) We are not responsible for the *unforeseeable* negative consequences of our good deeds. Those consequences are simply unintended, provided that they could not really be foreseen. The judge who sentences an offender to prison is not responsible for his death if the offender, once in prison, commits suicide.

4) We are not responsible for the *intended* negative consequences of omitting an immoral action. Whoever refuses a bribe is not responsible for the illicit acts that the corruptor will perform to get what he wants, even if they are more immoral.

5) One is not guilty of the *intended* negative consequences of good actions, as long as the conditions indicated for the action of the double effect, which are the following, are met:

a) *The act performed must be good in itself, or at least indifferent:* the morality of the action itself takes precedence over the morality of the effects; therefore, the act must be *good in itself, or at least indifferent:* the morality of the action itself takes precedence over the morality of the effects; therefore, the act must be good in itself.

---

[3] We follow the essential aspects of the broader analysis made by M. RHONHEIMER, *La perspectiva de la moral*, Rialp, Madrid 2000, pp. 385-389.

Therefore, before studying the goodness or malice of the effects, the goodness or malice of the act itself must be considered, otherwise everything from which positive effects derive *hic et nunc* could be licit.

b) *The good effect must not be achieved through the bad:* we must not do "evil in order that good may come."[4]. If good comes from evil, it is not "indirectly voluntary", but directly willed as a means.

c) *The person must directly seek the good effect* (i.e., have a straightforward intention), and reluctantly accept or grudgingly tolerate the bad effect. In this sense he will make every effort to avoid, or at least limit, the latter.

d) *There must be proportionality between the good that is intended and the evil that is tolerated:* it is not morally justified to risk one's own life in order to earn a few dollars, or to endanger a pregnancy by taking a medicine in order to avoid some inconvenience. Proportionality requires that the good effect be all the greater the more: (i) the more serious the evil tolerated; (ii) the greater the proximity between the act performed and the production of the evil: it is different to invest one's savings in a publishing house that has many immoral publications or to invest them in a bank that controls part of the publishing house; (iii) the greater the certainty of the bad effect: like selling alcohol to an alcoholic;
(iv) the greater the obligation to prevent the evil: for example, when a civil or ecclesiastical authority is involved.

6. MORAL IMPUTABILITY

What has just been said refers to the moral evaluation of the action by its matter, that is, that which corresponds to it by the existing relation between what is wanted and the moral virtues. Now we must add the consideration of the subjective imputability of the action, which will only be full if the action is perfectly voluntary. It would be possible that an action that is gravely immoral because of its subject matter does not correspond to a grave moral fault of the subject who has performed it, because, for example, due to a strong somnolence, the person did not realize what he was doing.

It is a matter of applying what we have already seen about the voluntary act. This requires the formal knowledge of the end, which in this context is usually called *warning*, and the full adherence of the will, the intentionality of the first level, which from this point of view is usually called *consent.* If the act is imperfectly voluntary from the psychological point of view, because full warning and/or perfect consent is lacking, the act is not fully imputable, and would not even be imputable at all if there is total absence of warning and/or consent. The warning is not full when there is an obstacle that prevents the realization of what is being done (drowsiness),

---

[4] *Rm* 3, 8.

The consent is not perfect when the warning is not full or when, even if there is a full warning, the will does not adhere definitively to the action, but hesitates. An example might be the person who, faced with a thought of hatred towards someone who has treated him badly, partly dwells on the thought, but partly rejects it, and there is a kind of struggle without the will ever resting and being satisfied in the thought of hatred. Perfect consent is presumed when a person performs an external action with full warning.