

# *A Critique of the Moral Reasoning Literature from the Perspective of Catholic Moral Theology*

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Moral reasoning literature is concerned with arriving at a decision, while the focus of Catholic moral theology is on judgment and discernment, beginning with revealed truth, reasoning through practical possibilities, and culminating in the application of moral norms to the particular situation. This paper reviews the history of moral reasoning theory in developmental psychology and contrasts it with the position of the Holy Father and Catholic moral teachings. In the end, the psychological literature fails to preclude decisions to do evil, such as commitment to abortion, as possible outcomes of "mature" reasoning, while the Catholic position views development as focused on prudence and human freedom, which preclude doing evil.

## *Overview*

In his recent critique of philosophy, the Holy Father expresses disappointment that the discipline seems content with stopping before it reaches moral truth. He says, "Reason, in its one-sided concern to investigate human subjectivity, seems to have forgotten that men and women are always called to direct their steps toward a truth which transcends them."<sup>1</sup> Developmental psychology has been particularly vulnerable to this criticism, especially in the area of moral reasoning. These theories have as their origin the work of Jean Piaget, who, at base, provided an ethology, or a system of observation and classification of human reasoning in several stages culminating not in truth necessarily, but in maturity. The chief disciple of Piaget in the area of moral reasoning was Laurence Kohlberg.

Kohlberg provides a taxonomy of six stages of moral reasoning organized into three broad levels. Level I encompasses premoral reasoning, characterized by concerns for punishment and obedience, and by hedonism. Level II encompasses the two conventional modalities of moral reasoning: maintaining approval of parents and then peers, and then viewing authority and subservience to authority as the guardian of morality. Level III, the highest level of moral reasoning in this paradigm, encompasses self-developed principles: concerns

for the social contract and then for the individually derived abstractions that are held as principles.<sup>2</sup>

In recent years, moral reasoning theory has taken on a distinct female variation. Feminist theorists believe that females develop moral reasoning that is oriented toward maintaining idiosyncratic views of relationships.<sup>3</sup> This innovation merely emphasizes the difference with Catholic orientation toward moral reasoning. Primarily, Catholic moral theology is concerned with orientation toward the transcendent truth rather than toward idiosyncratic and subjective principles of behavior. Conscience formation for the Catholic, then, involves developing the capacity to discern the truth rather than the capacity to think in abstractions.

### *The Metric of Right and Wrong*

The Holy Father is concerned about theories of ethics that focus on the conformity of behavior to some intended outcomes. These theories evaluate behaviors according to their accomplishment of non-moral or pre-moral gains, and by their capacity to maximize perceived good and minimize perceived evil,<sup>4</sup> rather than by their conformity to moral norms and principles. This attention to the relative weights of gain and loss is characteristic of proportionalism, and assumes that a metric or a common scale exists on which the good and bad of a decision could be commonly weighted and judged against each other. That is, the good outcome of this behavior can be said to outweigh the bad outcome as though they each could be assigned values on a common scale.

The moral reasoning literature takes this assumption a step further. The metric for evaluating behavior is defined as a quasi-statistical agreement with the majority, peers, or authoritarian dictates for those in the conventional stages of moral reasoning, or agreement with accepted principles for those in the principled reasoning stages. The latter, naturally, begs the question of what constitutes a "principle" other than some quasi-statistical reliability for the individual. An analogy with measurement theory illustrates the point: A test can be reliable by the uniformity of what it measures without being valid at all. However, it cannot be valid without being reliable. Simply put, moral reasoning theory is concerned only with reliability, and therefore admits of invalidity.

The Holy Father has been critical of approaches to morality that accept conventional morality as appropriate for any age level, and of theories of principled morality in which the principles are self-determined and ignorant of the truth. Conventional morality, the acceptance of moral behavior by popular endorsement, can be thought of as an implicit theory of statistical agreement. People do what they think peers or authority figures demand of them. Societies

exhibit this most clearly when government leaders, or people of influence and power, lead via opinion poll.

Moral decisions based on statistical norms are always misguided. Scripture teaches that when we are on the wrong path, headed in the wrong direction, we usually find someone to go along with us.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, our Catholic belief is that grace and the life of Jesus, Himself as experienced through the sacraments, are ordered to the Eucharist, which means proper moral development and salvation.<sup>6</sup>

John Paul II identifies two approaches of ethicists that are related to the developmental psychology description of principled reasoning. Those who view freedom as achieved by a continual conquest of our material or biological nature, although they remain sensitive to human freedom, subscribe to the first approach. This view casts moral development as a victory over nature rather than as a natural outcome.

The second approach reduces freedom to a self-defining phenomenon. Man becomes the product of his own freedom.<sup>7</sup> The Holy Father expresses concern that the statistical tendency to judge the quality of behavior in terms of the popular norms is being supported by some ethicists:

Some ethicists professionally engaged in the study of human realities and behavior can be tempted to take as the results of statistical study human behavior patterns and the opinions about morality encountered in the majority of people.<sup>8</sup>

Theory about classifying moral reasoning as either conventional or principled is absent any consideration of intentionality or of the obligation to discern moral truth. Void of considerations of this obligation, moral reasoning theory fails to describe human reasoning at all, because it casts moral reasoning solely as decisions rather than as judgments, and values as principled reasoning decisions that lead to morally opposite conclusions, e.g., keep the baby or abort the baby.

In its manifestation in recent feminist theory, we can be completely egocentric in our reasoning and still achieve the highest levels of the taxonomy.<sup>9</sup> Catholic moral theology does not accept self-generated principles as valid norms for moral judgment; rather it recognizes that the aim of moral reasoning is discernment of the moral truth as revealed to us in Jesus Christ.<sup>10</sup>

### *Thy Will Be Done*

The first obligation of conscience formation is to seek the moral truth, which is written on our hearts.<sup>11</sup> The second obligation is to use our reasoning to discern the practical possibilities for applying the principles. The third obligation is to make our last best judgment and to act on the principles. We should always act with hesitation and caution to discern in every step whether

or not our actions remain bound to the moral laws. These obligations have developmental implications:

1. In grace we are able to expand the moral options available to us, and in practice our actions become increasingly characterized by right moral judgment;

2. Moral reasoning becomes increasingly consonant with the will of God, prudence, so that right moral judgment becomes second nature.

Unlike the moral reasoning literature, which is non-directional, Catholic moral theology is directional, recognizing God as the source of morality and communion in Him as its end. Toward this end prudence develops not as a maturational phenomenon, but as the natural outcome of a developing relationship of love with God.

When theories of moral reasoning narrow their focus to the development of cognitive processes without a moral goal, the emphasis shifts from the counseling of children against immoral activity toward assuring that the children do not bear the consequences of that activity. That is, if human good is achieved by observance of moral norms, then denial of the norms denies that ignoring the norms fails to achieve good. Sinful behavior becomes reinforced because the immediate gratification is perceived to be without negative consequence. Finally, it is the absence of negative consequence that drives immoral behavior. This type of reasoning characterizes consequentialism, a low level of moral reasoning.

### *Law of Gradualness*

Implicit in the developmental theory is acceptance of gradualism of the law.<sup>12</sup> This position holds that living up to Christian ideals is not within the capacity of many, if not all, people. People are said to have no moral liability, that is, commit no mortal sin, if they only approach these ideals by degree as part of the developmental process. The goal, then, especially for the weak or immature, is to pursue but not necessarily achieve Christian moral ideals. Clearly, this approach to morality is in conflict with the Catholic imperative to know and act on the truth. Our Holy Father says,

And so what is known as "the law of gradualness" or step by step advance cannot be identified with "gradualness of the law," as if there were different degrees or forms of precept in God's law for different individuals and situation."<sup>13</sup>

Our Holy Father goes on to explain that the moral order, as something set forth by God, cannot be harmful, but is something ordered to the good of mankind. It follows that the goal of moral reasoning, if it is ordered in moral judgment and the behaviors that derive from that judgment, is not an oppression, but a good, the path of freedom.

In its sacramental life, the Church recognizes that children cannot be held fully responsible for their moral activities. Rather, catechesis provided by adults must be ordered to formation of a mature conscience in the children. Divine revelation speaks to this in several instances:

When I was a child I used to talk like a child, think like a child, reason like a child. When I became a man I put childish ways aside.<sup>14</sup> (1 Cor: 13: 11).

Of course, what intervened in Saint Paul's life was his conversion, the grace of our Lord. This is the maturity he describes. The childhood he describes is spiritual immaturity, and his maturity is a free positive response to the movement of grace.

The Holy Father says,

But man, who has been called to live God's wise and loving design in a responsible manner, is an historical being who day by day builds himself up through his many free decisions; and so he knows, loves, and accomplishes moral good by stages of growth.<sup>15</sup>

This building up is a normal developmental process involving increased cognitive capacities. However, it is clearly ordered by God's design toward an end, moral rectitude or prudence, supported by grace, and guided by universal moral norms. Clearly the emphasis is not on the process of reasoning, nor does it undervalue the applicability of the moral norms. Rather, man builds himself up in relationship with God.

### *Grace*

Developmental theory undervalues the importance of our relationship with God, and therefore ignores the importance of grace in our lives. Yet grace orders our reasoning toward redemption. The sacraments empower us to discern the truth. As the source of uncreated grace, the sacraments bring us the indwelling of the Spirit of Truth, who leads us to complete truth.<sup>16</sup> He helps us to seek the truth, discern it and know it when we encounter it, and to hold onto it.<sup>17</sup>

When we exercise wisdom in the context of grace, we aid the development of our capacity to correct our moral errors and our errors in moral reasoning. Making moral choices becomes easier, and we acquire virtue<sup>18</sup> and, ultimately, prudence.

The development of right moral reasoning, then, proceeds spiritually through the action of grace in our lives and our response to God's invitation. The Lord says,

Whoever loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love him and we shall come to him and make a home in him<sup>19</sup> (Jn. 14: 23-24).

Our submissive response to the word of God is the source of uncreated grace. The created grace expressed as a product of this indwelling of the Trinity is realized in Prudence. Prudence is not idiosyncratic, but is rather the mark of a maturing relationship that obliges and orients us toward moral action not by means of abstract cognitive processes, but by means of intimacy with the Lord.

The Holy Father describes this relationship in four revealed components:

1. submission to the will of God;
2. ordering of morally right behavior toward salvation;
3. intimate discipleship in Christ perfecting our lives; and
4. the gift of the Holy Spirit, as uncreated grace, both the source and means of moral living.<sup>20</sup>

This Catholic view holds that development is, in fact, ordered toward moral autonomy in freedom.<sup>21</sup> Piagetian theory would agree that moral behavior is a good in its own right, but to these theorists it serves an instrumental function of social or political gain, rather than salvation. For Catholic theology, moral autonomy is only realized in relation to God.

Catholic moral theology is less concerned with the perception of relationship or characterization of relationship than it is with the action of grace, which of course, affects that perception as an increase of love of God. Feminist theory focuses on the idiosyncratic perceptions of girls and women of relationships. This calls into question whether the concept of relationship applies at all, because it does not involve shared interdependency or commitment. In fact, it does not necessarily involve another person, only the perception of another person. Catholic faith demands real relationship, involving real union, and sharing the life of Christ through the sacraments, rather than a psychological disposition.

Man's freedom finds expression in the ultimate intimacy, the relationship of union with the Trinity. Our reason serves our freedom, supporting our growing capacity to discern God's will and surrender to it. Cooperation with God's free gift of grace enables this development. The Holy Father distinguishes this autonomy from heteronomy, which is obedience to laws that are unrelated to human good. Moral autonomy, on the other hand, represents a "participated theonomy" or our willful participation in divine providence, through the right use of natural reason and submission to divine revelation.<sup>22</sup> Moral autonomy defines human freedom.

Moral theology is distinguishable from moral reasoning theory precisely because it is rooted in God. The developmental theories hold that people construct their own realities, while Catholic theology teaches that our contact with reality is Jesus Christ. Rather than explicating the path of human moral development toward the end intended by the Creator, moral reasoning theory has yielded to the feminist focus on the process of reasoning. It is the

heteronomy that ignores the primacy of truth, and has lost sight of the destination in favor of the method of journey.<sup>23</sup>

### ***The Feminist Approach of Gilligan***

Most recent feminist literature defines morality in terms of the nature of caring relationships that define the "characteristic of women's psychic responses."<sup>24</sup> In fact, responsibility for others depends not on their reflection of the Father, but on their perceptions of the reciprocation of those relationships. Therefore, a woman need only feel responsible toward an unborn child she perceives to be able to reciprocate the relationship.<sup>25</sup>

It is not the actual reciprocation of the child that matters, but only the woman's belief that it exists. The reasoning process, then, at base is not even rational but emotional. When truth is discounted in relationships, docility is undervalued, and grace is completely absent from consideration, moral reasoning can only be without direction or purpose. There can be no principles under these conditions, only a redefinition of what a principle might be in terms of individual dispositions. Hypothetical psychological dispositions become the object, not truth. Catholic morality knows that if it's only my truth or only your truth, then it cannot be truth.

### ***Therapy: The Quest of Reconciliation***

Redefinition of principles becomes the only possible way for this theory to sustain itself. Even God becomes subject to redefinition, as those women who dare to express guilt over abortion are advised to redefine their image of God and of orthodox religion. Again, it is the erroneous psychology that is suspect and needs revision by this account. Woman's dilemma is not the product of immoral choices that ignore the truth, but rather the focus on principles outside herself. Reconciliation becomes impossible because the system cannot admit of sin. "Where no absolutes exist each woman is not just her own priestess but her own religion."<sup>26</sup>

The absence of moral norms eviscerates this system of the means of judging the morality or even the harm or good of behaviors and leaves it devoid of the means of evaluating intentions or of expiating guilt. This blindness also makes it impossible to gauge individual or social progress because it is empty of goal or ultimate truth. The focus, then, can only be fixed on process.

### ***My Soul Magnifies the Lord***

The invitation to grace and the availability of grace draws us into morally good choices. Children who lack mature prudence use judgment that often fails to consider all the possible moral alternatives, because they are incapable of acting on the full moral truth.<sup>27</sup> In our fallen nature, this privation can only be overcome through enlightenment in the Gospel.<sup>28</sup>

The invitation to grace and our relationship with God raises the possibility that a fundamental choice can be made as an act of faith that influences or orders our moral choices. We choose relationship with God through baptism and the sacraments, retaining our fundamental freedom through sacramental grace and living charitable lives.<sup>29</sup> It is in relation to God, then, that we find the charitable expression of relationship to each other, not in the evaluation of the reciprocity of social relationships.

A life of grace is a life of moral reasoning in its fullness. Grace enables us to overcome initial failures to act on the truth, or to consider all possibilities.

The capacity to reason in the abstract is insufficient to respond positively to grace, and is therefore a tool for moral reasoning but not the determinant of moral reasoning. Rather, reasoning ordered to truth helps discern the available possibilities. As morally good choices are enacted, people begin to correct errors in their reasoning and increasingly make the right choice.<sup>30</sup> Prudence develops from experience and moral virtue.<sup>31</sup> Cognitive development is a tool, a gift from God to aid moral reasoning and judgment. Abstract reasoning is not the sufficient cause of moral reasoning, even if, as in our measurement model, it attains a degree of reliability confused for principles.

Prudence becomes increasingly automatic as grace is accepted. That is, those developing the "stable dispositions of the will and emotions in line with moral truth,"<sup>32</sup> evidence a docility toward God's will that increasingly characterizes their reasoning and behavior. This docility is most easily recognized in Our Lord and Our Lady.

### *Do Whatever He Says*

Our Lady is completely free from concupiscence. She is the paragon of fundamental freedom and the model of moral reasoning.

Von Speyr describes Our Lady's reasoning as follows:

Mary does not face God's announcement considering and weighing what she might answer. . . . She does not weigh what she is giving and what she will receive for it. . . . The entire, inexhaustible meaning of her vow lies in the fact that it contains the meaning and the mind of God.<sup>33</sup>

Our Lady reveals to us the components of prudence;

1. her judgments are not particularly abstract, but are docile;
2. she does not gauge her response by its consequence to her;
3. she is completely God-centered and truth-centered.

The development of prudence contrasts sharply with the feminist account of the development of moral reasoning. In post-abortion counseling, the feminist approach asks women to:

1. Generate abstract criteria to constitute a reciprocal relationship with an unborn child, and then free themselves of responsibility to the child because it cannot meet the criteria;
2. Reevaluate the decision for its net (material, instrumental?) gain to their own lives; and
3. View the choice to abort the baby as an expression of autonomy in their lives and their choices.<sup>34</sup>

Our Lady's choice for life needs no rationalization, no abstract rationales. It defines prudence while the moral reasoning approach outlined above provides abstract constructs that not only forgive, but also actually value the choice for death by searching for excuses to substantiate it. Particularly troubling for this feminist approach is the fact that women who suffer guilt from these immoral choices are not relieved by these abstract perversions of truth, but are finding, instead, reconciliation in the Church and her outreach of moral certainty.<sup>35</sup>

### *Conclusion*

If moral reasoning theory, itself, were to be classified according to its own taxonomy, it would fall squarely into the conventional level. There are no expressed principles that define principled reasoning, and as a consequence, the theoretical level of morality is determined by the nature of the dilemmas or people's conventional response to them. We have called this approach statistical, but it might also be properly described as idiographic. The focus of the theories then must be restricted to process because they have no teleology, no reference to salvation or life in the Trinity.

Feminist derivatives of these theories are purposely in opposition with Catholic teaching, and therefore, in opposition to divine revelation. Submission to moral norms is seen as negative, and the world is viewed in terms of abstract relationships defined very idiosyncratically, with the self-ascending to primacy in the whole moral system.

Real relationships involve real people, not subjective personas. Real babies are also real people. Both require selflessness in relationship, subject to moral norms and laws, and ordered toward eternal life.

A revolutionary psychological system would be better built on reality, with Our Lady as the exemplar. Reasoning thrives in her absence of concupiscence, always ordered toward Our Lord, always developing and living, the ultimate model of prudence and reasoning. She, who is full of grace, is our constant reminder that there is something better for us, that our relationship to God is the basis of human development, a relationship of docility to His will, a relationship not of abstracts but of loving regard for the Trinity and people. This is the source of freedom that enables proper moral decisions. It does not need abstractions because it is the real God who abides within us.

## Notes

1. John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*. (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1988), #5, p. 14.
2. c.f. Lefrancois, G. R., *Of Children*. (Belmont, Ca.: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1983), pp. 355-356.
3. Gilligan, C. *In a Different Voice*. (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard Educational Review, 1982). Gilligan was an associate of Kohlberg who believed that his moral reasoning theories were male centered.
4. John Paul II, *The Splendor of Truth (Veritatis Splendor)*. (Boston, Ma.: Paulist Books and Media, 1993), #74, pp. 93-94.
5. Luke 24: 12-35. Despite first hand accounts of the Resurrection, these two disciples are walking in the wrong direction.
6. John Paul II, op. cit., 1993, #74, pp. 93-94.
7. Ibid., #46, p. 63.
8. Ibid.
9. Gilligan, op. cit. This work describes the reasoning of girls and women in pregnancies they did not anticipate.
10. *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum)* (1965). In Flannery, A. (Ed.). *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*. (Boston, Ma.: St. Paul Editions, 1988), #7, p. 753. The Gospel is held to be the "source of all saving truth and moral discipline."
11. Grisez, G., & Shaw, R. *Fulfillment in Christ*. (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), p. 32.
12. Ibid., p. 210.
13. John Paul II, *On the Family (Familiaris Consortio)*, (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1981), #34, pp. 32-33.
14. I Corinthians 13: 11.
15. John Paul II, 1981, op. cit., #34, p. 32.
16. John 16: 13-14.
17. Flannery, A. (Ed.), op. cit., *Declaration on Religious Liberty*. #1, p. 800.
18. Grisez, G. *The Way of the Lord Jesus (Vol. 2): Living a Christian Life*. (Quincy Ill.: Franciscan Press, 1993), p. 247.
19. John 14: 23-24.
20. John Paul II, 1993, op. cit., #28, p. 43.
21. Ibid., #41, pp. 56-57.
22. Ibid.
23. Gilligan, C., Kohlberg, L., Lerner, M. & Belenky, M. "Moral Reasoning About Sexual Dilemmas." *Technical Report to the U.S. Commission on Obscenity and Pornography, Vol. 6*. (Washington, D. C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1971), pp. 141-174. In this work, it is the complexity of the reasoning, alone, which is examined, not its outcomes. The reasoning is said to drop half a level when students consider dilemmas that are sexual in nature.
24. Ring-Cassidy, E. "Hijacking Healing: Pro-Abortion Response to Post Abortion Stress." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society of Catholic Scientists, (Steubenville, Ohio, 1998), p. 10.
25. Ibid., p. 10.
26. Ibid. p. 18

27. Grisez. op. cit., p. 246.
28. Ibid.
29. Father Kevin McMahon, St. Charles Borromeo Seminary foundation course in Moral Theology, a possibility raised by the Holy Father (op. cit., 1993, #66, p. 85).
30. Grisez, op. cit., p. 248.
31. Ibid., p. 247.
32. Ibid., p. 246.
33. Von Speyr, A., *Handmaid of the Lord*. (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1985), p. 15.
34. Rigg-Cassidy, op. cit., p. 10.
35. Ibid.

