

True Responsibility and Contemporary Amoralism

by DIETRICH VON HILDEBRAND

Dietrich von Hildebrand, who has perhaps contributed more to Catholic moral philosophy than any other contemporary thinker, explores in this study the fundamental nature of moral consciousness. Stating that the moral universe exists ultimately in relationship to God alone, von Hildebrand goes on to suggest a distinction between true moral responsibility and a conception of moral maturity popular in our own time.

One speaks much of responsibility today. Some Catholics even claim that Christians lacked true responsibility in the past and must acquire it now. Specifically, some suggest that in moral decisions we should no longer rely on the guidance of the Church but rather on our own convictions and our consciences. Before we can know whether these ideas are right or wrong, whether they embody the right notion of responsibility, and whether responsibility and the guidance of the Church are incompatible or not, we must first analyze the nature of responsibility and indeed, the nature of the awareness of responsibility.

To do this, we must compare the morally conscious and the morally unconscious man. The morally unconscious man behaves according to the impulses of his nature; he has not yet discovered within himself the capacity to direct himself freely toward the objective demands of the world of values independently of what is or is not congenial to his nature. He is unaware of this capacity freely to approve or disavow impulses arising from his own nature, according to whether or not they conform to the world of values. Such a man has not awakened to the specifically *moral* prerogative of the spiritual person either to freely approve or to disavow; he makes no use of it. The morally unconscious man can be a friend of truth; he can be good, faithful, just; but only in the sense of a pale reflection of these virtues. His goodness, fidelity, justice and truthfulness lack the specific beauty of moral excellence. They do not reveal a full and free turning to values, a submission to their sovereign majesty, and a real subordination to their eternal laws. The accidental character of such a man's virtue and the incomplete character of his response deprive them of their true moral core. They are moral virtues whose soul is deprived of its ultimate, free, meaningful life.

The morally conscious man, on the other hand, possesses the full consciousness of responsibility. He alone can justly appreciate the impact of the demands of the world of values. He grasps not only the splendor, the inner beauty and majesty of the world of values, but also the sovereignty over us which these values objectively possess. He understands the implacable earnestness of their demands, and he experiences their personal call. He perceives the commands and the prohibitions which issue from values. He possesses an alertness to the world of values which places his life under its sword of justice, which makes him at every moment aware of his own position and duties in the cosmos, and makes him realize clearly that he is not his own master. He knows that he cannot act freely according to his arbitrary pleasure. He knows that he is not his own judge, and that he must render an account to Someone who is higher than he. One very specific mark of the morally conscious man is that he responds not only to the value of the object – let us say, in saving the life of another person – but also to the moral obligation directed to him to save the other if he can do so without endangering his own life. He thus understands the call of God to save the other man, and the offense to God of refusing to heed the call. The morally unconscious man, on the contrary, is not concerned with the moral aspect, the call of God, even though he may well respond to the value of the object.

He may be concerned for the person in danger, may feel compassion for him, may want to help him, but without ever raising the moral question, without asking whether God expects him to help the other. His action is certainly good, but it lacks moral consciousness.

Now it may be interesting to state in this context that in former times some religious persons believed that the interest in the other person was in no way necessary, and indeed that it was even more perfect to save him exclusively because God commanded us to do so, because it was a moral duty, because not to follow this call of God was a sin. These persons were obviously in great error. Their attitude is contradicted by the attitude and practice of the saints. The saints show us clearly that they were thoroughly concerned both with the other person in his danger and also with the moral call of God – with the moral significance of this situation. Every morally conscious man is concerned about his neighbor's danger and wants to save him for his sake certainly, but he is simultaneously also aware of the moral question at stake, of the call of God, of what is at stake in this moment between God and himself. In truth these two concerns are organically linked, for God through the moral call precisely wants us to be concerned about the other person – to love him. Nevertheless, the moral question has a primacy with respect to the welfare of our neighbor. For moral values glorify God in a unique way, just as moral disvalues (sins) alone can offend God. And God is more important than any man.

Today, there is the widespread danger of emphasizing only the point of view of the neighbor's happiness and of ignoring the moral question. We might say that we are faced with the cult of moral unconsciousness. What in the morally unconscious man is a naive blindness has now been elevated by many into an idol. The former error of unconcern for the neighbor called for correction by appealing to the glorious example of moral consciousness in the saints. Instead of doing this, some have fallen prey to a subtle amorality by which they simply ignore the whole moral question. In ousting the all important, decisive role of the love of God, of the response directed specifically to Christ, they have also cut men off from true charity towards their neighbor. For this charity can arise in our soul only as a value-response directed to Christ Himself.

The morally conscious man alone is aware of his full responsibility. He grasps clearly the full moral significance of his actions and, when the action refers to another person, he combines the interest for the good of the other person with the response to the call of God, to the moral significance. He understands that all morality displays itself between man and God. He clearly distinguishes the two dimensions of his action: the injuring or doing good to the neighbor on the one hand, and the moral significance of this action on the other. It is this latter which either glorifies or offends God. These two dimensions are univocally disclosed when we analyze the situation where someone does wrong to another person, as when a man betrays his wife. The wife may forgive him the wrong done to her, but obviously it is not in her power to pardon him his moral wrong, to absolve him from his sin. She may say: I forgive you, and I pray that God may pardon you. One and the same action is thus negative in two directions: first, insofar as it wrongs the other, and second, insofar as it is a moral disvalue – a sin – which offends God.

But the dimensions clearly differ. Certainly, in the case of conjugal betrayal, it is the wrong done to the other which is the bearer of the moral disvalue. But there are other cases of moral disvalue, of sinful actions, which do not include the dimension of doing wrong to another person, for example, the impurity of masturbation, cursing, suicide, relishing one's own perfections, as in the Pharisee, or any revolt against God. Not only, therefore, are the two dimensions different when they arise from one and the same action, but also the moral disvalue can exist without the harm to another person.

The morally conscious man is always aware of the moral significance of his actions, and in those cases in which something good or bad is done to another person, he also grasps the primacy of the moral significance, that is, whether his action glorifies or offends God. The responsibility before God holds first place.

Concerning responsibility we must stress that we are always responsible to someone. There must be a person to whom we render account, whom we acknowledge as the judge of our actions. Obviously, this person can objectively only be God – the Absolute Lord, the Infinitely Holy. True awareness of responsibility thus always implies a confrontation with God. Our conscience is the voice of God in our soul – it is the *advocatus Dei* which warns us against sinning.

But conscience is not the organ by which we grasp what is morally good or evil. Rather conscience already presupposes this knowledge. Not conscience but our capacity of value-perception

enables us, for instance, to grasp the disvalue of injustice or the value of justice. This value perception we find in an extraordinary way in Socrates. In many persons, however, this capacity is greatly jeopardized by pride and concupiscence. Moral value-blindness is a widespread evil. There is, moreover, a higher realm of moral values which cannot even be grasped by this natural value-perception and was thus not accessible to such a noble, wonderful mind as that of Socrates. Belonging to this naturally inaccessible realm are, among others, the values of humility and charity. These can be disclosed to us only by Christ.

The higher source of knowledge concerning all that is good and evil is, therefore, the Revelation of God as given in the Decalogue and in the teachings of Christ. And all this has been entrusted by Christ to His Holy Bride, the Roman, Catholic, Apostolic Church. Thus, the morally conscious man – the truly responsible man – alone possesses the full awareness of his responsibility, knows how fallacious his own mind is, how easily he falls prey to self-illusion and to value-blindness. Aware of his need of redemption he thus seeks advice in God's commandments, in Christ and in His Holy Church. His conscience warns him of the danger of relying only on his subjective judgment. He does not forget what the psalmist says: *omnis homo mendax* – every man is a liar. In fact it is precisely his conscience which calls him to submit to the infallible teachings of the Church. There is no greater misunderstanding of morality and true responsibility than the belief, unfortunately today widespread, that to submit to the commandments of God and the teachings of His Church is an abdication of our responsibility, a cowardly escapism. On the contrary, to conform to the moral commandments of the Holy Church, which are nothing but the commandments of God and Christ, is the logical consequence of a full, true responsibility.

Certainly this conforming to the commandments of God implies a fully awakened cooperation on the part of every individual person. Because we submit to the true unchangeable morality revealed to us in the Decalogue and, above all, in the sacred humanity of Christ, we are not therefore dispensed from a full and awakened cooperation in the application of these commandments to the single, concrete situation which we face. This is the meaning of following not only the letter, but the spirit. In many cases, of course, we cannot follow the spirit without also following the letter. A man who admits to having committed adultery but only according to the letter and not the spirit, is obviously caught in a complete self-illusion. But there are several cases in which we may conform to the letter¹ and simultaneously offend the spirit. And it is precisely here that the full use of all our faculties is indispensable. To obey does not mean to mechanically conform. Obedience demands rather a fully conscious, free value-response with the full cooperation of our minds. Obedience to God's will is by its very nature a deep and energetic response to the world of values – responsibility at its best.

Responsibility is essentially linked to morality. If there is no responsibility – as all those must claim who deny the freedom of the will – all morality necessarily collapses. A man who has no free will and, thus, is not responsible for his actions and attitudes, could never be the bearer of moral values or disvalues, as little as an animal could be morally good or evil. He could be neither just nor unjust, neither humble nor proud, neither pure nor impure, even as little as a dog could be just or unjust, and so on.

But if morality presupposes responsibility the converse is also true: responsibility presupposes the existence of objective moral values and disvalues. As soon as the two fundamental categories of moral good and evil are denied, the notion of responsibility loses its sense. True responsibility refers necessarily to morality: a man is primarily responsible for *sins*, for all moral disvalues. But responsibility is also obviously implied for every virtue, for every good action. We say that responsibility is always before a person. Now as long as this responsibility is to a mere man, whose employee I am and who thus makes me responsible for accomplishing accurately what he ordered me to do, the notion of responsibility obviously does not necessarily imply any reference to morality. But by the same token it lacks all the depth and ultimate seriousness of the true responsibility which is directed to God. It has a more juridical character. The meaning of true responsibility – with its relation to our conscience, its ultimate seriousness, its connotation of punishment and reward – is indissolubly linked to the sphere of morality. It presupposes the drama between man and God which is to be found only in morality.

Today many speak much of responsibility, especially in stressing that man has come of age and so must take upon himself the full responsibility for his moral life, instead of transferring it to the guidance of the Church, the confessor, the spiritual director, and so on. But, simultaneously, the objective validity

or the unchanging character of moral good and evil is denied. Responsibility has thus been denuded of its meaning and has become an empty word, both contentless and meaningless. The greatest example of sham and caricatured responsibility is the so-called morality of authenticity introduced by Heidegger (who by the way, gave a very poor example of authenticity in becoming a full-fledged follower and admirer of Adolph Hitler).

Unfortunately the denial of the categories of good and evil is not restricted to the morality of authenticity taught by Heidegger. It is also found in the widespread amorality which is fashionable today. This amorality admits the existence of certain objective values such as the dignity of the person and democracy, but it simultaneously holds that absolute norms – such as the Decalogue and all the moral commandments – are subject to the rhythm of history and thus change in the course of history. By invalidating these norms, however, this position in reality denies the objective validity of the entire moral sphere – of all moral values. It acknowledges only morally relevant values, such as the ontological value of a human person, the dignity which he possesses in contradistinction to a mere animal. But such a value, however morally relevant, is obviously not a moral value in itself and we are in no way responsible for it. Indeed, when the validity of absolute norms is denied, all the moral values and disvalues such as justice, veracity, purity, generosity, meekness, humility and charity are implicitly rejected. Rejected for example is the moral goodness of resisting an impure temptation and the moral evil – the sinfulness – of an abuse of the mystery of sex in any extramarital intercourse.

The opponents of norms forget that if there exists an objective value of purity then, obviously, no impure things should be done and the commandment to abstain from them is perfectly valid. It is indeed wrong to reduce all morality to norms, to believe that morality is something superimposed like a mere positive commandment and to make of morality mere rules of human conduct. It is indeed wrong to overlook the plenitude of moral values, which glorify God, and thus to ignore for instance the intrinsic beauty and glory of purity in contrast to the meanness and horror of impurity – an error which is often to be found in former manuals of morality. But it is incomparably worse to attempt to oust morality entirely by denying the validity of moral commandments, which are then presented as mere rules which change with the times.

This ousting of moral values and stressing of only morally relevant values is ultimately a disinterest in God. Moral values resist any utilitarian interpretation; they display their impact only in front of God, for holiness alone glorifies God and sin alone offends Him. Amoralism, therefore, is deeply linked with a replacement of the theocentric attitude by an anthropocentric one. There is nothing but pure amorality in all these attempts to invalidate the moral commandments which, far from being superimposed, are deeply rooted in the very nature of moral values and disvalues. Specifically, the current amorality tries to get rid of all responsibility before God. It is a yielding to pride and concupiscence, too often under the title of an alleged self-fulfillment. I say *alleged* self-fulfillment because true self-fulfillment is to be found only in the saints, those very humans who love God above all else and who fear most to offend God by sin.

The amorality, on the contrary, interpret responsibility to mean standing on their own feet, ceasing to be submitted to God. But such a fulfillment is in reality an escape from true responsibility. Though perhaps unaware of it, amorality is really motivated by the desire to get rid of all responsiveness to the world of values. It is thus apparent that those who claim they have come of age and have acquired responsibility are, in fact, precisely those who have abandoned responsibility altogether.

The true awareness of responsibility implies quite simply that we do not render an account of our doings to any other judge but Christ. Similarly, a false notion of responsibility is characterized by primary concern for the judgment of some false arbiter which has nothing to do with the world of objective values. Indeed, the rendering of an account before false authority – such as honor, state law, or public opinion – is very widespread.² In this context it is enough to suggest that even many Catholics are not concerned about whether their ideas, actions and attitudes can stand the test before the infinitely holy Christ and His Church, but, instead, are concerned only as to whether they can stand the test before the opinions of the non-Catholic world – whether they are up-to-date. This false arbiter has in fact gained enough sway as to be named by some the ‘post-conciliar spirit,’ an unfortunate and deceiving phrase.

The danger of this false responsibility which is, in reality, the peak of irresponsibility, cannot be overestimated. It is the abdication of freedom, a real not having come of age. We must emphasize the necessity of examining ourselves time and time again on the question of just who it is before whom we justify ourselves, who it is whose judgment we fear the most, in front of whom are we eager to stand the test. True responsibility implies that we free ourselves from all these false norms and false arbiters – these substitutes for God Who alone is the source of the true world of values. It implies that we recognize but one judge, Christ, and that we take as norms His Commandments, His sacred humanity, His teachings through the Church during 2000 years. Indeed, awareness of responsibility cannot exist apart from awareness of the will of God. Ultimately, therefore, to be responsible is to accept that will and do it.

NOTES

¹Thus a man may push away someone urgently in need of help on the pretext that he must go to Sunday Mass. His subsequent attendance at Mass, although it fulfills the letter perfectly, in no way harmonizes with the spirit of the commandment to keep holy the Lord's day.

²D. von Hildebrand, *Graven Images: Substitutes for True Morality*, New York: David McKay Company, Inc. 1957, 204pp. In this book I attempt to analyze the different ways in which idols like honor, being a gentleman, the laws of the state, and so on, are taken as substitutes for objective moral values. Such idols have played a great role in the history of mankind and in the life of the individual. They play it still.