

Moral Choice And The Knowledge of Evil

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This study of morality hinges on a distinction between two types of goods, those which are subjectively satisfying and those which have objective and autonomous value in themselves. In developing the implications of this distinction, William A. Marra not only analyses the true nature of moral choice, but also makes a strong philosophical case against the premises of moral subjectivism.

“Man himself is a great deep,” says St. Augustine, “whose very hairs Thou numberest O Lord, and they fall not to the ground without Thee; and yet are the hairs of his head easier to number than are his feelings and the beatings of his heart.”¹

To every question which asks what man is, the true answer given must include freedom as a basic and all-important component of man. As a personal being man is entrusted with freedom – is, indeed, trusted with freedom. This power in a man to move his person in one direction or another finds its deepest challenge when it deals with the moral dimensions of the universe. Moral good and evil – righteousness and wickedness – are within the awesome possibilities of human freedom.

The subject of this study is the moral choice itself. Previous thinkers have often dealt with this subject by adopting the time-honored but, I believe, basically misleading interpretation of Aristotelian philosophy, to the effect that moral choice involves deliberating between *real* goods and *apparent* goods. This will be called the error of *intellectualism*. The analysis of moral choice here will hinge on two categories of goods elaborated by Dietrich von Hildebrand. Hopefully this analysis will correspond more nearly to the lived experience of moral choice and also will highlight the profound and awesome nature of moral decision.

Why does a man will anything? Why does he make the inner decision to get up on time for work, or buy a certain car, or propose marriage to a woman? Why does a man will to spend ten dollars at the racetrack, or give ten dollars to Care? Why does one man will not to get involved when someone else is attacked? Why does another man will precisely to go to the aid of the victim? Such questions are endless. Inspection of any and all these cases will reveal that certain features are common to all choices. For in each case of willing one thing rather than its opposite, the thing willed at least seemed *attractive* to the man. There was some aspect which caused it to glitter in his sight. It was somehow positively raised above the neutral. In short, it was grasped as in some way *good*. Given all the bad aspects of getting up very early in order to be on time for work, why would any man will this unless some good aspect glittered before him? If absolutely no attractive feature of the deed in any shape or form, whether present now or promised for the future, were displayed, why the man should will it would be incomprehensible. It would indeed be impossible that he will it.

Something like the above analysis has led philosophers to say that a man always wills *good*.² They mean to point to the profound fact that the neutral as such cannot move a man to will it, that a thing must glitter with positive importance – with goodness – before it can engender a will in us. They then erect this point into an alleged truth about the nature of man. They say that man necessarily wills the good, or that each man has a preconscious dynamism for good. Some even suggest that this good which all men necessarily will, this good towards which the inner dynamism of each man tends, is nothing else than God Himself.

The above might occasion little trouble if it were not for the kinds of things that some men will. It may be granted that a man’s punctual attendance at his job is somehow good – somehow glitters – because it means money and money means food, sports, cars, and the like, but what could a man possibly find good in murder, or in lying? How explain the eager willingness of some men to torture their fellows? What seems good to a Nazi about the massacre of Jews? Why was Iago so willing to deceive Othello and

destroy the latter's happiness? What glitters, what is good about all these deeds, only too often and too eagerly willed by men?

The answer given by Aristotelian philosophy, and by the Platonic philosophy even earlier, is that the choices are to be explained by some kind of intellectual failure.³ According to this school of thought, man's will necessarily wills only good, but his mind is charged with proposing certain deeds as good. Since man's mind is limited, it can seize upon a certain deed which is really and truly horrible and nonetheless propose it in such a way that it seems good to his will. Choices like the above, therefore, are alleged to be between the real goods and the apparent goods.⁴ One's will automatically and necessarily tends towards what is presented as good; a man thus wills to murder if this seems good to him, or he will lie, consent to torture, and so on. But why did the mind present just this deed as good instead of its opposite? Aristotelian intellectualists suggest that some previous will put an end to the deliberating whereby first X and then non-X alternately became attractive, and seemed good.⁵ But what motivated this previous will? What seemed good about ending the deliberation here and not there? Obviously some previous intellectual presentation of goodness. Clearly, two things result from the above theory of choice. First, there seems to be an infinite regress. The will is alleged to will whatever is finally presented to it as good, and this itself depends on a previous decision to end deliberation, which itself depends upon a still more previous grasp of the goodness of the will. Second, the dramatic question of choice, even when it involves murder, lying and cruelty, is reduced to the intellectual problem of discrimination between the real and the apparent good. Moral responsibility really is based on the awesome fact that a person can knowingly and deliberately say *yes* or *no* to what ought to be. Such responsibility is badly compromised and even vitiated by the intellectualist position.

What gives the intellectualist position great plausibility, however, is the following discussion.⁶ Things which are really good are somehow good for man – for his happiness. Now a man who lies or murders or hates or rejoices in cruelty is really acting against his own best interests. According to the intellectualists, such activities are not only worthy of punishment, but they also have natural consequences which strip a man of integrity and happiness. A man is more cramped, more miserable, more hollow when he hates and acts cruelly, just as he is better and happier and larger when he loves. Obviously, continues the argument, no man will knowingly will his own misery and emptiness. For all men desire happiness. For this reason too, therefore, it must be that men who murder or lie or do cruel things, mistake the deed. They wrongly believe it to be good, i.e. to be such as would militate for greater integrity and happiness. If only they knew, if only they could discern the real evil behind the apparent good, they would never consent to such atrocities.

The last consideration is as ancient as Plato and as modern as present-day attitudes towards many criminals and sinners. For Plato was convinced that no man would knowingly will something morally evil,⁷ and, today, many are ready to excuse evil conduct with the argument that the perpetrator does not know any better. But is the intellectualist position correct? It is argued here that every case of a morally wicked choice is not, in fact, reducible to one's willing an apparent instead of a real good. Moreover, it is something other than mere ignorance of real goodness which permits one to will what is wicked. In other words, if a man's intellectual sights change, if he somehow improves his knowledge, he might not thereby become a better person who will then will the good things which have at last been shown to him.

The chief point of this paper is to insist that moral choice involves the will – and ultimately the character – and not the mind. This means that one can knowingly choose what is morally evil and knowingly reject what is morally good and obligatory. The moral choice is not between real and apparent good, an intellectual question, but rather between what von Hildebrand has called subjectively satisfying goods and goods of value.⁸ The former, the subjectively satisfying goods, are indeed positively important, are indeed attractive, capable of motivating desires, loves, and acts of will. They are therefore quite properly called *good* in this large sense of something positively raised above the neutral. But the reason for their non-neutrality lies in their ability to pamper or appease certain subjective centers, including the deadly centers in man of pride and concupiscence. The values, on the other hand, are likewise good in this large sense of being positively raised above the neutral. But values have one essential note which sets them apart: the reason for their goodness is in no way their relation to pride, concupiscence, or indeed to

any subjective bent, even legitimate. On the contrary, values are good in themselves, autonomously good, good prior to any and every confrontation with a person.

It will be helpful to first look at several cases involving goods of value. If one thinks of some person whom he loves or admires, or if he thinks of some cause which he spends himself trying to advance, he can see that he deals with these persons or this cause not as something simply good for him, nor as something which flatters or pleases him, but primarily and basically as something already good and precious. The beloved shines with a goodness that awaited him. His great happiness comes just from the realization that he has been privileged to know and perhaps enter into communion with something good in itself – something already positively raised above the neutral. So too with the goodness one admires in a person. Who would pretend that one's admiration of a man is what makes the man admirable? The exact reverse is true: something good in the man accounts for the admiration, even invites it.⁹

Values admit of many differentiations, with regard to both structure and quality. It is enough here to characterize all values, of whatever kind, as things or events or qualities which flash up against the background of neutrality with an attractiveness and positive glitter that already belongs to them. If one looks upon the world with a true consciousness, therefore, one can grasp that many things are neutral, and that many other things are good, are precious, are an objective asset to the canvas of reality, are things that should be there: beloved persons, truths, beauty in nature and art, justice and peace among men, generosity and kindness in men and so on.

If, however, certain powerful subjective tendencies of human nature are allowed sway, then we have a distorted consciousness. Pride is the deepest of all such tendencies. It is at bottom always an arrogant self-affirmation. In its satanic form it is a rebellious sweeping away of all values and an enthroning of itself.

In its form of self-glory, pride wants to use values to puff itself up. Never does pride allow the inner goodness of a being to flash before it. Rather, pride wars against all values, desubstantializes their goodness. On the other hand, it invests certain beings, which would otherwise be either neutral or even disvalues, with a positive attractiveness – a goodness – just because they can flatter pride, appease its swelling self-affirmation. Pride is of the spirit. It is the posture of a rebellious finite person who can neither accept being surrounded by autonomous goods nor respond to their call. Concupiscence, on the other hand, is more a bodily pull than a spiritual one. It is the tendency to let oneself go, to be submerged in the flesh. Whereas hatred, cruelty, revenge and envy flow from pride, laziness, intemperance, and impurity flow from concupiscence.

These subjective centers are the key to understanding why certain options present themselves as good to a man. To snuff out the life of a fellow man, to trample on the value of human life, might at first sight seem so wicked that no one could possibly find it attractive or positively important, i.e. good. But let us think of a case wherein the deed is made to shine with the reflected light of subjectively satisfying goodness. Macbeth is my witness. (If I go to literature rather than to life, it is only because great literature is the distilled essence of life.) Thanks to the teasing prognostication of the witches and, above all, to the scolding exhortations of his wife, Macbeth develops what ancient theologians would call 'inordinate love' for the throne.¹⁰ It is not simply that he would like to be king. There would be no moral fault in that. Rather, his spirit is obsessed with ambition. The crown glitters before him. Were he motivated here only by values, were his centers of pride completely silenced, he would grasp the weighty responsibility of the throne; he would accept it, if need be, but out of duty. And, of course, he would never do anything that involved trampling of other values. As it is, however, he burns with a rage to be king, to wear the ermine of royalty, to have a kingdom subject to him. His pride is fully operative here: it not only causes the throne to glitter with an attractiveness utterly foreign to values, it also makes the throne an exclusive good – an idol before which all values must be sacrificed.

The life of an innocent man, Duncan, stands in the way of Macbeth's becoming King. Macbeth has a clear moral choice: to respect the sacredness of an innocent human life, and forego satisfying his burning ambition, or to satisfy the latter and thereby be forced to trample the value. This is in no way the choice between a real and an apparent good. Both goods are real and both present truly their aspect of attractiveness. The difference lies in this: one is the good of value, which imposes on Macbeth that he

approach it with reverence, while the other is a good that pampers pride. Now when he chooses the latter he does so knowingly. Therein lies the true horror of his choice, based as it is on the great gift of freedom, which he has here abused.

Macbeth is an especially good case since he meditates aloud on the exact kind of goods involved. He has unmistakably grasped the real issues and he nonetheless wills to trample what ought to be so as to gain what flatters him.

. . . He's here in double trust:
First, as I am his kinsman and his subject,
Strong both against the deed; then, as his host,
Who should against his murderer shut the door,
Not bear the knife myself. Besides, this Duncan
Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been
So clear in his great office, that his virtues
Will plead like angels trumpet-tongu'd against
The deep damnation of his taking-off;
. . . I have no spur
To prick the sides of my intent, but only
Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself
And falls on the other.¹¹

These are not the words of a man duped by an apparent good and unaware of the real good. Such a man is not ignorant. He does not need moral enlightenment. It can hardly be said that he, like all of us, necessarily willed good and necessarily desired happiness, but that he erroneously thought murder would bring him happiness whereas we think that respecting our fellow man is the better and surer way to happiness. Rather, the words of Macbeth etch out the general truth which we ourselves know when pride moves us to do evil: we knowingly prefer our self-aggrandizement to respect for values. We knowingly allow values to be trampled so long as we increase.

Two further cases of choice might be considered briefly to hint at different aspects of this central choice of self over values. First, if a man wills to kill a bank guard because the latter stands in the way of the money that he wants, then it is obviously concupiscence and not pride which accounts for his willingness to murder. He wants to steal money and flatter concupiscence in a double way: negatively, by not being forced to work; positively by all the things he can buy. He chooses to overthrow the value of a human life, therefore, because he prefers his own comfort and self-indulgence to any value. In both this case and the case of Macbeth, the trampling of the value might be said to be somewhat reluctant, in the sense that both murderers were not interested in killing as such, but only in the goods that killing would bring them. They conceivably, therefore, would never have willed to kill had the goods been otherwise accessible – i.e. had the throne been accessible to Macbeth simply through lying, or had the money been given to the thief by an unresisting guard.

The second additional case must be mentioned now. Here the very evil thing willed is directly willed and desired. This happens in every murder for revenge. If a man has utterly destroyed my happiness, perhaps by being the cause of my losing all the beloved persons in my life, I may find myself hating the man and consumed with a thirst for revenge. If now I will to kill him, the 'good' that attracts me here is directly his death itself. I do not see his death as a means which I must reluctantly use to gain some other glittering end. On the contrary, his death is the thing that glitters. For it feeds my spirit of revenge, my screaming pride which demands not justice alone, but hateful revenge.

If Shakespeare had wanted to risk an anticlimax, he might have put one extra scene in Othello. Here Othello would have bounded toward the hated Iago, destroyer by his lies of all his happiness. And he would gleefully have killed Iago with such accompanying words as these:

Die, cursed one, squirm, suffer! Let your lying
Tongue be slit. Bleed. . . . Gasp, die. . . . Die.

Man lives in a moral universe. All about him values glitter with autonomous splendor and invite him to cherish and respect them. But the sun of self glowers within man. Its eruption whether as pride or concupiscence casts a positive glow on possible intentions and deeds, so that their ‘goodness’ moves man to trample over values. This glow is not the result of some intellectual mistake, some misunderstanding or ignorance. It is rather a sickly glow which a man knowingly sees emanating from himself and bathing murder, lying, cruelty and other deeds with ‘goodness,’ that is with attractiveness to his pride and concupiscence. Von Hildebrand’s analysis of moral choice, as sketched here, obviously highlights the awesome moral responsibility which a man must bear when he knowingly wills to do something wicked because it simultaneously is ‘good’ for his pride or concupiscence. Such a man is not to be faulted with intellectual error. Rather, he should be blamed for moral evil.

It must now be seen that a man’s response to morally relevant values, his respectful and reverent cherishing of them, or else his trampling over them for the sake of self, is charged with eternal consequences. The real history of any man – the real portrait – is absolutely concerned with his moral life. Neither his intellectual gifts, nor his dynamism, nor his sensitivity to beauty are ultimately decisive. There is only one thing necessary: to be morally good. So decisive is the moral choice that, if the Bible is still to be believed, God Himself became man so as to reverse the horrendous consequence of one man’s fateful moral choice. Indeed, so decisive is the moral choice that heaven and hell hinge just on this. Adam’s fall, and our own several falls, are centered in the universe of moral relevance, and nothing else.

NOTES

¹*Confessions*, Book IV, 22, transl. by E. Pusey, New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1950.

²Thus Aristotle at the very beginning of his *Ethics* states: “. . . every action and pursuit is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim.” *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1094, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, edited by Richard McKeon, New York: Random House, 1941. See also the Pseudo-Dionysius, *De Div. Nom.*, IV, 32 (PG3, 732). See also St. Thomas Aquinas, “The will can tend to nothing except under the aspect of good. But because good is of many kinds, for this reason the will is not of necessity determined to one.” *S.T.* Ia, 82, 2, reply objection 1, in *The Basic Writings of St. Thomas Aquinas*, ed. by Anton Pegis, Vol. II, New York: Random House, 1945.

³“For each state of character has its own ideas of the noble and the pleasant, and perhaps the good man differs from others most by seeing the truth in each class of things, being as it were the norm and measure of them. In most things the error seems to be due to pleasure; for it appears a good when it is not. We therefore choose the pleasant as a good, and avoid pain as an evil.” Aristotle, *op. cit.*, 1113b.

⁴E.g. “The formal object of the will is goodness in general, regardless of how it is realized in the particular good of any of its material objects. It may be only negative, in that the object ‘is good to avoid.’ It may be only an apparent good, not a true moral good: a person’s motive for murder may be because it seemed good to him at the time, even though murder in itself may be bad.” James E. Royce, S.J., *Man and His Nature*, New York: McGraw Hill, 1961, p. 179. See also Gerard Smith, S.J., *Intelligence and Liberty*, Jan. 1941 issue of *The New Scholasticism*. (The article appears as a related reading in *Philosophical Psychology*, by Raymond J. Anable, S.J., New York: Fordham University Press, 1941).

⁵For a revealing statement of this position, see Fr. G. Smith’s article (see note 4 above), basing itself on extensive quotations from St. Thomas, *S.T.*, IaIIae, q.9, art. 1, ad 3um; Ia q. 82, art. 4; *S.T.* 1, 72; *De Malo*, q. 6, a. 1; *De Veritate*, q. 24, a. 1, ad 20um. Fr. Smith says, in part: “But you must say one or the other! Either the intellect determines the will, or the will determines the intellect! St. Thomas did not think that he should or could say one or the other. Choice for him is a ‘sort of’ judgment, ‘sort of,’ because choice is essentially an act of the will which wishes, not of the reason which judges. But though choice is essentially an act of the will, St. Thomas includes in that act the judgment, the voluntary choice of which is the conclusion of a deliberation.” (Pp. 339-340).

⁶This notion of the good as good *for man*, is, of course, at the basis of Socrates' entire moral philosophy. In his *Outlines of the History of Ethics*, (first published in 1886) paperback edition, Boston, Beacon Press, 1960, Henry Sidgwick gives this admirable summary: ". . . to Socrates it appeared . . . that knowledge alone could make men free. Only good conduct, he maintained, is truly voluntary; a bad man is constrained by ignorance to do what is contrary to his real wish, which is always for his own greatest good: only knowledge can set him free to realize his wish." (p. 25).

⁷"Plato seems to have clung . . . to the idea that no one does evil knowingly and willingly. When a man chooses that which is *de facto* evil, he chooses it *sub specie boni*: he desires something which he imagines to be good, but which is, as a matter of fact, evil." *A History of Philosophy*, Vol. I, by Frederick Copleston, S.J., Westminster, Md.: The Newman Press. (p. 219).

⁸cf. *Ethics*, by Dietrich von Hildebrand, Chap. 3, Chicago: The Franciscan Herald Press, 1972.

⁹One of the gravest errors in Spinoza is precisely his reversal of this truth: "it is thus plain . . . that in no case do we strive for, wish for, long for, or desire anything, because we deem it to be good, but on the other hand, we deem a thing to be good because we strive for it, wish for it, long for it, or desire it." *The Ethics*, Part II, Prop. ix, note.

¹⁰"Art thou afeard / To be the same in thine own act and valour / As thou are in desire? Wouldst thou have that / Which thou esteem'st the ornament of life, / And live a coward in thine own esteem, / Like the poor cat i' the adage?" (Act I, sc. vii).

¹¹*Macbeth*, Act I, sc. vii.