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## METAPHYSICS AND CATHOLIC BIOETHICS

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What is the fundamental difference between classical Catholic bioethics and its secular, predominantly utilitarian, counterparts? It is a metaphysical one. The Catholic tradition takes as a given a common sense realism, defended best by Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas, which acknowledges that the created order is both structured and intelligible to human reason. As such, reality can provide us with a foundation for a normative ethic—a natural law ethic—that can guide human action.

This metaphysical position in turn grounds the three distinctive characteristics of a Catholic bioethic: its claim to objective and universal moral absolutes, its unwavering defense of the sanctity of human life regardless of age or condition, and its focus on the structure of the human act as a key determinant in ethical analysis. To truly understand Catholic bioethics, one has to appreciate its metaphysical foundations.

### Nature is Teleological

Catholic bioethics is rooted in a reasoned study of nature and begins with the recognition that the world is ordered. The natural order is filled with purposes and ends. It is teleological. In particular, living things interact with one another to accomplish goals, their characteristic ends determined by their natures. Most biologists would agree that all organisms seek first to reproduce. Fireflies flicker to attract a mate; birds build nests to lay eggs; beavers construct dams to shelter their young. Each species lives in a manner specified by its genetic makeup which in turn is programmed to allow the individual to accomplish a common goal.

St. Thomas Aquinas, echoing Aristotle, recognized that as part of this created order, man too has to have his own particular end ordained by his unique rational nature. Consequently, the Angelic Doctor contended that reason could provide us with true knowledge of the human good by identifying the natural inclinations of the human being. These included the need to preserve life, to reproduce, and to know truth (*Summa Theologiae* I-II 94.2).

It was clear, however, that this was not to be an exhaustive list. Additional insights into human nature would lead to a better appreciation of the natural law. Consequently, any moral action which promoted the

attainment of these human needs would, by definition, be good; any moral action which hindered their achievement would be evil. As John Paul II wrote in his encyclical, *Veritatis splendor*: "The natural moral law expresses and lays down the purposes, rights, and duties which are based upon the bodily and spiritual nature of the human person" (n. 50). For the Catholic, therefore, right living is acting in conformity with what it means to be a human being living in an ordered universe.

### A Metaphysical Justification

Metaphysics justifies ethics in the Catholic tradition. For example, take the Catholic Church's claim that her moral precepts are objective and universal. Since all human beings share a common nature, the Catholic ethicist can assert that the basic principles of the natural law, derived from a study of this nature, are applicable and binding to all regardless of historical period and cultural milieu. Again quoting John Paul II:

[T]he very progress of cultures demonstrates that there is something in man which transcends those cultures. This "something" is precisely human nature: this nature is itself the measure of culture and the condition ensuring that man does not become the prisoner of any of his cultures, but asserts his personal dignity by living in accordance with the profound truth of his being (VS, n. 53).

Furthermore, the Catholic bioethicist can also claim that moral absolutes exist. Human nature limits human behavior. Physiologically, for example, a human being can never drink methane because it is incompatible with the functioning of the human body. Methane is and will always be dangerous to the human even though it is an appropriate energy source for methylophils, microorganisms that can oxidize methane.

Analogously, it stands to reason that certain actions are evil in that they disrupt the natural order which is necessary for the flourishing of the human person. Murder is always evil because it deprives a person of life, a fundamental good necessary for anyone to achieve any other end. Adultery is evil because it undermines the marital covenant necessary for the well-being of married persons and children. These acts, as pointed out by Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, do not admit of a mean—they are always intrinsically wrong and no circumstances, no honorable intention, no amount of good resulting from these actions can mitigate their evil. As Aristotle said "it is not possible, then, ever to be right with regard to them; one must always be wrong" (*NE*, Bk II, 6).

Pope John Paul II has reiterated the Catholic teaching that there are acts which are intrinsically evil: they are by their nature incapable of being ordered to God because they radically contradict the good of the person made in his image (VS, n. 80).

Metaphysics is also at the heart both of the Catholic Church's opposition to abortion and euthanasia and of its defense of the inherent dignity of the human person. Classically, Aristotelian and Thomistic realism recog-

# The National Catholic Bioethics Center

159 Washington Street, Boston, MA 02135-4325

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nizes the existence of substances that have essences. Man is no different. Simply put, human persons possess a human nature. Other bioethical traditions embrace functional definitions of personhood—from consciousness, reasoning ability, and self-motivation to communication, self-awareness and memory—but these all fail, appearing arbitrary after close scrutiny, because they confuse ability and essence.

As such, the human person and hence his right to life begins at conception when he becomes a unique example of the species, *Homo sapiens*. Even a four-cell human embryo is an individual and substantial whole despite its potential for giving rise to an identical twin under certain abnormal conditions. (It is clear, for example, that we still consider a single planarian, a species of flatworm with the capabilities of complete regeneration, an individual organism though it can give rise to two identical clones if abnormally split down the middle.) Since no ontological change occurs during development—the contemporary biologist acknowledges that the embryo, the fetus, and the newborn baby are all the same member of the human species—the embryo is deserving of all the lawful protections that are the right of a mature adult.

### The Three Fonts of Morality

Finally, classical metaphysics is behind the distinctively Catholic approach to ethics which focuses on the structure of the human act as a source of its morality. For the Catholic moralist, the human act can be divided into three parts. Each human act consists of an object, *what* is being done, an intention, *why* something is being done, and its attending circumstances or the *context* of the act which can lessen or heighten but not change the moral goodness or evil of the act (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1750). Each of these elements is a necessary determinant of the morality of the act. A change in any one of these factors changes the very nature of the act and can therefore alter its moral import.

For example, an observer in an operating room watching a surgeon remove a diseased uterus from a pregnant woman could be witnessing either one of two

*distinct* acts. If the surgeon intended solely to remove a diseased uterus to aid the mother, knowing of course, that this would lead to the death of the infant, the observer is witnessing an act of healing. If the surgeon intended, on the other hand, to end the life of the child, the observer is witnessing an act of murder. As this example illustrates, actions which appear identical to an observer may be totally different acts depending upon the elements that make up the act. Hence, empirical observation of externals is not in itself sufficient to specify the moral nature of the human act.

The Catholic bioethicist also has at hand certain principles—the principle of double effect and the distinction between ordinary and extraordinary means are just two examples—to determine the nature of the individual elements of each human act. For an act to be morally good, all three elements of the act, the object, the intention and the circumstances, must be good (CCC n. 1755). Again, this type of ethical analysis is only possible because of the Catholic conviction that both the structure of nature and the powers of human reason allow one to do this with some assurance of certainty.

In our contemporary pluralistic society, there is much disagreement on proper human conduct. Witness the very emotional and public debate on abortion or euthanasia. What is not acknowledged, however, is that these disagreements are often arguments over metaphysics rather than ethics. Thus the abortion “rights” advocate implicitly rejects the notion that personhood is an ontological status rather than a social convention, a position which the pro-life individual embraces. Without a clearer understanding of the metaphysical assumptions of various ethical traditions, it will be impossible to appreciate the differences between a Catholic approach to ethics and any of its secular counterparts.

Brother Nicanor Pier Griorgio Austriaco, O.P.  
Dominican House of Studies  
Washington, D.C.