Moral evalution in Catholic ethics

Wilhelmiina Hämäläinen

Moral judgment presumes always that the act was voluntary. A voluntary act is such which is done consciously and from free will, and for which man is considered responsible. Man has to be conscious both of the goals and the means, in addition to want the act. If we are specific, moral judgment presumes also free choice, but in practice free choice is always connected to voluntariness. Only if one would meet perfect goodness, s/he wouldn't have choice, but could only want it. But in this world, which is considered in ethics, one cannot reach perfect goodness.

Let's first consider how to reason moral responsibility (if the act is "moral", or morally evaluable), and then how to reason the moral quality of a moral act.

Voluntariness is perfect, if one has all needed information about the act and wants it completely. If the needed information or consent is totally missing, the act is not voluntary and man cannot be considered morally responsible for it. Quite often voluntariness is incomplete, and the degree of responsibility depends on the degrees of agent's knowledge or consent. Fagothey mentions five factors, which affect on the degree of voluntariness and thus responsibility:

1. **Ignorance**: Invincible ignorance, which can be overcome by acquiring the needed knowledge, only lessens the voluntariness. Vincible ignorance destroys it totally.

2. **Passion** (strong emotion): antecedent passion, which has spontaneously arosen before the will has acted, lessens freedom, but consequent (deliberately aroused) passion may increase it.

3. **Fear**: If fear is motive for acting, it lessens voluntariness.

4. **Violence**: The external violence destroys voluntariness, if we withhold consent.

5. **Habit**: Responsibility for habitual act depends on, how intentionally it has been acquired, and the amount of effort to get rid of it.

It is meaningful to evaluate the moral value of an act only, if the actor was morally responsible for the act. The moral evaluation of an act depends on three factors: 1) the **moral nature** of the act itself, 2) the **motive** of the actor, and 3) the **circumstances**. The moral nature of an act can be good, bad or neutral. According to Catholic theology, some acts have intrinsic morality: they are either good or bad, according to their very nature, and the customs, human law, or even divine order cannot change their moral nature. Only if the act is neutral by its nature, it can get its external morality from some authority. They can be right or wrong, because some positive law – human customs, state or God – has ordered or forbidden them.

The actor's motive and other circumstances affect also on the moral nature of an act. The act is morally good, if it is good in all three aspects: its inner nature, motive, and circumstances. Any bad motive or circumstance can weaken or totally ruin a good act. If an act is bad itself, it cannot be made good by motives or circumstances, but they can modify the degree of badness. If an act is indifferent itself, it gets all its morality from motive and circumstances.

The previous theory can be nicely described as a set of ethical reasoning rules. Let's first present the rules for reasoning the morality (voluntariness) of an act:

Voluntariness rules:

Knowledge ∧ ¬Antecedent passion ∧ Fear ∧ ¬Violence ∧ ¬Habit → Fully voluntary
¬Knowledge ∧ Available knowledge → Less voluntary
¬Knowledge ∧ ¬Available knowledge → ¬Voluntary
Antecedent passion → Less voluntary
Consequent passion → More voluntary
Fear → Less voluntary
Violence → ¬Voluntary
Intentionally acquired habit → Voluntary
Half-intentionally acquired habit ∧ Unconscious habit → Less voluntary
Unintentionally occurred habit ∧ Unconscious habit → ¬Voluntary
Conscious habit ∧ ¬Tried to get rid of → Voluntary

$$\text{Conscious habit} \land \text{Tried to get rid of} \xrightarrow{\text{depending on effort}} \begin{cases} \text{Voluntary or} \\ \text{Less voluntary or} \\ \text{¬Voluntary} \end{cases}$$

The moral quality of an act is determined by its inner nature, motive and other circumstances. Motives affect on the moral nature of an act in the same way than other circumstances, and thus we can combine them into one factor *Circumstances*. Now we can evaluate the moral quality according to following rules:

Nature good ∧ Circumstances good → Act very good
Nature good ∧ Circumstances neutral → Act good
Nature good ∧ Circumstances bad → Act bad
(or less good, depending on how bad circumstances are)
Nature neutral ∧ Circumstances good → Act good
Nature neutral ∧ Circumstances neutral → Act neutral
Nature neutral ∧ Circumstances bad → Act bad
Nature bad ∧ Circumstances good → Act less bad
Nature bad ∧ Circumstances neutral → Act bad
Nature bad ∧ Circumstances bad → Act very bad