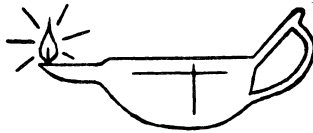

FAITH & REASON



"MORAL SYSTEMS: THE NEW AND THE OLD"

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Moral Systems: The New and the Old

by GERMAIN GRISEZ

In what follows, Germain Grisez pinpoints a central and important consideration for those confused about moral teaching in today's world: one cannot long adopt certain specific moral precepts without adopting the entire world view from which such precepts rise. In outlining both the natures and applications of the "old morality" and the "new morality" as consistent world views, Dr. Grisez reveals the total character of each system. Such a service forces one to choose—and informs one's choice.

What is meant by "the old morality" and "the new morality"? The old morality is the set of positions on moral questions respecting sex and human life which was held by almost all Jews and Christians as recently as sixty years ago. The new morality is a different and opposed set of positions on such matters, widely accepted today even by many who regard themselves as Jews or Christians.

According to the old morality, genital sexual activity can rightly be chosen only in the context of marriage. Marriage is indissoluble, and contraceptive practices are excluded. Erotic stimulation and fantasy is morally acceptable only if it is directed toward intercourse with one's own marital partner. Innocent life is never to be taken.

Thus, according to the old morality, fornication, adultery, seduction, rape, prostitution, polygamy, attempted remarriage following divorce, masturbation, intercourse between persons of the same sex, intercourse with nonhuman animals, and contraception are immoral. Incomplete acts of erotic stimulation directed toward forbidden sexual activities also are immoral, as is deliberate indulgence in erotic fantasies engaged in as a partial substitute for

such forbidden activities. Abortion, infanticide, suicide, and euthanasia are forbidden just as murder is.

According to the new morality, no sexual activity is morally excluded unless the satisfaction to be gained from it is outweighed by the pain it is likely to cause, or unless someone's rights are violated. What consenting adults do in private cannot be intrinsically wrong; they need only be careful that no one gets seriously hurt. Masturbatory sex and all forms of sexual fantasy are harmless, and thus morally acceptable. Innocent life may be taken in many circumstances; the lives which must be protected are those of persons who could and would put up a fight if someone tried to kill them and those of persons whose lives could and would be violently defended or avenged by others.

Thus, according to the new morality, rape remains wrong, insofar as it violates rights. Prostitution which is not chosen freely and deliberately is wrong. Seduction of children by adults is wrong. Sodomasochistic acts which cause serious damage are wrong. Spreading venereal diseases and unplanned babies are at least undesirable forms of behavior. Killing adults without their consent is wrong unless they happen to be individuals—such as those living permanently in institutions—who lack friends or relatives who would put up a fuss. Killing unborn children and infants is wrong if their parents do not wish them to be killed, but can be right if at least one parent consents to the killing.

Many people who hold significant parts of the new morality and who accept its basic principles cling to some parts of the old morality. The new morality has been replacing the old only gradually in Western culture, beginning about 1500. As this process has proceeded, many people have been inconsistent due to confusion, not due to dishonesty. Of course, some people have been inconsistent due to dishonesty.

Dishonesty in moral questions takes diverse forms at different times. During the Victorian period, dishonesty frequently took the form of hypocrisy—that is, profession in public of strict moral standards together with indulgence in private behavior incompatible with the standards professed. During our present period, dishonesty perhaps more often takes the forms of self-deception—profession to oneself as well as to others of honesty and openness together with evasion of serious reflection upon ideas which might require one to

change one's lifestyle or alter one's behavior.

Because the new morality has been replacing the old gradually for several centuries, many people today do not understand the old morality, and tend to confuse the morality they were taught as children or the morality of the nineteenth century with the old morality. However, few children today are instructed in the old morality as a coherent lifestyle growing out of intelligible root-principles. For this reason, most people today—like many already in the nineteenth century—regard the old morality as a bundle of unintelligible tabus or outdated social conventions.

In what follows I do not argue for or against either the old morality or the new morality. Rather, I attempt to explain what makes the difference between them. I try to show each of these opposed normative positions as a lifestyle which is understandable and coherent when it is seen in the light of its own presuppositions.

THE WORLDVIEWS OF MORALITY

Both the old morality and the new morality in respect to sex and innocent life grow out of worldviews which have much wider concerns, concerns with the whole of reality and the whole of human life. Someone who does not reflect upon these wider concerns and understand their relevance is likely to attempt to explain the opposing normative positions by superficial and irrelevant considerations.

An example of such a false explanation is the attempt—common in popular expositions of both the old morality and the new morality—to ground the norms in considerations of health. For example, some people mistakenly used to suggest that masturbation is wrong because it causes debility and pimples; others mistakenly suggest today that fornication is good because it relieves nuerosis and psychosomatic illnesses. However, there is no real evidence that adherence to either the old morality or the new morality is especially hygienic; except with respect to venereal disease, both are on a par in being irrelevant to the prevention, causes and cure of physical and mental illness.

The worldviews underlying the old morality and the new morality can be contrasted in respect to at least four fundamental principles:

The old morality

1. God has formed and still acts in us and in the world about us. Thus there is meaning which does not originate in human thought and value which does not originate in human desires and choices. What God creates is intelligible since he is intelligent and valuable since He loves His creatures and directs each being He creates to its own flourishing, its own fulfillment.

2. Human persons can make free choices. By choosing the goods to which they shall dedicate themselves, persons can determine their relationships with God, with other people, with the world, and with themselves. If persons determine these relationships in agreement with the meaning and value *already* given by God, they use their power of free choice well. If not, they are morally evil. Even if one is morally good, one may be unhappy or unsuccessful due to factors beyond one's own control. But if one's life is evil, one can only blame oneself.

3. Human actions which are good not only bring about desirable states of consciousness, but also carry on God's work of creation. Thus, good acts extend meaning and realize good in human

The new morality

1. Whatever is beyond human consciousness is simply nature—a world which exists and goes on of itself. All meaning and value originate in human thought and desire, for nature in itself is blind and indifferent. Brute facts take on meaning only as humans think and talk about them. Anything is good which yields a desired state of consciousness.

2. Human persons make choices due to their personalities and characters which are determined by heredity and environment, by nature and culture. If choices do not lead to happiness and success they are unfortunate and mistaken. However, personal failure is a result of institutions, poor early training, ignorance of facts, mental illness, or the inevitable consequences of mankind's evolution from apes. Thus, if one's life is bad, one is not responsible. If the good life is to be achieved, people must find techniques to alter human nature and the environment.

3. Human actions which are good only incidentally have effects outside human consciousness; their essential goodness is that they are conducive to enjoyable experience rather than to painful

persons as living wholes, in objective social relationships (such as institutions), and in the material world. Moral evil is analogous, for it does widespread, *real* disvalue, which is there whether anyone knows it or not. The overcoming of evil requires a complete turning about of the self, whereby consciousness of evil is gained. One must take responsibility for evil, struggle against it, and sacrifice to overcome it. Suffering can be valuable—although it is not valuable in itself—insofar as it brings evil to consciousness, where it can be faced and overcome by love.

4. Human life on earth is important not only in its lived experience, but also because human persons are related to God—as friends or as enemies—in a way which goes beyond conscious experience. Thus, human persons and all the goods which contribute to their fullness share in immeasurable dignity. For this reason, any act which goes directly against one of the goods intrinsic to human persons—as individuals and in communities—is always wrong. One's act goes directly against a basic human good whenever one's act executes a choice by which one adopts a proposal to

feelings. Thus, different generations do not contribute their good deeds to the gradual building up of a realm or perfect community—such as the Kingdom of God—larger than individual interests and satisfactions. Similarly, bad human acts do not have permanent significance; they cease being important if their impact is not *felt* by anyone. The overcoming of evil is largely a matter of altering one's consciousness—*e.g.*, by drugs, psychological techniques, "religious" experience, and so forth. All suffering is to be avoided, for it alone is intrinsically evil.

4. The whole importance of human life on earth is in lived experience. There is no share in divine life open to mankind except the divinity of human persons themselves. Human persons are absolutely limited; the worth of their lives is always measurable; there is a price on everything. Human actions are only wrong if for a particular individual under particular social conditions they are likely to cause more pain than enjoyment, or if for a group of people living together they are likely to have a bad effect on the whole and in the long run. Any harm a certain sort of act might do in most

destroy or impede a good in one instance in order to achieve or promote some good in another instance. The evil done by such an act cannot be outweighed by the good it does, however great this good might be. Thus, there are moral absolutes which protect the immeasurable dignity inherent in persons.

situations might always be outweighed by the good such an act might do in an unusual case. Thus, there are no moral absolutes. Any act can be justified by the good it does. If the good is great enough, evil may be done that the good might follow therefrom.

SPECIAL PRINCIPLES

These very general principles make the difference between the worldviews out of which the old morality and the new morality grow. But to see how the general principles lead to radically opposed normative positions on specific issues—as I summarized at the beginning of the paper—one must also take into account some more specific issues of principle which divide and oppose the two worldviews.

The old morality

1. Human persons are inherently bodily realities—they look back to an origin from the slime of the earth and forward to resurrection of the body. The bodily life and sexual function of human persons are *intrinsically* valuable, and immeasurably so, for they are of themselves personal, not merely instrumental to personal values. No person can *own* his body, for the body and its functions are *intrinsic* to a human person, whereas ownership implies power over what is *other*

The new morality

1. Human persons are conscious subjects who have and use bodies. What belongs to the person intrinsically is only what distinguishes the person from “lower” nature. Bodily life and sexual capacity are only valuable instrumentally. They get their significance only by being assumed into the sphere of the conscious subject and regulated to satisfy the subject’s desires. To treat bodily life and human sexual functioning as having inviolability in themselves is to

than oneself. Thus, persons ought not to treat human life and human sexual acts as mere objects. It follows that abortion, infanticide, suicide, and euthanasia are excluded as attacks on *personal* goods. Much sexual behavior—such as masturbation and intercourse with animals—which seems harmless on the surface is excluded because it goes against the reality of the person as bodily self and treats sexual powers as mere objects. Prostitution and pornography are wrong partly for this reason.

2. Sexual capacity and acts are especially important because human personal (which includes interpersonal) values are *immediately* at stake in the very biology of human sex. A man and a woman who copulate in a manner suited to hand on human life become “one flesh”, for they are a single principle of generation. A sexual act which *might* generate a new person carries within itself the immeasurable dignity of human life in its transmission and new beginning. The immeasurable, personal character of the value (new life) which grounds one-flesh unity argues for an enduring relationship between a man and a woman who are joined in inti-

subordinate persons to the blind laws of nature. Thus, killing can be justified if there is no self-conscious subject (abortion, infanticide, some euthanasia) or if the conscious subject no longer finds bodily life useful (suicide and euthanasia with consent). Masturbation and intercourse with animals is only a matter of taste. Prostitution and pornography are not inherently wrong, because human bodies *are* sex objects; genital organs *are* tools. A difficulty only arises if there is some lack of freedom, for one’s body is is one’s private *property*.

2. The special importance of sex is its vast capacity to make for happiness or unhappiness, and also to contribute to personal success and failure in life. No personal or interpersonal values are immediately at stake in the very biology of human sex. But sexual capacity is always ready at hand to yield intense and enjoyable (even if fleeting) satisfaction. People who copulate together often do each other a valuable service. Some sexual acts can cause pregnancy, but nothing follows from this fact unless pregnancy does occur. The basis of interpersonal sexual relationship in mutual service—the give and take of enjoyable experience—argues for a rela-

mate sexual unity, and argues against a relationship at the disposal of the parties. Contraceptive practices—acts intended to impede the handing on of life—are excluded from marital intercourse because such practices attack the *interpersonal* good of the handing on of human life; of a new person.

3. A person's life is not meaningful because of the satisfaction one experiences or the successes one achieves, but because of one's dedicated work in the service of goods which contribute intrinsically to the fullness of persons and communities. Similarly, persons have community only by joint commitment to each other and to goods to which they are dedicated together. Activity pertaining to sex not only must *respect* the goods immediately at stake in sex, but also must be shaped into a meaningful whole. Thus, sexual activity must be limited to a communal relationship suited to *serve* the relevant basic human goods, including the handing on of new life. Apart from such a context, sexual activity loses meaning, does not form community, and tends to become masturbatory. But a permanent relationship open to all the relevant goods and dedi-

tionship which is at the disposal of the parties. Contraceptive practices are reasonable and human, for they subject infra-personal biological processes to the truly personal values which are located only in conscious experience. No personal values can be at stake for a merely possible person who never comes to be.

3. A person's life is only meaningful to the extent that one is able to fulfill oneself. Self-fulfillment is gained by achieving one's own projected purposes and enjoying the satisfactions of the "good life". Merely physical sex, such as masturbation, is enjoyable, but there is more to be gained from sex. For normal people, sexual relations involving two (or perhaps more) persons are more enjoyable than the physical satisfaction which can be gained by oneself alone, for sexual relations involving two or more persons open up the possibility of various psychological satisfactions. These psychological enjoyments are of the most varied sorts, and none of them is to be regarded as inherently wrong. For example, some people enrich sex with experiences of domination and submission; sadomasochistic activity is good for those who enjoy it if no

cated to the ministry of serving God in creating new persons is marriage. Thus, adultery, fornication, homosexual activity, and other extra-marital sexual activities are excluded. The one-to-one relationship inherent in potentially fruitful sexual acts excludes polygamy, while the one-self unity of the relationship excludes serial polygamy—i.e., divorce and remarriage.

4. Human sexual activity is only appropriate within the framework of a mutual commitment in marriage. Since such a commitment and acts shaped by it depend upon the free consent of both partners, any sexual act involving another without the other's fully informed and free consent is wrong. Thus, rape, seduction of children, prostitution conditioned by enslaving factors, and so on are wrong. But at a much more subtle level, the demand for fully free consent excludes the choice of any sexual act, even in marriage, primarily to satisfy one's sex drive. Thus, it is vital that one develop the ability to abstain from sexual acts or to surrender oneself to sexual passion and action, precisely as the human goods relevant to sex require. Abstinence, when it is

permanent damage is done. Many people enrich sex with experiences of achievement; this enjoyment can be mutual when parties simultaneously succeed with each other. Marriage is not a vocation, not a ministry of creating new persons. Rather, marriage is an arrangement which enriches sexual enjoyment for some people who are not very adventuresome, and who prefer a secure source of sexual gratification.

4. Sexual desire is a basic physiological drive, not unlike hunger. People who are normal and healthy have no choice about *whether* to satisfy this drive, but only about *how* to satisfy it. One who does not feel the need for regular sexual outlets is sick; one who feels the need and cannot satisfy it will become sick. Rape, the seduction of children, and prostitution which involves enslavement are generally wrong, not so much because of the sexual acts involved as because of the assault or other coercive interference with the victim's rights. However, individuals who refuse to gratify others sexually without good reason lack decency and consideration; to refuse merely because of a moral scruple is cruel and inhuman. A wise person knows that one can gain

indicated, expresses and fosters marital love just as much as intercourse does. Abstinence from sexual activity outside marriage expresses respect for the relevant human goods, and is conducive to a more wholehearted dedication to other human goods, such as truth, justice and holiness.

5. Among Christians (but not among Jews and many others who accepted all the above), the old morality also involved the belief that *both* human sexual activity within marriage *and* abstinence from such activity apart from marriage signify and make real in the human family the mutual personal relationship which primarily holds between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This relationship is a peculiar sort of love; God is this love, but human persons are invited to enter into it through Christ and His Church. Christian marriage is a true sacrament, inasmuch as by their very marital bond of faithful love the Christian husband and wife signify and share in the union of divine love. Fruitful love in Christian marriage builds up the Body of Christ. Consecrated virginity bears witness to belief in the Kingdom which is coming, in which "there will be no marrying nor giving in marriage."

the most pleasure and satisfaction in life by making others happy. Therefore, the healthy person—seeking enjoyment in giving enjoyment to others—will engage in sexual activity of much greater variety, complexity, and frequency than mere physiological need would require.

5. Christian conceptions of sexual activity and abstinence as sacramental are nonsensical, for the whole Christian view of things is based upon meaningless notions, such as the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the Church as the Kingdom of God already present in a hidden way in this world. Such notions are at best myths which once served a purpose in Western culture but now only obstruct scientific realism and its technical applications. Love between persons is nothing but a mutual disposition to give to each other and receive from one another various sorts of enjoyment. This attitude comes and goes rather mysteriously, as other moods do. But, undoubtedly, once psychology progresses sufficiently, we shall be able to explain and to control this peculiar disposition called "love".

There probably are other factors which contribute to making the difference between the old morality and the new morality. However, the above factors seem to me to be the most important ones.

Undoubtedly, a great many people would maintain that neither the old morality nor the new morality is altogether correct. In practice such persons would sometimes agree with the moral judgments of the old morality but other times agree with the moral judgments of the new morality. The question is whether such persons can work out a coherent position—a whole worldview—comparable to that of the old morality and that of the new morality which will support the moral judgments they wish to make. I know of no complete and coherent position between these two radically opposed views.

Whether anyone will think out a coherent alternative to the old morality and the new morality remains to be seen. Meanwhile, however, one thing is clear. No one is entitled to take some of the positions of the old morality for granted while abandoning others, for the old morality is an organic unity, not a mere bundle of rules. To abandon some of the norms of the old morality is implicitly to give up some or all of its fundamental principles, and thus to remove the vital principle of norms which one, perhaps, would rather retain. The new morality, likewise, is an organic whole. To engraft oneself into it by adopting some of it is to accept some or all of its vital principles, and such acceptance inexorably leads to one's total absorption into the lifestyle and worldview of the new morality.
