

9th Grade CCD #17 St. Raymond of Penafort Catholic Church
Definitions Related to Human Acts
February 7, 2021

There are several concepts and definitions useful for our understanding of the goodness or badness of human acts as they relate to sin. I have taken them from *Call to Happiness, Guiding Ethical Principles, 3rd Ed.*, Sr. Terese Auer, O.P., St. Cecilia Congregation, Nashville, TN, 2018. The numbers are associated with the page numbers within the text. This is not meant to be a comprehensive discussion of the topic; but just highlighting a few basic points. The textbook cited above is used as a primary text at Pope John Paul the Great High School in Dumfries, VA, in their core ethics tract. It is the second text after *The Human Person*, also written by Sr. Terese Auer, O.P.

A similar discussion of this topic can be found in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Use the index to find a specific topic, but you will find "The Morality of Human Acts" (CCC 1749 – 1761), "The Morality of the Passions (CCC 1762 – 1775), and "Moral Conscience" (CCC 1776 – 1802).

Conscience

From previous classes we know that there is a rationale process for the operation of our conscience. Every judgment of our conscience applies this process to an individual act (p. 76). For most of us, they are performed instantly:

1. Understand the moral norm – Ex. It is wrong to disobey my parents.
2. Place moral norm in context of a particular act – Ex. My parents told me to stay home.
3. Make a moral judgment – Ex. I should not go out with my friends.

We must always follow our conscience (p. 78-79). Sometimes we can have an erroneous conscience – when a person is doing evil when thinking he is doing good – Ex. Small child coloring on his father's work papers. That

ignorance is called invincible (a person is not aware that he is doing wrong). A person is not responsible for such acts. On the other hand, for example, a Catholic who defies the teachings of the Catholic Church for many decades by saying that he is personally opposed to abortion, but publicly in favor of it; could have formed an erroneous conscience which has been trained for years in this belief. This is called vincible ignorance and does not excuse the evil. (CCC 1790 – 1794)

"This [vincible] ignorance can often be imputed to personal responsibility. This is the case when a man 'takes little trouble to find out what is true and good, or when conscience is by degrees almost blinded through the habit of committing sin'." (CCC 1791)

A doubtful conscience is one where the moral judgment is in doubt (p. 83) – a deer hunter shooting at a bush suspecting there is a deer behind it. In that case the person always must choose a safer course of action.

We inform our consciences by good habits: informing ourselves of the truth in what has been revealed to us by our "inner sense" which is the "foundation or basis of conscience" (do good avoid evil), Divine Revelation (10 Commandments), by following Jesus Christ's example, and by understanding the Divine Revelation given to us by the Catholic Church (p. 87-88). (CCC 1783 – 1785)

"Ignorance of Christ and his Gospel, bad example given by others, enslavement to one's passions, assertion of a mistaken notion of autonomy of conscience, rejection of the Church's authority and her teaching, lack of conversion and of charity: these can be the source of errors of judgment in moral conduct." (CCC 1792)

The lack of guilt does not necessarily mean innocence. "When...conscience falls asleep – we have seen it happen in the last century – man destroys both himself and the world." (Pope Benedict XVI sermon, 9/4/2004)

Acts

A voluntary act is an act which involves the intellect and will (see operation of conscience above). If there are options available (Ex. Do it or not do it), it is a free act. If there are no options, it is not a free act.

A human act requires an object (what is being done), an end (why it is being done), and the circumstances (when, where, how, and to whom it is being done) (CCC 1750 - 1754).

Moral Act

For an individual moral act, there is the requirement of an interior act (the will's consent to the act with its object, circumstance, and end) and an exterior act (the execution of the will's direction). The interior act is the planning component, and the exterior act is the "doing" of it.

For an act to be good, the object, end and circumstances must all be good. (p. 111-122) (CCC 1755)

Evaluating a moral act:

Object: is what I am doing in this exterior act good?

End: Is the end my will seeks in its intentions good?

Regarding a moral act, what is a sin? (p. 128)

1. What the person consents to is evil. (Objective)
2. The person knows that what he is consenting to is evil. (Subjective)
3. The person freely consents to what he knows is evil. (Subjective)

What about "thought sins"? Ex. My friend's parents always give her whatever she wants. She recently was showing off her new Apple watch and the promise of a new car when she gets her driver's license. I have been harboring thoughts of envy. One can continue to harbor the thoughts or reject them and perhaps find ways to be kind to your friend. Thoughts are not in themselves sinful. What one does with the thought can be sinful.

Principle of Double Effect: There are naturally arising circumstances when the consequence of an act has an evil effect. Ex. A young pregnant mother is diagnosed with advanced uterine cancer. The uterus must be removed immediately to save the life of the mother. The child is not yet developed enough to live outside the womb. The proposed operation saves the life of the mother but almost certainly will cause the child's death. (p. 130)

Four conditions must always be present to apply the principle of double effect:

1. The act itself must be morally good or neutral.
2. The person must directly intend the good effect and only tolerate the evil effect.
3. The good effect must be greater than or equal to the evil effect.
4. The good effect must not be obtained by means of the evil effect.

Ex. Is it justifiable for a fireman to enter a building that is fully engulfed with flames in order to rescue a cat? All human occupants are out of the building. The good effect is the cat is rescued. The evil effect is the fireman puts his life in danger. The good effect is not greater than the evil effect. This is not an application of the double effect.