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## What does moral theology expect from philosophical ethics?

The shortest answer to this question is that philosophical ethics should do *its* job. The problem, however, is that the perception of philosophical ethics by moral theology can vary, depending on the view of man's moral reality and on the perception of ethics as a separate discipline, different from moral theology.

One can immediately recognize the difference between philosophical ethics and moral theology by considering the definitions of the two. The term “ethics” is derived from the Greek word *ethos*, which means ‘a custom, a habitual way of acting a characteristic behavioral attribute or mind-set of a society or social group’. The Latin equivalent of this term is *mos*, or *moris*, from which the adjective *moralis* is derived. Hence, *ethics* and *that which is moral* are synonymous terms that are often used interchangeably. Therefore, ethics is referred to as the discipline or philosophy of determining the rightness or wrongness of human action. “Ethics is a theory of morality, i.e., a philosophical and normative science that justifies the obligation to do good”<sup>1</sup>. Moral theology, in turn, is that part of theology that also deals with human action. Therefore, various definitions of moral theology, as they reveal its subject matter, speak of human action. However, it is viewed from a different perspective than the *natural* perspective specific to philosophy (ethics); it is human action viewed from a supernatural perspective — from

<sup>1</sup> J. de Finance, *Etica generale*, Roma 1997, p. 7; I. Mroczkowski, *Teologia moralna. Definicja, przedmiot, metoda*, Płock 2011, p. 27–28.

the perspective of Divine Revelation. An example of such a definition can be found in Pope St. John Paul II's encyclical *Veritatis splendor*:

Moral theology is a reflection concerned with «morality», with the good and the evil of human acts and of the person who performs them; in this sense it is accessible to all people. But it is also “theology”, inasmuch as it acknowledges that the origin and end of moral action are found in the One who “alone is good” and who, by giving himself to man in Christ, offers him the happiness of divine life<sup>2</sup>.

The encounter between moral theology and ethics can be riddled with unfriendliness — of late mainly on the part of philosophy. However, it can also prove to be a place of fruitful exchange that can afford both sides of such an encounter some benefits, chiefly of an intellectual nature.

In more recent times (as the present conference focuses on this day and age), the most common form of unfriendliness on the part of philosophy towards theology has been its being closed to the transcendent dimension. Various philosophical currents do not recognize the existence of the transcendent reality, and therefore they find an encounter with theology meaningless. Under these conditions it is difficult to have any dialogue between philosophy and theology, let alone a fruitful one. The problem is that this kind of attitude is not an isolated phenomenon. A hostile attitude can be observed especially towards Christianity in general, and towards Catholicism in particular.

Although the converse (theology showing hostility towards philosophy) has sometimes occurred in history, there has long been a strong emphasis on dialogue, even with those who do not recognize God's existence. There is a reference here to the attitude adopted by the early Christians and their encounter with pagan philosophy, which was characterized by a cautious openness to humanist values, including philosophical values that antiquity had developed. This also applied to morality. The basis for

2 John Paul II, Encyclical *Veritatis splendor*, no. 29, [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_06081993\\_veritatis-splendor.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_06081993_veritatis-splendor.html) (10.09.2022).

such an open attitude can be found in St. Paul's words in the Epistle to the Philippians: "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things" (Phil 4:8). Such an attitude was also encouraged by St. Peter the Apostle in his First Epistle, in which he advised preparedness "to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope" (1 Pt 3:15). These two New Testament texts set the rules of conduct towards philosophy, including moral philosophy, or ethics. We are dealing here neither with an unreflective recognition of philosophical, (and therefore ethical) achievements, nor with praise, or even acceptance, of an approach that would be characterized by a "possessiveness" of theology towards philosophy, limiting it within its methodologically legitimate framework. The latter phenomenon is of particular interest to us, since it was polemicized against by Cracow-based professor Fr. Kazimierz Kłósak. This polemic was a reaction to Jacques Maritain's so-called *adequate philosophy*. Against the backdrop of the critique of Maritain's views, we learn the difference between philosophy and theology as separate fields of knowledge.

Maritain recognizes that philosophizing without references specific to theology is not possible. For if ethics wants to reflect the whole truth about human behaviour, it must take into account the fact that the world of human behaviour consists of supernatural reality, as well as natural.

If moral philosophy is to be a true practical discipline, a discipline equal to its object, that is if it is to guide concrete, actual, historical human action, i.e., action turned towards a supernatural goal and operating under the conditions of the fallen and redeemed human nature, while this goal and these conditions are known only to theology, then moral philosophy must take over these truths from theology, i.e., submit itself positively to them<sup>3</sup>.

3 K. Kłósak, *Maritainowa analiza stosunku filozofii moralnej do teologii*, „Collectanea Theologica” 19 (1938) no. 2, p. 177.

– as Kłósak relates Maritain’s position. It is precisely this subordination of philosophy to the rules specific to theology in the name of truth that Maritain calls “*adequate* philosophy”. Kłósak does not agree with such a position in philosophy. According to him, each type of sentence that we encounter in the discourse concerned with religion should retain its own specificity. Therefore, he reminds us what types of sentences we know concerning transcendent references. Accepting and/or expressing the content of Divine Revelation itself, where there is a limitation on the scope of reason’s interference, brings such an attitude closer to fideism. However, theology, in the proper sense of the word, is born “through the rational illumination of revealed truths”<sup>4</sup>. Philosophy, on the other hand, is a purely natural perspective (nonetheless recognizing the fact that these natural references do not constitute the totality of the surrounding reality), free of binding transcendent references, i.e. ones that give theological meaning to its statements.

Kłósak supplements this distinction between the *theological* and the *philosophical* by providing a summary of St. Thomas Aquinas’ concept of theology:

in contrast to natural theology, which through creatures comes to know God in His perfections common to Him and to creatures [...] supernatural theology, thanks to Revelation comes to know God first and foremost as He is in Himself, in His life exclusively His own, and not only from the aspect of His analogous likeness to creatures, which He possesses as their first cause [...] Theology deals with creation not as such, but insofar as Revelation speaks of it, or insofar as it enters into any relation with God as its origin and end [...]. Theology makes use of philosophical consideration to prove the *natural* truths that constitute the *praeambula fidei*, to better elucidate the truths of faith by pointing out in the natural order of things certain similarities to the supernatural reality, and finally to refute arguments against faith by showing their fallacy or non-necessity<sup>5</sup>.

4 K. Kłósak, *Maritainowa analiza stosunku filozofii moralnej do teologii*, p. 213.

5 K. Kłósak, *Maritainowa analiza stosunku filozofii moralnej do teologii*, p. 215–216.

This role of philosophy vis-à-vis theology (including ethics vis-à-vis moral theology) is confirmed in the encyclical *Fides et ratio* (no. 68). The encyclical details claims brought by ethics to moral theology. For this reason, it is worth quoting no. 68 in its entirety, because in some sense it answers the question posed in the title of this paper: “What does moral theology expect from philosophical ethics?”:

*Moral theology* has perhaps an even greater need of philosophy’s contribution. In the New Testament, human life is much less governed by prescriptions than in the Old Testament. Life in the Spirit leads believers to a freedom and responsibility which surpass the Law. Yet the Gospel and the Apostolic writings still set forth both general principles of Christian conduct and specific teachings and precepts. In order to apply these to the particular circumstances of individual and communal life, Christians must be able fully to engage their conscience and the power of their reason. In other words, moral theology requires a sound philosophical vision of human nature and society, as well as of the general principles of ethical decision-making<sup>6</sup>.

Commenting on no. 68 of *Fides et ratio*, Belgian Dominican Father Servais Theodore Pinckaers points out two important issues. The first one is the aforementioned structure of New Testament morality, which is based much less than the Old Covenant<sup>7</sup> morality on detailed moral regulations and precepts. Therefore, it needs the support of philosophy, and especially, but not exclusively, moral philosophy. At play here is also philosophical reflection on human nature and society, and on the nature of freedom to which we are called in the Holy Spirit<sup>8</sup>.

The second issue that Pinckaers points out is the proper conception of morality indicated by moral philosophy, which is adopted by moral

6 John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Fides et ratio*, no. 68, [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_14091998\\_fides-et-ratio.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091998_fides-et-ratio.html) (10.09.2022).

7 The Author of this paper uses the term „Covenant” instead of the “Testament” (both mean the same) since Fr. Pinckaers uses the latter in his paper quoted here.

8 S.T. Pinckaers, *The Place of Philosophy in Moral Theology*, in: *Faith and reason: the Notre dame symposium 1999*, ed. T. L. Smith, The Maritain Center, United States 1999, p. 10.

theology, which protects this theology from possible usurpation by human reason, which sometimes would like to take the place that Divine Revelation occupies in moral theology.

Let us first try to focus on the latter of these issues. The history of moral theology speaks of certain differences in views regarding morality, i.e. that which is most important in man's moral life — the main criterion for the rightness or wrongness of human conduct and its justification. Within the framework of moral theology, however, man's desire to know the truth and his desire to be able to fulfil God's revealed will as faithfully as possible came into play most often. This desire made it possible to see that not all visions of morality fully corresponded to what Divine Revelation conveys. This gave rise to a desire to better know and express the truth about a Christian's vocation and the resulting consequences for his conduct. This attitude also justifies the changes in the teaching of moral theology that we have seen over the course of its history. Pinckaers provides examples of certain philosophical concepts of morality and the effects they have had on moral theology. He also presents the philosophical concept that should be considered the most mature, while at the same time being the most faithful to the teachings of the New Testament.

There remain philosophical concepts that are difficult to reconcile with the moral message of the New Testament. Examples illustrating this would be the morality of obligations, as it refers to post-Tridentine theology textbooks, or the morality of duty and imperatives of the kind proposed by Kant. In both of these perspectives, few changes are made in relation to the Old Covenant, apart from new inspirations for long-established moral precepts. If it were correct,

[o]ne could conclude from this that the New Testament merely reasserts the moral teaching of the Decalogue, which is itself identified with the natural law, and that theology merely adds to moral teaching a few new sources of inspiration. As a result, morality principally becomes the concern of philosophy, and consequently the preferred name of the discipline becomes "ethics". Furthermore, the New Testament, such texts as the Sermon on the Mount in St. Matthew's Gospel and the apostolic catechesis in the St. Paul's letters, is

displaced from moral theology properly so called, and are relegated instead to the domain of spirituality<sup>9</sup>.

Pinckaers shows how the situation changes in seeing morality within the framework of moral theology when the moral philosophy on which we rely changes, and we introduce happiness and virtue ethics in place of duty ethics:

One's perspective and conclusions change, however, once one adopts the point of view of St. Thomas: in other words, the perspective changes completely once one adopts a morality of happiness and virtue that seeks excellence in action and in the moral agent himself, giving priority to interior acts, which form the virtues at the very root of one's personal actions. Once one views Christian morality from the perspective of the primary virtues, one immediately perceives the role played by theology with its virtues of faith, hope and charity<sup>10</sup>.

The examples presented here show the importance of not only moral theology referring to ethics, but also of referring to *appropriate* ethics. This appropriateness is also confirmed by attempts to create new theological approaches, whereby concepts that can by no means be reconciled with the content of Revelation are introduced in place of correct ethical approaches, i.e. those that are consistent with Revelation. By way of illustration, there is a tendency at certain Catholic universities to determine the moral value of an act primarily by its consequences. That is an instance of the so-called consequentialism, which is an attempt to transfer to Catholic theology the moral thinking inherent in utilitarianism, which is very popular in the Anglo-Saxon world<sup>11</sup>. The moral value of an act, in this viewpoint, is not

9 S. T. Pinckaers, *The Place of Philosophy in Moral Theology*, p. 10.

10 S. T. Pinckaers, *The Place of Philosophy in Moral Theology*, p. 10.

11 The influence of utilitarianism as a way of thinking in ethics has to do not only with the supremacy of the Anglo-Saxon culture, but above all with the dominance of the United States in the economic, military, cultural and political spheres after the collapse of communism in Europe.

determined by its object, but by its positive and negative consequences, which are compared and balanced. The final balance, then (i.e. the proportion between good and bad consequences) is supposed to be the answer to the question of the moral permissibility of a given act. Hence, this trend is also sometimes referred to as proportionalism. The basic problem of this model is concerned with balancing consequences that do not have a common denominator, e.g. the value of human life vs economic cost, or human life vs the comfort of the members of a given family. Another of its problems is concerned with the balancing of consequences, or rather, the attempt at identifying all possible, and even peripheral consequences, i.e. not only those that are defined as direct, but also further consequences that nevertheless may have a significant impact on the moral value of what one does. Most important, however, is the effect of such “balancing”. For it turns out that within the framework of such reasoning one can, for example, agree to abortion, that is, accept as morally permissible<sup>12</sup> an act that is morally intrinsically evil (evil by virtue of its object), because it openly transgresses the Fifth Commandment of the Decalogue, for the reason that we are dealing with here — the killing of an innocent human being.

From these examples it follows that the philosophical ethics to which moral theology refers plays an important role in the moral evaluation of a human act and in the determination of moral duty. One can also see how important it is that this evaluation does not conflict with what Revelation says about the act in question. A dissonance found here serves as an indication that a given philosophical reasoning in the case of moral theology does not work, because it leads to conclusions that contradict what Divine Revelation says and what theology has said so far. In this context, it is easier to understand why St. Thomas Aquinas and his theological work still play

12 Sometimes in justifying an act like this, the categories of *good* — *evil* are not used at all, but in their stead there appear *right* and *wrong*. However, this is a kind of ploy, because ‘right’ in defining an act is here a *de facto* substitute for the term *good*, and ‘wrong’ — for the term *evil*. At the same time, it can be seen that the ethical reasoning proposed here eliminates from moral theology its most important category and also the criterion for judging a given act, i.e. moral good and evil.



a hugely significant role in moral theology. He is the one who made a successful synthesis of philosophical ethics and theology.

This is what makes studying the theology of St. Thomas so interesting. Thomas succeeded in constructing a theology that was in harmony with Greco-Roman philosophy and did so precisely in the area of morality. Our interest is deepened when we realize that Thomas offers us the completed version of a virtue morality inherited both from the Fathers of the Church and from ancient philosophy, while most modern philosophies and the sciences remain tied to a morality reduced to the level of imperatives and prohibitions<sup>13</sup>.

Although Aquinas' concept of moral theology, incorporating the earlier achievements of theology and ancient philosophy, still seems to be the most mature form of cooperation between the two fields of knowledge (philosophy and theology), it is not the only attempt of this kind. Apart from some clearly unsuccessful efforts (e.g., challenging the Magisterium of the Church in the form of the so-called New Moral Theology, or through events such as the Cologne Declaration of 1989), one can also see other attempts by moral theology to use ethics. Karol Wojtyła's habilitation dissertation is one such attempt, albeit one that ends with a statement about the impossibility of adapting Max Scheler's ethics to a theological interpretation of morality. All these attempts make it possible to see that there are certain conditions that an ethical position must meet in order to be used in moral theology, to better understand how morality functions, what moral duties exist, and why they are the way they are. Certain basic threshold requirements must be met by this ethics, e.g.: openness to transcendence and acceptance of certain fundamental truths derived from Divine Revelation, such as the truth of things, man as a person composed of a body and a spiritual soul, freedom of the human will, etc. On the other hand, the compatibility of the more specific claims of a given philosophical position with the truths of Revelation is not so much a condition for the possibility of their *cooperation* in the search for the truth concerning morality, as it is

13 S. T. Pinckaers, *The Place of Philosophy in Moral Theology*, p. 12.

an effect of this *cooperation*. There is much optimism about the possibility of affirming such compatibility. If we assume that man sincerely desires to discover the truth as part of his philosophical search, then the fruits of his search will be no different from what we know about morality through Divine Revelation. After all, the object of cognition in both cases is one and the same, and only the tools of cognition (philosophy and theology, including their effectiveness) are sometimes different.

What does moral theology expect from philosophical ethics? It expects the latter to fulfil its task by being open to the content dealt with by moral theology; to preserve its identity, without wishing to replace or supplant the essential claims related to Divine Revelation, which are fundamental to moral theology; to reassert the certainty of cognition and to help rid it of errors in that which concerns man's moral behaviour.

A philosopher too can benefit from an encounter with theology. He learns more fully about the purpose and meaning of life, the meanings of good and evil, and happiness and suffering, as well as death and what comes after it, rather than relying solely on philosophical knowledge (based primarily on human experience). Thus, recalling Aquinas' *adagium* whereby *Gratia non tollit, sed perficit naturam*, one can say that moral theology does not nullify philosophy, but moves it towards its perfection<sup>14</sup>. And so it is still possible for moral theology and philosophical ethics to cooperate fruitfully, just as they have done over the centuries. For the purposes of this cooperation, another question could also be posed: what does ethics expect from moral theology?

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14 S. T. Pinckaers, *The Place of Philosophy in Moral Theology*, p. 20.

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## Abstract

*What does moral theology expect from philosophical ethics?*

The morality of the New Testament is different from the morality of the Old Testament. There is less specific guidance in the New Testament, and hence “more” human reason is needed to point to and justify particular (especially more specific) moral norms. Therefore, moral theology uses ethics to explain and justify moral norms. This is stated in no. 68 of the Encyclical Letter *Fides et ratio*. However, such ethics must meet certain basic requirements, e.g. compatibility with Revelation (not contradicting the truths contained therein). The problematics of the interdependence between moral theology and ethics have been addressed by many philosophers and moral theologians. Many textbooks on moral theology discuss the reference to philosophical ethics. Nevertheless, among the most representative authors for the discussion of the relationship between moral theology and ethics in the context of the debate over Karol Wojtyła’s habilitation dissertation are, on the part of philosophy, Kłósak, who was a professor at the Theological Faculty of the Jagiellonian University, where Wojtyła earned his habilitation degree; and Pinckaers, on the part of moral theology, who wrote a commentary on no. 68 of the Encyclical *Fides et ratio*, which was authored by John Paul II — Karol Wojtyła.

**Keywords:** moral theology, ethics, philosophy, St. Thomas, Pinckaers, Kłósak

## Abstrakt

### *Czego oczekuje teologia moralna od etyki filozoficznej?*

Moralność Nowego Testamentu różni się od moralności Starego Testamentu. W Nowym Testamencie jest mniej konkretnych wskazówek, stąd „więcej” ludzkiego rozumu jest potrzebne, aby wskazać i uzasadnić określone (szczególnie bardziej konkretne) normy moralne. Dlatego teologia moralna wykorzystuje etykę do wyjaśniania i uzasadniania norm moralnych. Wskazuje na to nr 68 encykliki *Fides et ratio*. Jednakże taka etyka musi spełniać pewne podstawowe wymagania, np. być zgodna z Objawieniem (nie sprzeczać się z prawdami w nim zawartymi). Problematykę współzależności między teologią moralną a etyką podejmowało wielu filozofów i teologów moralnych. W wielu podręcznikach z zakresu teologii moralnej pojawiają się odniesienia do etyki filozoficznej. Jednakże wśród najbardziej reprezentatywnych autorów w temacie dyskusji nad relacją między teologią moralną a etyką w kontekście debaty nad rozprawą habilitacyjną Karola Wojtyły znajdują się: ze strony filozofii, ks. Kazimierz Kłósak, który był profesorem na Wydziale Teologicznym Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, gdzie Wojtyła obronił swoją habilitację oraz ze strony teologii moralnej, S. T. Pinckaers, który napisał komentarz do punktu 68 encykliki *Fides et ratio*, której autorem jest Jan Paweł II — Karol Wojtyła.

**Słowa kluczowe:** teologia moralna, etyka, filozofia, św. Tomasz, Pinckaers, Kłósak