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A TALE OF TWO WOMEN. REFLECTIONS ON TWO TYPES OF MORALITY, ONE HUNDRED YEARS AFTER THE BIRTH OF ST. JOHN PAUL II

INTRODUCTION

The centenary of the birth of St. John Paul II is a welcome occasion to reflect on his legacy. In the field of moral theology and ethics, the publication of his 1993 moral encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* was, without doubt, a decisive moment. Against what some authors call the new morality, this papal document holds up the notion of morality as a realm in which we encounter the absolute, to the point that one may be called upon to lay down one's life in martyrdom. In what follows, I will argue that the Polish pope's teaching is rooted in a classical Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian understanding of morality and thus not limited to Christianity. In fact, Sophocles' Antigone, the pagan character of a non-Christian author, can serve very well as a figure of the morality presented by the encyclical. For Antigone, the requirement of honoring her dead brother's body has an absolute character, on account of which she is willing to risk her life. A different woman will then serve as a figure of the new morality: Mrs. Bergmeier, who is praised by some of the proponents of this approach for having committed "sacrificial" adultery in order to be reunited with her family. Examining the differences between these two accounts, I will recall the classical distinction between choice and intention and argue that the new morality has forgotten about the moment of choice, subsuming it entirely under the intention. It is precisely in its teaching on the moral object and intrinsically evil acts that *Veritatis Splendor* defends the basic moral experience that we have a choice and that our choices matter.

I. *VERITATIS SPLENDOR* AND THE ABSOLUTE CLAIMS OF THE MORAL LIFE

By starting with a reflection on the Gospel episode of the encounter between Jesus and the rich young man, *Veritatis Splendor* situates morality in the context of the *sequela Christi.* The core of Christian morality is to follow Jesus; it is about Christian discipleship[1]. Toward the end of the document, John Paul II offers a reflection on martyrdom, which is at once the highpoint of the imitation of Christ and a witness to the absolute claims of God's law. In fact, for the encyclical martyrdom exists not only in matters of the faith but also in questions of morality: "Accepted as an affirmation of the inviolability of the moral order, [martyrdom] bears splendid witness both to the holiness of God's law and to the inviolability of the personal dignity of man, created in God's image and likeness"[2]. As Christian disciples should be prepared to lay down their lives rather than to renounce or blaspheme the name of Christ, so they should likewise be willing to die rather than to commit any other mortal sin. Christ himself was the first to give up everything for the world he came to save. He himself has loved us to the end, in the most radical way possible. Christ's complete gift of himself on the cross asks for a response. The response can be nothing less. To say it in the words of Hans Urs von Balthasar, every single Christian should consider martyrdom "as the external manifestation of the inner reality from which he or she lives. Martyrdom is the horizon of the Christian life"[3].

In making its point on moral martyrdom, the encyclical does not limit itself to the context of Christianity, but cites the pagan Roman poet Juvenal: "Consider it the greatest of crimes to prefer survival to honor and, out of love of physical life, to lose the very reason for living"[4]. By citing an ancient Roman author here, John Paul II wants to underline the fact that the sense of the absolute that confronts us in morality is not an exclusively Christian idea, but belongs to the patrimony of humanity: "In this witness to the absoluteness of the moral good *Christians are not alone:* they are supported by the moral sense present in peoples and by the great religious and sapiential traditions of East and West"[5]. In fact, he could also have cited authors from the ancient Greek tradition here. Aristotle can imagine acts of a particularly shameful kind that "we cannot be compelled to do, and rather than

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[1] John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Veritatis Splendor* (=VS), 6 VIII 1993, no. 19: "Following Christ is thus the essential and primordial foundation of Christian morality".

[2] VS 92.

[3] H.U. von Balthasar, *Cordula oder der Ernstfall,* Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag 1987, p. 14-15. My own translation.

[4] VS 94. Juvenal, *Satirae*, VIII, 83-84.

[5] VS 94. All italics in citations throughout this essay are original.

to do them we ought to die after the most terrible suffering"[6]. But also Democritus and Socrates say as much in their famous affirmation that it is better to suffer from injustice than to commit it[7]. There are acts so gravely sinful that they rob us of the very reasons for our existence. It is better to lose one's life than that which makes life worth living.

John Paul II's treatment of martyrdom toward the end of his encyclical is the culmination of one of his main arguments in the document. There are acts that must never be done. Some acts are intrinsically evil, independent of their socio-historical context and their underlying motivations[8]. There are some acts for which it is enough to know their moral object to understand that they are immoral. The very moment one knows that this is an act of apostasy, blasphemy, impiety, murder, adultery, theft, or treachery, one can be sure that one must not do it. An act of this kind does not represent a viable practical option under any circumstances whatsoever. There is no need to ask whether one is committing adultery with the right person, at the right place, at the right time and for the right motives[9]. Every person with whom one commits adultery is the wrong person; every motive is the wrong motive because committing adultery itself is wrong[10]. Now, this teaching is denied by several important currents in moral theology today, which go by the names of "autonomous morality," "proportionalism," or "consequentialism"[11]. It is not uncommon to group these trends under the name of "new morality," following

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[6] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. R. Crisp, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, III, i, 1110a.

[7] Plato, *Gorgias*, 469c; for the roots of this affirmation in Democritus, cf. H. Diels and W. Kranz, *Fragmente der Vorsokratiker,* Zürich: Weidmann Verlag 2005, Vol. II, p. 156, B45: "ὁ ἀδικῶν τοῦ ἀδικουμένον κακοδαιμονέστερος".

[8] Cf. e.g., VS 80: "Reason attests that there are objects of the human act which are by their nature 'incapable of being ordered' to God, because they radically contradict the good of the person made in his image. These are the acts which, in the Church's moral tradition, have been termed 'intrinsically evil' (*intrinsece malum*): they are such *always and per se,* in other words, on account of their very object, and quite apart from the ulterior intentions of the one acting and the circumstances".

[9] Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, II, 6, 1107a.

[10] Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *De Malo,* q. 15, a. 1, ad 5: "A man ought not to commit adultery for any expediency, just as he ought not to tell a lie for any expediency, as Augustine says in the book *Against Lying.*"

[11] There are significant differences between these currents, and while some authors would readily identify themselves as adherents to autonomous morality, very few would describe themselves as "proportionalists" or "consequentialists", names usually given them by their critics. However, all these approaches hold in common one distinctive feature, which, according to G.E.M. Anscombe, renders the differences between them "somewhat trifling by comparison": it is excluding prohibitions of "certain things simply in virtue of their description as such-and-such identifiable kinds of actions, regardless of any further consequences". [G.E.M. Anscombe, *Modern Moral Philosophy*, "Philosophy" 33 (1958), p. 10]. In what follows, to speak of an approach that has this characteristic, I will not talk of "proportionalism" or "consequentialism", but rather of the "new morality", an expression introduced by its proponents.

the lead of Joseph Fletcher's influential 1966 publication *Situation Ethics. The New Morality*[12]. In some parts of the world, the different versions of this approach have become the dominant schools in Catholic seminaries and universities, and John Paul II's concern was to offer a corrective here.

If it is impossible to speak of an act in itself – of the *species* or *object* of an act – and if the act's moral evaluation will always depend on its circumstances (including the broader, socio-historical context) and its underlying motivations, then no act of whatever kind could ever be excluded definitively as a possible object of one's choices. Proponents of the new morality might even grant that there are some acts that one must never do, but this "intrinsic" evil is defined tautologically. Thus, for instance, the command "Do not kill" is interpreted as forbidding *unjust* killings, and the commandment "Do not commit adultery" is interpreted as prohibiting immoral sexual relations[13]. What makes a killing unjust or what makes having sexual relations immoral will always depend on circumstances and intentions. The result is that an agent can never be entirely sure whether what is being proposed to him or her here and now is an act that violates the commandments or not, whether it is displeasing to God or perhaps even positively encouraged or commanded by him.

All our acting becomes hypothetical. But with that goes the possibility of martyrdom, given that in it one's whole life is at stake. No one will die for a hypothesis[14]. Who would rather die than offer incense to Caesar if he or she cannot be sure that rendering divine homage to a human being is *always* and *everywhere* offensive to God, independent of particular circumstances or motivations? Is it an act of idolatry only if one does it at the wrong time, at the wrong place, or for the wrong motives? What if one burns the incense to survive so that one can impart a Christian education to one's children and, thus, contribute to the growth of God's Church? Could offering incense to Caesar then be pleasing to God or even be commanded by him? No one who entertained such considerations has ever died a martyr. Either there are – at least a few – acts about whose immorality we can have certainty, or the martyr, far from being the epitome of Christ's disciple, is a fanatic who claims to know more than he or she can. The point of John Paul II's argument at this stage, then, is this: either some moral claims are absolute (in fact, these are few and yet of existential importance) or all are hypothetical. If, as the new morality has it, all moral claims are hypothetical, then the possibility of martyrdom is ruled out. As an approach that dispenses with martyrdom, the new morality cannot be a Christian one, given the central role martyrdom plays for Christianity.

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[12] J. Fletcher, *Situation Ethics. The New Morality*, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press 1966.

[13] For an interpretation of "intrinsic evil" in this sense, see for instance J. Fuchs, *Personal Responsibility and Christian Morality*, Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press 1983, p. 140: "But 'Thou shalt not kill' is obviously too broadly stated; it would be better to say, 'Thou shalt not commit murder'—that is, 'Thou shalt not kill unjustly'".

[14] Cf. R. Spaemann, *Überzeugungen in einer hypothetischen Zivilisation*, in: Schritte über uns hinaus. Gesammelte Reden und Aufsätze I, Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta 2010, p. 300.

II. ANTIGONE AND CLASSICAL MORALITY

Though not cited by the encyclical, the fictional character of Sophocles' Antigone may help us to get at the experience that John Paul II has in mind, namely the experience of the absolute that confronts us in the moral sphere. Antigone is a moral martyr and, in many ways, a prototype of this category. Defying the king's decree that denies the rite of burial to those convicted of treason, Antigone insists on honoring her dead brother's body, traitor though he is, by laying him to rest. She prefers risking her life to seeing her brother's body being eaten by dogs and birds. Her problem is that she gets caught and sentenced to death. Previously promised in marriage to the king's son, she accepts the king's judgment without remorse.

Further along in the piece, the Choir sings of her as someone who acted "αὐτόνομος," autonomously. Looking at the Choir's use of this word "αὐτόνομος" and contemplating Antigone's courage in violating a human law, the German moral theologian Stephan Goertz suggests that Antigone is a champion of autonomous morality, that is, the very type of morality that has been the main object of criticism of *Veritatis Splendor.* Thus, Goertz writes: "Antigone defies the command of Creon and, at the cost of *her* own life, fulfills her religious duty to bury the traitor and her own brother Polynices. She makes a decision, she makes a choice – according to 'her own law,' *autonomously*, as Sophocles explicitly states"[15].

The English translation of the passage to which Goerz refers reads as follows: "Then in glory and with praise you depart to that deep place of the dead, neither struck by wasting sickness, nor having won the wages of the sword. No, guided by your own laws and still alive [ἀλλ᾽ αὐτόνομος ζῶσα], unlike any mortal before, you will descend to Hades"[16]. Now it is undoubtedly true that "αὐτόνομος" literally means "following one's own law." And what the Choir wants to express with this phrase is without a doubt that Antigone did not observe the king's law but, instead, followed a different one, one that was closer to her own self. Yet one must ask what motivation Antigone should have had to die for a law that she had literally given to herself. If she herself was the lawgiver and all that was at stake was faithfulness to herself, or, to use a term dear to autonomous ethics, her authenticity, why would she put her life at risk? What is there to fear in transgressing a law that one has given to oneself? Why not say, together with Walt Whitman, "I contradict myself? Very

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[15] S. Goertz, *Autonomie kontrovers. Die katholische Kirche und das Moralprinzip der freien Selbstbestimmung*, in: S. Goertz, M. Striet (eds.), *Nach dem Gesetz Gottes. Autonomie als christliches Prinzip*, Freiburg i. Br.: Herder 2014, p. 153: "Antigone widersetzt sich dem Gebot Kreons und kommt um den Preis des eigenen Lebens *ihrer* religiösen Plicht nach, den Landesverräter und eigenen Bruder Polyneikes zu bestatten. Sie fällt eine Entscheidung, sie trifft eine Wahl – und zwar nach 'eigenem Gesetz', *autonom,* so heißt es ausdrücklich bei Sophokles". My own translation.

[16] Sophocles, *The Antigone of Sophocles*, ed. R. Jebb, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1891, verses 817-820.

well then, I contradict myself; I am large, I contain multitudes"[17]? If I am my own supreme lawgiver, why can I not change the law I have previously promulgated the very moment that this law gets me into trouble? Authenticity may be an excellent good, but giving away one's life for it would have to seem irrational.

Now Antigone was no fool. She was perfectly in her right mind, and her concern was not primarily with herself and her self-consistency. What, then, is meant precisely by Antigone's "autonomous" action? To interpret well Sophocles' intentions in this play, one must not look only at the words of the Choir by themselves. These have to be read in the light of Antigone's words during her defense before the king:

> *Creon:* And even so you dared overstep that law?
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> *Antigone:* Yes, since it was not Zeus that published me that edict, and since not of that kind are the laws which Justice who dwells with the gods below established among men. Nor did I think that your decrees were of such force, that a mortal could override the unwritten and unfailing statutes given us by the gods. For their life is not of today or yesterday, but for all time, and no man knows when they were first put forth[18].

"Nor did I think that your decrees were of such force, that a mortal could override the unwritten and unfailing statutes given us by the gods." By putting these words into Antigone's mouth, Sophocles already anticipates the declaration of the Apostle Peter who, confronted with the irrational demands of the Jewish authorities, affirmed: "We must obey God rather than men" (*Acts* 5:29). Antigone was free to transgress the king's decree because she took her bearings not from a law that she gave to herself, but from a law both written in the heavens and written in her heart: the eternal decree, promulgated by the gods, that demands familial piety. Sophocles' tragic heroine became truly free precisely by submitting to the "unfailing statutes given us by the gods," in which one may see a prefiguration of what later Christian theologians would call the natural law, namely the rational creature's participation in God's eternal law. She was not the slave of human beings, nor was she the slave of her fears, clinging to her survival, but she was free to do the good that she had recognized, even if it meant putting her life on the line.

Despite the Choir's use of the word "αὐτόνομος," the new morality will be hard-pressed to turn Antigone into one of its champions. Since she was guided by the concern not to "prefer survival to honor" so as not to "lose the very reason for living" (Juvenal)[19], she is the figure, not of the new, but of the classical morality of the Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian type, which recognizes the absolute and unconditional nature of at least some moral claims on our lives. The main difference between the new morality and classical morality would then seem to be this. For the former, the martyr is an irrational fanatic. For the latter, in contrast, he or she

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[17] W. Whitman, *Song of Myself*, in: *Leaves of Grass*, New York: Viking Penguin 1959, p. 85.
[18] Sophocles, *Antigone,* verses 450-455.
[19] Cf. VS 94.

is the quintessential moral person who witnesses to the fact that some goods are worth more than survival and that some moral claims are so radical that they are worth dying for. Antigone perfectly fits this latter description.

III. MRS. BERGMEIER AND THE NEW MORALITY

Due to its hypothetical nature, the new morality cannot make sense of martyrdom. The martyr will have to appear as someone unreasonable, seeing absolute moral claims and certainties where at best, there are recommendations and probabilities. For the new morality, the quintessential moral person has the courage of not excluding any practical option from the outset, taking into account that life is never ideal. Not afraid of getting his or her hands dirty, this person is set on making the best even of tragic situations. What matters most is to do the best one can to produce the greatest good possible under the given circumstances. For this, one needs a sober realism and the capacity to envision and calculate well the probable outcomes of different possible courses of action. As the epitome of this approach to morality, one may present another woman, not Antigone, but a certain Mrs. Bergmeier[20].

As James Keenan tells her story, Mrs. Bergmeier is a German citizen, held captive in a Nazi-prison during World War II. She has a husband and children who suffer from health issues and struggle to make do without her. One day she learns that pregnant women are immediately released. In her desire to be reunited with her husband and children as soon as possible, she seeks out sexual relations with a prison guard and becomes pregnant. Released from prison, she rejoins her husband and children, who welcome her with open arms. A few months later, a little boy is born whom they give the name of his father, the prison guard, to whom all feel a debt of gratitude. Joseph Fletcher entitles his account of the story "Sacrificial Adultery." In Keenan's description of the events, the word "adultery" does not so much as appear. According to him, Mrs. Bergmeier's behavior was not merely excusable on account of the extreme circumstance; no, it was truly laudable. For Keenan, Mrs. Bergmeier is an epitome of virtue. She exercised all the cardinal virtues, integrating them into the order of charity. As it testifies to the logic of the new morality, his argument bears citing at length:

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[20] Cf. J. Fletcher, *Situation Ethics* ..., p. 163-165. Fletcher presents the events surrounding her life as historical. In contrast, James Keenan, who extensively comments on her story, shows little interest in historical detail, suggesting that he does not consider the events historical. Cf. J.F. Keenan, *Proposing Cardinal Virtues*, "Theological Studies" 56 (1995), p. 709.

> From the viewpoint of justice, she demonstrates an obvious concern for her neighbors and their equality; we note too that in her society she has also been a caring wife and mother. Until the point when she violated the institutional claims of marriage, she was true to her culture's institution of marriage. But this violation is not pursued for its own sake. From the viewpoint of fidelity, she has special bonds with her husband and children that distinguish her situation. Her husband's and children's health are in jeopardy, and she alone is the primary caregiver. Her absence leaves those others neglected. She chooses to engage in an action whose consequences mean new life, a child with whom she will probably have a particularly faithful relationship precisely because the conception and birth of that child led to the rescue of her other children and husband[21].

Of what kind is the morality that uses Mrs. Bergmeier as figurehead and exemplar? Central to Keenan's approach is the distinction between the good and the right that was first introduced by William Ross in 1930[22] and that found its way into Catholic moral theology through the writings of Bruno Schüller, Joseph Fuchs, and Klaus Demmer, to name just a few of its more influential proponents. For this approach, goodness is a quality of the will. To be good, the will needs to aim at bringing about the best possible result. The will that is good, the will that is informed by charity[23], is the will that strives toward producing the best possible future state of affairs (which, in turn, is called "the right"). If this is indeed the motivation, then the will is good. The act is right if it actually achieves the best possible results as intended. The act's rightness is a technical question, and a will can still be good (aiming at the best), even if the act is wrong (on account of given circumstances incapable of producing the desired effects)[24]. On this account, Mrs. Bergmeier's will was good, because her act was motivated by bringing about the best state of affairs thinkable under the given conditions: her reunification with her family. Her act was also right because, by it, she indeed managed to produce this effect.

Thus, on Keenan's account, an action has two measures, the action's rightness – that is, its efficiency – and the action's goodness – its motivation. An act is right if it manages to produce the best possible future state of affairs – here: a state in which an imprisoned wife is happily reunited to her family. An act is

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[21] J.F. Keenan, *Proposing Cardinal Virtues* ..., pp. 728-729.

[22] W.D. Ross, *The Right and the Good,* Oxford: Oxford University Press 1930.

[23] Charity is essentially equated with a good will, which in turn is equated with a will that strives for the right, the best state that one is able to bring about. Cf. J.F. Keenan, *Distinguishing Charity as Goodness and Prudence as Rightness: A Key to Thomas's Secunda Pars*, "The Thomist" 56 (1992), p. 424: "Any action requires two measures, one which pertains to whether the action is right or prudential, that is, one which asks whether the mean has been attained. The other measure asks whether the act originates from a command of charity, that is, whether the agent has striven to love God and neighbor as much as the agent could".

[24] Cf. J.F. Keenan, *Proposing Cardinal Virtues* ..., p. 716: "In order to call a person good the person's conduct does not need to be right; striving out of love for the right sufficiently describes a good person. This is the response to the gift of charity: to strive for right living".

good – or rather the will that commands this act is good – if it is motivated by the desire precisely to bring about the best possible future state of affairs. However, by looking exclusively at an action's efficiency and motivation, the new morality neglects a further measure of action that has been upheld by the tradition and that is recalled by *Veritatis Spendor:* the action's *whatness*, or, in the language of Saint Thomas, whom the encyclical follows here, the action's moral object[25]. The new morality does not so much as raise the question of *what* one is *presently* doing to produce a *future*, desirable state of affairs. The present activity is entirely judged by criteria taken from the future: its goodness derives from what one aims at (a desirable future state); its rightness derives from the action's efficiency in actually producing this desired state of affairs. On this new account, the action does not have any consistency of itself in the here and now.

The new morality is hence a hypothetical morality as the future, from which it derives its criteria, is uncertain by definition. Thus, an act that was right yesterday when one did it can become wrong today upon changed circumstances. Whether Mrs. Bergmeier's action was right cannot be decided before she is actually home, and her husband and children welcome her and her new baby with joy. This is indeed a possible outcome but by no means the most likely one. We can imagine different scenarios. What is the legal value of a decree issued in a Nazi prison camp? Can one reasonably rely on it? What is the likelihood of things changing from one moment to the other? Imagine that just after Mrs. Bergmeier has managed to become pregnant, the prison director abolishes the previous decree. He no longer sends pregnant women home but has them executed on the spot, which, historically speaking, would have been the more plausible scenario. Initially the right action, her seeking sexual relations with the guard has now turned out wrong. Or let us suppose she does manage to get pregnant and get released. The problem now is that her husband, though relieved to have her back, is not enthusiastic about having to raise another man's child. He becomes jealous and angry and seeks to drown his negative emotions in a sea of alcohol, finally committing suicide. Life is full of unforeseeable twists and turns. Some of them we can perhaps anticipate. Other results of our actions may completely surprise us. The consequences of Mrs. Bergmeier's action were ultimately out of her control. There was just one thing in her power, which is also the one thing she is responsible for, and which is the one thing the new morality ultimately claims does not exist: her act in itself. Her choice of freely engaging in sexual relations with a man other than her husband.

[25] VS 78: "*The morality of the human act depends primarily and fundamentally on the 'object' rationally chosen by the deliberate will,* as is borne out by the insightful analysis, still valid today, made by Saint Thomas". Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, 18, 6.

IV. CHOICE VS. WISH AND INTENTION

There is, then, a fundamental problem with any moral theory that, in seeking to give criteria for our actions, refuses to look at the action itself, that is, at what *Veritatis Splendor* calls its object. Any account of morality that reduces the action's whatness entirely to its motivation (=goodness or badness) and consequences (=rightness or wrongness) is deeply flawed in its action theory. It eliminates the moment of choice, forgetting the grounds in our lived experience that allowed Aristotle to introduce the crucial distinction between προαίρεσις and βούλησις: between choice and what one may translate as wish or intention.

Treating this distinction in Aristotle is complicated by the fact that the Philosopher seems to have in mind three ideas (choice, wish, and intention), while disposing only of two words (προαίρεσις and βούλησις). Distinguishing well these ideas is relevant enough to the present purposes to warrant a short excursus, looking at the pertinent passage in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. When Aristotle begins distinguishing προαίρεσις from βούλησις the context suggests rendering the former with "choice" and the latter with "wish":

> But, though it [choice – προαίρεσις] does seem closely connected with wish [βούλησις], it is not this either. For there is no rational choice of what is impossible, and someone claiming that he was rationally choosing this would be thought a fool. But there may be wish even for things that are impossible, such as immortality. And wish can also be for things one could never bring about by one's own efforts, such as that some actor or athlete win in a competition. No one, however, rationally chooses things like this, but only things that he thinks might come about through his own efforts[26].

Here, the contrast between προαίρεσις and βούλησις is the contrast between choice and wish. Choosing always concerns the possible, while wishing can also include the impossible. One could wish for past events never to have happened, but one has no business in choosing their non-occurrence, since, as past, they are inherently impossible for us to change. The object of choice is always something that directly depends on the agent to do or not to do. The object of wishing can also involve things that are, as such, possible, but upon which the agent has no direct bearing. One can wish for one's favorite football team to win the championship, but one does not choose it since the event is independent of one's own efforts. Here the contrasted pair is patently wishing vs. choosing.

One could leave the problem at this point and say that βούλησις is simply "wish" and nothing else, which would mean that Aristotle does not have a precise

[26] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, III, 2, 1111b.

word for "intention" as some indeed claim[27]. However, Aristotle continues giving further examples for distinguishing προαίρεσις from βούλησις, in which cases the idea of βούλησις seems to change and where rendering the word with "intention" would appear justifiable. Thus we read on:

> Again, wish [βούλησις – here, perhaps better: "intention"] is more to do with the end, rational choice [προαίρεσις] with what is conducive to the end; for example, we wish to be healthy, but we rationally choose things that will make us healthy; and we wish to be happy, and say that we do, but to claim that we rationally choose to be so does not sound right. For in general rational choice seems to be concerned with things that are in our power[28].

In this context, health and happiness are examples of objects of βούλησις. But we can do more than merely wish for health and happiness. They are not impossible, and there is indeed something we can do about them. They are, in fact, ends of our activities. Hence it does not seem inappropriate here to render βούλησις with "intention." In later scholastic language, intention is by definition that which is of the end, while choice is that which is of the means to the end. We *intend* the end, such as health, or, as the final end, happiness, while we *choose* those acts that are toward this end, such as eating vegetables or practicing the virtues. As Aristotle says, "Wish [βούλησις – or here perhaps better: "intention"] [...] is for the end"[29], so Thomas, many years later, will say: "Intention belongs first and principally to that which moves to the end"[30]. Βούλησις in Aristotle would thus seem to be at the very least a precursor of the later, more distinct Latin notion of *intentio*.

While it is important to be historically and terminologically precise, we can return now from this short excursus to the main point of our discussion, which regards the actual experience that is expressed by the terms we have just examined. There are different movements of our will, depending on its objects: choice, wish, and intention. The movement of wishing is an idle velleity that may even be of the impossible. It is not connected to our activity in any way, as when we say,

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[27] Thus, following Elizabeth Anscombe, Martin Rhonheimer argues that Aristotle does not have a proper word for the idea of "intention": "Aristotle lacks a proper word for the concept of intention, and this is probably one of the major deficits of his action-theory" (M. Rhonheimer, *The Perspective of Morality: Philosophical Foundations of Thomistic Virtue Ethics*, Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press 2011, p. 109 n. 19). If by "intention" indeed we mean the rather elaborate notion proposed by Anscombe, we might have to agree. If by "intention" we simply mean the will's movement toward the end, things are different. In this sense, Rhonheimer, too, admits that "of course, Aristotle also knew an act of 'setting a goal' distinct from *prohairesis*. But he doesn't have an action-theoretical concept for it" (M. Rhonheimer, *The Perspective of Morality* ..., p. 109, n. 19). While the word βούλησις in Aristotle has a broader meaning, inasmuch as it includes wishing, it would also seem to serve at least partly to express the idea of moving toward a goal.

[28] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, III, 2, 1111b.

[29] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, III, 4, 1113a.

[30] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae,* I-II, 12, 1.

"Wouldn't it be nice if...", although we have neither the means nor the motivation to do anything about it. Then there is intention, which is about a good or apparent good[31] that is not under our immediate control, although there is something that we can do to realize it. In contrast to the object of a mere velleity, the object of an intention elicits and gives direction to concrete action, as the goal of health directs us to eat vegetables and do physical exercise. Then, finally, there is the moment of choice, which is "concerned with things that are in our power"[32].

Let us now apply these distinctions to the case of Mrs. Bergmeier. Before she knew what to do about it, her desire to be reunited with her family had been a simple wishing. As she hears the news that pregnant women will be released from prison, being reunited with her family becomes an end that guides her concrete actions: it becomes the object of an intention. This reunification is a future, desirable state and, as such, still out of the immediate control of her will. But now she can think of a concrete action that is in her power, and as such, the object of a choice that may lead her to this end. *Intending* to be reunited with her family, Mrs. Bergmeier *chooses* to engage in sexual relations with a man to whom she is not married. In the story, this act is under the immediate control of her will to engage in or not to engage in. She chooses an act, traditionally called adultery, intending to be reunited with her family.

There is no denying that the intention enters the moral description of the act. Choice and intention form an organic whole[33]. Hence, for Martin Rhonheimer, the "'means' (that is to say, the concrete actions that are chosen for the sake of a definite goal) are a kind of concretization of the intended goal *in* action, or an anticipation of the good of that goal *through* action. If someone is getting some rest in order to finish his work, he is already engaged in finishing that work"[34]. The problem with the new morality is not with recognizing the undeniable importance of the intention but with disallowing any significant role to the moment of choice, as if, in Rhonheimer's example, the "means" – the distinctly describable action of "getting some rest" – were no longer accorded any substance of its own and were completely subsumed under the description "finishing my work."

In order to turn Mrs. Bergmeier's act of adultery into an act of charity (given that she performed it intending to bring about the best results possible), one must completely abstract from *what* her will chooses at present. Acting is then reduced to bringing about certain states of affairs without it having any consistency of its own. However, this state of affairs is nothing we can intelligibly be said to choose; we can only intend to produce it. The concrete action that we perform intending

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[31] Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, III, 4, 1113a.

[32] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, III, 2, 1111b.

[33] Thus, according to St. Thomas Aquinas, following Aristotle, a man who steals in order to commit adultery is "strictly speaking more adulterer than thief" (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae,* I-II, 18, 6), which, however, does not change the fact that he is also a thief.

[34] M. Rhonheimer, *The Perspective of Morality* ..., p. 108.

to bring about the best state of affairs possible will then receive its entire moral specificity from this intention. As Livio Melina puts it, in itself, apart from this intention, the new morality considers actions as physical events and "not as *choices* of our freedom"[35].

In this way, acting is ultimately conceived in a way analogous to pressing a button, and choosing between acts is then like "choosing" between buttons. Let us imagine someone asked us for advice about whether he or she should press button A, B, or C. Quite evidently, to be able to counsel intelligently, we will need to know which kind of effects pushing button A, B, or C will respectively provoke: the lights will turn on, a building will explode, a missile will be launched... Just in itself, however, pressing a button is indifferent to reason and thus has no moral consistency or meaningfulness in itself, so that evidently no intrinsic evil can be attributed to pressing button A, B, or C. Now Keenan seems to understand Mrs. Bergmeier's actions in an analogous way. The possible choice to remain inactive and not to procure a potential pregnancy is like pressing button A, which will keep her in prison. The choice of seducing a prison guard is like pressing button B, which will get her to be reunited with her family. Which button should she press? The answer seems obvious if pressing button A *is* staying in prison, and pressing button B *is* being reunited with her family. In other words: there is no choice of the means apart from the intention of the end. The moment of choice has disappeared from this account of morality.

V. CONCLUSION: WE HAVE A CHOICE

One of the lasting legacies of Saint John Paul II's encyclical letter *Veritatis Splendor* is to have underlined the importance of the moment of choice in action. When we choose to act, we do not simply choose pressing button A, B, or C to bring about an effect, which will then alone decide about the moral qualification of what we have done. No, by acting, we always choose a good, here and now. We take a stance toward this good and, therefore, at the same time also before God, the supreme good[36]. In the act of choosing, we also decide about ourselves. We choose what kind of persons we want to be. We determine ourselves. To this extent, John

[35] L. Melina, *Morale tra crisi e rinnovamento*, Ares: Milano 1993, p. 51: "Possiamo anche dire che il proporzionalismo considera gli atti umani al livello di eventi fisici e non come *scelte* della libertà." My own translation.

[36] Cf. VS 72: "Acting is morally good when the choices of freedom are in conformity with man's true good and thus express the voluntary ordering of the person towards his ultimate end: God himself, the supreme good in whom man finds his full and perfect happiness."

Paul II cites St. Gregory of Nyssa: "*We are* in a certain way our own parents, creating ourselves as we will, by our decisions [qualescumque nos volumus electione gignentes]"[37].

Having sexual relations with someone to whom one is not married is not like pressing a button that will reunite one with one's family (Mrs. Bergmeier). Rather, this choice has a significance of its own that cannot be completely subsumed under the intention. This choice means taking a particular stance toward the good of human sexuality and marital fidelity, in fact, a negative stance. Given the nature of our sexuality, it means instrumentalizing oneself and others (using a guard and one's child to get a ticket home). Analogous things must be said where other fundamental human goods are at stake that touch our deepest being, such as our life itself and our relationship to truth[38]. Instrumentalizing someone sexually, injuring or killing someone, or deliberately deceiving a person about an important fact regarding his or her life: all these are always and everywhere incompatible with the respect and love we owe to each other.

Incidentally, to claim that there are a some types of acts that must never be done does not take away from the role of practical reason; it does not stifle creativity or reduce morality to geometry as John Locke or Baruch Spinoza had it.[39] The kind of acts that must never be done are few in number, and, as we have seen, already Aristotle, champion of practical reason, could think of some of them, which does not make him the intellectual forerunner of Locke or Spinoza. The certainty of my conviction that I must not commit adultery or that I must not kill an innocuous victim does not yet tell me how positively to build my life. Just by avoiding extramarital relations and not killing one's spouse one does not yet live a good marriage. By avoiding intrinsically evil acts, one does not yet live a good life. Though such avoidance is a necessary condition, much more is needed positively to cultivate a marital relationship or, more generally, to live a good life, of which one is the creative protagonist. The teaching about intrinsically evil acts only tells us about a few things that we must never do. It does not tell us what to do in the positive, and thus it does not substitute practical reason with geometry.

In contrast to the account of Mrs. Bergmeier, who, as the story goes, is happily reunited with her husband and children, Antigone's tale, to be sure, turns out tragic, ending in total disaster. Obeying the unwritten laws of heaven over the king's godless decree, she shows tremendous courage. In her subsequent dealings with

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[37] VS 71, Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses* II, 2-3: *PG* 44, 327-328.

[38] Cf. R. Spaemann, *Wer hat wofür Verantwortung? Kritische Überlegungen zur Unterscheidung von Gesinnungsethik und Verantwortungsethik*, in: *Grenzen. Zur ethischen Dimension des Handelns*, Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta 2001, p. 232.

[39] Cf. J. Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding,* ed. P.H. Nidditch, Oxford University Press, Oxford1975, book III, ch. X, §16, p. 516: "Upon this ground it is, that I am bold to think, that *Morality is capable of Demonstration,* as well as Mathematicks." Cf. also B. Spinoza, *Ethics. Proved in Geometrical Order,* ed. M.J. Kisner, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2018.

the king and her final suicide, she shows why she is not a Christian saint. Yet her stubbornness and ultimate despair notwithstanding, her choice to observe the laws of heaven, even if that means risking her life, even if that means espousing death rather than the king's son, is an act by which she shows that she has a purpose in life: "I was made to join in love, not in hate"[40]. This love becomes manifest in concrete choices that are significant in themselves. They are not simply productive of effects, of state of affairs, of situations. These choices themselves are expressive of one's love. The choice to bury her brother was a symbolic act that manifested her love for him and made this love present in a concrete way. Thus, for classical morality, to love means to will a good for the beloved[41], as when Antigone willed a burial for her brother. To love is also located on the level of choice, that is, the level of concrete acts that are immediately in our power.

For the new morality, as it has essentially eliminated the moment of choice, to love is exclusively located on the level of the intention. It is now no longer to will – that is, to choose – a good for the beloved, but to intend to produce the best possible future outcome, according to the best of one's predictive capacities. This best possible future outcome is not necessarily the best for an individual person, but it regards the general state of affairs in the world. For classical morality to love the poor means to do them good. For the new morality, to love the poor essentially means to strive to abolish poverty, which is why the words of our Lord must sound discouraging: "You always have the poor with you" (Mk 14:7). Thus, Jesus tells us explicitly that it is not in our human power to end poverty once and for all. Loving the poor cannot reside on the level of the intention to end poverty. Indeed, Christ places the love for the poor on the level of choice as he continues: "Whenever you will, you can do good to them" (Mk 14:7). He calls us to love the poor – to do good to them – and not to end poverty.

The difference is crucial. If to love the poor meant aiming at a state of affairs where poverty is abolished, several atrocious acts would indeed be compatible with love: stealing from the rich[42], killing the rich, killing the poor. Though possibly conducive to a state of affairs in which poverty is abolished, these acts are incompatible with the love of concrete persons. Christians are called to love all people,

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[40] Sophocles, *Antigone,* verse 523: "οὔτοι συνέχθειν, ἀλλὰ συμφιλεῖν ἔφυν" (translation adjusted).

[41] Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, III, 90, 6: "In hoc enim praecipue consistit amor, quod amans amato bonum velit." Aristotle, *Rhetorica*, II, 4, 1380b 35-36: "ἔστω δὴ τὸ φιλεῖν τὸ βούλεσθαί τινι ἃ οἴεται ἀγαθά, ἐκείνου ἕνεκα ἀλλὰ μὴ αὑτοῦ."

[42] What is being discussed here does not regard the *action of the poor,* but *the action of those who have a certain power over the poor.* Thus, nothing is said here about the question of whether it could ever be morally licit for the poor to *take* from the rich. [In fact, the right to property is not absolute, and in case of dire necessity, all earthly goods become common (cf. Vatican Council II, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes,* 7 December 1965, no. 69). For St. Thomas, who expounds on this principle, in such cases it is improper to speak of stealing (cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, 66, 7)].

and one cannot love them by stealing from them or by killing them. One can love them by willing the good, by doing good to them. Choosing this good is in our power ("whenever you will, you can do them good"). Intending the best state of affairs possible, in contrast, is something we must humbly leave to the providence of God who alone is able to make all things work together for the good of those who love him (cf. Rm 8:28), and who alone can even turn our sins into happy faults. As far as we are concerned, in our choosing, there remain some acts, which are not even many, that, by their specific nature, are of the kind that they must never be done if we want to remain in the love of God and neighbor. In fact, we have a choice.

A TALE OF TWO WOMEN REFLECTIONS ON TWO TYPES OF MORALITY, ONE HUNDRED YEARS AFTER THE BIRTH OF ST. JOHN PAUL II

Summary

On the centenary of the birth of St. John Paul II, this article reflects on his legacy for moral theology by examining the enduring relevance of his 1993 Encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*. Against what some authors call the new morality, this papal document holds up the classical notion of morality as a realm in which we encounter the absolute, to the point that one may even be called upon to lay down one's life in martyrdom. As a figure of classical morality, the essay presents Antigone, who risked her life to honor her dead brother's body. A different woman serves as a figure of the new morality: Mrs. Bergmeier, who is praised by some of the proponents of this approach for having committed "sacrificial" adultery in order to be reunited with her family. Examining the differences between these two accounts, the paper recalls the classical distinction between choice and intention. It is argued that the new morality has forgotten about the moment of choice, subsuming it entirely under the intention. In its teaching on the moral object and intrinsically evil acts, *Veritatis Splendor* defends the basic moral experience that we have a choice and that our choices matter.

K e y w o r d s: John Paul II, Veritatis Splendor, new morality, moral absolutes, choice, intention, Antigone, martyrdom

OPOWIEŚĆ O DWÓCH KOBIETACH REFLEKSJE DWÓCH RODZAJACH MORALNOŚCI W SETNĄ ROCZNICĘ URODZIN ŚW. JANA PAWŁA II

Streszczenie

W niniejszym artykule w setną rocznicę urodzin św. Jana Pawła II podejmujemy temat jego wkładu w rozwój teologii moralnej, badając aktualność encykliki *Veritatis splendor* z 1993 r. W przeciwieństwie do tego, co niektórzy autorzy nazywają nową moralnością, w dokumencie tym podtrzymano klasyczne pojęcie moralności jako sfery, w której mamy

do czynienia z absolutem do tego stopnia, że można nawet być wezwanym do złożenia męczeńskiej ofiary z własnego życia. W eseju przedstawiono Antygonę jako przykład osoby kierującej się moralnością klasyczną. Ryzykowała ona życie, by uczcić ciało zmarłego brata. Inną kobietą, która stanowi *exemplum* nowej moralności, jest pani Bergmeier, chwalona przez zwolenników tego podejścia za to, że popełniła cudzołóstwo, by móc zjednoczyć się z rodziną. Analizując różnice między tymi dwoma postaciami, autor artykułu przypomina klasyczne rozróżnienie między wyborem a intencją oraz wskazuje, że nowa moralność zapomniała o momencie wyboru, zaliczając go całkowicie do intencji. W *Veritatis splendor* papież w swoim nauczaniu na temat moralnego przedmiotu czynu i czynów z natury złych broni podstawowego doświadczenia moralnego – tego, że mamy wybór i że nasze wybory odgrywają istotne znaczenie.

S ł o w a k l u c z o w e: Jan Paweł II, *Veritatis splendor*, nowa moralność, absoluty moralne, wybór, intencja, Antygona, męczeństwo

EINE GESCHICHTE VON ZWEI FRAUEN. EINE REFLEXION ÜBER ZWEI TYPEN DER MORAL ZUM 100. GEBURTSTAG DES HL. JOHANNES PAUL II.

Zusammenfassung

Anlässlich des hundertsten Jahrestages der Geburt von Johannes Pauls II. denken wir über sein Vermächtnis in der Moraltheologie nach, indem wir die bleibende Bedeutung der Enzyklika *Veritatis splendor* von 1993 untersuchen. Im Gegensatz zu dem, was einige Autoren die neue Moral nennen, hält dieses päpstliche Dokument an der klassischen Vorstellung von Moral als einer Sphäre fest, in der wir dem Absoluten begegnen, bis zu dem Punkt, an dem man sogar dazu aufgerufen sein kann, sein Leben im Martyrium hinzugeben. Als Sinnbild der klassischen Moral stellt der Aufsatz Antigone dar, die ihr Leben riskiert, um den Leichnam ihres Bruders zu ehren. Eine weitere Frau dient als Symbol der neuen Moral: Frau Bergmeier, die von den Befürwortern dieses Typus von Moral dafür gelobt wird, dass sie Ehebruch begeht, um wieder mit ihrer Familie vereint zu werden. Der Artikel analysiert die Unterschiede zwischen diesen beiden ethischen und moraltheologischen Ansätzen und erinnert an die klassische Unterscheidung zwischen Wahl und Absicht. Es wird argumentiert, dass die neue Moral das Moment der Wahl vergessen hat, welche für sie ganz in der Absicht aufgeht. In seiner Lehre über das moralische Handlungsobjekt und die in sich schlechten Handlungen verteidigt der Papst in *Veritatis splendor* die grundlegende sittliche Erfahrung, dass wir eine Wahl haben, und dass unsere Wahlakte von Bedeutung sind.

S c h l ü s s e l w o r t e: Johannes Paul II., *Veritatis splendor*, neue Moral, moralische Absolute, Wahl, Absicht, Antigone, Martyrium

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