

Morality part 5

The dignity of the human person and conscience

Although this topic is usually the starting point of most moral discussions, by discussing this topic at this point in the series it will bring many of the topics we discussed into better focus. The moral law only makes sense in light of the advancement of the human person. As we discussed in the first session the goal of any of the major thinkers of moral philosophy was to determine how to live well. Hence the human person's desire to live well is rooted in a moral law and the inherent dignity of the human person.

The Dignity of the Human Person

The concept of human dignity is still present in modern society although it has changed shape significantly in the last one hundred years. Human dignity was defined by the way one acted, the way one dealt with the people of their town and culture, and the rights and responsibilities of the individual towards the collective good. Although many of these elements still exist in modern culture, their shape has changed. We now seek dignity as synonymous with freedom, the way we act is replaced by our desire to be or choose how we are, and the way we dealt with our culture and neighbors replaced by the individual conscience.

But what is human dignity? The Christian church teaches that our human dignity is rooted in our creation. Since God created us and created us good, we were created from love and to love while seeking the good for ourselves and the world around us. Therefore the inherent dignity of each human person is given to us and a process which unfolds within us. Each person has intrinsic dignity given from God and not created as a right from civil order. Similar our mission, purpose, or goal is to live moral and upright lives both to enhance our own freedom but also to root our lives in charity: love of God and of neighbor. Our quest for freedom is rooted in our dignity not as a sense of escapism but to allow the human person to truly flourish. We become the best versions of the human being when we pursue the good, are free to seek the good, and conform our lives to the good; hence, moral philosophy at its core. In the same way, a human person is truly free when he/she is allowed to be the person he/she is created to be and inherently is. Thus the marks of human dignity are inherent goodness from a creator, purpose to seek the good, and life-long quest to conform to the good so as to live in freedom.

The modern culture takes a different approach to the concept of human dignity. The human person is an animal with animalistic instincts. These instincts are the core of the human person and must be followed to live in such a manner as to allow freedom for the individual. The purpose of the human being is self-discovery and through self-discovery to become the person one wants to be. Each person's conscience directs him/her to an individual good that orients and directs his/her life. Thus the human person is an animal whose goal is to direct his/her passions to the freedom and self that the individual desires.

Conscience:

The idea of conscience is common both in religious and modern thought. Most of the time we picture conscience as an angel and a devil sitting on either shoulder of a person giving the person advice on how to act. This image is incorrect. Conscience is an innate understanding of right action. The conscience directs the person to good action and moral decision making. The oddest part of conscience is that everyone believes it to be an innate sense but only Christianity gives language for its origin. As people made in the image and likeness of God, we are given the mind of God within our souls. This sense of the “mind of God” gives us an orientation towards the good. Therefore when we encounter morally ambiguous situations, our conscience helps us make quick decisions whereas otherwise we would need to ponder the situation.

The Church teaches that we are morally obliged to follow our conscience. Since our consciences are rooted in the wisdom of God, we are more likely to act rightly by following our conscience than by reason alone. The Church teaches that even if our conscience is wrong or ill-formed, we have a moral responsibility to follow our conscience unless we know it to be in error. For a person is judged based on adherence to one’s own conscience.

Two questions dominate the discussion of conscience. How does one form one’s conscience and what happens when a conscience is erroneous? Both of these questions lead into one another. Everyone has an innate sense of right and wrong. Even people from different cultures recognize when the established norms of their culture do not match their conscience and what seems right from reason. Therefore, for the most part a person’s conscience is innate. Yet, conscience is also formed by societal norms and reflection. The way a person is raised directly affects that innate sense regarding right and wrong. This nurturing of a person’s conscience is evidenced by situations of sexual abuse. Many studies have shown a strong link between being sexually abused and the probability of that person sexually abusing another. Similarly, if I was raised with drugs and violence, these situations color my sense of the world and my understanding of right and wrong. Thus each individual is required to form his/her own conscience so that it correctly directs the person towards the good.

The process of forming one’s conscience is based on reasoning and reflection. Before, during, or after an event we can reflect on the good that was caused by our actions. Was I acting in accord with my conscience? How did it direct me? Was the end result and my intention good or evil? All of these questions allow us to address the quality of our conscience and whether it needs some revision. We can also reason to the way we ought to act. Just as Kant used pure reasoning to find a moral law, so can we use our reasoning to find the way we ought to act. Once we have decided that our conscience is ill-formed, then we are morally obliged to correct the error.

Even if our conscience is ill-formed, we are morally required to follow it. This seems odd. Why would you follow an ill-formed conscience? On one level, the person listening to his/her conscience would only have that voice through which to make a moral decision. We must assume that our consciences are properly formed unless we have evidence to the contrary. Once we have evidence that our consciences are ill-formed, we no longer have the moral obligation to follow our conscience for the actions through which we believe it to be ill-formed. We now have the obligation to form it and to correct its errors so that we can live well and moral lives.

Sin

The topic of sin is one of most challenging topics in moral theology but piques the curiosity of anyone pondering moral law. How are sin and morality related? Where are the differences and similarities? Can one sin and still follow the moral law? Can one make a moral decision but yet still sin? The core of sin is God's law. All sin is an offense against God whereas all immoral actions are a breach of the moral law. If we claim that moral law is independent of God, then one can sin but still act morally but all immoral actions are sinful. If, however, all moral law is based on God's law, then sin and morality are the same. This sounds confusing. All sin is based on God's law. Therefore all sins are inherently immoral. We may be inclined to speak of morality in the same way: since the moral law is based on God's law then all immoral actions are sinful. For the vast majority of situations, this is correct. Some actions specific to individuals are sinful yet do not break the moral law. A person may feel compelled to follow God's command yet choose against it. This would be sinful in the sense of ignoring God yet no moral law has been broken.

Mortal vs. venial sin

Many Catholic struggle with these two distinctions for the quality of sin. The main reason for this distinction is to make clear the gravity of sin and the gravity of specific sins. A mortal sin is an action that breaks or severs a person's relationship with God. Although this seems like a vague definition, its rather clear for anyone who has cultivated an authentic relationship with God. As St. Theresa of Avila states in her master word *The Interior Castle* once a person has reached the 4th mansion and experienced the depth of meditation, turning back to former sins and passions causes greater harm and can even complete impede the person from advancing further into the castle. Often we think of the gravity of mortal sin simply in terms of our final judgement. This short-sighted approach ignores the building of a relationship with God we experience here in this life. Therefore we must see the gravity of mortal sin as something more than the final judgement but as a severing of the relationship here and now. The conditions that lead to a mortal sin are the following:

1. Knowledge of the gravity of the act
2. Full consent to the act
3. The action has to be grave matter.

Venial sins are much less in gravity. Venial sins cause harm to our relationship with God but do not sever it. Mortal sins can be reduced in gravity even to the point of becoming venial sins due to the following conditions: ignorance of the gravity of the sin, lack of understanding of the character of the sin, or lack of consent. Lack of consent can be from ignorance, mental or physical conditions, circumstances, lack of free-will, coercion.