

Moral Acts – Object, End, Circumstances

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[Intro: how the Roe v. Wade decision used *circumstances* to justify abortion.]

In any act, three elements combine into making one single act, and the morality or immorality of those elements make the entire act either moral, immoral, or morally neutral. For an act to be moral, **all three** of those elements must be moral or at least morally neutral. To put it another way, if any **one** of those three elements is immoral, it will make the **whole act itself** immoral, whereas to make an act moral, **all three** elements must be either morally good or at least morally neutral. If even one of those three elements is morally bad, that is, is immoral, then the **entire act** is immoral – this a standard moral principle, and all the way back in the time of St Paul we find the apostle stating a conclusion drawn from this already-known principle in Romans 3:8, where he said that we can never “do evil, that good may come.”

Those three elements that combine to make up the morality of any act are called the *object*, the *end* and the *circumstances*. We call these three elements the three ‘fonts’ of the moral act – because they are like three fountains which flow together to form one stream; one act. So what do we mean by the object, the end and the circumstances?

The **object** of an act is simply “what the exterior action is about,” according to St Thomas Aquinas (*Summa*, I-II, q. 18, a. 6). The object of the act is what we would observe if we were to witness the act. It answers the question, ‘what happened?’ The object is what any observer to the act would witness. The *object* is different from the *objective*. That is, the observable act does *not* answer the question, “what is the good thing that one is doing?” but rather, “what is the observable action that we are talking about”? One question to ask to help determine whether an act is good or not is: whether or not the agent has, absolutely speaking, the right of doing this action, while not harming the right of another in doing so. With some actions, the object alone is enough to determine whether the act is morally evil or not, with other actions it is not enough – thus we must also consider the intention.

The *second* element of the morality of an act – what we call “the end” of an act. The **end** of an act is what the agent had in mind when he did the act – the intention of the person doing the act. Asking the question, “**why** was that act done?” usually arrives at the ‘end’ of the act. The *end* of an act can make a morally good act either good or evil, and can make a morally neutral act either good or evil. However, the best of intentions cannot turn some objects into good acts. Let’s be clear; a good intention **cannot** make an act whose *object* is evil into a good act. Even with the **best of intentions**, some objects cannot ever be good acts, for their *objects* are intrinsically evil – the exterior action is already evil: for example, lying, direct abortion, using contraceptives, direct sterilization, committing fornication, adultery or acts associated with these new kinds of unions that are being

pushed – these are always evil. If the object is bad, all the good intentions in the world cannot make the act good. A good intention cannot make a morally *evil* act good. (Recall St Paul's words that we may not do evil for a good intention.)

The **circumstances** of an act make up the *third* element of the morality of an act. The circumstances of an act are the various particular traits that surround and are attached to the act. Taken together, the circumstances provide us with the complete picture of the kind of act we are considering: they are the *context* in which the act is done. The questions who, what, where, how, when, and with whose help, bring us to the circumstances of an act. Some circumstances may not affect the *moral* character of the act, but some can take an act which is morally harmless and make it morally evil. The object, the end **and** the circumstances must **all** be good or at least morally neutral for any act to be moral. If *any* of those three is immoral, then the *act* will be immoral, even if the other two are good. Even if the end is good, if the object or the circumstances are evil, the act cannot be good.

“But, Father, aren’t there circumstances where it would be lawful to perform an act in spite of a foreseen evil effect? There are four requirements that determine when it would be lawful to perform an act in spite of a foreseen evil effect:

1. the act must be good in itself or at least indifferent; (object)
2. **the good effect must be immediate;** (object)
3. the intention of the agent must be good; (end)
4. a proportionately grave reason for acting thus must be present. (circumstances)

In considering an act which has a foreseeable evil effect, "it is necessary that the bad effect *does not precede*, but rather **follows** the good effect." The good effect cannot flow from the evil action. The first effect must be good or morally neutral. In other words, we cannot do evil that good may come of it (Rom 3:8). If the *first effect* is morally evil, then also the act itself, which produces the effect, is morally evil also. For example, one could not do a direct abortion, even for a grave reason.

Application: “Father, I gossiped, but I wasn’t trying to hurt the person’s reputation.” Though the person didn’t have an evil intention, the object and the circumstances themselves were bad. This makes it immoral, even though the intent is not to damage another’s reputation. Another case: “I contracepted because I was trying to avoid having another child for very serious reasons.” Serious circumstances would never justify an illicit means of avoiding contraception.

[Conclusion: If the Court in Roe v. Wade would have correctly considered and assessed not just the circumstances but the object itself, we would not have abortion on demand today.]

[An a different note, related to the ongoing Synod...] Cardinal Burke recently said, in regards to the question of what one should do if statements suggesting heterodox opinions regarding divorce and homosexuality come out of bishops participating in the Synod: “We follow our Lord Jesus Christ. He is our Master. And we are all held to be obedient to him and to his word, beginning with the Holy Father and with the Bishops. If a bishop, or a priest, or anyone, should announce something or declare something that is contrary to the truth of Our Lord Jesus Christ, as it’s communicated to us in the teaching of the Church, we follow Christ.”

“I say to people who are very anxious, because it seems in this time that there is simply a lot of confusion and statements that are really quite stunning about the faith, that we should remain serene. Because, in the Catholic Church, we have teaching authority, which is expressed, for instance, in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, and we simply need to study those things more deeply, adhere to them more ardently, and not be led astray by false teaching, from whatever source it comes,” he said.