

Once when I was at sea, we heard those dreaded words that no sailor ever wants to hear announced over the 1MC, the ship's public announcement system: the words were, "Now, Fire in the Main Engine Room; this is not a drill!" General Quarters was sounded and every man went to his fire station. A high pressure fuel line on one of the main engines had vibrated loose and began spraying fuel at 2000 psi onto the 170-degree cylinder of one of the Fairbanks-Morse opposable-piston engines. That combination was enough oxygen, heat and fuel to make a fire, and the fuel ignited. Thanks to the quick response of the engineering crew who shut down the engine immediately, by the time the crew had manned their firefighting stations, the fire was already out.

Every sailor assigned to a naval vessel is given firefighting training. Among the instructions given to the firefighters are lessons about the three sides of the fire triangle – the three elements necessary for any fire to take place; heat, fuel, and oxygen. If one of those three elements is missing (either the heat, fuel or oxygen), or the chemical reaction between those three elements is interrupted, you won't have a fire.

Similarly, three elements combine to determine the morality of every act. These three elements are present in every action, and they combine to make that act either a morally good act, a morally bad act or a morally neutral act. Since these three elements combine into making one single act, the morality or immorality of *any one* of those elements can make the entire act either moral, immoral, or morally neutral. To put it another way, if any *one* of those three elements is *im*-moral, 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 this already-known principle in Romans 3:8, where he said that we can never "do evil, that good may come." Today we are going to look at the three elements that combine to make any act morally good, evil, or indifferent, assisted by Dr. Dennis McNerny's book *Thomistic Ethics*. We are doing this as a preparation to a series of sermons on the Commandments.

Heat, fuel and oxygen are needed to make a fire, but what are the three elements needed to determine the morality of an act? Those three elements that combine to make up the morality of any act are 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?' Some examples of objects are as follows: "a man gave the needy person some money", or "a man yelled at the innocent old lady", or "a child scratched his head". Each of these describes the object of an act: these hypothetical examples describe what some people did. So far as we can tell from the object alone, one object is morally good (he gave the needy person some money), one is morally evil (he yelled at the innocent old lady) and one is morally neutral (he scratched his head). With some objects, the object alone is enough to determine whether the act is morally evil or not. Take for example, the object "a man yelled at the innocent old lady". The best of intentions cannot turn the object of being cruel to an innocent

person into a good act. Likewise, even with the best of *intentions*, lying, abortion, using contraceptives, committing fornication, adultery or acts associated with these new kinds of unions that are being pushed, cannot ever be good acts, for their *objects* are intrinsically evil. However, for some objects, we need more information to determine the morality of the action. The object, the end **and** the circumstances must **all** be good or at least morally neutral for an act to be moral. If the *object* is immoral, then the *act* will be immoral, even if the end and the circumstances are good. So let's move on to 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. Take for example the object “a man gave the needy person some money”: the end or intention can make that act either good or evil. If the end of the person giving the money was simply to help out a needy person, then the act is morally good. If the end or intention is to gain public notice, then it ceases to be a morally good act – even though the needy person happens to benefit along the way. Also, even 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 object, the end **and** the circumstances must **all** be good or at least morally neutral for an act to be moral. If the *end* is immoral, then the *act* will be immoral, even if the object and the circumstances are good.

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 act, but some can take an act which is morally harmless and make it morally evil. Take for example an act with following object “he drove through the intersection.” If the circumstances include the context, “while the light was red and an old lady was in the intersection”, this makes the act an immoral one. Or take another example: the object of “firing a pistol”. This is a morally neutral act until one adds the circumstance of *where*. If the place in which one shoots the pistol is a crowded street, this circumstance would make the act an immoral one. The object, the end **and** the circumstances must **all** be good or at least morally neutral for an act to be moral. If the *circumstances* are immoral, then the *act* will be immoral, even if the object and the end are good.

So we have taken a look at the three fonts of the moral act – the three elements that combine to make up the morality of an act – the object, the end and the circumstances. We saw that the **object** is what the exterior action is about; what we would observe if we witnessed the act. We saw that **end** of an act is what the doer of the act had in mind when he did the act; what his intention was. The end answers the question, “why did he do that act?” We also saw that the **circumstances** play into the morality of the act – who, what, where, how, when and with whose help the act was done. We saw that the circumstances set the context in which the act is done. We also saw that the object, the end **and** the circumstances must **all** be good or at least morally neutral for an act to be moral, and that if any one of the three elements is immoral, it makes the act immoral.

The Three 'Fonts' of the Moral Act

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Can we see now why it takes more than 'having a good heart' to determine whether someone is moral or not? 'A good heart' is usually meant to imply having a good intention (a good end) – but can we see now that this only giving us a *part* of the picture – that this is only one of the three necessary fonts that combine to define the morality of an act? Can we also see now why when someone gossips the act is immoral, even if the gossip does not have the *intention* of harming someone's reputation? The intention is only one of the three necessary fonts of the morality of an act. Can we see that the "end" that the gossip might have of "venting" does not justify the circumstance that the gossip is telling someone who has no right to the information which damages another's reputation, even if that damage is not the gossip's intention.

Some people today have erroneously reduced morality down to simply having a good intention, but let's always remember that a good intention is only *one* side of three in the morality of an act, just like fuel is only one side of three in the 'fire triangle' of heat, fuel and oxygen. Yet now we know that the object, the end **and** the circumstances of every act must **all** be good or at *least* morally neutral for an act to be moral. Any one of the three elements of the act – whether the object, the end or the circumstances – can render the act immoral, even if the other two are good.

Hopefully, having a better understanding the three sides of the *moral* 'fire triangle', that is, the object, the end, and the circumstances – the three elements which all factor in *together* to determine the morality of every act – we'll avoid starting *moral* fires, and instead we will ensure that all our actions are always morally good.