

Theory 7

THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS, PART I

Prudence and the Decision-Making Process, Part I

The CCC in 1806 defines prudence as the virtue that “disposes the practical reason to discern, in every circumstance, our true good and to choose the right means for achieving it.”

An easy way to understand this virtue is that it helps us do the right thing, in the right way, in the right time, with the right measure.

How do we determine what is the RIGHT thing to do?

How do we know what is right and wrong / good and evil?

CCC 1750 The morality (goodness) of human acts depends upon the following three aspects simultaneously.

1. The **object** chosen; what you are doing.
2. The end in view or the **intention**; why you did it – motive.
3. The **circumstances** surrounding the action.

CCC 1751 The Object of an act:

**This element of the moral act answers the question, “What am I trying to do?”
The object is the essence of the act.**

The act is considered an abstraction from any other sort of factor or consideration. In other words, the object defines the act according to its own nature, regardless of motive or circumstances. It is the goal towards which the act is directed, what the act is trying to achieve.

Examples:

- Physically it looks the same to kill an innocent person and to kill a guilty person, to kill a non-aggressor and an aggressor.
- Physically it looks the same to take the pill for contraceptive reasons and to take the pill if your doctor prescribed it for a hormone issue.

- Now you can disagree about whether it's a good idea in either case, but one is a different kind of act, namely the act of contraception, and the other is a medicinal act, an act to attempt to correct something that's out of balance.
- If you were just going to describe it by the mere observation of taking the pill you would describe them both the same way. The moral object determines whether or not the act is good or bad, however.

Additional examples: This is what the person chooses to do.

- Have you decided to buy your secretary flowers?
- Have you chosen to donate to a political campaign?
- Have you decided to lie under oath?

The first two are fine in themselves but lying is always wrong. It is always wrong to perform an evil action. No reason or circumstance justifies doing evil. One cannot do evil hoping for a good outcome.

Remember, it's what you're trying to do. If you're trying to murder somebody and you don't succeed, you have still committed murder in your heart. You have still made that moral move to choose an evil object. Thus, we can't simply describe the object in terms of what we've successfully achieved or accomplished. It's what you try to do, not necessarily what you get done.

When the moral object is evil, the action is called 'intrinsically evil.' This means that it can't be chosen despite a good intention; they are wrong regardless of your intention or the circumstances. To paraphrase St. Paul, "You cannot *do* evil so that good may come from it."

Examples of intrinsically evil actions

- theft; slavery; exploitation; prostitution; torture; murder, lying;
- fornication – sex outside of marriage; adultery
- contracepted sex: to sterilize a given act of intercourse of your own will through the Pill, Patch, tubal ligation or vasectomy
- oral sex, artificial insemination, and in vitro fertilization
- homosexual acts

Here we must recall the most basic moral principle: Do good and avoid evil.

One can never do evil with the hope of a good outcome. People often try to come up with extreme scenarios to justify using evil to bring about good. But the most basic principle remains - it is never permissible to do evil.

There are times in life when we are left with only two choices: heroism and sin. Difficult cases only prove that sometimes heroism is necessary to do what is right. God will always give us the grace to remain faithful to Him.

CCC 1752 Intention

This element of the moral act answers the question, “Why am I trying to do this?”

This is why the agent is acting.

- Why are you doing this?
- Why did you do that?
- Is the purpose of the act good?
- Is your motivation good?
 - An evil intention can spoil a good action.

The intention is the motivation. It is the state of affairs that you hope to bring about. It's the perceived good that's motivating you.

From the example above: Think of the man who is giving flowers to his secretary. Did he buy her flowers as an expression of gratitude, to lift her spirits or morale. Or with the hope of seducing her? The first two reasons are good. The last reason makes the action unacceptable.

- Even when the motive is good, this cannot make an act good if it has a bad object.

The end never justifies the means.

- If you have a bad means that is a bad object. It can't be made good regardless of motivation.
- The reverse is also true: a good object (giving to the poor) can be made bad with a bad motivation (praise of men). This is why Jesus condemns the Pharisees.

Note: To avoid confusion, it's better to be more specific when you're teaching your mentee. Ask, “**What you were trying to do and why were you trying to do it?**”

CCC 1754 Circumstances

This element of the moral act answers the question, “What are the circumstances?”

This is the final test for a moral act, albeit in a subordinate way. These are the surrounding details pertinent to the act that determine whether it's a good or bad act. Circumstances cannot make an evil act good, but they can make a good act bad. If the circumstances are all wrong, even a good act or a good intention is spoiled.

Examples:

- If Superman was flying to save a school bus of kids from falling over a cliff but, on his way, he also sees a dog that's about to be hit by a car. It's moral to save a dog; it's a good object with a good end. But ignoring the bus full of kids for a dog is wrong.
- A parent spending so much time in adoration that the children are neglected. This is immoral.
- Suppose the father of a starving family has been given a full course turkey dinner to bring home to his poor wife and children for Thanksgiving. As he is carrying this meal home, he sees several starving dogs at the roadside. Filled with pity, he gives them the turkey originally intended for his family. In such a case, the *object* is good; there is nothing wrong with feeding a hungry animal. The *intention* is good, the man just wants to ease the suffering of the dogs. But the *circumstances* determine it's the wrong thing to do, because the man's family situation is such that the meal should have gone to his family. That is why it is necessary to consider all relevant facts surrounding an action before deciding to pursue it.

In summary: A morally good act requires the goodness of the object, of the end, and of the circumstances together. CCC 1755 A morally good act requires the goodness of its object (what); the goodness of its intention (Why); and of the circumstances surrounding the situation.

Prudence Begins with the End in Mind

Prudence is first because it places before us our true goal, happiness through union with God, the Supreme Good and the human goods. Prudence directs all our choices to the goal.

The question to be asked: Will this lead to toward or away from God?

In conclusion, Paragraph 225 of the Catechism tells us that Prudence means making good use of created things: faith in God, the only One, leads us to use everything that is not God only insofar as it brings us closer to him, and to detach ourselves from it insofar as it turns us away from him.

My Lord and my God, take from me everything that distances me from you. My Lord and my God, give me everything that brings me closer to you. My Lord and my God, detach me from myself to give my all to you. ~ St. Nicholas of Flüe

May this prayer of St. Nicholas of Flüe guide us both in our own growth toward holiness and as spiritual mentors.