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INTENTIONS, GOOD ACTS, AND HUMAN FREEDOM

In the last chapter we claimed that everyone has some sort of morality, or set of rules, to live by. We then looked at why people follow the sets of rules they do, and found an important difference between a morality of obligation and a morality of happiness. But though we spent some time reflecting on why people are moral in general, we spent no time figuring out how to determine the different particular ways people do what they do. How do we specify the types of people that we and other people are? How can we ascertain what our different actions mean in order to try to evaluate those actions as good or bad?

This chapter continues our preparation for more specific evaluation of particular virtues and moral issues. The purpose of this chapter is not to claim that all people have desires that they live out in certain ways (the point of last chapter) but rather to describe how we can identify the different desires people have in life, how they give meaning to our actions, and how they give each of us a certain character. This is necessary in order to be able to evaluate different moralities and different actions. To that end we explore two crucial concepts in moral theology here: intention and freedom. The first half of this chapter explains what an intention is, and how intentions render our actions both intelligible (i.e., understandable or meaningful) and open to moral evaluation. In fact, through examining intentions in our lives, we can arrive at a stable

vision of our characters, or “what we are all about.” The second half of this chapter examines the notion of freedom. After defining freedom and offering three classic terms to help describe free actions, the chapter concludes with a challenging discussion of two different types of freedom.

Intentionality: People as Purposeful Creatures

Consider an everyday occurrence you might witness in a hallway before class. A young lady is walking along when she suddenly drops her books and they scatter across the hallway. A young man witnesses the situation, stops, and bends down to help the young woman pick up her books. This is a seemingly straightforward event. But what exactly happened here? Does this situation have any moral relevance, beyond simply serving as some random act of kindness? The last chapter implied that morality is at least as much about everyday occurrences as it is about intensely contested ethical issues; is that true in this case? The first part of this chapter will help us better understand this event, our own actions, and even how all our actions fit together to make up our character. It will do so by exploring a crucial concept in moral theology: intention.

What is an Intention?

An *intention* is a goal or purpose toward which we direct ourselves. It is the specification of our desire. It answers the question, “what do you want?” or in Jesus’s own very first words in the Gospel according to John, “What are you looking for?” (John 1:38). You want to become a teacher, to do service work, to be a good friend, to go and work out at the gym, and so on. Notice that you do not simply want, or desire in general. You desire something. And what you want is grasped, or understood, as something more or less specific. That is why we say that acting intentionally not only involves pursuing, or fleeing, something, but also a grasp of what it is we pursue or flee. For human persons, this means that acting intentionally is a function of our wills whereby we move toward, or away from, something, and our intellect or reason whereby we grasp or comprehend what we are pursuing or avoiding. For example, I want to be a good friend to someone. And I understand that being a good friend means helping my friend move into a new house, sharing my hopes and fears, and listening when he or she is in need. Therefore I pursue or seek (with my will) those things I grasp (with my intellect) as making me a good friend.

Notice also that intentions exist at a variety of levels. You can intend (or in Jesus’s words, “look for”) something very limited and immediate (say, to go work out), or something far longer term and more important (say, to be a teacher). Furthermore, some of our more immediate intentions are for the sake of longer term intentions. So you may come to class regularly because your further goal is to succeed in the class and get a good grade. You intend

to succeed in class and get a good grade because you desire the even further goal of becoming an educated person and graduating with a degree.

To explicitly connect this analysis to the previous chapter, we intentionally seek goals because we seek our own happiness. Whatever we intentionally do we do because we think it leads to our happiness, either directly or as a means to that happiness. Note that this does not contradict the preceding chapter's distinction between a morality of happiness and a morality of obligation. People who live a morality of obligation still do things intentionally, and do them ultimately to be happy, whether they recognize that is what they are doing or not. We say they espouse a morality of obligation rather than happiness not because they do not seek happiness; after all, even Glaucon wanted to be happy and live a good life! Rather, their morality is one of obligation because the moral rules they obey—the things they do to be morally good—are seen at best as things to be grudgingly endured on the path to happiness, or at worst as impediments to or (as in the case of German philosopher Immanuel Kant) a separate realm from that happiness.¹ The point is, to recall opening words of this book, people are restless, longing to be happy and have their desires fulfilled. The intentions we have in life reveal what we think will make us happy and how we pursue that happiness in our actions.

That is why—though as noted above intentions exist on a variety of different levels—what they all have in common is their power to guide actions. You only have an intention in the proper sense of the word when it drives an action, or purposeful inaction. This is one way in which the use of the term “intention” in moral theology differs from common usage. Sometimes we speak of “good intentions,” as when we hear “the path to Hell is paved with good intentions.” This phrase implies that you have some intentions that never translate into action. That is not an intention in the technical sense of the term. An intention is a purpose or goal you have that drives some sort of action. You hope or wish for things all the time that you never pursue. Properly speaking, you only have an intention if it guides your action or purposeful inaction.

Intentions Make Our Actions Meaningful

The intricate connection between intention and action leads to a further point about intention. Not only do intentions prompt actions, but they also make those actions intelligible, or meaningful. Human persons are the sorts of creatures that act for purposes, and you cannot fully understand their actions without some sense of their purposes. Therefore, intentions are what make our actions intelligible (literally, “understand-able”), or meaningful.

1. The Stoic school of philosophy is an interesting challenge to this dichotomy since they claim that acting virtuously *is* happiness (and so seem to espouse a morality of happiness), and yet hold such an idiosyncratic view of what constitutes happiness that they seem dissonant with other adherents of that approach.

Recall the above example of the young man helping someone pick up her books. What is happening here? We can easily describe what the young man did here: help someone pick up her books. But we really do not have a sense of what this act means without looking at his intentions. Why did he help her pick up her books? Is he simply a considerate person who saw someone in need, and responded with what help he had to offer? Was he trying to impress the young woman to get a date, or impress someone who was watching close by? Was he concerned that someone watching might know that he is active in church and campus ministry activities, and think him a hypocrite if he did not stop to help? All of these are different intentions that might have prompted the same act of helping the young woman pick up her books. Needless to say, that same act could have very different meanings based upon the intention at hand. It could be an act of generosity, or a clever move to get a date, or a façade before others to evade charges of hypocrisy. That is why we have to attend to people's intentions to truly understand what their actions mean.

Consider another example. Every term I teach in college, I find the students generally quite motivated to succeed in the course. Yet there are many different reasons that could be driving them to do their reading, study for tests, write good papers, and the like. Some students rely heavily on their parents' affirmation, and good grades gain that affirmation. Other students want to get good grades to get into the best law school possible, in order to eventually make the most money possible. Some students study to maintain athletic eligibility, which is what they really desire above and beyond their education. Other students want to learn the material in the class to have a better understanding of themselves and the world. We can therefore only really understand the meaning of these different students' actions (in this case, studying for class) by attending to their larger goals for those actions.

Because intentions are so crucial in giving human actions their meaning, they also help us evaluate actions as good or bad. For instance, we can judge if the purpose driving the act is praiseworthy or blameworthy. If I do all sorts of nice things because I want people to think I am generous, we will likely think less of those acts, and me as a person, than if I did the same thing in order to help someone in need. Realizing people's intentions can also help us determine if the actions they perform are effective ways of achieving that purpose or goal. When we eventually adjudicate between different moralities and rules, a key part of that task will be determining which goals are good or bad, and more or less important. From a morality of happiness approach, what this means is determining which goals contribute to or detract from, and are more or less constitutive of, human happiness and flourishing. Knowledge of intentions not only enables us to evaluate the goodness and relative importance of those intentions, but also how effectively or ineffectively our chosen courses of action lead to those goals.

At this point students commonly wonder about mixed intentions. What if I was trying to help the person in need, but also did it to feel good about myself, and so that others would think me compassionate, and perhaps even to get a date out of it! It is surely the case that we commonly have many reasons to do a certain act. But remember that intentions are properly understood to be action-guiding. So though we may have various hopes or wishes that accompany an act, what intentions are actually driving you to do the act? Would you do it if no one else were around? If so, that wish to appear compassionate before others may be present, but it is not the intention driving the act.² You would have done it otherwise. Would you have done it had you not been attracted to the person you were helping? If so, the hope for a date may have been there, but it was not driving the act. Of course, sometimes different circumstances may reveal that we would not have done the act, and that does indeed reveal something about our true intentions.

Another way our intentions give our actions meaning is by shaping how they are done. For instance, if a student's goal in class is to achieve good grades for the sake of admission to a prestigious graduate school, then truly learning the material, rather than simply preparing to put right answers on the test, would be less important. One might even be willing to cheat to secure those grades. Doing either of these would of course be nonsensical if one's true intention were to learn more about one's self and the world through understanding the course material. We could also imagine two seniors who already have jobs approaching their studies at the end of the spring term quite differently based upon their intentions for college study. All of these reflections reveal why it is that intentions make our actions intelligible, or give them their meaning.

Intentions Shape Who We Are

When we think of human actions, we most likely think of what effect or change people's actions make in the world around them. What do people's actions accomplish? What good or harm do they do? These are of course crucial questions since it does indeed matter how our actions effect change in the world around us. Recall the example above. When the young man helps the young woman with her books, one effect of this action is that the books get picked up. It would certainly be a very different situation if he kicked her books down the hall and jeered at her! Thus our actions have what is called a *transitive* effect; by our actions we make changes in the world around us.³

2. This is why the word "wish" is used here rather than intention, an important distinction for later discussion of euthanasia.

3. The "transitive/intransitive" distinction used here was found in Paul Wadell's book *The Primacy of Love* (New York: Paulist, 1992). He cites its origin as John Finnis's *Fundamentals of Ethics* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1983).

But our actions do not only impact the world around us; they also impact our very selves. Our actions shape who we are.⁴ By performing certain acts, we shape the sorts of persons we are, for good or bad. In the above example of picking up books, if the young man acts for the purpose of being generous, it helps to make him a more generous person. He is a different person than he was before the act, since now he is more considerate. If he had helped the young woman simply to look compassionate in the eyes of others, he would also shape his very self, though in a different way. Such an act would make him more of the sort of person who does good things to impress others. The impact that our actions have on ourselves is called an *intransitive* effect.

It is not simply the type of action performed that shapes our very selves. This should be clear by the fact that the same external act can shape us in varying ways. Rather, it is the intentionality of the act that both gives it meaning and determines what sort of way it will shape who we are. What we do is guided by intentions that reveal what we hold to be important. Acting on those intentions not only reveals what we think is important, but also further ingrains that purpose or goal in our lives. The next chapter will explore the dynamics of how exactly this happens by examining habits, virtues, and vices. For now it suffices to note that due to intentionality, our actions not only impact the world around us (the transitive effect) but also shape our very selves (the intransitive effect).

Intentions and Our Character

In the myriad of activities we perform through a day, year or life, we see reflected a multitude of different goals or purposes that drive us to action. By examining the different purposes in our lives we can discover who we are by what is important to us, by what drives our actions. Attending to intention gives us a very realistic account of who we are. Since intentions are action-guiding, discerning who we are by the multitude of goals and purposes in our lives means that who we are is not some idealized or abstract account, but rather is determined by what we do and why we do it. This is why we become what we do.

If our lives are made up of a multitude of goals and purposes, how can we give any consistent sense of who we are? Doesn't this imply that our identity is constituted simply by what we are doing at the moment? Though our goals exist on a variety of levels and change over time, there is a consistency to our character since some goals are more important than others and some persist over time. To get a sense of what purposes in life are more important to you, consider what you prioritize when a conflict arises and you have to choose one. For instance, faith, family, work, friendships, home, leisure, exercise,

4. For a beautiful discussion of this point, see Paul Wadell, *The Primacy of Love*, 29–36.

and service work may be purposes that are all important to you, and which guide actions in your life. Will your studies come first or your leisure time with friends? When time with family and your work conflict, which generally wins out? Making, say, family most important in your life certainly does not mean you are not devoted to work, your friends, etc. But it does mean when conflicts arise that family generally wins out.

By reflecting on what the goals are in our lives that drive our actions, and what relative importance we attach to each of these purposes, we obtain a sense of our character. Each of us is a constellation of intentions lived out in varying ways and with varying priorities. We might imagine them pictured as a triangle, with our less important (but still action-guiding) intentions at the bottom (taking care of my car, keeping up with a favorite team, occasional tennis with a friend, etc.), more important ones toward the middle (spending time with friends, exercising, etc.), and the most important ones at the top (family, faith). Goals toward the top of the triangle are our higher priorities that win out when conflicting with other goals. As noted above in the case of college students who study to learn versus those who study to eventually get a high-paying job, higher priorities not only win out over lower ones, but also shape how those lower ones are done. How we live out our set of priorities reveals our character.⁵

Though thinkers have debated this question for millennia, a broad stream of the Western tradition has maintained that each of us has one ultimate goal or purpose in life.⁶ We might describe this as “what we’re all about.” What do you believe is your greatest good, or purpose, to which you are most consistently turned because you believe it best for you? For some it may be their faith. In fact, the Judeo-Christian tradition interprets the great command to love God with all your heart, your mind, and your soul as indicative of the believer’s highest goal in life: God. For some, it may be one’s family. We hear some people say, “there is nothing I would not do for my family.” For others it may be money, or power, or status, or pleasure. All of these are common answers people live out to the question, what are you all about?

Why insist that each of us has one ultimate goal in life? Isn’t it clear from what was said above that we have a multitude of intentions governing our lives? Claiming that we are each ultimately “all about” one ultimate purpose does not mean such a person has only one intention in life. It simply means it

5. Many thinkers are attracted to the terms “story” and “narrative” to describe both how particular actions fit into our overall lives, and how our lives of a multitude of goals and desires can still be coherent. For a helpful introduction to “narrative theology,” see Stanley Hauerwas and Gregory Jones, eds., *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

6. For examples of this claim, see Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), I. and Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*. English Dominican trans. (New York: Benziger, 1948) I-II 1.

is the overarching goal that shapes all others. It wins out when other priorities conflict with it. Furthermore, it even shapes how we do other things. The person of faith, for instance, can be a devoted family member, employee, reliable bowling partner, and so on. But all those lower goals of varying levels stand in relation to her ultimate goal, and are related to—or at least do not interfere with—that ultimate goal. A fine example of this is the troubling story of Jesus seemingly denouncing his mother and brothers, and saying that you cannot follow him without “hating” your family (Luke 14:26). A categorical rejection of family simply does not make sense given Jesus’s life (see John 19:26–27). But what makes perfect sense of this troubling claim is Jesus’s consistent refusal to put anything—even his family—before his mission to spread the kingdom. When a conflict between family and mission arose, there was no doubt which would win out for him.

Conversely, a conniving status seeker can at times care for his family, exercise, go to church, and so on. But when push comes to shove, any of these varying lower priorities will yield to an opportunity to gain status. In fact, how each of those lower goals is lived will be shaped by the ultimate goal of seeking status, such that church may be also an opportunity to look wholesome, and exercise may be a way to become more attractive and charming. One’s ultimate goal in life does not simply win out when intentions conflict. It also shapes, or governs, how the goals that are below it are lived out and pursued.

This is precisely why the Sermon on the Mount’s words on putting God above all else are so important. Christ exhorts his followers to put the kingdom of God first, and not let anxieties over mundane or even other important matters interfere with discipleship: “seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these [other] things will be given you besides” (Matt. 6:33). He implores his followers to store up heavenly, rather than worldly, treasure, since “where your treasure is, there also will your heart be” (Matt. 6:21). Finally, the governing importance of one’s highest goal in life is nowhere more obvious than in Christ’s famous claim that “no one can serve two masters. He will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon [money]” (Matt. 6:24).

By attending to what intentions guide our actions in life, how they are lived out particularly in relation to each other, and what constitutes our ultimate goal in life, we obtain a sense of our character. What we hold important and why we do what we do is revealed to us. In short, it reveals what we think true happiness consists in and how we pursue it. This is the essential starting point for any moral self-reflection. Who are we, what do we do, and why? By attending to these questions and their honest answers, we can begin to determine the ways that we are proud of our characters and hope to further ingrain them, and the ways we realize the need to change to live better lives.

Some Qualifiers on this Vision of Intention

This vision of intention, and how our goals are prioritized to reveal our characters, may seem rather static and deductive, as if we go through life in a staid manner, mechanistically acting out more important goals over lesser ones. This is not the case. The claim here is that people act for purposes. These intentions are specific, which enables us to morally evaluate them. They not only guide our actions but shape our very selves, making us certain sorts of people. Furthermore, our goals may be prioritized hierarchically to reflect what intentions are more or less important to us. Finally, we all have some highest good, ultimate aim, or overall plan in life that governs all other intentions.

Nonetheless, though the above claims are all indeed affirmed here, the following qualifications, or caveats, must be kept in mind. First, we generally do not self-consciously understand all our actions as hierarchically ordered, and then make choices with some vision of this triangle in mind. If we pause to reflect on what we do, and what takes precedence in our lives, we will indeed discern some sort of prioritization in our lives revealed by our actions. Nonetheless, this is lived out dynamically and often without thinking, rather than self-consciously and deductively.

Second, our actions do not reflect the whole of our hierarchy or goals, in proper proportion, at each moment or day or week. Exercise may be an important, but not really important, goal in your life. But when you are working out, you are likely focused on it alone. During exam week, studies may consume our lives in vastly disproportionate ways given the impending exams. But this is not an indication of their consistent relative importance in our lives. In other words, at certain times lower or middle goals may assume seemingly disproportionate importance. This may well be a function of time frame, and not an indication of their relative importance in our lives. Part of the virtuous life is having the practical wisdom to determine what those times are, a topic discussed in a later chapter.

That said, even while focused disproportionately on certain goals at certain times, one should not act in ways that positively defy and deny higher purposes in one's life. It is one thing to see less of my friends or spouse during a stressful time in the term. It is another to steal those same friends' notes due to my more immediate goal of passing finals, or to let the stress of added work make me cruel or short-tempered with my spouse. These ways of pursuing the immediate goal at hand would positively defy the higher goals, rather than be insistences where they are temporarily on hold.

Third, it is not the case that we always act in a manner that is perfectly consistent in reflecting our higher and lower intentions. Even the most reliable among us deviate from our integrity and act against goals that we hold as important to us. Sometimes we get caught up in a moment and lose our sense of priorities by focusing on lower goods over ones we know to be more

important. The reasons why this happens are examined in a later chapter. Though ignorance and immaturity are common causes, the Christian tradition affirms that the most common cause is human sin. Of course, if acting against goals we hold highly important happens consistently enough, it is no longer accurate to say that the goal is truly more important to us. But apart from that, sometimes we are simply inconsistent in how we pursue the most important goals in our lives.

Fourth, this chapter's claims about possessing a consistent character, or triangle of purposes in our lives, should not be taken to deny that people change over time. Sometimes this happens developmentally, or through stages in life. To use an obvious example, married parents have priorities in life (spouse, child) that simply did not exist before they had those people in their lives. Sometimes these changes are equally obvious but not simply developmental, as when someone suddenly gains or loses faith. Someone could develop an addiction, as to alcohol, or cease such an addiction. These sorts of changes impact one's entire triangle not only by introducing or eliminating a higher level goal, but also in the resulting impact of that change on the other goals in one's life. That said, though people certainly change over the course of their lives, the attention to character examined here is not so fluid as to be something that changes daily.

Fifth, notice that there has been no discussion here of whether one's higher goals in life are actually good or not. More obvious examples are given here, such as the development or curing of an addiction, or performing good acts for recognition or out of genuine generosity. But the detailed task of evaluating one's particular life goals and their relative importance is not the task of this chapter. Later chapters will examine what constitute good and bad intentions and actions concerning issues such as drinking alcohol, waging war, having sex, and making end-of-life decisions. The goal of this chapter is to illuminate the dynamic of how people's intentions shape their lives, so that you can become aware of what to look for in assessing your own life, and then do so in the company of family, friends, mentors, and the like.

Freedom and Human Action

What does this chapter's discussion of intentionality have to do with human freedom? Since most of the above discussion of intention is equally a discussion of freedom, it would help to pause and define freedom, especially in relation to intentionality. As noted above, an intention is most properly a goal directing an action and making that action meaningful. Something is grasped and pursued, or fled. In this broader sense, animals can be said to act intentionally. Beavers build dams; birds seek food for their young; sheep run from wolves; salmon swim upstream to spawn, and so on. These

animals all have some grasp of something, and then seek or avoid it. All of these actions are goal directed, and their proper meaning is grasped only by understanding that goal.⁷

But of course we would not describe the beaver, bird, sheep, or salmon as “free” in these instances. Free action is goal-directed activity, but not simply that. It is the activity of a person who understands the goal of an activity and therefore does, or does not, do it with a certain understanding of that goal in mind. Animals have some grasp of the goal they pursue, but it is supplied by their instinct, or at times by training from humans. They do not properly understand what they are pursuing as one option among many, so as to be able to choose otherwise. We might picture two circles, one larger, with the smaller one inside the larger. The larger circle would represent intentional action, while the smaller subset would represent free action. All free action is intentional, but not all intentional action is free.

The discussion of intentionality in the entire first section of this chapter, since it focuses on human intentionality where the goals are understood and embraced by the one acting, is actually a discussion of free intentional action. Though we often speak of free will, our wills are free due to the power of reason, by which we understand the goals we embrace. In fact, it is precisely the human power of reason that distinguishes us from animals and makes us truly free. It is our reason that gives us free choice, since it enables us to understand different goals, and pursue one or the other—or none at all. This is why the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines freedom as “the power, rooted in reason and will, to act or not act, to do this or that, and so to perform deliberate actions on one’s own responsibility. By free will one shapes one’s life.”⁸

Helpful Terms in Evaluating Free Action

Moral theology is all about understanding and evaluating free actions, the things we do intentionally in our quest for happiness in life. With the above discussion of intentionality and a precise definition of freedom in mind, you are now ready for several terms that will help you morally evaluate different actions and situations. These terms will be invaluable in later chapters’ discussions of issues such as drinking alcohol, having sex, making end-of-life decisions, and waging war justly. In discussions of moral theology, for an act to be “good,” it must be good in *object*, *intention*, and *circumstances*. Though these terms may sound foreign, you actually use these ideas all the time. To understand

7. For a fascinating discussion of intentional action in dolphins, and an exploration of the pre-rational roots of practical reasoning, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999).

8. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), 1731.

what each of these means, consider a classic example used by both Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas.⁹

A ship captain is out at sea. A terrible storm arises, such that the lives of his crew as well as the safety of the cargo are dangerously threatened. When it seems the ship may indeed sink, the captain orders the crew to throw all the cargo overboard to lighten the ship and keep it afloat. Though Aristotle and Aquinas use this case to make a slightly different point, it perfectly illustrates our three terms.

The *object* of an act is what is actually done. Identifying the object can be a tricky matter. The trick is to name the action in the most specific way possible, without reference to longer-term goals. Yet the act must still be described in a rich enough matter that it has meaning. For instance, if asked upon return to port what he had the crew do, it would be a poor description of object for the captain to say, "I had them save the ship." While true, this is not specific enough to name the particular act that was done. It is a longer-term goal. On the other end of the spectrum, it would also be accurate but unhelpful for the captain to say, "I had the crew lift up and drop boxes of cargo." While true, this does not describe the crew's actions in a meaningful way. The object here is throwing cargo overboard. This names the specific action that is done in a meaningful way.

What is the intention? The *intention* is the goal or purpose we have in mind for doing an action. Often we use phrases such as "in order to" or "to" or "so that" when we reveal our intentions. In the above scenario, the cargo was thrown overboard to lighten the ship and keep it afloat. Thus the intention here is to save the ship and its crew by lightening the ship.

Finally, what are the circumstances of an action? *Circumstances* are features of the situation which, although secondary, help determine the morality of an act. This case, like all cases, is full of them. How bad was the storm? How heavy was the cargo? Would sending crew on deck put them in more danger? As indicated by these questions, the circumstances are crucial in determining whether the object of a particular action is a wise way to achieve even a good intention. As should be clear after explaining these terms, one must consider all three features of moral action. For an action to be labeled good it must be good and fitting in object, intention, and circumstances.

Though these terms are technical, they help us sort through the moral evaluation of activities with greater ease. You actually do this all the time, even if you are just now learning the names of these three terms. Recall the case of the young man helping to pick up books. When we say it is important to know whether he kicked the books further or helped pick them up, we are asking what the object of the action was. What did he do? When we give various reasons

9. This example can be found in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* III.1 1110a, and Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae* I-II 6,6.

for why he might have done that act, we are inquiring as to his intention. If you have ever said something like, "She was really trying to . . .," what you were saying is that the intention was not as it seemed. Finally, circumstances are also important. Even if the young man did this act with a good intention, if it was done while he was delivering insulin to someone in diabetic shock, we will probably protest that given the circumstances, he could have let the young woman pick up her own books!

Therefore, when people act freely, they knowingly engage in a certain activity (object), for a purpose (intention), with a good grasp of the situation (circumstances). When this occurs, we say they are responsible for their actions, and we may praise or blame them depending on the sorts of actions they perform or the purposes they hold. When we are responsible for our actions, they do not just happen to us but are done by us and thus shape who we are (as mentioned above and described in detail next chapter). When we act freely we ourselves are the source of an action. Therefore free actions reflect and further ingrain who we are.

Becoming Free: Two Types of Freedom

Talk of "becoming free" may seem odd to certain people. Many think that freedom is like a light switch. It is on or off. You are free or not. You are free when you act without any external influences such that your action is just from you. You are not free when you are forced by some influence or state of affairs to do something that you yourself would not want to do. There are clearly some cases where you act intentionally but are not free. For example, if you are passing by a bank one morning and some bank robbers grab you at gun point and force you to drive their getaway car, are you free? You understand the goal of getting the robbers safely away from the scene of the crime, and you act toward that goal by driving them. Therefore, this is an intentional action. In fact, you presumably could have acted otherwise, refusing to participate, even at the possible cost of your life. But if you were to participate, it would not accurately be labeled a free action because it happened *to you*, rather than arising *from you*. It was forced upon you rather than chosen. The technical term for some external force or pressure that leads you to do something in a manner that lessens, or even removes, your responsibility for an act (praise if it is good, blame if it is bad) is *duress*. In the case of your coerced participation in the bank robbery, we would say you acted under duress and thus are not responsible for (in this case blameworthy for) the act. Even though you did it, it was not your act.

It is easy to see in this case how you are not responsible for your act, and therefore not free. But other instances from our lives reveal that the variety of influences in our lives are far more subtle, and so it is not accurate to group all our actions into two black-and-white categories—free or not free—depending

on whether or not we were coerced by external pressure. For instance, what of other pressures like peer pressure, or that exercised by a boyfriend or girlfriend? What of the pressure to be financially secure, or receive our parents' approval? These external influences certainly impact how we act. Do they make us less free, and therefore less responsible for our actions? What of a series of bad influences in one's life back through childhood (absent parents, abusive siblings, manipulative teachers.)? For that matter, what of good influences such as loving parents, good teachers, financial security, and others? Do these bad or good influences make us less free for our actions since they are shaped by external influences? At what point do those influences become duress and lessen our responsibility for our actions?

The point here is not to claim that since we are all subject to external influences we can never hold people responsible for their actions. The point is that freedom is best understood not as a binary capacity that is either on or off, but rather as a capacity we have by which we understand and internalize as our own the actions we do. Even when we are the recipients of bad or good influences, to the extent that we are mentally capable of understanding our actions and that we take on, or internalize, the goals and meanings of those actions as our own, then we are responsible for our actions, and we act freely. It is true that this process of internalization is a continuum rather than an on/off switch. It is also true that at some point on that continuum people are determined to have taken on their actions adequately enough as their own that they are responsible, even despite the presence of significant external influences. If this were not the case, we could not, for instance, have courts and jails. But nonetheless, people can become more free to the extent that their actions are understood and undertaken as their own.

There are other reasons why people can be more or less free in the sense of having our actions be our own. Chapter 5 will examine different forms of ignorance, and explain to what extent we are, or are not, blameworthy for ignorance that impedes our ability to live well. That chapter will also briefly explore the influence of unjust social structures on how we live. Nevertheless, the presence of any external influence whatsoever does not "turn off" our freedom; our actions are generally shaped by external influences rather than simply originating from us alone. The point here is that human persons are free because we have the capacity to understand and undertake our actions as our own, and we are more or less free in particular situations to the extent that our actions are indeed our own.

According to one perspective on the meaning of human freedom, as long as your actions are truly taken on as your own, then you are fully free. In this view, it does not matter what you choose to do; as long as the action is truly your own, you are free. This perspective is called *freedom of indifference*, because you are free no matter what you choose (hence "indifference"), as long as it is

your choice.¹⁰ However, according to a second perspective on freedom, being truly free depends not only on whether the action is your own, although that is certainly necessary too. It also depends on what you choose. This perspective is called *freedom for excellence*. The assumption here is that freedom is a human capacity with a purpose: the happiness and flourishing of the human person. So it is fully exercised not only when actions are taken on as our own, but when those actions contribute to our happiness and flourishing (hence "excellence"). On this view, the person who chooses what is true and good is actually more free.

To illustrate the two different approaches to freedom, consider the story of the rich young man in the Gospel according to Mark (Mark 10:17–22; cf. Matt. 19:18–22 and Luke 18:18–23). A young man approaches Jesus and asks how to inherit eternal life. Christ exhorts him to follow the commandments. When the man says he has done so since his youth, Jesus "looked at him, loved him, and said to him, 'You are lacking in one thing. Go, sell what you have, give it to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.'" We read that the rich young man's face fell and he walked away sad, "for he had many possessions."

This extraordinary passage could be pondered for countless insights about the moral life. But for our purposes in this chapter, the key question is, "Was the rich young man free when he walked away?" We assume he never came back, though we cannot know for sure. We do know he went away sad, and we have no evidence that he was dragged away against his own will. In other words, he clearly chose to walk away. The question is, when he made that choice, was he fully free?

It depends on which perspective on freedom you hold. From a freedom of indifference view, the rich young man is clearly free. He chooses to walk away; no one drags him. You may reply that he seems torn or conflicted by that decision since we read he walked away sad. Maybe so, but that inner conflict is his own rather than imposed on him. The story clearly implies he can choose to follow Jesus, but does not. According to a freedom of indifference perspective, the rich young man is indeed free, since the choice to walk away is his own.

However, according to the freedom for excellence perspective, it is not enough for an action to be one's own in order for a person to be fully free. That is certainly necessary, and if an action is not truly one's own, then the person is not fully free (or even free at all). But in addition to this condition, to be fully free a person must not only choose, but also choose what is good. Thus from this perspective, assuming Christ's invitation was

10. For extensive work on the two different types of freedom discussed here, see Servais Pinckaers, OP, *The Sources of Christian Ethics* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1995), 327–378.

indeed the path to eternal life, the rich young man actually acted against his own freedom.

This very way of speaking sounds oxymoronic to some. How can a person act against his own freedom, if the act is chosen by him? True, if freedom is just the ability to do whatever you want, you cannot act against your own freedom. But if freedom is the ability to choose to act well in pursuit of truth and true happiness, then not only can you choose to defy your freedom, but positively you can continually grow in this freedom through good choices.

The question here is what is the purpose, or point, of human freedom. If human freedom is simply a capacity to choose, then one is free no matter what one chooses. This is what the freedom-of-indifference perspective claims. Note that these people do not say that any exercise of freedom is equally good. They also hope people use their freedom for good choices. But even when they do not, they are still fully free since they have used their freedom to exercise a choice.

The freedom-for-excellence perspective holds that the point of human freedom is not simply its exercise, but its use for the flourishing and happiness of the human person. They of course recognize that people can choose badly. And they even admit that when people choose poorly they may well be free in the more limited sense of making the choice themselves. (Otherwise they could not blame people for choosing wrongly.) But they also claim that since the point of freedom is to contribute to the happiness of the person rather than simply to be used in no matter what way, then people are more free to the extent that they choose what is true and good and thus leads to happiness. From this perspective freedom is more like a skill to be developed than a binary capacity that is either on or off like a light switch. This perspective is seen perfectly in the *Catechism* when it says:

Human freedom is a force for growth and maturity in truth and goodness; it attains its perfection when directed toward God, our beatitude [happiness]. (1731)

The more one does what is good, the freer one becomes. There is no true freedom except in the service of what is true and just. The choice to disobey and do evil is an abuse of freedom and leads to the "slavery of sin" (cf. Rom. 6:17). (1733)

By deviating from the moral law man violates his own freedom. (1740)

Appealing to some common experiences may help make this claim more understandable. Surely all of us have experienced failing to refrain from acting on a bad habit that we knew we possessed and were trying to change. Some examples are trying to quit smoking, or stopping a habit of procrastination,

or trying to avoid losing your temper. When you fail to avoid these things, you are not only acting badly, but actually defying your own freedom by doing so, even if it is you yourself who is making the choice. Of course, some might reply that this is only because we possess some sort of desire to not act in that manner. But according to the freedom-for-excellence perspective, it is also true that we can defy our freedom even when we act willingly and without hesitation or remorse. Perhaps you have had the experience of seeing a friend engage in behavior you know to be wrong. Though she may not see it and thus acts willingly, from your perspective you can see how the behavior, though freely chosen, is not in her true best interest. Thus she is acting in a manner that is keeping her from living as rewarding and satisfying a life as possible. And so she is defying her own freedom. An extreme case would be watching someone willingly develop a drug habit. You might wonder how she could limit herself like that, how she could do that to herself. If you have ever had a response like this, toward your own actions or toward those around you, your response reveals your awareness that true freedom is not only doing what one wants, but wanting what is genuinely best. That is freedom for excellence.

One more case will help illuminate the difference between freedom for excellence and freedom of indifference, and also prepare us for the following chapter on virtue. Consider two spouses. The husband struggles to be faithful to his wife. He is constantly tempted to cheat on her. But he never acts on his temptations. His wife, on the other hand, experiences no such temptations. She knows she wants to be with her husband, and after years of marriage has become so accustomed to their life together that she does not even imagine, let alone experience a temptation to, being in a sexual relationship with some one else. The question is, who is more free?

From a freedom-of-indifference perspective, you could say both are equally free. Both make their choices and do what they want. Perhaps the husband is even a bit more free. Choosing to sleep with someone else is a live option for him and so he has more choices, whereas in the sense of entertaining various options the wife seems to have fewer choices and thus less freedom. Yet from a freedom-for-excellence perspective, it is abundantly clear that the wife is more free. She easily chooses what is good for her. She may seem to have fewer choices, since she never considers being with someone other than her husband. But since this fidelity is both chosen by her, and what is truly good for her (assuming that is the case), she is actually more fully free than her husband. The following chapter on virtue will continue this line of thought by explaining how it is that people can reach the point where doing good becomes ingrained in them, as it is in this case with the wife.

This treatment of the two perspectives on human freedom is very challenging to people. Some insist it is not right to insert into our understanding of freedom notions of goodness or badness, such that acting poorly is a failure

to be fully free. Such freedom-of-indifference proponents may indeed agree that it is best to use freedom for the good, but also think that you are fully free even if you choose poorly, as long as it is your choice. Yet proponents of the freedom-for-excellence perspective insist that the human capacity for freedom is integrated with, rather than apart from, the sets of goals that lead a person to happiness. Either way, since both sides agree it is best to exercise one's capacity for freedom by choosing what is good, it is not necessary to decisively settle this difference here before proceeding with the rest of the book, and in particular the next chapter on how to become the sorts of persons for whom choosing well is easier and more consistent.

Concluding Thoughts

We have now come full circle back to the topic that began chapter 1 of this book. Is morality the path to happiness? Or is morality a matter of obligations that limit our happiness? The former perspective is that of Socrates and leads to a morality of happiness. The latter is that of Glaucon and leads to a morality of obligation. Each of the two types of freedom seems more at home in one of these perspectives on morality than the other. The morality of obligation perspective reflects the freedom-of-indifference view, since the exercise (or not) of one's freedom has no connection to one's happiness. Yet the person who holds a morality of happiness would surely say that only choosing to live the moral life, which is the truly happy life, makes one fully free. While the immoral person may be called free in some sense because he is responsible for his actions, he is not fully free since freedom is a human capacity that is meant to be exercised in a manner that leads to our fulfillment. The exercise of choice alone is not the point of this capacity. It is to choose well. The following chapter explains how choosing well shapes us into certain sorts of people by developing habits in us called virtues.

Study Questions

1. Define intention. How do intentions render our acts meaningful?
2. Describe how our various goals in life are related to each other such that we can get some coherent sense of a person's character.
3. Define freedom. Why is it important that freedom is an act of will and reason?
4. Define object, intention, and circumstances, and use an example to illustrate each.
5. What is the difference between freedom of indifference and freedom for excellence? Be able to use the story from Mark 10:17–31 to explain each one.

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Terms to Know

transitive and intransitive features of human action, intention, free will, freedom of indifference, freedom for excellence, object, circumstances, duress

Questions for Further Reflection

1. Do any human actions have no intention? Do any significant human actions have no intention? If not, why not? If so, what do they look like?
2. Need it be the case that each person has one ultimate goal in life? Is it possible to have a set of balanced priorities without naming something as overarching? Explain.
3. Freedom is described here as a human (rather than animalistic) sort of acting intentionally. What ramifications of this analysis are there for better understanding child development and parenting?
4. Which perspective—freedom for excellence or freedom of indifference—do you espouse and why?

Further Reading

For a helpful and accessible survey of the morality of human acts and human freedom, see the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1730–1761. Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae* is the classic source for the action theory described here, but the text is very difficult. Daniel Westberg's *Right Practical Reason* and Charles Pinches' *Theology and Action* are helpful, though also challenging, expositions of Aquinas's thought. An accessible explanation of intentionality is found in Paul Waddell's *Primacy of Love*. Servais Pinckaers, OP, explains the different notions of freedom in his *Sources of Christian Ethics*. Finally, Pope John Paul II's encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* is an important exploration of Catholic moral theology, the entire first section of which is a detailed analysis of the rich young man story from Mark.