

2-1-1994

[Book Review of] *Principles for a Catholic Morality*, by Timothy E. O'Connell

William E. May

Follow this and additional works at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq>

 Part of the [Ethics and Political Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Medicine and Health Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

May, William E. (1994) "[Book Review of] *Principles for a Catholic Morality*, by Timothy E. O'Connell," *The Linacre Quarterly*: Vol. 61: No. 1, Article 12.

Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq/vol61/iss1/12>

BOOK REVIEW

Principles for a Catholic Morality

by

Timothy E. O'Connell

Revised Edition, Harper & Row, San Francisco, 1990, xvi + 303 pp. \$14.95, paper

This is the revised edition of a work first published in 1978. The most significant changes in the revised edition are: (1) a slight reorganization of the chapters in Part I, (2) the addition of a new chapter, "The Current Debate," in Part III, and (3) the acknowledgement by O'Connell that there is at least one exceptionless or absolute specific moral norm, namely, that prohibiting the intentional or direct killing of innocent human beings and his *seeming* repudiation of the proportionalist method of making moral judgments which he espoused in the first edition. Below, after presenting an overview of the volume, I will take up in more detail the reasons why O'Connell now accepts as universally valid the norm proscribing the intentional killing of innocent human beings and his current attitude toward proportionalism.

O'Connell divides his material into four somewhat loosely related parts. Parts II and III, on the human person and the moral world, are more integrally related than other parts of the work, since they deal with the human person who is called to freedom and with the criteria for determining the moral quality of human acts. The introductory essays of Part I take up the meaning of moral theology, its history (very schematically and indeed superficially outlined), Christ and moral theology, and Jesus and moral living. The chapter entitled "Jesus and Moral Living" is substantively the same as the chapter entitled "Elements of a Biblical Morality" in the first edition, and in this revised edition is placed after the chapter on Christ and moral theology, whereas in the first edition its counterpart was placed before the chapter on Christ and moral theology. O'Connell, seemingly, came to realize that "Elements of a Biblical Morality" was simply too inaccurate a title for the material taken up in the chapter. But what strikes me as quite significant is that O'Connell seems to be distinguishing, in these chapters, between the Christ of faith and the Jesus "of personal encounter," whose authenticity, however, is to "be tested . . . through comparison with the Jesus of the Bible" (p. 36), the Jesus who offers us a way-of-living summed up in the biblical themes of covenant, reign of God, repentance, law, love, and beatitudes. O'Connell's basic point in these chapters is that Christian morality is essentially simply *human* morality, and that to model one's moral life on Jesus is simply to be fully human.

Part II, substantively unchanged in the present edition, is concerned with the moral person and with such issues as human acts, freedom, and theology of sin and the difference between mortal and venial sin, conscience and Christian vocation. In these chapters O'Connell makes a sharp distinction between what he terms "categorical freedom," or the freedom of choice involved in human acts, and what he terms "transcendental freedom," or the freedom to determine who we are by taking a fundamental stance that gives our lives "direction, significance, and definition" (p. 72). The act of transcendental freedom is what O'Connell calls "fundamental option," and "inner act of self-definition" (p. 73). Since we become, or fail to become, "fully human" only "by the exercise of basic, transcendental freedom" (p. 91), it follows that "mortal sin as an act is nothing else than a synonym for fundamental option"; it is an act "by which we substantially reject God and assume

instead a posture apart from, and in alienation from, God" (p. 91). Consequently, "mortal sin is not precisely the doing of any one categorical act" (p. 91). Rather, categorical acts (the objects of categorical freedom and not of fundamental freedom), such as committing adultery or killing an innocent person, are not themselves mortal sins, although "these objective acts are 'occasions of sin'" (p. 91).

In other words, according to O'Connell, it is possible for a person freely to choose to commit adultery or to kill an innocent human being and not commit mortal sin. Although acts of this kind may provide "occasions" for sinning mortally, i.e., for making a mortally bad fundamental option, they do not necessarily make one to be a mortal sinner nor is it necessary that one make a bad fundamental option in freely choosing, say, to commit adultery.

The Problem

O'Connell's problem here is that he relocates self-determination from the free choices which we make every day to an alleged act of fundamental freedom at the core of our existence and of which we are aware only in a nonreflexive way. At the heart of his problem is his belief that human acts are material events that come and go and do not abide within the person, whereas in truth human acts are not physical events but rather acts of the person. At their core is a self-determining choice which abides within the person as a disposition to further choices of the same kind. It is, indeed, in and through the actions we freely choose that we give to ourselves our identity as human persons; it is in and through them that we give to ourselves our character. Here it is worth noting that in this revised edition O'Connell has not even attempted to respond to the trenchant criticism given of the fundamental option theory he espouses by others, in particular by Joseph Boyle, Jr., in his outstanding essay, "Freedom, the Human Person, and Human Action" (in *Principles of the Catholic Moral Life*, ed. William E. May [Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1981], pp. 237-267).

In Part II O'Connell also takes up the meaning of conscience and the relationship between the conscience of a Catholic and the teaching of the magisterium. He distinguishes between conscience/1, which is a "general sense of value, and awareness of personal responsibility . . . utterly emblematic of the human person" (p. 110), conscience/2, which deals with the specific perception of values, and conscience/3, which "is consummately concrete . . . [being] the concrete judgment of a specific person pertaining to her or his own immediate action" (p. 112). Since conscience/1 and conscience/3 are uniquely personal and inviolable, and since conscience/3 is "infallible" (p. 114) insofar as it is "the final norm by which a person's action must be guided" (p. 112), the teachings of the magisterium on moral questions intersect only with conscience/2, where there is the possibility of disagreement and error. The teachings of the magisterium on moral questions, which in O'Connell's judgment have never been infallibly proposed (p. 116), can illuminate conscience. They cannot, however, bind the conscience because the magisterium, in proposing specific moral norms, finds itself in the same situation as does the individual person in the endeavor to discover these values. "What we have," O'Connell writes, "are teachings that, although assisted by the Spirit, are nonetheless susceptible to error and therefore fallible" (p. 116). It thus follows, according to O'Connell, that Catholics have a right to dissent from authoritative teachings of the magisterium on specific moral issues and to shape their lives by norms other than those proposed by the magisterium. It is instructive to note that O'Connell, in considering the possibility that the magisterium can propose specific moral norms infallibly, notes that some authors, e.g., Germain Grisez and John Ford, maintain that some of the specific moral norms proposed by the magisterium have been infallibly proposed by the ordinary and universal magisterium of the Church. After noting this, O'Connell calls attention to the writings of theologians who challenge this view and concludes by saying, "it is fair to say that the opinion [of Grisez and others] is generally regarded as extreme, if not eccentric" (n. 11, p. 268). What is most instructive about O'Connell's discussion of this issue is that he fails to inform his readers that Grisez has patiently replied to the objections levelled by the theologians whom O'Connell mentions and that they have not sought to reply to Grisez's critique of their positions. Apparently, the argument from the authority of the *schola theologorum* is far stronger, in O'Connell's judgment, than the evidence and unanswered arguments marshalled by Grisez, not to mention the teaching of the magisterium itself.

In Part III O'Connell is concerned with the "moral world," with objective morality, and the

criteria for distinguishing between morally good and morally bad actions. In the earlier edition O'Connell had espoused a form of the proportionalist method of making moral judgments which he called "macroconsequentialism," and, in company with other advocates of this method of making moral judgments had concluded that there are no true moral absolutes or specific moral norms universally proscribing sorts of human actions described in nonmorally evaluative language (e.g., sexual relations with someone who is not one's spouse, i.e., adultery, lying, the intentional killing of the innocent, etc.). In the present edition O'Connell has slightly modified his position in the light of criticisms levelled against proportionalism. He now acknowledges that there is at least one kind of human act that is intrinsically evil (the killing of innocent human beings) and that, correspondingly, there is at least one exceptionless or absolute specific moral norm, namely, that proscribing the intentional or direct killing of innocent human beings. According to O'Connell, this sort of act is "wrong because in any circumstance whatever it represents an affront to the very enterprise of morality . . . it is a rejection of morality itself, for morality . . . is nothing else than the responsibility that follows from the intrinsic dignity of human persons" (p. 172). It attacks the very subjects "on whom the very existence of the moral enterprise is built" (p. 172).

But this is the only moral absolute that O'Connell acknowledges. He believes that other sorts of acts described as intrinsically evil in the Catholic tradition, and correspondingly prohibited by absolute norms, such as suicide, lying, extramarital intercourse, and divorce and remarriage cannot be shown to be such (pp. 189-193). For him, one cannot say that willful self-destruction is always immoral. It is instructive to compare his views here with the teaching of Vatican Council II in *Gaudium et spes*, n. 27.

Proportionalism Partially Renounced

By acknowledging that there is at least one sort of act that is intrinsically evil, O'Connell believes that he must renounce his previous acceptance of the proportionalist method of making moral judgments. Yet he is still very sympathetic to this approach, and indeed he still shares its basic presuppositions, of which one is that we can morally appraise human actions only "on the basis of their actual effects on human persons and on the living of human life" (p. 203). He simply comes to the conclusion that, appraising human actions on this basis, we can confidently assert that the killing of innocent human beings is always morally wrong insofar as he judges that this sort of human act is an attack on "the very existence and meaning of morality" (p. 210). He believes that the "basic human goods" approach advocated by Germain Grisez and others, while useful, is certainly inadequate. In his judgment Grisez and those who agree with him, while denying that basic human goods are commensurable, in fact surreptitiously introduce judgments comparatively evaluating these goods into their moral analyses (pp. 207-209). Here O'Connell is simply mistaken, and fails to note that Grisez and his associates recognize that people indeed do make comparative judgments and indeed make commensurations both in nonmoral situations and in situations where a *moral norm provides the means of making comparative assessments*, which is quite different from comparing the incomparable in order to come up with a moral norm, as proportionalism requires.

O'Connell, seeking a "mediating" position between proportionalism and the so-called "basic goods" approach, says that we must "go beyond them to a vision that incorporates the best of both" (p. 205). However, when he seeks to do this, he ends up back in proportionalism. He admits, astonishingly, that while he cannot theoretically justify the comparative assessments needed to determine whether or not the consequences of human actions are ultimately beneficial or not for human persons, he nonetheless believes that we can and indeed must make such comparative assessments simply because this squares with our experience (p. 211). Thus, despite his seeming repudiation of the proportionalist method of making moral judgments, his proposal for "going beyond" both proportionalism and the "basic goods" approach ends up as a proportionalist proposal.

Part IV is quite brief, consisting of two short essays on the question of a "Christian" and a final assessment of Catholic morality today and tomorrow. O'Connell thinks that an ethics is "Christian" because of its vision and motive, but not because of any specific Christian moral obligations. Indeed, for him in the end the "natural law" and the "law of Christ" are one and the same.

While O'Connell, I believe, is to be congratulated on admitting publicly that he was wrong in denying that there are *any* moral absolutes and for acknowledging that the intentional killing of innocent human beings is an intrinsically evil act, his study is nonetheless marred by a very faulty understanding of human freedom and action, of the role of the magisterium of the Church, a muddled account of moral reasoning which ends up, paradoxically, in being the proportionalism that he seemingly rejects, and a far too humanistic understanding of the nature of the Christian moral life. It is, unfortunately, a book that cannot be recommended for any who believe that the Christian moral life utterly transforms our existence as moral beings and that the Church is the pillar of truth and that its magisterium is authorized to speak in Christ's name, authentically interpreting the demands of the natural law in the light of Christ's redemption.

— **William E. May**

Michael J. McGivney Professor of Moral Theology

John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family
