2-1-1999


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Book Review


This is a big book. In general, a book requires a good excuse to swell to such dimensions, but in this case the reason seems proportionate. The book consists of a short introduction followed by two hundred particular moral cases, followed finally by two appendices. So, though the book is initially intimidating, it is not necessary to wade through all nine hundred pages before looking at the question that interests you. After reading the introduction (which is essential to understanding the book), one can browse or dip, select any question without having to read any other. This book in fact proves remarkably accessible, in many ways the most accessible of the series thus far, for it takes people where they are, with particular moral questions or dilemmas, and in a very short space develops the moral considerations relevant to finding some practical solution.

Some might doubt the benefits of such a project. Surely every moral question is unique and particular practical problems cannot be solved from some simple manual. People have to make their own decisions from their own perspectives and there is no way that all of those details could be known in advance. Would it not be better to stop at the general level, with Christian moral principles, and let people work out the details for themselves? This objection fails to see the point of these moral questions. It is not that readers are expected to be presented with exactly this case, but that they need to learn how to deal with individual cases, often difficult cases. The importance of this book lies not in its answers but in its working. The only way to learn how to solve problems is to look at particular examples and apply, for oneself, the relevant moral principles.

The main strength of the book is in the method used to approach these problems. This combines a sophisticated understanding of cooperation (as set forth in the two appendices) with a great flexibility in the principles applied to differing cases. Dr. Grisez is not a man in the grip of a theory. Rather, the scope of his account of basic goods and modes of responsibility gives room for a diversity of goods and principles to be discovered in the individual case. So the general theory is open to
refinement as particular cases show the need for other principles of responsibility or of judgment. The rejection of a single simple scale frees the presentation to genuine openness about the principles required in different cases. There is not here some apparently simple calculus used to rationalize decisions made on other grounds (as in the case of all quasi-utilitarian moralists). There is rather a genuine attempt to understand the variety of goods, circumstances and principles relevant to each case.

It is instructive to compare this work with that of earlier casuists. One difference immediately stands out. There is, in this volume, scarcely any attention paid to the probability of different opinions. An earlier generation of casuists concerned themselves excessively with which opinions were licit for Catholic moralists to hold. To defend any particular judgment, appeal was made to the opinion of various doctors (such as Aquinas, Vitoria, or de Lugo). If an opinion could find sufficient support among such doctors it was rendered probable. Concern then focused on whether any act could be undertaken if it was supported by some degree of probability, or whether only a more probable opinion could be acted on. Obviously all this abstracts from the actual goods or principles at stake, and interprets moral theology as a set of Church rules. Grisez characterizes this approach as legalism, and his presentation is completely free of legalism in this sense. His authorities are the gospel and the goods and principles which constitute reasons for acting or desisting from action. He refers to the documents of the Church only when they are relevant. His reasons are open for examination and can be accepted, rejected, or modified.

The other feature that most distinguishes this treatment of moral difficulties from previous treatments is its form. This volume consists not in cases described in the third person and then analyzed in the third person. Rather it consists in a number of requests for advice and the subsequent replies. “Each case is presented by a conscientious person with a real moral problem who wants a reasonable answer to the question: What should (or may) I do?” (p. xxiii). This form is adopted no doubt because the first person reflection (What should I do?) is thought to be the basis of practical reason. Still another reason also shapes this form. The requests for advice are clearly thought of as a model for those who have some pastoral care, and may be asked for such advice. “This perspective — that of the conscientious person deliberating — should be adopted by a moral advisor asked questions like those in this book” (p. 849). The book is “intended primarily for use as a seminary text or instructional resource” (p. xv), that is, it is a text for advisors. This, in part, explains the form.

The form chosen in the book is, I think, the root of its major failing. The form aims to accomplish two things, but ends up falling between two stools. The replies are thought of as though they were actual replies to real
characters (that is, in some pastoral situation). Yet of course the formulating of such a reply, on the basis of the question (thought of perhaps as a letter), is long distant from real personal engagement. No doubt this is a pleasant corrective to the non-directive “never ask questions, never give advice” school of counseling, but it cannot pass for a real pastoral engagement. The person himself (or herself) needs to be led gently to come to his (or her) own mind. This takes delicacy and time, and is a cooperative venture. During this there will be occasions for speaking clearly and for challenging or refusing to accept some false compromise, but even in this case it is a judgment of prudence when and how to speak. Dr. Grisez is well aware of this failing and, to his credit, devotes some time in his introduction trying to correct the impression that these replies give “a model for the process of pastoral moral guidance” (p. xxii). Yet how can they be viewed any other way when the reply explicitly addresses not the reader but the fictitious questioner? The replies do not (directly) give an analysis of what someone should do in such and such a situation. Rather they give an answer to the questioner, thought of as a conscientious seeker after advice.

In the introduction, no doubt in response to criticism generated in the course of his researches, Grisez asserts “Packaged answers quickly delivered seldom help people with their actual problems” (p. xxi). Yet the answers given here cannot but be taken as attempts to answer, with a single relatively brief answer, the person’s problem. For the answers are directed to the questioner! The rhetorical tone suffers greatly from the form into which it is forced. If one attempts to formulate a reply which is supposed to satisfy a genuine enquirer with a difficult problem, and must do so in five pages, it will be extraordinarily difficult to sound other than quick, glib, smug, harsh or pious, or all of the above.

The title “Difficult Moral Questions” could refer to practical problems that were perplexing, or to those that were not perplexing but were emotionally arduous. This book is concerned with the former, though it would have been helpful to have more discussion of the latter. The whole question of the arduousness of solution seems underplayed, while even in perplexing cases it is emotional attachments which make the solution unappealing in practice. Of course, such gentle weaning of penitents away from bad habits and disentangling emotionally complex situations (where moral obligations are nonetheless clear) is a major focus of genuine pastoral engagement. This sort of gentleness fits ill with the form, and hence the style of this book, which therefore contributes to its apparent harshness. None of this is to deny the practical conclusions set out in the book, most of which I would agree with. It is rather a criticism of the way such advice can be given and so of the form of the present book. It
would have been far better to take the criticisms acknowledged in the introduction seriously and write, for each case, an extended analysis for the reader — without pretending to meaningful pastoral dialogue with the questioner.

The style also suffers occasionally from an element of jaundice with the perceived liberal clerical establishment. Again Dr. Grisez admits in his introduction that the priests (and religious) in the book are worse than average, for it is these worse clerics who generate interesting problems. Yet many of the comments which are made about Catholic universities, Catholic hospitals, bishops and priests in the book are hardly necessary. It seems that when Dr. Grisez applies some color to his examples the colors are often the same. Whether or not the situation of the American Catholic Church warrants this, it is bad rhetorically. Perhaps many of these examples are amalgams of true cases. Nevertheless the preponderance of cases of certain sorts certainly seems to be an attempt to persuade by rhetoric, rather than argument, and this becomes tiresome. This is unfortunate, for I imagine there are many who would be interested in this work (especially this particular work), but would be put off by the tone.

Having criticized the form, I should add a note of appreciation for much of the method. One refreshing thing is the extent to which theological themes shape the general approach. Three large themes could be mentioned. First, mercy as a principle of Christian action is developed in many of the questions. In this volume, as in Volume II, it is asserted that mercy is obligatory, not supererogatory for Christians. Perhaps I could qualify this by agreeing that the habit or virtue of mercy is obligatory, and in some situations a failure to be merciful would be an offense against mercy (when presented by great need). Nevertheless I think that in general, mercy, like generosity, which is an allied virtue of large-heartedness, makes no sense unless it is gratuitous. A choice to be just but not (on this occasion), generous, is not an act against generosity, as seems clear in the Gospel (Matthew 20, 1-15).

A second key theological concept at work throughout this volume (and, again, in Volume II) is the notion of vocation. Vocation becomes a central concept structuring one’s obligations to others. This is shown across a whole range of cases, but see, for a good example, the concept cropping up in the analysis of advertising. “Thus, morally acceptable advertising arouses emotions that lead people to consider using a product or service that might help them fulfill some of the responsibilities of their vocation, while morally unacceptable advertising arouses emotions that do not serve that purpose but are more or less directly at odds with it.” (p. 633)
This concept seems to me immensely fruitful for a spirituality drawing from the insights of the Second Vatican Council.

A third theological concept that seems to play a structural role for the whole project is damnation. Many questions pay particular attention to the danger of leaving someone in sin unrepentant. Even victims are considered, as regarding any complicity they might have, and therefore what need they might have for repentance and reconciliation. Babies and unbaptized believers should be baptized if in danger of death. Hell is a real possibility and charity demands we do all we can, not only to save ourselves, but also to save others from futility. Thus the spirited attack on Hans Urs von Balthasar (p. 21-28) is not so tangential as it, at first, appears. For the real possibility of hell is a strong motivating force behind much of the book, and indeed the project as a whole.

However, one argument of Dr. Grisez in this area is clearly invalid. He claims that because Jesus said that those who have done evil will go to perdition, then there will be people in Hell. If these threats remain unrealized the Holy Spirit “may have been bluffing, that is, may have lied.”! (p. 25) But I can say truthfully “Trespassers will be prosecuted” and yet hope that no one trespasses, and so no one is prosecuted. An officer may warn the soldiers under his command of the real danger of straying from the safe path across a minefield, and the danger is real, but he can still hope that everyone gets across safely. If fear of hell is salutary then perhaps some are saved from hell by the fear of hell. Hell is a real possibility for anyone who dies unrepentant in grave sin, yet we may hope that, by the grace of God, no one will die in such a state. Of course, we cannot know this, and must not be presumptuous, but neither can we know that there are souls in hell, and we must not despair, of ourselves or of anyone else. In short, I think that a healthy awareness of what damnation means and the real human possibility of it, are salutary things, and it is good to see a moral theologian take them on board. However, I do not think impious those who hope that, in the end, all will be saved.

Many of the questions in this book are genuinely difficult so that loyal conscientious Catholics might come to different conclusions. Dr. Grisez himself remarks, “no one who contributed to the book agrees with everything in it” (p. xxxi).

Nevertheless, for the record, these are a few of the concrete judgments that, in this reviewer’s opinion, are unacceptable:

Surely everyone has a duty to feed himself or herself and care for his or her own bodily life except in the most extreme cases (of sacrificing one’s own life for that of another). Thus it cannot be reasonable to make an advanced directive suggesting that “if he or she were in that [persistently
unconscious] conditions, no care be given, in order to save others the costs and other burdens of giving it” (p. 223).

Is it true that becoming pregnant “has nothing to do with the good of marriage” (p. 242)? If a technician makes my wife pregnant with her sister’s baby, this seems to compromise the bond of our marriage and the good of procreation. Pregnancy seems to be an intrinsic element in the procreative good of marriage, not only an element of child rearing that might be done by anyone.

Should a young mother attached to her child and no danger to it be persuaded “to give him up” (p. 187), for what are, presumably, financial reasons? Dr. Grisez seems to seriously undervalue the good of knowing one’s own self and one’s own natural parents, even when this does not lead to any satisfying relationship (cf. p. 189-192). He fails to give an account that would explain why those involved pressed so hard for a legal right to trace natural parents. In general his account of the natural bond seems too weak, and of the process of adoption too sanguine (which is not to deny that it can be the occasion of much good).

I was shocked and thought scandalous the suggestion that a daughter should be encouraged to make a formal act of renunciation of the Church (p. 169), for the sake of having a valid marriage (when she would have been in good faith with regard to the invalid marriage). There was no account given of the grave wrong of formally breaking communion with the Church, and what formal cooperation with that wrong would involve.

Finally, the suggestion that smoking was a “grave matter” (p. 601) shows up the cultural context in which it was written, that is, the American attitude to these things (and perhaps give a new twist to the adage “There’s no smoke without fire.”). Though there would seem to be little doubt that smoking is a vice, a decision about its gravity requires a more sophisticated account of risk than is given anywhere in this volume, or, with respect, in Volume II.

There are no questions here involving war and deterrence, murder and self-defense, or capital punishment (this last to my great disappointment). Yet these topics may reasonably have been thought beyond the scope of the book, and have been treated elsewhere. Most curiously, what used to be thought of as the difficult moral question in medical ethics, the area of therapeutic abortion, ectopic pregnancy and craniotomy, is not treated here. This is surely deliberate and in the context of the subject matter of this book seems an unjustified omission, even though it has been treated elsewhere.

This book made me appreciate more of what Thomas Aquinas meant when he said that, “In matters of action, practical truth or rectitude is the same only in what is common, not in matters proper to some person.
And even when the practical truth involved is the same, it is not equally known to all” (Summa Theologiae lallae Q. 94, 4). As we descend from general principles to particular conclusions, the particular circumstances become more important and the application of the principles requires more practical insight. Prudence only comes with maturity and requires the guidance of holy and wise examples as well as personal experience. It is a very ambitious project to set about answering so many particular questions, for it requires a deep understanding of the human practices involved. If I thought this task sometimes beyond the author, and some of the answers seemed lacking in nuance, that should not be thought too harsh a criticism, for serious reflection on so many diverse areas is a standard against which one would not wish to be measured oneself.

In general this is a useful, serious book, full of insights into many (if not all) the principles involved in resolving the most perplexing of moral questions. It is certainly a great contribution to the neglected discipline of casuistry, and in many places was illuminating for the present reviewer. My hope is that this format — of many individual questions — will make this school of thought appealing to a far wider audience than has hitherto treated it seriously. The construction of the questions themselves is a service to those interested in exercising their practical reason, and for this alone the book deserves a wide welcome. This book is a substantial contribution to the field of moral theology.

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