

St. Joseph Society



Objective: Catholic morality is the practical outworking of the great dogmas of the Catholic faith. St. Paul commands us to “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Philippians 2:12-13). Last month, we investigated the end or goal of the Christian life which is happiness with God in heaven. For the remainder of this course, we will discuss how to make good choices that will lead to eternal beatitude. This month, we are going to look at the nature of the human act.

Unit 4 Podcast Schedule

- Episode #13 – Our Last End Depends on our Conduct
- Episode #14 – Humans Acts vs. Acts of Humans
- Episode #15 – The Steps of the Human Act
- Episode #4 – The Morality of Human Acts

Monthly Meeting

I. Episode #13 – Our Last End Depends on our Conduct

1. Our Last End Depends on Our Conduct
 - a. The wisdom of God demands it. – Because perfect happiness is the highest good and it is only reasonable that it should be appreciated by those possessing it. It would be unwise to squander it on those who deliberately make themselves unworthy of it.
 - b. The dignity of man demands it. – Because man is by nature an intelligent and free being, if perfect happiness were thrust on man without his will, his highest attributes, intelligence and freedom, would be useless to him for accomplishing the main purpose of his existence.
2. Humans Acts vs. Acts of Humans
 - a. “Acts of humans” are involuntary acts that one has no rational control of (ex. reflexes, sleep-walking, snoring, etc.) and therefore, have no moral import.
 - b. “Human acts” are those actions that are performed by human beings voluntarily. “Human acts” are performed after deliberation (knowing and willing).

II. Episode #14 – Ethical Constitution of the Human Act

1. Ethical Constitution of the Human Act: Knowledge – The **will** is a blind faculty, a faculty of striving and not of knowing, and cannot act unless enlightened by the intellect. The **intellect** proposes the good and the will tends towards it.
2. Ethical Constitution of the Human Act: Freedom – Aristotle declares “Since that which is done under compulsion or by reason of ignorance is involuntary, the voluntary would seem to be that of which the moving principle is in the agent himself, he being aware of the particular circumstances of the action” (*Nicomachean Ethics*, bk. III, ch. 1, 1111a 22).

III. **Episode #15 – The Steps of the Human Act** – Since every moral act proceeds from the powers of intellect and will, we will consider the different parts, or steps, in the progressive completion of a moral act. Since all moral action is purposive, we shall first consider the end, then the means to the end, and finally the execution of the moral act.

1. Steps Concerned with the End – 1. Application to a Concrete Situation (Intellect) & 2. Intention (Will)
2. Steps Concerned with the Means – 3. Deliberation (Intellect), 4. Consent (Will), 5. Judgement Limiting to One Option (Intellect), & 6. Choice
3. Steps Concerned with the Execution – 7. Command (Intellect), 8. Execution (Will), & 9. Delight or Enjoyment (Will)

IV. **Episode #16 – The Morality of Human Acts** – The morality of human acts depends on:

1. The Moral Object (The “what” of the moral act.)
 - a. The object chosen is a good toward which the will deliberately directs itself. It is the matter of a human act (CCC 1751).
 - b. Are human actions always good or bad? – For St. Thomas Aquinas, every particular human action is either good or bad. Aquinas would agree that actions can be neutral as long as we are referring to a kind of action rather than a specific instance of action (ST I-II, q. 18, a. 8; ST I-II, q. 18, a. 3).
2. Intention (CCC 1752-1753) – Intention is the aim or objective of a course of action. Intention is targeted to the goal of an action, what good (or evil) I want to happen. Why am I doing this? There are two rules for governing intentions: 1. Keep the intention good. 2. The end does not justify the means.
3. Circumstances – Circumstances of themselves cannot change the moral quality of acts themselves; they can make neither good nor right an action that is in itself evil, but they do contribute to increasing or diminishing the moral goodness or evil of human acts (CCC 1754).
4. Good Acts and Evil Acts – A morally good act requires the goodness of the object, of the end, and of the circumstances together. An evil end corrupts the action, even if the object is good in itself (such as praying and fasting "in order to be seen by men").