

Living a Catholic Life

Making the Right Choices

“Living a Catholic Life” is a collaboration between dioceses, parishes, Knights of Columbus councils, grassroots organizations, and The National Catholic Bioethics Center to educate the laity on principles of the moral life and their application.

In ethical discussions today, one frequently hears a certain repeated formulaic terminology about “making choices” or “having options.” This fits well with a consumer mentality in which we shop and choose among material goods and employment opportunities. And yet, in historical perspective, it was not always thus. The old phrases had to do with following nature or living according to nature. Surprisingly, this latter conception of the moral life seems to be coming back into currency with the environmentalist emphasis on living in harmony with the natural world, with the return to virtue ethics, and with the emphasis on the affective and emotional life in spirituality.

In our contemporary context, we can, therefore, sketch out two kinds of moral life and moral freedom. In one, we have what might be called a morality of making choices, in which central emphasis is put on the will, on the autonomous individual choosing in indifference to, and in subjective isolation from, such objective referential realities as reason, convention, and nature (i.e., rightly ordered inclination). According to this scenario, we are born as complete moral agents, needing no education in virtue, no attention to natural inclinations in accord with our true nature, no training in making proper choices, and no instruction in knowing what to do in certain situations. We simply have to choose for ourselves between two equal contraries rather than between good and evil, the natural and the unnatural. To abort or not to abort, to contracept or not to contracept, and to engage in sodomy or not are, from this perspective, indifferent choices, equal in value, and devoid of natural consequences. According to this mode of morality, the individual act is isolated and the individual choice is sovereign.

But the inevitable question arises, What about other people? What about the rights of those in community around us? What about law? Certain concessions do have to be made to law. As Cicero observed long ago, we are inherently social beings. We need other people; we live with other people. Law is perceived, according to the first mode of morality, as a constriction, a limitation on the individual will, and a concession to community. Virtue is reduced to observing the law, and then you are free to “do as you please.” Minimum obligation, maximum freedom.

The other form of moral life we might call the morality of the virtues, according to which we follow nature. The aim here is happiness, which is achieved by the perfection of the powers of the soul (intellect, will, and the passions) so that one is able to act with perfection when one wishes. One attempts to bring to

fruition the natural human inclinations toward truth, goodness, and happiness—that is, to union with the fullness of good or being (which, in a Christian context, is union with God). One seeks to make the *right choices* in accordance with objective reality, with reason, convention, and natural law. Virtue, thus, is not mere obedience to law, but a second nature developing natural inclinations and conducting them to their perfection. Further, the law is educative in that one needs to be trained and formed in the virtues as one gradually progresses toward their mature perfection.

Let us consider an example. In playing the piano, we develop and acquire of a certain power to produce music. We cannot simply choose to play the piano with an initial instant proficiency. At first, we must have a natural inclination toward music. Then some basic training is necessary in which we learn the fundamentals necessary to the perfection of producing beautiful music. As we gradually attain, through repeated exercise, more knowledge of music itself and the ways in which we might interpret and play a certain piece, we begin to achieve a certain mastery which enables us to play the piano with some degree of perfection. Finally, of course, this becomes an exercise that is at once joyous and fulfilling. In the whole process, we have achieved several goods—the power of producing beautiful music, the self-mastery of playing the piano with ease and facility, the unification of several of our faculties of mind and body, and the ability to please friends with our proficiency in the art of piano playing.

In the moral life, like in piano playing, making choices and choosing options certainly are part of the process, but they are not the whole or center of it. Choices, after all, are not always the *right choices*, not always *intelligently* perceived as in harmony with human goods or with playing the piano.

The ultimate question in the moral life today then becomes, What kind of moral agents are we? Autonomous wills choosing by caprice? Men and women free from all restriction in a void of indifference? Or are we intelligent men and women discerning the *right choices*, freeing ourselves through intelligent choices from the natural disorder of sin to perfect ourselves, our individual human natures, and our communities, so as to enter eventually into the transcendent joy of the eternal banquet? By reducing the moral life to obeying law and responding to circumstances, arbitrary impulses, or calculable goods, modern ethical systems have lost sight of the primacy of the intellect, the influence of natural inclinations, their perfection acquired in stabilizing the dispositions of the virtues, and the integrating goal of a final end.