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In Defence of the Rationality of Ethics : «Veritatis Splendor» and Robust Conception of Moral Agency

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IN DEFENCE OF THE RATIONALITY OF ETHICS. *VERITATIS SPLENDOR* AND A ROBUST CONCEPTION OF MORAL AGENCY

Abstract. The central metaethical contention of *Veritatis Splendor* is that an indispensable element of any plausible conception of moral agency must always be a specific notion of a moral act – an act executed by a moral agent. In my paper I focus on the way in which the interpretation of a moral act as a specific enterprise fully identifiable and determined by its clearly outlined aim (the object of an act) informs the concept of moral agency – human faculty of deliberating upon and performing moral acts. In view of the pledge made by the encyclical’s author not to “impose upon the faithful any particular theological system, still less a philosophical one” I try to demonstrate that the dependence (or perhaps interdependence) in question is of the most basic nature and can thus be construed as a key condition for a genuinely rational character of any ethical theory.

Keywords: moral agency, moral act, meta-ethics, prescriptivism, Christian moral philosophy, moral rationality

1. The embodiment of moral “I”. 2. Against the “archangelic” model of moral deliberation. 3. Towards a plausible moral teleology.

Despite the whole variety of different approaches to major ethical controversies of our times, one can reasonably expect a pretty widespread acceptance of the claim that ethics concerns a c t i n g. The term is judged by the most respected dictionaries of the English language to

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be coextensive with “doing something” or “taking action”/“carrying out an action”.¹ Whatever boundaries one is inclined to set for the possible reference of these phrases – we might go along with what Professor John Finnis proposes in the sentence opening the first volume of his recently published *Collected Essays*, namely that “deliberating about what to do is itself already an action”² – there can be little doubt about the significance of a certain type of structural integrity implied by the involved verbs’ direct objects: action, an action, something, a thing done. It is a specific rendering of the category of moral act, taking account of its distinct autonomy and completeness, that the majority of commentators of *Veritatis Splendor* consider the most essential element of the conceptual framework reaffirmed by John Paul II as the foundation of Christian ethics. In my paper I would like to focus on the way in which the interpretation of a moral act as a specific enterprise fully identifiable and determined by its clearly outlined aim (the object of an act) informs the concept of moral agency – a specifically human faculty of deliberating upon and performing moral acts. In view of the pledge made by the encyclical’s author not to “impose upon the faithful any particular theological system, still less a philosophical one” (VS, 29) I will try to demonstrate that the dependence (or perhaps interdependence) in question is of the most basic nature and can thus be construed as a key condition for a genuinely rational character of any ethical theory.

It seems relatively uncontroversial to demand from an ethical theory aspiring to present a rational – i.e. coherent and comprehensive – account of human preoccupation with moral matters that it: 1) formulates a set of clear principles governing moral deliberation, 2) lays a solid foundation for (authenticates) human capacity to perform moral acts, 3) strengthens the plausibility of holding moral agents accountable for their deliberate actions. A crucial element of each theory, which satisfies this fairly modest set of criteria, is the conception of moral agency developed within it.

¹ <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/act>, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/act>, <http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/act> [accessed 7 Dec 2014].

² J.M. Finnis, *Reason in Action, Collected essays: Volume I*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011.

Correspondingly, a theory's failure to meet any of these requirements is in most cases caused by some important deficiency of that conception. In general, the issue of rationality of ethics boils down to whether the model of moral agency which it necessarily entails can be plausibly interpreted as sufficiently robust to explain how individual people systematically reflect upon their (intended) actions, how they can successfully execute moral acts and, in the end, how they can be held responsible for what they do.

1. THE EMBODIMENT OF MORAL "I"

The central metaethical contention of *Veritatis Splendor* (if one is allowed to employ this somewhat risky category supposedly separating the strictly normative content of ethics from its formal/logical underpinnings) is that an indispensable element of such a conception must always be a specific notion of a moral act – an act carried by a moral agent. The essential characteristics of that notion as well as its role in shaping the fundamental identity of a moral agent are revealed in the critical examination the encyclical undertakes of two apparently opposite views on morality. The first one – represented by a distinct trend in moral theology centred around the idea of the so called fundamental option³ – proclaims a profound separation between a particular instantiation of moral subjectivity and the domain of various kinds of psychological/physical involvements of the human individual in question. With the whole dynamic of morally relevant experience reduced to the moral I's "inner life", any kind of practical engagement of that "I" will always be, so to speak, engagement "by proxy". It is principally against that conceptual scheme – a blueprint for an almost perfect isolation of the moral subject from the substantive content of his particular undertakings – that the encyclical asserts the validity of a holistic view of moral agency: "The person, including the body, is completely entrusted to himself, and it is

³ The authors mainly referred to in the discussions concerning this aspect of the encyclical are Karl Rahner (see, e.g., K. Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. W.V. Dych, Seabury Press, New York 1978) and Joseph Fuchs (see, e.g., J. Fuchs, *Human Values and Christian Morality*, Gill and Macmillan, Dublin 1970).

in the unity of body and soul that the person is the subject of his own moral acts” (VS, 48). Among the manifold consequences of this assertion there is one of the utmost importance. It is the immediacy and directness of a moral agent’s involvement in bringing about certain states of affairs (“body and soul” not “soul through body”⁴) that determine a truly moral character of that involvement: a moral I becomes a full-fledged moral actor, capable of bearing full responsibility for all the changes in the world which he initiates. The essential guarantee of the intelligible nature of these interventions – a basic condition for their being subject to rational deliberation – is that they take the form of specific moral acts – clearly delimited undertakings of a moral agent aimed at some perceptibly achievable goals (objects of acts). The acts of a moral agent – by virtue of their essential orientation towards their objects – always display a certain level of thematic “density” and completeness: they can never be treated as morally non-dimensional, point-like interventions in physical reality. Any attempt to sever the link between the realm of a person’s moral experience and the sphere of his concrete activities, subject to various schemes of rational planning, organisation and design, ultimately results in a paradoxical, if not bizarre, conception of moral agency which is totally deprived of the ability to act morally. Thus, the category of a (particular) moral act turns out to be a constitutive element of a rational moral discourse: it is – in the first place – particular acts of a moral agent that can be good or evil (for the discourse in question to

⁴ The encyclical staunchly denounces dualistic consequences that may result from the latter formulation: “A freedom which claims to be absolute ends up treating the human body as a raw datum, devoid of any meaning and moral values until freedom has shaped it in accordance with its design. Consequently, human nature and the body appear as presuppositions or preambles, materially necessary for freedom to make its choice, yet extrinsic to the person, the subject and the human act. Their functions would not be able to constitute reference points for moral decisions, because the finalities of these inclinations would be merely »physical« goods, called by some »pre-moral«. (...) In this way of thinking, the tension between freedom and a nature conceived of in a reductive way is resolved by a division within man himself.” VS, 48.

remain functional, the latter group necessarily enclosing acts which must be classified as intrinsically, i.e. by virtue of their objects, immoral).⁵

The indispensable activation of moral subjectivity in the outer world is proclaimed in *Veritatis Splendor* simultaneously with the specification of an exceptionally important characteristic of this kind of “external exposure” of the moral I. A crucial feature of a subject’s direct involvement in the sphere of moral praxis is what the encyclical’s author calls in his earlier writings the “intransitive character” of moral acts.⁶ Not only does the directness of a moral agent’s interventions in the world let him actually carry out some morally relevant projects of his own choice, but it also leaves him particularly vulnerable to the effects brought about by these undertakings. The substantive moral “I” is totally exposed to the reciprocal impact of his deeds: the actions performed by a person shape his essential identity as a moral subject. In several fragments of the encyclical the reciprocal dynamics in question is specified as related, in the first place, to the consequences of violating absolute negative norms. Such universal prohibitions “oblige everyone, regardless of the cost, never to offend in anyone, beginning with oneself, the personal dignity common to all”,⁷ whereas the intrinsically immoral acts which they proscribe “are a disgrace, and so long as they infect human civilization they contaminate those who inflict them more than those who suffer injustice”.⁸ On the other hand, each act of martyrdom “unmasks the true face of such an [intrinsically

⁵ “[T]he negative moral precepts, those prohibiting certain concrete actions or kinds of behaviour as intrinsically evil, do not allow for any legitimate exception. They do not leave room, in any morally acceptable way, for the »creativity« of any contrary determination whatsoever. Once the moral species of an action prohibited by a universal rule is concretely recognized, the only morally good act is that of obeying the moral law and of refraining from the action which it forbids,” VS. 67. “The acknowledgement of the validity of such universal prohibitions is referred to in the encyclical as the rational determination of the morality of human acting without which it would be impossible to affirm the existence of an »objective moral order« and to establish any particular norm the content of which would be binding without exception”. VS. 80.

⁶ K., Wojtyła, *The Acting Person*, transl. by A. Potocki, ed. A.T. Tymieniecka, D. Reidel Publishing Company, Dordrecht 1979.

⁷ VS, 52 (emphasis mine).

⁸ VS, 80 (emphasis mine).

immoral] act: it is a violation of man's "humanity", in the one perpetrating it even before the one enduring it".⁹ As a general rule, "human acts are moral acts because they express and determine the goodness or evil of the individual who performs them. They do not produce a change merely in the state of affairs outside of man but, to the extent that they are deliberate choices, they give moral definition to the very person who performs them, determining his profound spiritual traits" (VS, 71). In this way, the encyclical sets forth the most elementary structure of a subject's individual responsibility – responsibility towards oneself. What constitutes a critical component of its conceptual rendering – the principle of self-preservation (understood in the broadest and most comprehensive sense of the term) – is also a crucial assumption of the majority of (if not all) ethical theories. The possibility of holding an individual responsible for what he does entails at least a minimum level of concern on that person's part for a significant imprint – potentially detrimental and at times permanent – left on himself by his conscious actions.

2. AGAINST THE "ARCHANGELIC" MODEL OF MORAL DELIBERATION

A rational moral agent is thus – first and foremost – a complete human being ("body and soul") that performs (has the ability to perform) particular moral acts, which, in turn, determine his basic identity as a moral subject. He definitely cannot be an omniscient and, by definition, morally exquisite Archangel (or rather a caricature of one) of a type described by Richard Mervyn Hare in his *Freedom and Reason*.¹⁰ The most significant dispute that *Veritatis Splendor* engages in – the one concerning the second type of dissent from the traditional church teaching, i.e. proportionalist/consequentialist tendencies in moral theology – is essentially a dispute with utilitarian ethics. It cannot, therefore, be a coincidence that the conception of moral agency promoted in the theory considered by many to be the most sophisticated version of utilitarianism – Hare's

⁹ VS, 92 (emphasis mine).

¹⁰ R.M. Hare, *Freedom and Reason*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1963.

preference utilitarianism – entails a specific d i s e m b o d i m e n t of the moral “I”. The ideal moral subject portrayed by Hare (semi-ironically?) in the character of the bodiless Archangel represents the ultimate fulfilment of a distinct type of deliberative competency requirement characteristic of the utilitarian (consequentialist) model of ethical thinking, also in its not strictly paradigmatic configurations.

Demonstrating the fundamental inconsistency of the utilitarian/consequentialist approach to validating moral rationality does not pose a particularly laborious problem. It is Hare himself who points out what he considers to be three basic handicaps afflicting ordinary, non-“archangelic” moral subjects. The first problem is a shortage of the relevant data, resulting from the imperfection of the psychological mechanism, which enables a human being to sympathize with other people. Another reason for the defective character of moral judgements made by normal people (whom Hare affectionately calls “proles”) is lack of time necessary to carry out the whole procedure of ethical deliberation, i.e. forming in one’s imagination and comparing/balancing all the affective states of oneself as well as others, which may be connected with a specific development of the situation (an undertaking, one should add, which is impossible to carry out for far more fundamental reasons¹¹). The third kind of deficiency characteristic of the human type of moral subjectivity consists in people’s inability to think clearly.¹² In the face of such elementary imperfections

¹¹ One of them has its roots in the symmetricity of the relation intrinsic to the act of sympathizing with others. The reciprocal dynamics of that relation generates a classic type of *petitio principii*: the procedure of exchanging individual points of view concerning a given ethical dilemma can never be satisfactorily fulfilled. One cannot also accept the alternative interpretation of the act of imagining oneself in other people’s position, i.e. the concept of a specific dissolution of moral subjectivity – a “bi/multi-location” of an individual moral “I”, which entails the possibility of an individual experiencing simultaneously a potentially infinite set of sensations pertaining originally to different moral subjects. (For the analysis of the inconsistencies of R.M. Hare’s prescriptivism see, e.g., my discussion of the theory: A. Cebula, *Uczucia moralne. Współczesny emotywizm a filozofia moralna szkockiego Oświecenia*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Semper, Warszawa 2013.

¹² R.M. Hare, *Essays in Ethical Theory*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1989, 188. For a comprehensive critique of ethical consequentialism see, e.g. J.M. Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1980 as well as J. Seifert,

of human moral agents, the author of *Freedom and Reason* has no choice but to call for the use in most cases of the intuition-based general rules.

There is, however, a more important sense in which Hare's ethical theory – as well as any other type of utilitarianism regarded as a systematic attempt to defend the rationality of moral thinking – proves to be self-refuting. It becomes evident in Hare's treatment of the case of a moral fanatic – an individual demonstrating absolute rigidity in settling moral dilemmas by applying the rules of universal prescriptivism. Hare considers moral fanaticism in the context of the analysis of a liberal approach to conflicts that may occur between incompatible interests and ideals pursued by different individuals. While in the case of a difference of interests a compromise seems almost always possible, a direct clash of ideals – universalizable prescriptions of a higher-order – may oftentimes lead to a deadlock.¹³ It is Hare's fanatic that becomes an advocate of such an uncompromising ideal: due to his exceptional ability to perform large-scale “calculations” of the emotive costs and benefits related to the universalizable prescriptions he proposes, he can successfully resist all kinds of arguments aimed at challenging his views. In *Freedom and Reason* moral fanaticism is exemplified by a repulsive character of a Nazi “moralist” opting for the extermination of the Jews while, at the same time, meticulously carrying out the procedure of balancing all the involved people's preferences.¹⁴

It turns out, according to Hare, that with the interpretation of the dispute between the Nazi and a liberal in terms of rules formulated in

The splendor of truth and intrinsically immoral acts: A philosophical defense of the rejection of proportionalism and consequentialism in Veritatis Splendor in the present volume.

¹³ “Where an ideal is involved in the conflict (...)” – writes Hare – “the situation is much more difficult; for ideals, as we have seen, have a universalizability of their own, and therefore resist the attempts of morality to reconcile them with one another.” R.M. Hare, *Freedom and Reason*, op. cit., 158.

¹⁴ In the analogous, though much more equivocal, argument presented in *Moral Thinking* Hare replaces the character of a Nazi with a physician determined to administer life-sustaining treatment whatever the level of suffering of his patients (as well as their chances to survive the treatment) may be, R.M.Hare, *Moral Thinking*, Oxford University Press, 1981.

universal prescriptivism, it is the former that may reasonably claim to be “right”: arguing for the implementation of his plan, the fanatic puts forward a result of deliberation which is carried out in strict compliance with the standards of accuracy of moral thinking set out in Hare’s theory. The abhorrent project to exterminate the people of a certain nationality receives thus the status of a universalizable prescription – the respective preference emerging in the fanatic’s mind is accompanied by his full awareness of the suffering of the innocent victims. This absolute intransigence in establishing such universal precepts, based on taking into account all the terrifying costs of their fulfilment, may even give the fanatic a perverse sense of superiority over any of his opponents, no matter how vehemently they may object to them.¹⁵

This type of reasoning cannot be counterbalanced by any properly structured argument resting upon the assumptions of Hare’s ethical theory. In articulating his position the Nazi complies with all the standards of moral deliberation: he achieves what he believes to be the “most comprehensive” perspective for balancing the whole variety of emotive “reasons” classified as relevant to the matter at stake – he is able to see and compare simultaneously all the modalities of the situation under consideration. In view of this, the only safeguard against the threat of moral fanaticism will rest – in Hare’s own words – “not upon logic by itself (...) but upon the fortunate contingent fact that people who would take this logically possible view, after they had really imagined themselves in the other man’s position, are extremely rare.”¹⁶ The integrity of the system of liberal values promoted by Hare is thus effectively protected not by the internal logic of universal prescriptivism, but as a result of a set of fortunate

¹⁵ “[The Nazi] is still making prescriptive universal judgements, and the only difference between himself and his opponent is that the Nazi sticks to his judgements even when they conflict with his own interest in hypothetical cases (for example the case where he himself is imagined as having the characteristics of Jews). In this respect he might even claim to be morally superior to his opponent, in that the latter abandons his principles when they conflict with his own hypothetical interests; the Nazi might say that one should stick to one’s principles regardless of questions of interest.” R.M. Hare, *Freedom and Reason*, op. cit., 163.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 172 (emphasis mine).

circumstances. However, even the most credible assurances concerning the supposedly low incidence of what Hare would probably call moral pathology cannot change the fact that it is the fanatic that gets closest to the full implementation of the principle of not favouring anybody's (including one's own) preferences over the overall balance of individual points of view relating to a given moral dilemma. Performing the act of the all-encompassing pan-sympathy, the Nazi becomes a perfect caricature of Hare's Archangel.

3. TOWARDS A PLAUSIBLE MORAL TELEOLOGY

It is mostly against such c o n s e q u e n c e s of ethical consequentialism that *Veritatis Splendor* proclaims the body-and-soul unity of a moral subject. In contrast to the perspective of a perfectly incorporeal (or wholly discarnate) moral I, capable of attaining the "point of view of the universe" while formulating all kinds of ethical norms (both general and specific), the position taken by an ordinary person facing a moral dilemma is always distinctly externalized, i.e. made finite by virtue of his unique and indissoluble identity as a concrete human being. Any kind of plausible response to that dilemma can only be spelled out in terms of particular acts (to be) undertaken by the specific – genuinely human – moral subject in question. Lacking in the archangelic ability to predict the genuinely ultimate consequences of his interventions in the real course of events (the real impact they may have on the total balance of preferences at the final stage of the development of the universe?), the moral agent may only contemplate undertaking projects which are fairly limited in scope, fully commensurate with his natural potentialities, and – as a result – wholly subject to rational deliberation. The category of an individual moral act, substantially informed by the concept of the object of an act, once again turns out to be the basic meaningful unit of an intelligible moral discourse. There is no other way to adequately conceptualise it than by taking into account the actual ontological "footing" of the moral agent capable of performing particular moral acts. As the encyclical puts it: "In order to be able to grasp the object of an act which specifies that act morally, it is (...) necessary to place oneself in the perspective of the acting person" (VS,

78). No matter how comprehensive and sophisticated consequentialist calculations may be, it is only the interpretation of morality as deeply anchored in the immediacy and finality of human experience that retains a sufficient level of plausibility and guarantees the preservation of a truly rational character of ethics.

The necessary proximity of the direct object of a moral act does not leave the act hanging isolated, as it were, from the rest of the universe, completely unconnected with the causal structure of the world. As long as it is not an intrinsically evil act, it must always be interwoven into the overall scheme of more systematic undertakings of the moral agent. There is, however, another kind of consequential relevance, patently unrelated to standard, natural causality of the ordinary chains of events, that *Veritatis Splendor* ascribes to moral acts performed by a human individual. In what seems to be a specific reversal of the consequentialist idea of a moral act allegedly gaining its only significance from its ultimate result, the encyclical points out a fundamentally teleological character of such an act: “Activity is morally good when it attests to and expresses the voluntary ordering of the person to his ultimate end and the conformity of a concrete action with the human good as it is acknowledged in its truth by reason. (...) The human act, good according to its object, is also capable of being ordered to its ultimate end.” (VS, 72; 78) Moral experience is not a set of seemingly uncoordinated reactions of a human agent to the constantly changing circumstances of his direct involvement in worldly matters: by virtue of the substantive identity of the moral “I”, it becomes part of a supreme moral order centred around the Absolute Good.

In sum, the essential “metaethical” postulates formulated in *Veritatis Splendor* can be interpreted as aimed at validating the concept of a rational moral agent – cherishing an adequate level of autonomy and sufficiently potent to successfully execute and take full responsibility for his own acts. What at first glance may seem to be simply an authority-based defence of a religious moral doctrine is essentially a vigorous attempt to secure the basic principles of rationality of moral thinking. It is only by a sufficiently robust conception of moral agency, one that provides for a human subject being “completely entrusted to himself” (VS, 48), that the rational character of ethics may be ultimately preserved.

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