Accepting Side Effects and Personal Vocation

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When we think about what makes an action right or wrong, we almost always focus our attention on what the agent intends. Certainly if an agent intentionally brings about some evil, his or her act is wrong. But we sometimes overlook the fact that an agent could have a good intention in the course of acting wrongly because he or she accepts foreseen, bad side effects unreasonably. In this paper, I will attempt to explain why accepting side effects rightly is necessary for living morally, and how fidelity to one's personal vocation is an integral part of living morally, and as such, influences the rightful acceptance of side effects.

What are side effects and why is rightly accepting them important?

The principle of double effect is a tool for making a distinction between what an agent intends and what he or she voluntarily accepts, for the purposes of making a moral judgement about an act. Strictly speaking, the principle of double effect is not in itself normative—it must function within the context of some normative ethical theory.[1] In this paper, I will work from the Christian ethical perspective of Germain Grisez.

The principle of double effect is traditionally comprised of four criteria, usually formulated something like this: "(a) the intended final end must be good, (b) the intended means to it must be morally acceptable, (c) the foreseen bad upshot must *not* itself be willed (that is, must not be, in some sense, intended), and (d) the good end must be proportionate to the bad upshot (that is, must

[1] See Karen E. Stohr, "Doing Things With Double Effect" (paper, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill), 2.

be important enough to justify the bad upshot)."[2] Side effects are the unintended results of carrying out what one does intend. Side effects are not intended or chosen. They can be good or bad, foreseen or unforeseen. In this paper, the term "side effects" will mean foreseen, unwanted, bad side effects, because these are the most interesting for our purposes. The third and fourth criteria of the principle of double effect have to do with side effects, but it is the fourth criterion, which is about properly accepting side effects, that this paper is concerned with. The fourth criterion says that the good which is the object of choice, must be proportionate to the evil that results in the course of pursuing it. St. Thomas alludes to this very point when he says that: "an act that is properly motivated may, nevertheless, become vitiated if it is not proportionate to the end intended."[3]

Often, when we think about the moral permissibility of an action, we view the agent's intention as the sole determinative factor in the action's rightness or wrongness. While it is true that intending to do evil always makes an action wrong, intending a good does not necessarily make an action morally permissible, because the agent could be accepting side effects unreasonably. Accepting side effects unreasonably makes an action morally wrong.

For example, a speeder does not intend to do evil in deciding to speed excessively—he only chooses to get where he is going faster. However, in choosing to speed excessively, the speeder accepts the side effect that he is more likely to cause a fatal automobile crash. Accepting such a side effect is usually wrong.

Why is it important to accept side effects rightly? It is important because an agent's character is shaped by his or her will. Since side effects are foreseen, accepting them is voluntary.

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[2] Warren S. Quinn, "Actions, Intentions and Consequences," in *The Doctrine of Double Effect: Philosophers Debate a Controversial Moral Principle*, ed. P.A. Woodward, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 38 n. 3.
[3] St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Marcus LeFebure O.P. (London: Blackfriars, Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1975), 2-2 q. 64 a.7

By choosing to realize some good when such a course of action involves side effects, an agent voluntarily accepts bringing about the foreseen evils. An agent could avoid bringing about the foreseen evils by foregoing that realization of good which involves these side effects.

One's character is one's identity that is formed by one's willing. If one does evil, then one shapes his or her character badly by that choice. Likewise, rightly choosing to actualize goods[4] shapes one's character well. While the acceptance of side effects does not shape one's character in the same way that what one intends does, this does not necessarily mean that accepting side effects shapes an agent's character less significantly. One could intend a relatively minor evil and unreasonably accept an extremely grave one; with the result that one ends up worse off, morally speaking, in the latter case.

For example, Larry is on his way to class, but he has to stop by the bank to cash some checks. As he uses the pen at the service desk, he remembers that he forgot to bring a pen to write with in class, so he steals it. The pen only costs a few dollars, and undoubtedly the bank has more. Nevertheless, Larry has committed a theft.

In another case, Ann is at home with her two-year old son. It is a beautiful autumn day and Ann would like to take a nice, relaxing walk outside; she feels that she needs a break from the constant attention that her son demands. So, she decides to go for a walk, leaving her son at home alone, foreseeing that he will certainly become frightened and lonely and that he might play with a dangerous object or find something to choke on. All that Ann was choosing to do was go for a walk and unwind, but in the course of doing this, she accepted side effects unreasonably. The result is that Ann has harmed her character more severely by wrongly accepting evil than Larry has by intentionally doing evil.

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[4] One could choose to actualize goods wrongly by accepting side effects unreasonably.

In summary, the way that one accepts side effects shapes one's character because the acceptance of side effects is voluntary and one's character is shaped by one's willing. Hence, character is determined by what one chooses or intends and by what one willingly accepts, but does not choose or intend. Because who and what we are is important, and because accepting side effects bears upon who and what we are, accepting side effects rightly is important. To be good we must choose well, and as a corollary, this means not choosing to pursue some good when doing so will bring about a disproportionately evil state of affairs. Since proportionalism is fatally flawed, there must be some other way of determining proportionate good. In what follows, I will try to lay out the role that one's personal vocation plays in determining when good is proportionate: that is, when it is reasonable to accept evils.

The first principle of morality, ways of acting morally, and personal vocation

The first principle of morality tells us in general how to act morally—an action in accord with it constitutes a moral action. Germain Grisez formulates the first principle of morality as: "in voluntarily acting for human goods, one ought to choose *and otherwise will* those and only those possibilities whose willing is compatible with a will toward integral human fulfillment"[5] (emphasis mine). The *and otherwise will* indicates, among other things, that side effects, which are not intended, must be accepted in a way that is compatible with integral human fulfillment. In other words, for a choice or action to be moral, it has to be directed toward integral human fulfillment.

The first principle of morality is a general directive, and is too vague, left as it is, to be helpful in analyzing the morality of accepting side effects in particular cases. So, the first principle of morality is specified by ways of acting that embody this first principle. Grisez calls these modes of

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[5] Germain Grisez and Russell Shaw, *Fulfillment in Christ: A Summary of Christian Moral Principles* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 80.

conduct, which are the unfolding of the first principle of morality, the "modes of responsibility."[6] While the first principle of morality requires one to choose or act in a way that is directed toward integral human fulfillment, the modes of responsibility specify the first principle by ruling out ways of choosing or acting that are incompatible with integral human fulfillment. The modes of responsibility are specific requirements of living in a morally responsible way. Observing the modes of responsibility guides one to accept side effects reasonably. It is wrong to accept side effects when doing so conflicts with one or more of the modes of responsibility, because accepting such side effects is incompatible with a will directed toward integral human fulfillment.

Jesus formulates the law of the New Covenant as: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind...[and] you shall love your neighbor as yourself."[7] The essence of the love of God and neighbor that Jesus calls for is the "will toward integral human fulfillment" which is the core of the first principle of morality. In giving us the Beatitudes, Jesus teaches us, in a more specific way, how to live as members of the New Covenant community. So, when the modes of responsibility, which embody the first principle of morality, are seen in the light of the Beatitudes and transformed by them, they direct our actions so that they will be in accord with the law of the New Covenant and be cooperative in Jesus' redemptive act. By living according to these Christian modes of responsibility, one participates in the work of Jesus.[8] To cooperate fully with Jesus in redeeming mankind, one has to find and fulfill one's unique, unrepeatable but limited role in God's plan of salvation. In other words, one has to find and fulfill one's personal vocation. Fidelity to one's personal vocation is an essential part of acting morally,

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[6] See Germain Grisez, *Christian Moral Principles*, vol. 1 of *The Way of the Lord Jesus* (Quincy IL: Franciscan Press, 1983), ch.8.
[7] Mt 22:37, 39.
[8] See Grisez, *CMP* chapter 26.

since by fulfilling it we participate in Jesus' work of redeeming mankind and it is Jesus' redemptive act that we hope will actualize the goal of integral human fulfillment.

Vatican Council II gives a formulation of the first principle of morality, calling it the "norm of human activity"[9] which is: "to harmonize with the authentic interests of the human race, in accordance with God's will and design, and to enable men as individuals and as members of society to pursue and fulfill their total vocation."[10] Here too, we see a connectedness between living morally and fulfilling one's vocation.

Two modes of Christian response explicitly include personal vocation. They are: (1) "put aside or avoid everything which is not necessary or useful in the fulfillment of one's personal vocation"[11] and (2) "endure fearlessly whatever is necessary or useful for the fulfillment of one's personal vocation."[12]

These two modes of Christian response are related to each other in that they are the positive and negative explication of the necessity of being uncompromisingly faithful to one's personal vocation. As these modes relate to side effects, the first mode says that it would be wrong to accept the side effects that come with being involved in certain projects or endeavors, or owning certain things, if these are not in accord with the living out of one's personal vocation. One ought to forego accepting side effects when these hinder the fulfillment of one's personal vocation, and are not necessary in the course of fulfilling it. The second mode says that it is reasonable and perhaps incumbent upon the agent to accept side effects that come with the living out of his or her personal vocation, as long as doing so does not violate any other mode of responsibility.

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[9] *GS* 35.
[10] *GS* 35.
[11] Grisez, *CMP*, 26-F.
[12] Grisez, *CMP*, 26-G.

An example may help to illustrate the first relevant mode. Becoming a volunteer firefighter seems like a good thing to do. It is beneficial to the community and it is a way to serve one's neighbor. However, it would probably be wrong for a committed student of history who thinks that he is called to become a history professor someday to take on the responsibility of becoming a volunteer firefighter, because while firefighting is good, presumably, it is not what he is called to do. The side effects of time lost that could be spent studying, lack of sleep from running calls at night, distraction and shortened attention span would probably be unacceptable because they hinder the fulfillment of the student's personal vocation. However, such side effects most probably would be acceptable for a middle-aged army retiree who has no other commitments to work or family, and they would likely be acceptable for a medical student who has plans to become a trauma physician, or for a student who is majoring in fire science with a view to becoming a professional firefighter or working for FEMA.

While it would probably be wrong for the committed history student to accept the side effects of getting involved in firefighting, it would be right for him to accept the side effects of *foregoing* becoming a firefighter, for *not* becoming a firefighter also has side effects. By not becoming a firefighter the student will not be able to serve the various people that he otherwise would be able to serve, the local fire department will have one less man to run calls, and he will have to forego attaining all the knowledge that he would be able to attain in firefighter training. By accepting these side effects, the student does, in a sense, what the second mode requires: he bravely endures what is necessary for the fulfillment of his vocation.

But, the firefighter example shows how a course of action would be wrong because it *conflicts* with the living out of one's personal vocation. The first mode says that one should set aside everything which is not *useful or necessary* for living out one's personal vocation. One might assume that this injunction would rule out more than courses of action that directly conflict with being

faithful to one's vocation. While everything that *conflicts* with the fulfillment of one's personal vocation is not useful or necessary for fulfilling it, it does not *appear* to follow that everything which is not *useful or necessary* for the fulfillment of one's personal vocation *conflicts* with it. In saying that one should set aside everything that is not useful or helpful in fulfilling one's personal vocation, the first mode may seem unreasonably demanding. What about seemingly harmless kinds of activities like favorite hobbies? Should they be set aside because they are not directed to fulfilling one's vocation?

Understanding the first mode as too strict or limiting comes from having a conception of personal vocation that is too narrow or too vague. If vocation is viewed as pertaining to just one aspect of life, such as one's job or a particular project, or even one's state in life, considered abstractly, then the first mode can seem too strict. However, if personal vocation is understood as something that encompasses every aspect of life, including one's work, recreation and interpersonal relationships, then, while everything that conflicts with one's personal vocation is certainly not necessary or useful for fulfilling it, it turns out that everything that is not necessary or useful actually *does* conflict with the living out of one's personal vocation, by hindering a more perfect fulfillment of it.

I think that there is value to formulating the first mode as: "set aside everything that is not helpful or necessary for the fulfillment of one's personal vocation," rather than formulating it as: "set aside everything that conflicts with the fulfillment of one's personal vocation," because formulating it as the former is stronger, and drives home the necessity of being dedicated to one's personal vocation by integrating everything in life to the fulfillment of it, even seemingly insignificant activities like hobbies. Uncompromising fidelity to one's personal vocation requires one to live a life of personal integrity.

Another example concerns the second relevant mode. Consider the life of St. Maximillian Kolbe. He endured severe evils in the course of fulfilling his personal vocation. Suffering from tuberculosis, he spent himself ministering to other patients in the hospital,[13] and he went on missionary trips to Japan where he endured many hardships, including being snowed upon at night for want of adequate shelter.[14] By being dedicated to the truth in the publication of his *Knight of the Immaculata* magazine, St. Maximillian accepted the side effect of being targeted by the Nazis and arrested.[15] As a prisoner at Auschwitz, St. Maximillian gave of his meager rations to strengthen others[16] and in the end, he chose to lay down his life for another, taking the place of a condemned prisoner who was a young husband and father,[17] thus accepting the side effect of death.[18] St. Maximillian accepted many side effects bravely and rightly in the course of living out his personal vocation; not only his vocation to be a priest, but also his vocation to be a saint and martyr.

Conclusion

While side effects are not intended, accepting them can sometimes be morally wrong. Accepting foreseen side effects is voluntary. Foreseen side effects can be either accepted, or rejected by foregoing the choice that would unintentionally bring them about. Since the acceptance of side effects is voluntary, it shapes an agent's character for better or worse, depending on whether they were accepted rightly or not. If accepting side effects is not in accord with the first principle of morality, then it is wrong to accept them. One can determine whether accepting certain side effects is moral by asking if doing so would violate any of the modes of responsibility, which are ways of

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[13] See Patricia Treece, *A Man For Others: Maximillian Kolbe: the Saint of Auschwitz in the Words of Those Who Knew Him*, (Libertyville, Il: Prow, 1982), 23.
[14] See Treece, 56.
[15] See Treece, 142.
[16] See Treece, 208.
[17] See Treece, 222-223.
[18] Germain Grisez also uses St. Maximilian as an example of rightly accepting death as a side effect. His analysis can be found in: *Living a Christian Life*, vol. 2 of *The Way of the Lord Jesus*, (Quincy, Il: Franciscan Press, 1993), 8 C 1c.

acting that specify and embody the first principle of morality. When the modes of responsibility are seen in the light of the Gospel, they are transformed and take on fuller meaning as guidelines to the way of living that Jesus taught. The injunction of two of these Christian modes of response is uncompromising fidelity to one's personal vocation. Therefore, fidelity to one's personal vocation is an intrinsic part of living morally, and consequently, one's personal vocation affects the way that one ought to accept side effects. One should not accept the side effects that come with getting involved in things not ordered to the fulfillment of one's vocation, and one should typically be willing to accept side effects that come with acting in a way that is ordered to the living out of one's personal vocation, and foregoing activities that are not. †

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