

# The Principle of Double Effect

**ISSUE:** What is the principle of double effect? What circumstances govern the morally acceptable application of this principle?

**RESPONSE:** The basic moral principle that we follow is to pursue and do good, and avoid that which is evil or bad (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1732, 1955).<sup>1</sup> The principle of double effect is an ethical formula that enables someone to evaluate the moral dimensions of complicated moral issues that may involve consequences or side effects which are both positive and negative, good and bad. This principle may be employed when one is considering an action that is morally good, yet the action involves one or more unintended bad consequences. Because these consequences are side effects, and not directly willed, the choice that brings them about is morally acceptable.

**DISCUSSION:** The Church teaches that one may legitimately choose to carry out an act that is morally good, but which has one or more unintended side effects that are morally evil. The principle of double effect has several guideline that must be met for an act to be morally acceptable:

- The **intended act** must be good in itself. The intended act may not be morally evil.
- The **good effect** of the act must be that which is directly intended by the one who carries out the act. The **bad effect** that results from the act may be foreseen by the agent but must be unintended.
- The good effect must not be brought about by using morally evil **means**.
- The good effect must be of **equal or greater proportion** to any evil effect which would result.
- Acts that have morally negative effects are permissible **only when truly necessary**, i.e., when there are **no other means** by which the good may be obtained.

As an example of how these criteria are applied to contemporary issues, consider a woman who has an ectopic pregnancy, i.e., one in which the pre-born child has become implanted in a place other than the uterus. In most ectopic pregnancies, the pre-born child has become implanted in one of the mother's Fallopian Tubes, which normally transport unfertilized eggs. Because the Fallopian Tubes are very small and narrow, implantation within one of them presents serious problems. The growing child will eventually rupture the mother's tube and cause a life-threatening situation. If the situation is left untreated, both mother and child will likely die.

By the time an ectopic pregnancy is diagnosed, the life of the pregnant mother is usually already in danger. If the Fallopian Tube is not already ruptured when the pregnancy is diagnosed, a person applies the principle of double effect to make a morally acceptable course of action. In this case, a person has two legitimate options: 1. Remove the entire Fallopian Tube or 2. Remove a portion of the tube at the site of implantation.

The side effect of any of these procedures is the death of the unborn child; yet this end is not the end which the mother or physician intends or chooses. Direct attacks on an unborn child are always forbidden, as in an elective abortion which intends the death of the child. If the death of a child was not the intended effect, an abortion would just be an early means of delivering a child. However, abortion is an evil means that attempts to bring about some good end, real or perceived. Therefore, shelling out the child from the damaged tube as a means of "medical" treatment is equivalent to an abortion, which is morally unacceptable. The death of the child would be the means of "medical" treatment.

If you allow and justify the direct killing of a pre-born child involved in an ectopic pregnancy, then you thereby justify other direct killings of pre-born children via other means. In contrast, removing part or all of the Fallopian Tube is not an abortion. These treatments are morally permissible because they meet all of the conditions of the principle of double effect. The morally good end which is directly sought is to save the life of the mother. That which is directly treated is the life-threatening damaged tissue of the tube; therefore, the child is not directly attacked. Removal of the damaged tube or a portion of the tube that contains the child is morally permissible, because the death of the child is an effect which may be foreseen, but it is unintentional. The good end of saving the mother's life

is proportionate to the unintended evil side effect, that of the unborn child's death.<sup>2</sup> Further, because there are no other means by which the mother's life may be saved, the principal of necessity also applies. There are no other medical procedures that can save both mother and child.

<sup>1</sup> See also Catechism, nos. 1731-38, 1749-61, 1954-86. C.f. Psalm 37:27-28, Matthew 7:12, Mark 12:29-31, John 15:12).

<sup>2</sup> National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Services*, 1994, no. 47.

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Last edited: 11/97

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