

SOME UNRELIABLE GUIDES TO RIGHT AND WRONG

Emotionalism: *'Follow your emotions, your feelings...If it feels right, do it.'*

While our feelings can often be a preliminary guide to what is right (especially if they are well-trained through habits of virtue and good character), of themselves they can't be totally relied upon – even a feeling like 'love'. Someone's 'feelings' of love might lead them into an extra-marital affair deceiving an innocent spouse; or someone's 'feelings' of love for their family might lead them to trample on someone who gets in the way of family advancement. Also, feelings can be generated even just by chemicals in our brains – they aren't necessarily in line with the real world. So feelings *sometimes* lead us right, sometimes wrong. We need faith and reason to help us discern: which are the feelings that are in line with true goodness and genuine love for all people, and which feelings lead us astray?

Rationalism: *'Reason alone is the supreme guide.'*

Human reason is indeed from God, and *when used properly*, can never logically prove a wrong answer; natural reason can indeed establish many moral truths. The trouble is, we often don't use reason properly. Ethical/moral thinking is often very complex and difficult, so we can't assume we can easily work out the right answers on all questions just by reason. Often the answers society and the media suggest to our reason haven't really been thought through very deeply by their proponents. Also, human reasoning has been clouded by original sin. And we easily *rationalise*: we use distorted reasoning to produce the conclusions we wish, and justify our wrong behaviour.

So reason needs God's infallible word and the light of faith to illuminate it and keep it true to itself and on the right track. Faith is rightly our supreme guide; and right reason itself confirms us in the step of saving faith in all that God has revealed through Christ and his Church. So when faith clashes with what reason is *apparently* saying on this or that moral issue, we must go with faith in God's word. (It will always be found in the end that reason did not really prove what it was seeming to prove.)

If we make exceptions, and go by faith in God's word and Church teachings *only if* they don't go against our own opinions, then we have really made ourselves, our opinions, our own reasoning, our ultimate standard and guide. Thus we stand in judgment, discriminating between the things that God has said, and only believing those that are acceptable to us. This is to abandon genuine faith in God, and instead to place our faith in ourselves – which cannot save us.

Relativism: *'Everything is relative...We can't judge.'*

If all moral assessments were merely relative to individuals, time and culture, and never absolute, it would follow that slavery, oppression of women or minorities, etc. were wrong in *our* time and culture, but might be right in *another* time and culture when those things were thought to be acceptable.

In truth, although the limited moral knowledge of someone's time and culture might indeed limit their *blame and responsibility* for these evil actions, they don't make the actions themselves truly good and right. Fundamental human nature is the same for all humans.

(Otherwise we would not be equal members of the same species.) Basic moral principles are derived from essential truths about human nature by right reason, and therefore are the same for everyone: the same thing cannot be simultaneously true and false.

And when one person tells another person, ‘You shouldn’t judge’ – the first person is actually themselves making a judgement that they are applying to the second person. True (and maybe this is what they mean), it is not right behaviour to stand in judgement over another person’s *soul*, their deep responsibility in the sight of God. Yet everyone can certainly make judgements (assessments) as to which types of *behaviour* are genuinely in line with human goodness, happiness, and spiritual health, and which are not.

Consequentialism: *‘Do whatever brings about the best consequences, the best outcomes.’*

An example of consequentialism in action might be the Nazi experiments on human subjects, often causing their suffering, disability or death. The supposed ‘good outcome’ would be the advance in scientific and medical knowledge, saving and enhancing other lives in future. But we are rightly filled with revulsion at these experiments, no matter how many other lives would be saved – the end does not justify the means. Consequentialism cannot be a correct general principle.

Taken as an absolute moral principle, consequentialism would mean that we could rightly deliberately kill one innocent person to save ten other people down the track, since ‘overall’ we would save nine lives. But if we do this, in that very action of killing the innocent we twist and corrupt our own soul, in our choice to violate the dignity and preciousness of that person we choose to kill. We do not truly love them; we do not respect God’s image in them. (And this actually means that our concern for the other ten people is not motivated by respect for God’s image either: it is not genuine Christian love. If it were, we would respect God’s image *wherever* we found it.)

So, we must rule out actions that are wrong ‘of themselves’ (‘intrinsically’ evil), whose very nature involves evil. We cannot do evil that good may come. The supposed good intention and good consequences do not justify the evil means used to achieve the good. The intrinsically evil choice does not merely ‘lead to’ our moral corruption as a ‘consequence’: it already *is* that corruption. And it is on that freely chosen corruption that we will be judged by God.

So only when we have ruled out actions and intentions that are evil in themselves may we then bring consequences into the equation, balancing up different outcomes. If the only way we can achieve some noble purpose is by doing something intrinsically evil, then we must accept that God does not intend or expect us to achieve that noble purpose. It is not our job to save the world and achieve all possible goods: we aim only at those purposes that we can achieve by legitimate means.

And regarding the ten people who are in danger of death, whom we are hoping to save – by refusing to kill the first person, we are still not *intending* the deaths of the ten. We are not disrespecting God’s image in them by any positive action or intention – we simply withhold our hand, recognising that there is nothing more we can rightly do for them. It is in the hands of God (who made the moral law that we are obeying). We do the best we can for them, within the means that God has made legitimately available to us.