



# THE IDEA: The moral theory of proportionalism.

Proportionalism is an ethical theory based upon Natural Law and that has been debated over the last 50 years within Roman Catholic theological ethics. It originated with the German theologian Peter Knauer in 1965 who wrote an article, written in French, about the concerns he had with interpretations of the principle of double effect. This article was reviewed by Richard McCormick who was to become a leading figure and supporter of proportionalism. Proportionalists have been referred to as revisionists or, detrimentally, consequentialists. The theory suggests that 'proportionate reason' can determine concretely and objectively the rightness or wrongness of acts. Proportionalists make a distinction between what is 'right' and what is 'good'. A good act is an act that follows the moral rules of Natural Law, and a right act is an act that is not necessarily a totally good act, but creates the lesser of two evils as a consequence of it. The 'rightness' of an act does not just depend upon moral rules but also upon intention, right reasoning and the amount of values and disvalues an act delivers in all foreseeable circumstances involved. In this way, the human act is seen as a structural unity, and a moral judgment can only be made in relation to all components of that unity, not just one or two.

## QUOTES

- It is not a method but a way of examining received moral norms according to a conflict model of reality. Every moral choice occurs in a context where competing values and disvalues must be weighed critically. (Richard McCormick)
- Proportionalism is a method for (a) resolving conflicts of values, (b) determining objectively what is morally right or wrong about an action (as distinguished from judging the goodness or badness of the agent), and (c) grounding concrete behavioral norms and exceptions to them. (James Walter)



- This revisionist movement began in the writings of Peter Knauer, S.J., as a way to move beyond double-effect thinking. (Jean Porter)
- Proportionalism is neither a menace nor a method. (Jean Porter)
- Its proponents are attempting to reform Roman Catholic moral theology from within the tradition, which in recent decades had focused almost exclusively on the act considered in itself. (Philip Foubert)

## REFERENCES, FURTHER EXPLANATION AND EXAMPLES

- Proportionalists argue that an act needs to be considered carefully by considering all determining factors.
- For example, it may be considered bad not to tell the truth, but it is not necessarily morally right to tell the truth about everything in all circumstances.
- Knauer's basic concern was that a moral act under the principle of double effect is reduced to components rather than considering it as a single act.
- Although it is not always relevant to Roman Catholics in general, and is mainly studied in theological colleges, the theory of proportionalism is considered highly controversial by the Vatican.

### Answer:

Proportionalism is an ethical theory based upon Natural Law and that has been debated over the last 50 years within Roman Catholic theological ethics. Although it is not always relevant to Roman Catholics in general, and is mainly studied in theological colleges, the theory of proportionalism is considered highly controversial by the Vatican. However, Jean Porter states, it is 'neither a menace nor a method.' It originated with the German theologian Peter Knauer in 1965 who wrote an article, written in French, about the concerns he had with interpretations of the principle of double effect. As Jean Porter continues: 'This revisionist movement began in the writings of Peter Knauer, S.J., as a way to move beyond double-effect thinking.' Knauer's basic concern was that a moral act under the principle of double effect is reduced to components rather than



considering it as a single act. This article was reviewed by Richard McCormick who was to become a leading figure and supporter of proportionalism. McCormick explains, 'Every moral choice occurs in a context where competing values and disvalues must be weighed critically'. Proportionalists have been referred to as revisionists or, detrimentally, consequentialists. The theory suggests that 'proportionate reason' can determine concretely and objectively the rightness or wrongness of acts. Proportionalists make a distinction between what is 'right' and what is 'good'. For example, it may be considered bad not to tell the truth, but it is not necessarily morally right to tell the truth about everything in all circumstances. A good act is an act that follows the moral rules of Natural Law, and a right act is an act that is not necessarily a totally good act, but creates the lesser of two evils as a consequence of it. Philip Foubert confirms that 'Its proponents are attempting to reform Roman Catholic moral theology from within the tradition, which in recent decades had focused almost exclusively on the act considered in itself.' The 'rightness' of an act does not just depend upon moral rules but also upon intention, right reasoning and the amount of values and disvalues an act delivers in all foreseeable circumstances involved. Proportionalists argue that an act needs to be considered carefully by considering all determining factors. In this way, the human act is seen as a structural unity, and a moral judgment can only be made in relation to all components of that unity, not just one or two. As James Walter summarises: 'Proportionalism is a method for (a) resolving conflicts of values, (b) determining objectively what is morally right or wrong about an action (as distinguished from judging the goodness or badness of the agent), and (c) grounding concrete behavioral norms and exceptions to them.'



## THE IDEA: Proportionalist distinction between a good act and a right act

In the light of a very complex debate that was emerging, Hoose attempted to clarify the issues of good, evil, right and wrong by looking at a fundamental philosophical distinction that had been made by G E Moore in his Principia Ethica many years earlier.

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[\*] In short, a good moral action is an action that follows a moral rule and does not deviate; it is a descriptive term that highlights the moral qualities of an action and the person involved.

However, the question as to whether this is a morally right action to take is an entirely different matter; this is not descriptive and requires a moral judgement and that this moral judgement could be based upon a variety of different determining factors.

Although Moore admitted that a morally good act could depend upon intention, for him, the idea of considering the intention of an act had no value whatsoever in judging whether it was morally right or wrong. [\*]

Therefore, an action may be morally good but whether or not it is morally right or wrong depends upon several contextual factors that a philosopher must consider. [\*]

For the proportionalist, this soon developed into a consideration of an action by looking at the balance of intrinsic goods and evils/ontic goods and evils/pre-moral goods and evils/primary goods and evils/values and achieving this calculation through considering other contributing contextual factors. [\*]

What is clear, however, that it was gradually emerging within the debate the fact that there was a clear distinction between what was a morally good action and what was a morally right action, and that the two were not necessarily synonymous.



## QUOTES

- ‘The conscience cannot mislead one about moral goodness and badness. It always and infallibly calls for moral goodness. However, it can mislead on regarding what is morally right.’ (Hoose)
- ‘An act is either morally right or morally wrong. It cannot be both. If we talk of morally evil (meaning morally wrong) elements in an act that is morally right and is performed by a morally good person, we confuse the whole issue.’ (Hoose)
- Some of them are talking about how to ascertain the rightness and wrongness of acts, and it would seem that the others should be discussing the same thing, although it is far from clear that they are in fact doing so.’ (Hoose)
- ‘My point is only that this question does sometimes depend on the motive, in some degree; whereas the questions whether his action was right or wrong never depends upon it at all.’ (Moore)

## REFERENCES, FURTHER EXPLANATION AND EXAMPLES

- Hoose begins with pointing out the confusion between the terms.
- For G E Moore, in ethical debate there was a definite distinction between the words good and right, and the words evil and wrong.
- For example, a moral act is not made ‘right’ simply because the person doing it refers to their beliefs and considers the act good.
- The main issue, however, was not always understood clearly at first and many proportionalists did not clearly differentiate between good and bad, right and wrong.