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Moral Absolutes: Tradition, Revision, and Truth by John Finnis (review)

Robert P. George

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

348 BOOKREVIEWS to God's commandments is "the way and condition of salvation" (VS #12). Now obedience to the commandments entails, in addition to a good motivation or a willingness to strive, the conformity of an action's object to the specifying content of the commandment. What is the significance of a commandment to honor one's father and mother, if it does not specify actions? The commandments of God specify what kinds of action are, or are not, in conformity with the true good of man. In his analysis of the moral act, the Pope holds that the object of the act is "the primary and decisive element for moral judgment" (VS #79). Actions which by the nature of their object are unable to be ordered to man's true end can never be "good" actions. Further, he notes that acts, even individual acts, are determinative of the

goodness or badness of the person. These points are summarized nicely in the following passage: 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. If the object of the concrete action is not in harmony with the true good of the person, the choice of that action makes our will and ourselves morally evil, thus putting us in conflict with our ultimate end, the supreme good, God himself (VS #72). I believe that Keenan's study commendably highlights the freedom of the will in the order of exercise, and its power to exercise dominion over the intellect in the order of specification. Keenan also insightfully emphasizes the central role of the love of God as the root of our striving to live well. Yet any willing can only be consequent to some knowing. Further, the willingness to strive and be determined, if it is good, is a willingness to be determined, or specified, by the true good known by reason and faith. This willingness, which is a crucial element in moral goodness, must be completed by actions in conformity with the true good. Human goodness is in freely, and lovingly, living out the truth of human nature and its end. The Catholic University of America Washington, D.C. JOHN A. D. CUDDEBACK Moral Absolutes: Tradition, Revision, and Truth. By JOHN FINNIS. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1991. Pp. 113. \$24.95 (cloth), \$9.95 (paper). Not long after his conversion to Roman Catholicism, Alasdair MacIntyre told a group of Catholic bishops: "As a matter of fact, I came to the conclusion that there were exceptionless and binding [moral] norms prior to and quite independently of any faith in Divine Revelation." Within the Church MacIntyre entered, however, there existed, and exists, widespread doubt and confusion about "moral absolutes" or "exceptionless moral norms." Certain eminent Catholic moral theologians today dissent from Pope John Paul's teaching that "there exist acts which per se and in themselves, independently of circumstances, are always seriously wrong by reason of their object." In the face of this dissent, John Finnis has produced a powerful philosophical and theological defense of the papal teaching. Moral Absolutes presents the 1988 Michael J. McGivney Lectures which Finnis delivered at the John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and the Family. The book consists of four chapters: "Foundations," "Clarifications," "Christian Witness," and "Challenge and Response." Like MacIntyre, Finnis maintains that the authority of scripture and tradition supplement reason's grasp of certain specific types of act as intrinsically wicked and, therefore, never to be performed. Although his goal is to vindicate the proposition that there are moral absolutes, rather than to say which, or even how many, moral norms qualify as "exceptionless" (and therefore as, in the relevant sense of the term, "absolute"), his examples include norms against abortion (and, more generally, the direct killing of innocent human beings), adultery, fornication, contraception, homosexual sex, blasphemy, and disclaimer of the faith. As Finnis observes, the Church's tradition of proclaiming these norms and their absolute nature is "massively solid." Against certain neoscholastic...

to God's commandments is "the way and condition of salvation" (PS # 12). Now obedience to the commandments entails, in addition to a good motivation or a willingness to strive, the conformity of an action's object to the specifying content of the commandment. What is the significance of a commandment to honor one's father and mother, if it does not specify actions? The commandments of God specify what kinds of action are, or are not, in conformity with the true good of man.

In his analysis of the moral act, the Pope holds that the object of the act is "the primary and decisive element for moral judgment" (PS # 79). Actions which by the nature of their object are unable to be ordered to man's true end can never be "good" actions. Further, he notes that acts, even individual acts, are determinative of the goodness or badness of the person. These points are summarized nicely in the following passage:

Actions are morally good when they act in and express 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. If the object of the concrete action is not in harmony with the true good of the person, the choice of that action makes one's will and intellect morally bad, they putting us in conflict with our ultimate end, the acquisition of God through (PS # 72).

I believe that Keenan's study commendably highlights the freedom of the will in the order of exercise, and its power to exercise dominion over the intellect in the order of specification. Keenan also insightfully emphasizes the central role of the love of God as the root of our striving to live well. Yet any willing can only be consequent to some knowing. Further, the willingness to strive and be determined, if it is good, is a willingness to be determined, or specified, by the true good known by reason and faith. This willingness, which is a crucial element in moral goodness, must be completed by actions in conformity with the true good. Human goodness is in freely and lovingly, living out the truth of human nature and its end.

JOHN A. D. CORDERACK

*The Catholic University of America
Washington, D.C.*

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