

Catholics and Consequentialism

Before getting into the nitty gritty of how one can be (and hopefully is not) an accessory to sin, we have to talk about what sets the Catholic understanding of right and wrong apart from the secular world.

It's not that there's no overlap. What our society considers "common sense" morality has its roots in Christian belief, even though in some respects it's gone in a different direction. However, there are important differences to identify at the outset.

First, Catholics have a cheat sheet as to the answer of what's right and what's wrong. We believe we can reason our way to right and wrong to some degree, but in the end, God has revealed that some things must be done and some things must never be done. Secular people don't have such a cheat sheet. Catholic logic will always end with God's conclusions; secular logic may or may not.

Second, Catholics believe in good and evil, not just desirable/undesirable or better/worse. What do I mean by this? I mean that Catholics believe we are responsible for our actions. Some of those actions are good, like being honest, caring for the poor, attending Mass, etc. Some of those actions are evil, like theft, lying, taking the Lord's name in vain, etc. We should do the good and may never do actions that are evil.



The secular world tends to think along a different line. The philosophical school is called utilitarianism. The idea here is that actions aren't good and evil in themselves, but should be done or avoided based on whether or not their results promote an overall increase in happiness in society. Take our good friend Robin Banks. Let's say Robin takes an altruistic turn and starts to act more like Robin Hood, robbing only in order to give money to the poor. A utilitarian would look at that situation and might judge that this is acceptable, if it promotes the overall

well being of society. A Catholic would not. For a Catholic, stealing is always wrong and may never be done, no matter what the consequences.

I mention this because in the discussion about being an accessory, sometimes objections will come up like, "They would have done it anyway." For instance, maybe Robin would have attempted to rob the bank even without Ima's counsel; Ima just made it safer for him to do so. This kind of logic does not apply in Catholic thought. Our actions are right or wrong independent of the gravity of their consequences. We must never do evil, even if good may come of it.

– Joe Moreshead