

TOWARDS AN EPISTEMOLOGY OF ETHICS

JOHN G. MILHAVEN, S.J.

Fordham University

The following pages aim merely at articulating some questions, directing them at those more competent than the present writer to answer them. Catholic ethicists and moral theologians generally rely on certain axioms when they deal with questions of the day. At least one of the axioms often fails to be understood outside the ranks of the ethical specialists and, surprisingly enough, is rarely brought to light and discussed in its general bearing by them. The neglect in explaining this principle, coupled with the frequency in invoking it, may well be cause of much present-day bewilderment among nonspecialists concerning what is presented as natural law—for example, in sexual matters. The present article, composed by one who is not a professional moralist, seeks to win light on this principle by focusing questions on it and finally suggesting an answer. The ethical principle under question is the axiom that the essential purpose of a particular act suffices to determine its moral and immoral use. The context of the questions is that of natural-law morality and not of values or imperatives imparted only by Christian revelation.

As it stands, the principle is unexceptionable. Clearly, everything created should be used for the purpose God has marked for it. And God's purpose is its purpose. But when the principle is applied, e.g., to marriage, to the physical life of deformed babies, to sexual activity, to man's speech, its meaning loses clarity, even becomes ambiguous, at least in the eyes of the nonspecialist.¹

¹ Thus, the application of this principle in papal texts to reject all contraception as intrinsically immoral bewilders many today. Frs. Ford and Kelly have assembled pertinent texts from the teachings of Pius XI and Pius XII and bring out in their analysis that "the principle stressed in all the papal texts is the principle of 'divine institution,' 'divinely established order,' 'divinely established design.' In other words: God has written a certain definite plan into the nature of the generative process, and human beings are not free to change it" (John C. Ford, S.J., and Gerald Kelly, S.J., *Contemporary Moral Theology 2: Marriage Questions* [Westminster, Md., 1963] p. 286; this point is repeated throughout the analysis, pp. 286–91. Cf. Kelly's "Contraception and the Natural Law," *Proceedings of the Eighteenth Annual Convention [1963] of the Catholic Theological Society of America*, pp. 28–33). The point of the present writer is obviously not that such an application of

Seemingly, the source of the confusion lies in two different ethico-intellectual syndromes. Many ordinary educated American Catholics of 1966, perhaps unlike their fathers, and apparently unlike the professional ethicists, do not in forming their moral judgments instinctively look first to God's *particular* purpose for the thing to be used. They would not at all contest in principle such a point of reference, but their minds implicitly move another way. They look first to God's *general* purpose for man and they measure the questioned action against it.

One might articulate their understanding of God's general purpose as *gloria Dei vivens homo*. The glory God would have of a man is simply that he live—that he live fully. One day the life will be the vision and intimate love of God; today it is an imperfect anticipation of that goal through the understanding and love a man ekes out in the world for God and for his fellow men and for himself. When the question arises how to act in a certain situation, the ordinary man today does not normally inspect the total complexity of the object to be used in order to deduce what God must have envisioned in all these details. Rather, he finds out what he can do. From what he can do he chooses as morally right those actions by which human life, i.e., life of understanding and love, his own and his neighbor's, can be further realized. For example, speech which misrepresents one's views is wrong, and wrong before God, because it thwarts a life of understanding and love among men. Ordinarily, a man feels no need to inspect the complex details of tongue, larynx, lungs, etc., and discern God's specific purpose for the the faculty in order to make his moral decision.

There are, then, apparently two approaches to moral evaluation. Both base their moral judgment on the "purpose" of the prospective action,² but they do not envisage the same thing as the morally decisive purpose. One traces out first the specific purpose of the action and

principle is invalid. His point at the moment is sociological: it leaves uncomprehending many educated Catholics today, many a husband and wife facing their large family and their love and need for each other, many a priest trying to counsel them. The subsequent point of the writer will be epistemological: how, in general, does one come to know principles that can be applied in this way?

² Or, if one prefer, the purpose of the object to be used. In this context one can speak indifferently of the purpose of speaking or of the purpose of the faculty of speech, the purpose of living a married life or the purpose of the institution of marriage.

does not doubt that the ultimate purpose and good of the whole man will be attained thereby.³ The other measures the action directly in the light of man's general purpose, a full life of understanding and love, and does not doubt that the relation to the general purpose coincides with the specific end. It may be that the dichotomy appears only on the surface. Nevertheless, it is the dichotomy many a man today does find: the way the moralists think and the way he thinks.⁴ From this dichotomy, real or imagined, arise conflict and confusion of conscience.

The confusion permeates discussion of significant issues and raises questions in the popular mind. The prolonged existence of a baby extensively deformed in body and soul may be demanded by the specific purpose of man's physical existence in this world, but does it constitute the *vivens homo* who alone is God's glory? Should not conjugal morality for given families in a given society be governed by the fact that the general good of this society and this family can be most practically furthered by generous childbearing to a certain extent and then by continuing expression of conjugal love with the use of contraceptives? Are the mental gymnastics of a *reservatio mentalis* necessary or even worthy of a grown man in circumstances where mutual love and understanding indisputably demand that a certain other person entertain a false opinion?

Questions of this type, met at every turn today, may betray subjective confusion of the popular mind rather than obscurities in the presentation of the ethician. Nor does the present writer espouse all the

³ Arthur Vermeersch, S.J., discussing his proof of the grave immorality of contraception, expressed well the first approach: "This argument is free from any consideration of the moment which that rightness [*honestas*, i.e., the essential order which man should observe in his use of the conjugal act] has for the private or the common good. True, the provident God himself, while He lays down the order to be kept, is the guardian and protector of the common good. But we should not weigh what advantage or harm each act may bring in order to determine from this that there is a serious or light fault. Mortal sin . . . is *formally* an act substantially *against order* laid down by divine law, but not *formally* an act against the common good" (A. Vermeersch, S.J., *De castitate et de vitiis contrariis* [Rome, 1921] p. 256, n. 258; italics are V.'s, translation mine).

⁴ At very least it must be granted that ethicians in recent years have intensified their efforts to complement the argumentation from specific purposes with other approaches more congenial to contemporary thinking, e.g., from the symbolism or "sense" of a given act. However, since many ethicians still offer the first-mentioned argumentation as by itself decisive and since the new, complementary approaches are far from having attained universal acceptance, the dichotomy is, if only as a distorting epiphenomenon, widespread today.

presuppositions that the questions would seem to imply. But he does feel that the vague, implicit attitude behind the questions is not without insight and should be articulated by more precise questions in the hope that the reply of the ethicists may bring needed light.

The first attempt at a more precise question is offered by way of foundation for further questions. When a process (e.g., the total physiological process that brings about ocular vision) regularly terminates in the same result, in what sense is the result necessarily the "purpose" of the process? The regular result is, of course, purpose of the process in the sense that anything that happens can be called the purpose of the action immediately producing it and therefore of the divine concurrence. Furthermore, one need not contest the principle (concerning whose meaning and basis, however, *disputatur inter scholasticos*) that whatever acts regularly in the same way is necessarily ordered to its term by an intelligent director; for so watered a sense of purpose neither requires nor invites the kind of moral response at stake. The mere fact that my hair regularly tends to grow long has, as such, no decisive influence on any moral judgment. Clearly, the constant term of a process is not *eo ipso* the kind of purpose under present discussion, one intended, in a stricter sense of the word, by nature and God, i.e., one absolutely incorporating intrinsic value, orienting means, demanding unconditionally moral respect, prohibiting any violation or frustration.

Similarly, even when the process only through a complex convergence of numerous factors produces its regular result, does it follow necessarily that the result is the kind of absolute purpose under present discussion? One could take once more the example of the process that makes vision possible. Does the degree of complexity argue the degree of importance the term has? Even the most anthropomorphically conceived divine watchmaker must labor effortlessly; He has no need of proportioning the complexity of His created processes to the value of their term. Yet there are moralists for whom the relatively small proportion of a total bodily system that participates in a given activity proves the relatively small importance intended by God for that activity within the system.⁵ One wonders how they would discern the primary importance God envisioned for man in the universe.

⁵ "Further, if we consider the totality and complexity of the generative system—a complexity that is neural, glandular, vascular, muscular, with internal and external organs—

The point of these two tendentious questions is not that the purposes which the tradition found in human processes are irrelevant to moral decision. On the contrary! But how does one know the proportionate value of each one? The point is that neither mere regularity nor mere degree of complex convergence reveals the proportionate value of the term or "purpose" of a process. To prolong a *simpliste* image often invoked: if a man's father gives him a watch, the son recognizes its purpose in the regular term of its complex processes, namely, that it tells time for him. But would this suffice to situate the proportionate value of the term or purpose, i.e., the importance the father gave to it in his mind? Might there not be other purposes indeterminately envisaged by the father? How would the obvious proximate purpose be measured with a given remote one? Would the father be excluding the sale of the watch if this were the only way of paying for an operation for the son's wife, or the use of the watch as a hammer (and thus its destruction) if this alone on a given occasion could save the son's life?

How, then, can a man know the absolute and inviolable purpose of anything? How can one know . . . ? This epistemological question is the central one the present writer would like to pose. It seems to him that urged in its universality it could profitably receive more consideration from the ethicists.

To reword the question: how can one know inviolable values in this world? Certain values, it would seem, are recognized immediately on discerning what they are. If one discerns what can be the authentic love between a man and a woman, one recognizes its absolute worth. One sees that no man may seek to frustrate or destroy it. The discerning required is clearly no indirect, superficial conceptualization; to reveal the worth of human love, genuine understanding and therefore some experience of it are needed. One could use here the overused word "insight." But once human love is understood, once the insight is had, man sees immediately its absolute worth. Obviously, it is a question

what a small part of that whole system actually participates in the mere bodily union of intercourse, and what a small part of that whole system is the site of pleasure and bodily satisfaction. Surely, if God had envisioned the personal satisfaction of His individual spouses as the equal or primary purpose of the generative function in marriage, He would have fashioned man and woman in a different mold" (Joseph S. Duhamel, S.J., *The Catholic Church and Birth Control* [New York, 1962] p. 16).

here of an immediacy of evidence, not necessarily of time. No further evidence is required. One need not consult the further consequences of the act. To know what it is, i.e., to know its direct, specifying object, is to stand before an intrinsic, absolute value. It is, therefore, one way of coming to an absolute, inviolable purpose of God.

Can the same immediate evidence be found for all acts where moral decision is called for? Evidently not. A man may well understand what marriage is and what dissolubility would be, but does that immediately reveal to him that marriage should always be contracted as indissoluble? It would seem not. The ethicists themselves adduce ulterior evidence for the point. A man may well understand what is *locutio contra mentem* and not yet have enough evidence to discern its immorality. On this point, too, ethicists feel constrained to adduce further evidence.⁶

This is the final focus of the epistemological question: what is the nature of the "further evidence"? For, although the ethicists themselves at times invoke it, the universal nature of the further evidence seems to be neglected when principles of morality are brought to bear on other questions of the day. Thus, in the recent controversy concerning abortion, some Catholic moralists confronted humanitarian outcries *simply* with the assertion of the inviolability of human life.⁷ But the inviolability of human life is not a first principle. It is not evident

⁶ References to some ethicists will be given presently, when the nature of this evidence is discussed. See notes 12, 16, and 18.

⁷ For example, Richard McCormick, S.J., in an article on "Abortion" (*America*, June 19, 1965, pp. 877-81), explains carefully what is the absolute inviolability of any innocent man's physical life. But he never indicates the reasons that prove there is an absolute inviolability, holding under all circumstances. He invokes the dignity and inviolability of the human *person*, but does not show that there follows from this an equally absolute inviolability of human *physical existence*. He does adduce pertinently the harmful consequences a merely relative inviolability of human life could entail. But he never makes clear whether it is these consequences that ground the absoluteness. If he would actually ground it on this basis, his solution could fit well with the general epistemological orientation that the present article is about to suggest. But such a grounding needs to be drawn into the clear and justified directly and fully. An analogous criticism could be made of the several comments published in *America* concerning the killing of babies deformed by thalidomide (Aug. 18, 1962, p. 605; Sept. 22, 1962, p. 763; Nov. 10, 1962, pp. 1118 and 1128). The present writer is not criticizing the stand taken on abortion and mercy killing nor the relevance of many points made. But he submits that the above articles and comments neglected a question uppermost in the minds of many readers: What proves that innocent human life is inviolable under all circumstances? How do we know this?

simply on understanding what human life is (i.e., physical existence in this world) and what its physical suppression would be.⁸ It is a conclusion of further premises. The main contention of the present article is that thematizing epistemologically the nature of such further premises or evidence, not merely for the particular case of abortion, but insofar as they are relevant throughout the science of morals, would bring invaluable light to the nonspecialist and perhaps to the moralist as well.

One final example of what would seem to be neglect of this epistemological question: recently several moralists have pointed out that the argument condemning all contraception cannot be based on the invalid principle that *no* faculty or act may be used against its purpose. On the contrary, they say, the force of the traditional argument proceeds from a principle which considers the specific nature of the *procreative* faculty or act: "Just as innocent human life itself is inviolable, so those things which immediately pertain to the beginning of human life are also inviolable."⁹ This represents a valuable clarification of the traditional viewpoint, but the moralists have characteristically left unanswered one question many of their contemporaries would ask them: what is the evidence for this principle? How do we know it is absolutely and universally true? In other words, granted the inviolability of human life, why does it follow from that inviolability that the life-giving processes are equally inviolable? Recall that the principle, as used by the moralists, does not mean simply that one may not violate the processes in such a way as to harm life. It means that one may not violate the processes even when life would suffer no harm as a result, e.g., in the cases where the only reasonable alternative to contraception would

⁸ It should be clear that the "human life" meant here is not the *vita hominis* mentioned above, the life of human understanding and love which alone constitutes formally the glory of God. The "human life" in question here is merely the physical existence of a human being on earth, which might be without any understanding or love and which is opposed to the afterlife.

⁹ Gerald Kelly, S.J., "Contraception and the Natural Law," *Proceedings of the Eighteenth Annual Convention [1963] of the Catholic Theological Society of America*, p. 30. J. J. Lynch, S.J., in "Notes on Moral Theology," *Theological Studies* 25 (1964) 234, refers to this argument of Fr. Kelly as one which "would appear to throw some new light on the teleology of the generative act." He also notes that J. L. Thomas, S.J., expressed the same thought a few years ago in *The Family Clinic* (Westminster, Md., 1958) p. 186. Cf. also Ford and Kelly, *op. cit.*, pp. 286-91.

be continence. Taken in this sense, the principle is not self-evident. What is the evidence for it? Once more one finds unanswered the question concerning the nature of the further evidence which would ground an absolutely universal prohibition of certain actions.¹⁰

In conclusion, let a possible answer be suggested for this question. It may serve at least to concretize further discussion. What is the nature of the further moral evidence for those acts where a simple understanding of what they are is not decisive? This epistemologist would suggest that such further evidence in the last analysis is always empirical. It is the evidence of the probable or certain consequences, of what is going to result from the act in question. Will its eventual result be to contribute to, or to oppose, the concrete realization of those absolute values already recognized through the immediate evidence discussed above (e.g., the absolute value of human love)? And the evidence of what is going to result can only be, as David Hume showed more lucidly than anyone else, the evidence of the past sequence of individual events: they indicate "what generally happens." One suggests, therefore, that it is empirical evidence, not direct insight into what something is, but the observation, correlation, and weighing out of numerous facts, which reveal the value of most human acts; for they show what effect these acts will have in the concrete, existing world on those absolute values a man discerns by immediate insight.¹¹

Traditional moralists do not ignore such empirical evidence. They do not condemn divorce simply by describing what marriage is and

¹⁰ Recently an important study has treated this question extensively: Germain G. Grisez, *Contraception and the Natural Law* (Milwaukee, 1964). The present article and Dr. Grisez's book are mutually independent, and though they follow a similar course in the first steps of the problem, are far from coming to the same solution. Cf. the present writer's "Contraception and the Natural Law: A Recent Study," *Theological Studies* 26 (1965) 421-27.

¹¹ Germain Grisez, *op. cit.*, describes well the epistemology of ethics that the present writer is suggesting. He points out that this sort of epistemology characterizes most of the contemporary attitudes that are hostile to traditional natural law and, in particular, refuse to condemn any particular external behavior unconditionally, i.e., under all circumstances. Without denying this, the present writer submits, and tries to develop in the following pages, that the same kind of epistemology can be found also in the natural-law tradition and that it *can* ground the unconditional prohibition of certain external actions, although the great refinement and extension that empirical knowledge enjoys today may well diminish the number of actions that, considered abstractly, can be condemned without any qualification.

what dissolubility means. They do describe these, but then appeal to what is going to result, namely, what is going to result in marriage if its dissolution be licit: the hindrance to the fitting education of the child, the damage to married love, etc.¹² And to show what is going to result, they are appealing implicitly to empirical evidence (at least to what a man has through analogy or vicariously through observation), e.g., of what generally happens to a child whose parents are separated, of what generally happens when one has committed oneself totally to another and knows one can be abandoned, etc. That the *condigna proles educatio* and the *amicitia* between husband and wife are absolute values and purposes is clear to anyone who understands what they are. But it is only empirical evidence that reveals that the liceity of divorce opposes these absolute values and therefore that divorce itself is absolutely wrong. Only in the empirical context does it make sense to say, by way of conclusion, that divorce is wrong because it violates the nature or purpose of marriage. Could not this simple case provide a paradigm for more complex moral evidence?

Nor do the ethicists condemn lying by simply describing what it is. Here, however, they disagree on the nature of the decisive evidence.¹³ Some hold that the very nature and purpose of speech, the manifestation of one's thoughts, suffices to prove the intrinsic evil of lying, since the lie by definition violates this nature and purpose.¹⁴ Of these, some advance also an empirical argument, based on the consequences for social life, but they proffer it as a parallel proof, not as the foundation for the argument from nature or purpose.¹⁵ They find no need to offer

¹² E.g., V. Cathrein, *Philosophia moralis* (2nd ed.; Freiburg, 1895) pp. 309–11, nn. 448–49; E. Elter, *Compendium philosophiae moralis* (3rd ed.; Rome, 1950) pp. 182–83; I. Gonzalez, *Ethica (Philosophiae scholasticae summa* 3 [2nd ed.; Madrid, 1957]) pp. 754–60, nn. 931–42; V. Bartocetti, "Divorce," *Dictionary of Moral Theology* (Westminster, Md., 1962) pp. 427–28.

¹³ Cf. E. Elter, *op. cit.*, pp. 149–51.

¹⁴ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 2-2, q. 110, a. 3, c, and 4 ad 4m; H. Davis, *Moral and Pastoral Theology* (New York, 1952) p. 114; E. Elter, *op. cit.*, pp. 151–54; E. Genicot and J. Salsmans, *Institutiones theologiae moralis* 1 (14th ed.; Buenos Aires, n.d.) p. 340, n. 415; H. Noldin and A. Schmitt, *Summa theologiae moralis* 2 (27th ed.; Barcelona, 1951) p. 578, n. 638; A. Sabetti and T. Barrett, *Compendium theologiae moralis* (34th ed.; New York, 1939) p. 300, n. 312.

¹⁵ Thus Elter (although he does not believe that the empirical argument suffices to demonstrate that lying is by its very nature immoral and absolutely illicit in every case), Noldin-Schmitt, and Sabetti-Barrett, *loc. cit.*

any evidence that this nature or purpose is of such a kind as to be respected absolutely. They neglect completely the general epistemological problem which the present article is attempting to pose in sharp focus and which it claims lies behind much contemporary confusion.

Other ethicians, however, after describing what lying is, appeal ultimately, not to the nature and immediate purpose of speech, but to what is going to result, namely, what is going to result in society if lying be licit: the damaging of social life itself.¹⁶ And to show what is going to result, they are appealing implicitly to man's empirical evidence of what generally happens when one cannot tell if his neighbor is speaking the truth. That man's social life is an absolute value and purpose is clear to anyone who understands what it is. But it is only empirical evidence that reveals that the liceity of lying opposes the absolute value of social life and therefore that lying itself is absolutely wrong. Only in the empirical context does it make sense to say, by way of conclusion, that lying is wrong because it violates the nature or purpose of speech. Could not the presentation of these moralists provide a paradigm for most moral evidence?

The discussion, it might seem, has come full turn. The problem set up at the beginning of the article, the dichotomy between the intellectual syndromes of the ethicians and the popular mind, appears to have been neither problem nor dichotomy. At least in the cases just seen, both ethician and nonspecialist ultimately invoke empirical evidence: to evaluate certain actions, they compare what is going to result from the actions for certain absolute values, those intrinsic and formal values which constitute a "living man." The implicit attitude of the

¹⁶ L. Bender, "Lying," *Dictionary of Moral Theology*, pp. 720-21; V. Cathrein, *op. cit.*, pp. 212-13, n. 298; I. Gonzalez, *op. cit.*, pp. 598-99, n. 636; J. De Lugo, *De virtute fidei divinae* (Venice, 1718) 4, 1, 11; 4, 1, 9; 4, 4, 57; 14, 5, 74; *De iustitia et jure* (Venice, 1718) 16, 2, 29; F. Suarez, *De fide theologica* (Paris, 1872) 3, 5, 8. One is tempted to put St. Thomas in this group rather than in the one previously given (*supra* n. 14). True, in question 110, article 3, he reasons purely from "innaturale et indebitum," with no reference to the empirical. But in question 109, article 3, ad 1m, he explains that the virtue of veracity "aliquo modo attendit rationem debiti." For "... naturaliter unus homo debet alteri id sine quo societas humana servari non posset. Non autem possent homines ad invicem convivere nisi sibi invicem crederent, tanquam sibi invicem veritatem manifestantibus." This is clearly an empirical argument. However, the context of question 109 is different from that of 110, and it is perhaps pressing the word *debitum* too much to conclude that St. Thomas is thinking of the same thing in both places.

man on the street coincides with the last reasons of the traditional proofs of the ethicist.

Nevertheless, it is respectfully submitted that the examples cited of divorce and lying are not universally paradigmatic in the presentation of contemporary ethics, that the ethicist does not keep in mind as often as he could the empirical nature of his evidence, that he does not work out and apply systematically an epistemology of ethics. The epistemology proposed here could be summed up once more from a negative point of view. An act is seen to be wrong in one of two ways. Either (e.g., cowardice) it betokens by definition the absence of a quality (courage) whose absolute value is seen intuitively on understanding what it is, or the empirical observation of a number of cases indicates that the act (e.g., divorce) will result in some absolute evil, itself recognized in the former way (e.g., damage to the fitting education of the child). It is suggested that any talk of frustration of purposes merely expresses in a derived fashion one or both of the above evidences.

Such an epistemology makes large place for the empirical. Few are the acts whose value simple direct insight suffices to establish. They would be restricted to acts such as "love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice." Moreover, although moral qualities are needed to appreciate these and live them fully, they pose no intellectual problems for the educated Christian. On the other hand, for the numerous acts whose value direct insight does not suffice to establish, e.g., sexual actions, the question is frequently open or being reopened. If the epistemology suggested here is justified, such questions could be more fruitfully explored or at least their answers more convincingly communicated, if it were kept in mind that the decisive evidence is empirical.

Not that empirical evidence would make all conclusions contingent and revocable. An empirically established necessity can be a true necessity.¹⁷ Just as arsenic, placed in the diet, would necessarily destroy the physical life of men, so the liceity of lying would necessarily damage their social life. Even when extreme exceptions be conceivable, no

¹⁷ This has been traditionally recognized, as the thesis of the knowability of miracles illustrates.

sane man decides his action in these cases on the basis of the remotely possible exception.

According to the suggested epistemology of ethics, moreover, it is precisely such empirically discovered necessity that founds, and alone founds, most moral judgments. To uncover these necessities, the exacting complexity of empirical techniques, evolved to fine perfection by the sciences in the last few centuries, must be brought to bear. Should Christian ethics neglect these techniques, or apply them merely as gratuitous reinforcement? Should it not rather see in them the main source of light for the involute obscurity of many moral problems? Can, for example, the evil of homosexuality be certain—even for the specialist—unless the methods of contemporary social sciences attest its disastrous consequences: e.g., that the homosexual relation generally results in an unstable, stunted caricature of love? And would not this scientific attestation merely render more clear and convincing the empirical insight behind the old formula that homosexuality violates the nature of the faculty?

On the other hand, many empirical conclusions are contingent and revisable. The necessity is in these cases relative. The ethician readily admits this for the “nature” of money or of occasions of sin in the matter of chastity. For this reason he rightly disclaims any reversal of position when he declares to be licit what was formerly condemned. Empirical evidence has revealed to him that something different than heretofore is going to result from the use of money or the wearing of a certain costume. Consequently and consistently the morality is different. The nonspecialist would ask only whether the ethician should not recognize more thematically his empirical evidence and show himself more widely sensitive to contingency in conclusions and change in evidence. The nonspecialist often has the feeling that some arguments of the ethician are based, not on an absolute necessity that evil is going to result from a given action, but on a relative necessity, on a likelihood of the result within the area observed so far. The Church seems at times to come along and, going beyond the evidence, validly and wisely imposes an absolute obligation, which furthers the general good and moves the Christian people towards a higher ideal of life. As a matter of fact, ethicians, especially moral theologians, are often

modest on the force of their purely rational arguments, but a more precise methodological modesty might be helpful all around.

A case in point might be that of euthanasia and suicide. The final and decisive argument against them is not the inviolability of physical life, although this is a valid, relevant link in the reasoning. Ultimately the ethician faces the question why a man cannot in a given case, because of the enormous good at stake, presume God's permission to take a life. The ethician answers with the empirical argument of what is going to result if men be permitted, even if only in exceptional cases, to end directly their own lives at their own good judgment.¹⁸ The empirically evident likelihood of abusive extension of the privilege would come into play here. This empirical, *ex semel licito* argument is strong, but perhaps not strong enough to be absolutely necessary, applying indubitably in all cases. One would touch here, not so much the natural limits of human intelligence, but the particular limits of the empirical evidence in question. Yet that evidence would be strong enough to ground a general principle of action and to explain and justify—if justification were needed—the more universal condemnation by Christ's Church.

A general advantage envisaged in recognizing more extensively the empirical evidence of moral judgments would be a gain in force and clarity, at least in the eyes of the contemporary Christian who is not a trained ethician. Too many educated, committed Christians are turning from the ethicians with one word, "Casuistry!" One hears more and more often, "I simply follow my conscience." Tragic is this progressive alienation from an indispensable tradition. But what are the causes? According to the present essay, one cause is the empirical tenor of contemporary thinking, at a loss before the rationalistic garb of much professional moralizing. In the last four hundred years Western thought has grown more and more consciously empirical. In Christian circles one is wont to condemn the creeping empiricism for its exaggerations. But has it not also been a progress? Has it not clarified and uncovered resources of man's knowledge? Is not the critical sense

¹⁸ E.g., C. Boyer, *Cursus philosophiae* 2 (Rome, 1939) 508; V. Cathrein, *op. cit.*, p. 203, n. 282. One would, of course, like to substantiate the thesis of the article and show that the other arguments used in this context by these and other authors could, or at least should, be reduced to an empirical methodology. But this would go beyond the limits of the article, which merely seeks to raise and urge the question.

of the empirically oriented contemporary, which he brings to bear on the ethicist's solution, in part something good and sound, a gain over the contemporary of Thomas Aquinas? Might not the ethicist profit from it more methodologically and systematically than he has heretofore? Might he not thereby be more faithful to the best in his own tradition and more relevant to the problems of his contemporaries?

The present article is no more than a question—a leading question, but one honestly meant as a question. To appraise the worth of the question, and a fortiori to answer it, a full-scale review of ethical principles with a view to epistemological synthesis would be in order. If the review is ever carried out, whatever be its outcome and however naive and misleading the original question turn out to be, the raising of it should have been worth while, at least for the nonspecialist.