

Editorial

# Introduction to the Special Issue of Religions—“The Future of Catholic Theological Ethics”

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If the past is said to be a foreign country, then the future must be even less native. This is something many Catholic theological ethicists feel when they look back into the history of moral theological reflection and attempt to relate it to practical issues of today. What should be the starting point for discussing the future of Catholic Theological Ethics? It is not easy to address this question at the time of unprecedented change in which political upheavals, migration of people, inequalities, climate change, views on gender, sexuality, human relationality (including the relationality of the human to the non-human species) are amongst many issues that require careful attention and new understanding. This is in no way to imply that what went on before in Catholic ethics is no longer relevant. Arguably, the moral wisdom of the tradition is an important resource. However, new approaches, both theoretical and practical, are needed. The ten contributors to this special issue of *Religions* search for new ways of making Catholic theological ethics pertinent. For each of them the starting point of discussion is the groundbreaking publication *Reframing Catholic Theological Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 2016) by Joseph Selling, Emeritus Professor of Moral Theology, Catholic University Leuven.

The papers presented here cover several major themes that, traditionally, Catholic theological ethics have considered but, according to the authors of the papers, need revisiting. Amongst these themes are: conscience, virtue, natural law, authority, ecumenism, the human person and the *theology* of theological ethics. The writers represent a variety of approaches, geographical locations (Western and Eastern Europe, USA, and India) and while most of them are Roman Catholic, there is an imbedded ecumenism in several discussions and there is a direct and indirect interreligious and inter-cultural slant in some of the papers.

Joseph Selling opens the issue with a summary of the approach he developed in the above-mentioned publication. In his ‘Reframing Catholic Theological Ethics: Summary and Application’ (Selling 2017) he argues that while traditional Catholic moral theology has much to offer regarding responsible, ethical living and decision-making, the method of theological ethics used over the centuries doesn’t serve us well today. The aim of theological ethics in the past was to train priests for hearing confessions and helping them to judge whether acts confessed were sinful or not. Selling traces the history of the discourse and notes that while the goal of the acting person was also important in judging the acts, it was only in order to find whether the guilt of the penitent was possible to mitigate. Selling makes a case for inclusion in the method a proper attention to the goals of ethical living. He proposes a review of ethical terminology, especially the meaning of good, bad and evil. He builds his method of moral evaluation and decision-making on the work of Thomas Aquinas and the documents of the Second Vatican Council which urged the adaptation of a norm broadly called as ‘Human Person Integrally and Adequately Considered’. He offers a new reading of ‘circumstances’, ‘ends’ and ‘intentions’ as well as virtues. He lists twenty ‘principles’ which for him are part and parcel of the Catholic ethical tradition: ‘the need for a working *anthropology*, an emphasis on *attitude* before behavior, a sense of *commitment* to life projects, protecting the *common good*, maintaining a sense of *community*, validation of *corporeality*, striving toward *detachment*, fostering love of *enemies* protecting our *environment*, promoting *equal human* dignity, maintaining an *eschatological* sense, construction of a shared *ethics*, belief in basic

goodness, cultivating a sense of *justice*, communicating through *narrative*, embracing an *option* for the disadvantaged, seeking *reconciliation* whenever possible, exercising *responsibility*, recognizing the reality of *sin* developing a life of *virtue*. Selling considers a number of challenges for the future Catholic theological ethics including, at the end of his paper here and the book, the challenge of teaching.

Lisa Sowle Cahill (Cahill 2017) in her 'Reframing Catholic Ethics: Is the Person an Integral and Adequate Starting Point?' explores a different type of challenge (although with the implication on teaching): the person as the starting point for ethical reflection. While making a response to Selling's method of moral evaluation and using the example of the HIV/AIDS problem (introduced by Selling), Cahill challenges the Western tendency to view the human person as a free and responsible moral agent. She calls for a more social, inductive, and global approach in which a greater attention is given to the social and political aspects of sex and gender and to the intersection of gender, race, class and economic inequality. Cahill is interested in the way non-Western perspectives might inform and alter Western methods and conclusions. She not only expands certain aspects of Selling's perspective but makes a strong case for a cross-communal and dialogic ethics, which is appreciative of what we (as human beings) share and how we differ.

Another challenge, namely a challenge to concretize goal-oriented moral thinking, is explored by Illathuparampil (Illathuparampil 2017) and Marie Catherine O'Reilly-Gindhart (O'Reilly-Gindhart 2017). Illathuparampil in his 'Goal-Oriented Ethics: Framing the Goal-Setting Concretely' discusses 'four supportive pillars' which aim to supplement Selling's approach: (1) openness to human sciences; (2) conversation among various narratives; (3) positing a theological frame for ethical reasoning; (4) recourse to non-discursive reasoning. O'Reilly-Gindhart in her 'Pope Francis and Joseph Selling: A New Approach to Mercy in Catholic Sexual Ethics', uses Selling's method of the 'virtuous trapezium' to analyse Pope Francis's approach to matters concerning sexuality in his Apostolic Exhortation of *Amoris Laetitia* (Franciscus 2016a) and Apostolic Letter *Misericordia et Misera* (Franciscus 2016b). She finds a number of interesting connections between Pope Francis and Selling and shows how the insights of the two could advance our understanding of the virtue of mercy.

Nicholas Austin (Austin 2017) in his 'Normative Virtue Theory in Theological Ethics' supports Selling's turn to virtue. However, Austin is aware that many theological ethicists dismiss virtue theory and see it as normatively weak. So, prior to endorsing Selling's turn to virtue, Austin considers the key objections to the normativity of virtue theory and responds to them by drawing on Thomas Aquinas and contemporary discussions. He makes a strong case that virtue theory is about qualities of character that are oriented towards action; virtue theory provides a rich moral vocabulary for describing moral rightness or wrongness of actions and offers the right level of normative guidance. Austin wants future theological ethics to 'reap the benefits of the renewal of virtue by recognising that virtue theory is normative'.

Nenad Polgar (Polgar 2017) in his 'Reframing Catholic Theological Ethics from a Scotistic Perspective' responds to Selling's invitation to re-think the post-Tridentine development of theological ethics but unlike Selling (and Austin) Polgar doesn't find the Thomistic approach helpful. According to him, one of the problems is the unresolved debate within the discipline on how Aquinas' texts ought to be interpreted. So, Polgar proposes an alternative route via the (presumably, less ambiguous) works of John Duns Scotus. He reflects on Scotus' study of marriage and bigamy in the Old Testament that, in Polgar's view, justifies drawing a parallel between Scotus' work and Selling's attempt to reframe Catholic theological ethics.

The exercise of reframing Catholic theological ethics into a more ecumenical discourse is considered by Stewart (Stewart 2017) in her 'Hermeneutic and teleology in ethics across denominations—Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth' and Peter Sedgwick in his 'Anglican moral theology and ecumenical dialogue' (Sedgwick 2017). Stewart's study arises from the context of current debates in the Catholic Church on the place of rule and law in moral reasoning. She suggests that ethics may be best served by approaches that place the human subject in a teleological context and that recognise the need for interpretation of circumstances surrounding actions to be evaluated. As several authors

mentioned above, Stewart too supports a contextualized approach to theological ethics and contrasts it with normative rule approaches. She compares Selling's insights on moral reasoning in Aquinas with an account of the ethical implications in Karl Barth's theology of hope as expressed in Volume Four of the *Church Dogmatics* (Barth 1967). Stewart concludes that, in an ecumenical convergence, neither propose a normative rule approach. Rather both use a teleological context and require a hermeneutic of evaluation. Sedgwick, an Anglican moral theologian, advances three ecumenically relevant arguments: (1) Roman Catholic moral theology has been in a state of sustained engagement, and sometimes outright conflict on the nature of moral theology and the place of the human agent, since the 1960s; (2) this debate has overshadowed the search for ecumenical rapprochement in many places, but especially the acceptance of the report on moral theology entitled *Life in Christ* from the Anglican—Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC); (3) Sedgwick suggests that there are contributions which Anglican ethics can bring both to the Catholic debate, and to ecumenism, in the area of moral norms and the nature of a moral absolute. He substantiates these contributions by exploring the works of Richard Hooker, Jeremy Taylor, and Kenneth Kirk. Sedgwick pays attention to something that is also important to Selling, namely the theology of theological ethics, a theme which the final two papers address more directly: the theocentric study of conscience in St Paul by Marian Machinek and love ethics by Edward Vacek.

Machinek (2017) in his 'My conscience is clear' (1 Cor 4:4) examines the Pauline understanding of conscience while aiming to formulate some of the foundations of the Christian ethics. Machinek argues that the meaning Paul attaches to conscience depends on the context (mainly in Rom and 1–2 Cor), ranging from the personal to the communal one. He finds an important inspiration in the way Paul considers the relationship between various members of the *ecclesia*: those appointed to hold authority and those who supposed to submit to it. He suggests that despite the variety of differences between our and Paul's worlds, Paul offers important insights on the foundations of Christian ethics, especially in ensuring that the foundations remain theological. Vacek's (Vacek 2017) study of 'Theocentric Love Ethics' is committed to the theological turn in ethics. He acknowledges and even endorses contemporary attempts to revise natural law ethics by turning towards a more theocentric approach in theological ethics. He goes even further by proposing his own love-covenant approach. Vacek contrasts secular and religious ethics. Religious ethics, for him, involves communion with God. As several other contributors to this issue, he builds his position on Thomas Aquinas.

It seems that one of most important services that Catholic theological ethicists could offer to contemporary debates on pressing moral issues is to help others to discern. Vacek sees discernment as an affective process of union with God. When talking about this union he warns against the dangers of the reductionist view of this union in which God is reduced to self or self to God. This is an important warning to bear in mind, especially as theological ethicists find themselves in increasingly less 'native' lands or less familiar territories and prepare themselves for greater inter-denominational, inter-religious, inter-cultural, and inter-disciplinary engagements. As the papers presented here suggest, for Catholic theological ethics to be relevant it has to become more context-sensitive, ecumenical, practice-based, experience-oriented, continuously discerning, pedagogically wide-ranging and theologically articulate. It has to be unceasingly willing to review and renew its method as well as revisit its key concepts. It must neither dismiss its long tradition nor stick to its single interpretation.

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