**Getting Started on Proportionalism**

***Teacher’s Notes***

**The purpose of this sheet is to introduce to Proportionalism, some key concepts involved, and criticisms that are made of it. It does so by introducing you to three passages from recognised sources on the subject.**

1. **Defining the Area**

This definition of proportionalism provides an excellent starting point for the key ideas involved in this area:

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| Proportionalism is a type of analysis for determining the **objective moral rightness** and wrongness of actions in conflict situations and procedure for establishing exceptions to behavioural norms. It began in the mid **1960s** as a revision of both the principle of double effect and the doctrine of intrinsic moral evil. ‘Proportionate reason’ is a moral principle used to determine concretely and objectively the rightness or wrongness of acts and various exceptions to behavioural norms. Proportionalists argue that no judgement of moral rightness or wrongness of acts can be made without **considering all circumstances** of the action. Because the human act is a structural unity, no aspect of the act can be morally appraised apart from all the other components. Consideration of the agent’s intention, all foreseeable consequences, institutional obligations, and a proportion between the premoral values and disvalues are necessary before making moral judgment.  James L. Walter, “Proportionalism,” *The HarperCollins Encyclopaedia of Catholicism,* ed. Richard McBrien San Francisco: Harper, 1995), p. 1058. |

Note the following points from the passage above:

* **‘Objective moral rightness’.** There is a long tradition in Catholic theology of focusing on the moral goodness of an act – and also the motives of the heart. Proportionalists think that this area is important, but that it is *not the only aspect of morality*. After all, even people full of love can make bad decisions! There is an ‘objective’ aspect to morality which is about taking the right, correct or appropriate decision that creates less moral evil in the world. A doctor might invent a cure for cancer and do so for bad ‘subjective’ reasons: fame, glory and financial reward. However, objectively speaking, creating this cure is the ‘right’ thing to do as there will be less suffering in the world. How do you determine ‘rightness’? This is the concern of Proportionalism.
* **1960s.** Catholic moral theologians became concerned about an exception-less approach to issues of birth control and other issues such as tubal pregnancies. The doctrine of double effect could be used to justify removing a part of the fallopian tube – since abortion would not be directly intended; it is a ‘side effect’. However, the Church still does not permit the use of a drug which makes it possible to leave the fallopian tube intact (so the woman can have reproductive capacity in future) but directly kills the foetus (which would have died regardless). This is not consistent, nor a ‘proportionate’ (say the Proportionalists)!
* **‘considering all circumstances’ –** You do not need to consider all circumstances in order to determine whether one has a ‘good’ or ‘bad’ heart. Goodness/badness is the subjective area of morality that is guided by Christian principles and teachings. However, rightness/wrongness is all about which course of action to take given the totality of particular circumstances; right or wrong is about justifying a course of action based upon proportionate reason. Let’s go back to our egocentric doctor who creates a cure for cancer so she can be rich and famous. This is a ‘bad’ act in terms of the heart; it is a ‘right’ act in terms of objective morality – when you consider the circumstances of so many people being cured!
* **More on ‘all circumstances’.** The enemies of Proportionalists in the Church accuse Proportionalists of being Utilitarians/Consequentialists. However, ‘All’ circumstances for Proportionalists is far more than simple utilitarianism (calculating pain and pleasure). As the definition above says, it involves casting a pretty wide net that includes intentions and the creation of values. For instance, if an action creates less moral evil in one area, but increases the amount of lying or dishonesty (disvalues), these disvalues are also a part of the circumstances that need to be considered. So, this is a very ‘Christian’ moral theory because Christian values and norms shape the understanding of what constitutes both goodness/badness as well as rightness/wrongness.

1. **Going Deeper: Understanding Ontic/Premoral Evil**

One of the key areas Proportionalists discuss is Ontic (or, Premoral) Evil. This is the evil that just ‘is’ in the world – apart from our moral decisions. Some proportionalists believe that decisions we make can’t avoid increasing the amount of ontic evil. For instance, surgery can involve pain and mutilation. In a perfect world, this would not be the case. However, this is not a perfect world; we often have to add to the amount of ontic evil in order to help people (such as in surgery). The goal of decision making, therefore, is not to make a perfect decision (that is impossible), but to make a decision which creates less ontic evil than other decisions.

Here is an excellent definition of ontic evil:

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| As used mostly in Catholic moral theology, and influenced by Thomas Aquinas, ontic evil refers to the lack of perfection that exists in the created order and in human social structures by virtue of the reality of sin that permeates everything. Ontic evil, including natural disasters, accidental harm or damage, or even the potential negative effects of all human actions, including those whose intent was good, reflects the moral ambiguity of the universe, where notwithstanding humanity’s best intentions, suffering does happen and is endemic to the human condition. Contrary to moral evil, however, the evil or suffering that is caused is not directly intended, even if a proportionate reason i.e., the intent of a greater good) makes us tolerate it. For example, the effects of a surgery always include pain and discomfort, but that negative effect or ontic evil is to be preferred to the greater harm of disease or even death. From, Nadia Delicata, ‘Ontic Evil(or Physical, Nonmoral, or Premoral Evil)’ in Anne L. C. Runehow ed., Encyclopaedia of Sciences and Religions Vol. 2 (Springer) pp. 1556. |

1. **Activity for Students**

**Show the students the quote above and have them put it in their own words.**

1. **Using your own words, what premoral evil? (use a sentence or two - also include examples of ontic evil)**

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1. **Using your own words, what is moral evil (ensure that you describe how this is different than ontic evil)**

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1. **Beginning to Evaluate Proportionalism**

As we have seen, Proportionalists stress ‘objective morality’ and ‘considering all consequences’. It is because of these themes that some Proportionalists refuse to call any type of act ‘intrinsically evil’ in itself – for, they are concerned to examine an act in the context of the consequences it brings into the world. Does this mean that something like ‘murder’ or ‘rape’ cannot be called intrinsically evil? Do we really need to examine the consequences before we can say that an act is wrong? Below is a criticism of Proportionalism from this perspective:

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| ‘The distinction between premoral and moral evil is one made by the heresy called proportionalism, specifically condemned by Pope John Paul II in his encyclical, *Veritatis Splendor*. The distinction rests upon the main thesis of proportionalism, namely, that there is no such thing as a human action that is intrinsically evil independently of its intention, circumstances, or consequences. According to proportionalism, at best, a human action, independently of the intention, circumstances, and consequences, can be pre-morally evil, but its ultimate moral status can only be determined after considering the intention, circumstances, and consequences. Proportionalism was "invented" shortly after *Humanae Vitae* was issued in order to find a way around the fact that contraception is intrinsically evil. One of the more revealing questions to ask a proponent of proportionalism is: "Is rape intrinsically evil?" If the proponent of proportionalism sticks to his position, he would have to say: Before we can know if a specific act of rape is evil, we would have to ask the rapist why he raped, how he raped, and we would need to consider the consequences of the act of rape.’  Rev. Dr. Stephen F. Torraco, Associate Professor of Theology at Assumption College <http://www.ewtn.com/v/experts/showmessage.asp?number=354874&Pg=&Pgnu=&recnu> |

1. **Evaluation Activity for Students**

Show your students the quote above and ask them to respond to these questions.

**Using your own words, what does this Catholic priest does not like about proportionalism?**

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**How might a proportionalist respond to this attack?**

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