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The Twofold or Double Effect

Man is sometimes confronted by situations that make moral judgments less assured and decision difficult. But he must always seriously seek what is right and good and discern the will of God expressed in divine law. — *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1787

In our everyday life, we frequently perform actions which have more than one effect. For example, a family sends its children to a Catholic school. On the one hand, this results in a financial burden; on the other, there are the benefits of a religious education for the children.

Some actions have two good effects, such as going to church, which gives glory to God and good example to our neighbor. Some actions have two bad effects, such as drunkenness, which deprives the drinker of the use of reason and gives scandal to others.

Obviously, all acts that have only morally good effects may be done, and acts which have morally evil effects may not be done. However, what are we to do when an action has both a good effect and a bad effect? The answer can be found in what is known as the principle of the twofold or double effect. But before explaining this principle, some important distinctions should be pointed out.

Some Important Distinctions

When we perform various actions, they are followed by various effects, some of which we desire (wish, intend, want, will) and others of which we do not desire but merely allow (permit, tolerate). A firefighter entering a burning building wills to extinguish

the fire and tolerates inhaling quantities of smoke. An Olympic athlete puts in thousands of grueling hours training for an event in the hope of winning a gold medal. A person whose features are marred by a large nose undergoes a difficult operation, willing the correction of an abnormality and accepting the pain and discomfort of the recuperation period.

The same kind of analysis can be applied to moral conduct. Sin is an act of the will and, since this is so, we must distinguish between what is willed or intended and what is tolerated or merely permitted before judging the morality of an action.

Another distinction that must be kept in mind when considering the principle of the twofold or double effect is that there is a difference between performing a good act which has both good and evil effects, and performing an evil act in order that good may result. For example, if the officials of a state decree that a necessary new highway shall be built, they perform an act that benefits the common good, while at the same time working some hardship on those individuals who are required to move from their homes to make room for the highway. Both good and evil come from the same good act.

But if the government decrees that all people with mental illness shall be killed in order to decrease taxes, the good effect results from the evil act. The government performs the evil act of murder and taxes are lowered, but the desirable effect comes about only through the killing of thousands of innocent people.

Sterilizing a man or a woman so that they cannot add more children to their financially overburdened family is another example of achieving a good effect by engaging in an evil action; the benefit comes about only because of an immoral procedure. This is not permissible under Catholic moral teaching because an evil means can never be used to bring about a good end (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nn. 1753, 1756, 1759, 1789).

Four Necessary Conditions

Under the principle of the twofold or double effect, the science of ethics lays down certain conditions which must be fulfilled to justify performing an action that has both a good and bad effect. These are the conditions:

1. The action to be performed must be morally good in itself or at least morally indifferent or neutral.

2. The good effect must not come about as a result of the evil effect, but must come directly from the action itself.
3. The good must be willed, and the evil merely allowed or tolerated.
4. The good effect must be at least equivalent in importance to the evil effect. In other words, there must be a sufficient reason for permitting the evil effect to occur.

Although the conditions may sound complicated, all of us apply them frequently. A little boy cuts his hand, and his mother puts an antiseptic on the cut. This action has two effects: it causes the boy pain and it wards off infection. Although the mother did not realize it, she actually used the four principles above. She performed an action that was good in itself, namely, putting antiseptic on the boy's hand. The good effect did not come from the pain but rather from the use of the antiseptic.

The mother did not will to give her child pain, but only desired to help him. Finally, the good effect of preventing infection far outweighed the evil effect of the antiseptic's sting.

This is an easy application of the double-effect principle; it becomes more difficult when applied to more serious problems, especially those involving a great moral evil.

One classic example involves the right to life. A pregnant woman with cancer of the uterus is told by her doctor that an immediate hysterectomy is necessary to save her life. This procedure, of course, will result in the death of the baby she is carrying because the child is not developed enough to survive outside the womb. So the surgery will produce two effects: the good effect of saving the mother's life and the evil effect of ending the baby's life.

Is this operation morally permissible? Yes, under the principle of the twofold effect. First of all, the action of removing a cancerous organ is morally good. Second, the good effect of saving the mother's life is a direct result of the surgery, and not a result of the baby's death. Third, the intention of the doctor is to save the mother's life, not to kill the child. The death of the baby is an unintended side effect of the operation. Fourth, the saving of the mother's life is at least equivalent to the baby's death.

When the Principle Does Not Apply

Now let us look at a situation which would not be permitted under this principle. A pregnant woman is suffering from perni-

cious vomiting, a condition that can easily be solved by aborting the child. However, such a solution is not morally permissible and violates the double-effect principle in the following ways:

1. The action is not morally good or even neutral; it is evil, it is an attack on innocent human life.
2. The good effect, namely, the health of the mother, follows from the evil effect. The mother is cured by the death of her child.
3. The evil effect is willed and not merely tolerated.
4. The death of the baby is not equivalent in importance to stopping the mother's vomiting.

It should be noted that such a condition can be treated with hospitalization, bed rest, the use of IV fluids, and antiemetic medications. There is no need for abortion, although this is still recommended in some circles. It is not morally permissible, however, because a good end never justifies an evil means. We may not do evil in order that good may come from it.

More Applications of the Principle

Case 1. A commanding officer orders the bombing of a military base. He is aware that there are civilians on the base and civilian families living nearby, some of whom will probably be killed. Is the commanding officer acting morally? If we look at the four conditions of the twofold effect, we will see that he is.

1. Bombing a legitimate military target in wartime is not an evil act
2. The good effect of hastening the end of the war does not come about through the evil effect of killing civilians.
3. The commander wills only the destruction of a military target, not the death of the civilians.
4. Defending one's own nation, or another country, against an unjust aggressor in a just war constitutes a sufficiently serious reason to permit the evil effect of some civilian deaths.

Case 2. A married woman discovers that her pregnancy is not developing normally, that it is occurring in the fallopian tube instead of in the uterus. If the doctor does nothing, the tube will swell further and finally rupture, possibly causing the death of the mother. The only cure is to remove the tube promptly, which

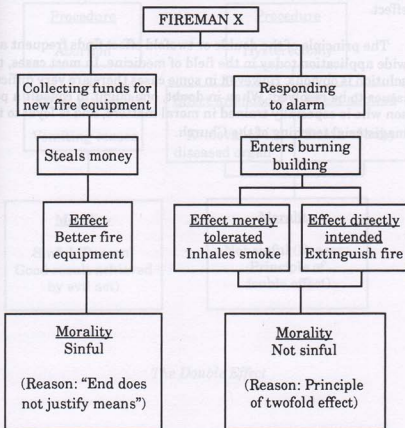
will save the mother's life and result in the death of the baby. Is it moral for the doctor to operate? The answer is yes.

1. The purpose of the operation is good, to remove a pathological organ which is a threat to the life of the mother.

2. The good effect of saving the mother's life does not come from the evil effect of killing the baby.

3. The surgeon does not will to kill the baby; his death is an unintended side effect of the operation that is merely permitted.

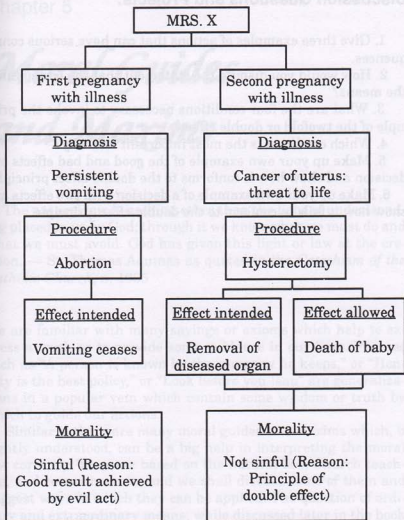
4. The good effect of saving the mother's life is at least equivalent to the evil effect of the baby's death.



Case 3. The leader of a nation engaged in war orders the execution of all inmates of mental institutions and nursing homes in order to devote the country's entire able-bodied population and resources to bringing the fighting to a quick end. Is this order morally justified? It is not, for the following reasons:

1. The killing of innocent civilians is not morally good in itself or even morally indifferent.
2. The good effect of ending the war would come from the evil effect of killing innocent civilians.
3. The evil effect is willed and not merely tolerated.
4. The good effect is not equivalent in importance to the evil effect, and there is not sufficient reason to permit the evil effect.

The principle of the double or twofold effect finds frequent and wide application today in the field of medicine. In most cases, the solution is obvious. However, in some cases there are very difficult issues to be resolved. When in doubt, one ought to consult a person who is especially trained in moral matters, and is loyal to the magisterial teaching of the Church.

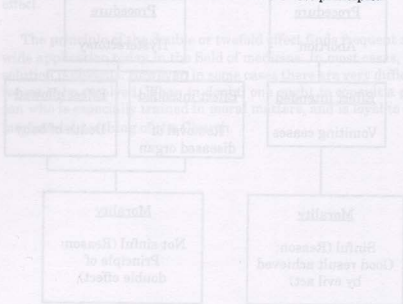


The Double Effect

Natural reason and the principles of Christian morality say that a person entrusted with the task of taking care of another human being has the right and the duty in case of serious illness to take the necessary means for the preservation of life and health. According to circumstances of persons, places, times, and cultures,

Discussion Questions and Projects:

1. Give three examples of actions that can have serious consequences.
2. How would you dispute the statement that the end justifies the means?
3. What are the four conditions necessary to invoke the principle of the twofold or double effect?
4. Which condition is the most important and why?
5. Make up your own example of the good and bad effects of a decision and show how it conforms to the double-effect principle.
6. Make up your own example of a decision with two effects and show how it fails to conform to the double-effect principle.



The Double Effect