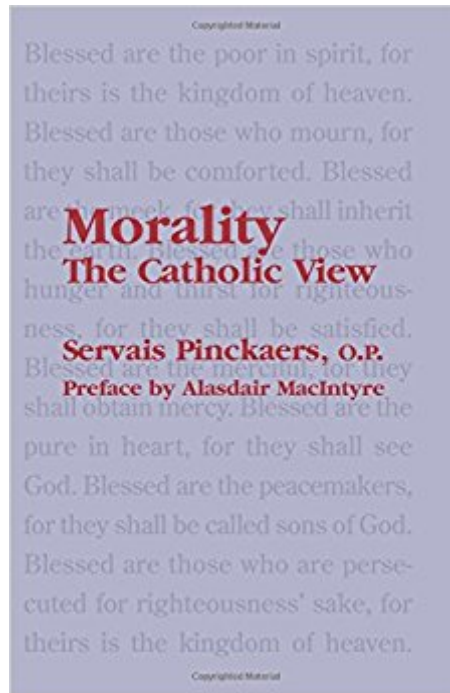




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Morality: The Catholic View



Synopsis

“As Alasdair MacIntyre notes in the preface, the work of Pinckaers attracted strong and fully justified notice in this country with the publication in English of his *The Sources of Christian Ethics*. As Pinckaers himself notes in the text, excellently translated by Michael Sherwin, the interest should in no way be limited to Roman Catholics. *Morality* recasts the earlier book in an argument that is both lower and upper case catholic, and is accessible to readers and teachers outside the limited circle of moral theologians and academic ethicists. Pinckaers contends that Christian morality is not first of all about obligations but about happiness, understanding that the happiness of union with God is our natural destiny made possible by grace. The Sermon on the Mount is at the center of an approach to morality that turns on the distinction between freedom for excellence and freedom of indifference, the former understood as human flourishing and the latter as a neutral capacity to choose between controversies. The proposal of *Morality* is thoroughly Christ-centered, humanistic, and faithful to the magisterial teaching of the Church. Warmly recommended.

• **First Things**

“If you want to have the experience of reflecting on Catholic morality as though you were reading about it for the first time, treat yourself to Father Servais Pinckaers’ *Morality: The Catholic View*. He has recovered the classical view of the moral life as the quest for happiness and has presented it with disarming simplicity. Bringing us back to the Sermon on the Mount and Romans 12:1-15, the writings of Augustine and Aquinas, and the theme of natural law, he has freed those texts from the layers of legalism which has hidden their liberating, spiritual powers for moral living. By distinguishing freedom of indifference from freedom for excellence, he has restored a wise vision of freedom. No one has shown better the role of virtues as building blocks for morality. Catechists need to read this book.

• **Rev. Alfred McBride, O.Praem., Professor of Homilectics and Catechetics at Blessed Pope John XXIII Seminary, Weston, Massachusetts**

“Father Pinckaers has given us a masterful exposition of Christian living. The clarity and brevity of his presentation are captured well by the translator and make this book ideal for classroom and parish use.

• **Readers will find the historical and systematic observations very informative.**

• **Romanus Cessario, St. John’s Seminary, Brighton, Massachusetts**

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Customer Reviews

Text: English (translation) Original Language: French

Servais Pinckaers *Morality: The Catholic View*. This is a brief, clear and thoroughly accessible book. Pinckaers' exposition of Catholic moral teaching is broken up by a number of tables and charts that expand, illuminate or summarize the points that he makes. Pinckaers divides the work between an historical exegesis and a meditation on the nature of Christian morality. According to Pinckaers, Catholic moral teaching is not a mere code of prescriptions and prohibitions; Catholic morality is a response, he says, to the aspirations of the human heart for truth and goodness, and seeks to educate men for growth. (p. 1.) Morality today is considered the domain of moral obligations, whereas it was historically viewed as the area in which the question of happiness and perfection were answered. (Id.) Pinckaers points to the Sermon on the Mount as illustrating an exhortation to excellence, rather than a code of conduct. Likewise, Paul exhorted Christians in the second part of Romans to a way of life that would conform to their new life in Christ. Pinckaers calls this kind of moral exhortation "paraclesis" from the Greek word "parakaleo" ("I exhort") from which the term Paraclete, signifying the Holy Spirit, derives. Pinckaers points to the other exhortations as an invitation for Christians to live up to a model of perfect Christian behavior rather than simply following a set of rules. The theme of exhortation toward virtuous living continued as a feature of Christian moral thinking. St. Thomas Aquinas, for example, subordinated moral obligations to the virtues. (p. 32.) However, over time, particular during modernity, the focus of morality became the calculus of obligation. Aquinas' contributions, such as the treatise on happiness, were forgotten. According to Pinckaers: "Because of its focus on obligations, moral theology has detached itself from everything that goes beyond legal imperatives; from the search for perfection, which is

henceforth reserved to an elite; from the interior mystical movement of the heart so closely linked to love; and from spirituality in general." (p. 40.) Fortunately, after the Second Vatican Council, the hope is to reclaim the original sense of moral theology as exhortative and to move away from treating morality as merely a set of obligations. The second part of Pinckaers' book opens with the distinction between "moralities of excellence" and "moralities of obligation." This distinction grows out the difference between the "freedom for excellence" and the "freedom of indifference." "Freedom for excellence" takes the position that there is an objective good that can be discerned through reason and the will, the discernment of which motivates the will to make a choice. The movement of the will toward this objective good is "freedom for excellence" because the will seeks the good, which is its own perfection. The "freedom of indifference" posits that there is no objective good in the world, rather the will simply chooses between things that are indifferent as between themselves. The exercise of the capacity to choose is what is meant by "free choice." Pinckaers lays the divergence of views at the feet of William of Ockham and the Nominalists during the 14th Century, in that it was the Nominalists who made indifferent and arbitrary "choice" the sine qua non by which human actions were understood. The freedom for excellence necessitates a morality of happiness. Insofar as choice is necessarily directed toward the good, or the perfection of oneself, such a view necessarily and directly takes up the issue of what is good. The freedom of indifference leads to a morality of obligation, says Pinckaers, because insofar as there is no good in nature to be discerned by reason, there is only arbitrary choice by the will, and that choice becomes paramount in the form of "obligation." Nature is thus drained by the proponents of the philosophy of the freedom of indifference of any intrinsic goodness. Pinckaers also points out an interesting feature of the morality of happiness, namely that "joy" is a virtue in such a system. People who are seeking excellence may not feel particularly "happy" about their pursuit of excellence, but they can feel joy, e.g., an athlete seeking excellence may hurt in training, but there may be joy in being the best, or merely better. Pinckaers also takes up the theology of the Holy Spirit and its relationship to morality. Aquinas concludes his analysis of law with consideration of the "Evangelical law." In Christian theology, the Holy Spirit lives in the hearts of believers and gives them the supernatural virtues of faith, hope and love. From the consideration of the morality of excellence, we know that love is that which motivates human choice. The Holy Spirit is therefore the Paraclete - the Exhorter - driving believers to become better. Pinckaers returns to a consideration of the Sermon on the Mount by pointing out that the Sermon is not a set of new obligations; rather it is an exhortation to become perfect, an exhortation that can only be accomplished by love and not by a sense of duty. Pinckaers concludes with an analysis of "Natural Law and Freedom." Natural law, according to Pinckaers,

"does not primarily function by constraint but by attraction." (p. 94.) The five inclinations that natural law provides are (1) the natural inclination toward the good; (2) the natural inclination to preserve one's being; (3) the natural inclination to marry; (4) the natural inclination to know the truth; and (5) the natural inclination to life in society. Pinckaers has many interesting and worthwhile things to say in each area. For example, he points out that the first principle of morality - that good is to be done and evil avoided - is not primarily about obligation, rather it "expresses the attraction of the good, which it extends by enjoining us to search for the true good and avoid the really evil." In other words, the first principle of morality is not the first principle by edict, rather it is the first principle because it is the basis of our very nature, i.e., we love the good and we hate evil. Love is directly caused by the presence of the good. Something is good insofar as it is loved. Because good things are particularly good when they are loved for themselves, love is a better love when the thing loved is loved for itself. This inclination leads to the love of friendship and benevolence. The object of such love, according to Pinckaers, is another's excellence, their virtue, which then leads directly to morality. Pinckaers writes: "The inclination toward the good is expressed in the Ten Commandments through the two commandments to love God and neighbor that express the entire law. This inclination lays the foundation for the rights and duties that the other inclinations delineate. In short the inclination toward the good gives each person the right and instills in him the duty to search for the good and reject and combat what is evil. By activating in concrete actions the general desire for justice and friendship, the virtues develop our inclination toward the good. Love of the good, being simultaneously universal and specific, provides charity its natural foundation." Ultimately, love and exhortation causes moral development. Pinckaers' view of morality makes sense. It is definitely not the moral view of modernity, which seems to think that people will be naturally good, while teaching them that the only good is in their choice itself and, perhaps, in restraining themselves from other people. Morality as it is conceived today certainly does not teach that one kind of life is more excellent, much less better, than another, lest the advocate of such a distinction be accused of engaging in discrimination. Then, when people don't act morally, society responds by attempting to pen up their choices with regulation after regulation. The modern approach to morality seems to be an exercise in self-contradiction. It may be time to give this ancient moral approach another go.

As a seminary student in 1972 the Catholic Church was in the midst of a painful transition from a highly rational clearly reasoned set of conclusions and caveats to an emotion based moral theology. That's not what Vatican II intended but that's what happened. There was a drift away from the Church's clear position of sexual morality to a laxity that is sadly apparent in today's church. This

text is a balanced turn back toward faithful Church understanding of moral demands of Christianity. Fr. Pinckaers' gives a clear historical perspective of the Church's growth pains in moral theology. I enjoyed reading his perspective on the role of the beatitudes in the Christian's moral development. It is a nice extension of the Catechism's statement on the role of the beatitudes in the moral life. If I had this small book in 1972 I might not have wandered so far afield in the moral life.

Outstanding brief survey of Catholic moral theology combined with thought-provoking call for recovering an older, more affirming approach to morality as pursuit of the good and happiness. Pinckaers is much like Joseph Pieper who writes compact works that cannot be measured in page numbers. Also like Pieper, he brings us back to the Angelic Doctor, Aquinas, as the foundation for a body of teaching both rational AND spirit-filled whilst still firmly scriptural.

This is an introductory text of unusual depth and breadth. Father Pinckaers' thesis is that since the 14th century moral philosophy and theology have posited human freedom as primary to human nature. From this premise have come a series of "moralities of obligation" in which freedom is seen as restricted by externally imposed moral rules. Almost by definition, such a model tends to disassociate happiness from morality. According to Pinckaers, a better, more classical, and more Thomistic approach is to consider human freedom as part of human nature, rooted in and ineradicably woven among our yearnings for the good, the beautiful, and the true. Thus the best use of our freedom is virtue, which is not only compatible with happiness but in its highest form (i.e., love) is the source of joy. Pinckaers' analysis of the fundamental flaw of modernist ethics is penetrating and, in my view, probably correct. The concept of human nature presented here is a high one, and may strike some as too exalted. But that's the point. Catholic morality looks to humanity as it was intended to be, and as it can be when redeemed by grace.

ok

bought it for class. Just about every Catholic morality course uses this book. Easy read.

this was recommended to me by a moral theology professor. It is excellent and well thought out - some areas require work to understand, but I blame my own ignorance.

This was a good book.

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