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**Review of:**  
**J. SELLING, *Reframing Catholic Theological Ethics*,**  
**Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2016,**  
**254pp.**

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I got to know about the scholar Joseph Selling first through the Internet, where he has published various materials from his teaching that I found informative and useful, for example, the summary of the history of the moral theology (cf. <https://theo.kuleuven.be/apps/christian-ethics/home.html>). Later on I realized that a new book of his had come out, since he published in an on-line review a presentation and summary of this book as well. I read it through with much attention and pleasure, finding it to be an interesting approach, stimulating and illuminative for different areas of Catholic morality, even though I do not necessarily share all of the author's conclusions. The book consists of eight (not so long and therefore readable) chapters, of which the seventh called "Framing ethical behavior," is obviously the core. Based on years of teaching experience at the Catholic University of Leuven, the author dedicates other chapters to the historical development of Christian ethics, its biblical roots and contents, exegesis of a part of Aquinas' Summa, re-evaluation of virtue theory, or modern post-Tridentine changes in Catholic moral thought. He offers many charts and analysis of texts in the appendices that in various aspects are still more interesting and useful than the body text itself.

Selling's key point seems to be that to be judged ethically is not the brute act

in itself, but the entire “moral event” as such. Every act is “circumstantiated” and every end is chosen in particular circumstances. Sin is the quality of the agent who committed it and not only that of the sinful action, which cannot therefore be treated as something chemically pure or under a kind of veil of ignorance. The author rightly points out that the so-called “object” (*finis*) of an act is not to be understood too narrowly as the physical matter or mere thing used to accomplish an action.

His critique – which in part can be endorsed – is along the lines that in the past the moral event was fragmented and the ethical assessment abstracted from the actual subjective motivations and outer circumstances, leaving only the act in itself to be examined and evaluated objectively and impersonally. He accuses modern Catholic ethics of being normative throughout, which for him means “not distinguishing sufficiently between an ‘act’ and a ‘behavior’” (p. 171). It might be that excessive emphasis on the act without paying attention to ends, intention, means has been a fact. But the question remains: whether there isn’t always also the opposite extreme – the danger of neglecting the material act, emphasizing the subjective moment at the expense of objective morality. Be it as it may, I have to admit that I found the analysis of the moral event as seen in the figure on page 172 quite illustrative and interesting. Particularly, it helps to show that pairs of words like good/evil, good/bad, right/wrong are similar or connected to each other, but not the same thing at all. I therefore greatly appreciate this kind of meta-ethical reflection of this book.

By way of example, I would like to mention the pair of good/bad designates the aspect of intention held by the agent and end(s) aimed at. In some cases there might be some situations in which a moral event could represent a virtually wrong (regrettable) behavior, while at the same time being ultimately a good (not evil) and justifiable act thanks to good (not bad) ends that are being pursued. The doubt that remains is whether *any* circumstances or any

intention can justify *any* behavior. Using examples from page 25, there are various actions “clearly harmful to another [person]” which get different moral evaluation though: causing another person to feel unhappy, striking a person, beating them, mutilating them, taking their life... These actions describe physical activity (which is similar in all of them), i.e. hurting somebody, which is insufficient for judging them ethically. Indeed, thanks to different circumstances and intention, disciplining a child might be objectively painful but might be justifiable (to some extent) and can be called good for higher reasons. My point is, however, that even if some circumstances can justify some “ontic” evils, it is not the same as to say that any intention can render any action good, which the author seems to suggest continuously, and in the end does not really distinguish between ontic (pre-moral) and moral evil.

My overall impression is that Selling’s obsession with getting rid of the allegedly already overcome natural-law theory and rigid act-based morality unfortunately leads him to apply any means available. In my opinion, it is true that the end moves the will to choose means to achieve it, but not all means leading to the same end have necessarily the same value and therefore are not alternatives. I would also disagree with Selling that (for Aquinas) “killing to achieve revenge is vicious, but killing to safeguard justice is virtuous” (p. 74). The latter statement sounds to me more like the nominalist position of William Ockham, with whom many modern moralists share another trait: that every person is unique without any preexistent, inherent normativity. (For some of them, the law given by an authority fulfills this function; whereas for this author neither rules based on authority nor some goal inherent in human nature are relevant anymore.) In Selling’s view, it is the whole moral event that (ideally) has to be good, and to that end the material act first of all needs to be *appropriate* (p. 76 fn.). It is in the second half of this claim that the proportionalism of the author comes more patently into light by identifying

appropriateness with proportionality (p. 75). My question is whether or not, for medieval theologians, the *debita proportio* could have meant something slightly different than simple proportionality. It is clear that under certain conditions we choose to act in ways we would not in other situations, finding in every case a different meaning of the good (cf. p. 69), but this fact does not make it an axiom *per se* that all acts are to be approved as a situation requires. Moreover, the methodological problem consists in reading ancient texts: even after purifying Aquinas from subsequent interpretations of Cajetan et al., we as a community of faith do not have a direct access to sources, not even to the Scripture. Nevertheless, these were written in a community and are properly interpreted by the community in continuity with it, because it knows the best the spirit of the text. If this is not one of the crucial points of Catholicism, what else is? In the end, cannot even Aquinas commit errors?

I think to call Selling's approach "revolutionary," as somebody did<sup>1</sup>, is also an exaggeration. There is no doubt that many people will welcome this kind of voice, but by no means did I find it a thoroughly original nor marginal interpretation, but rather a useful summary. Especially regarding the discussion on ends and intentions vs. objective morality, the author heavily depends on the idea of the pre-moral good and evil of L. Janssens (1908-2002), as he himself admits. The virtue theory, on the other hand, is a development of an insight by the young P. Knauer SJ. Indeed, the proportionalist criticism of the traditional theory of "intrinsically evil deeds" as such goes far back into the

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<sup>1</sup> I am referring here to a review by Mary Catherine O'REILLY-GINDHART. She calls it "a revolutionary book which provides a new vision of virtues and examines how people consider and arrive at ethical judgements" ("Pope Francis and Joseph Selling: A New Approach to Mercy in Catholic Sexual Ethics," in *Religions* 2017, 8 [12], 264, accessible on-line at: <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/8/12/264>). In the same special issue "The Future of Catholic Theological Ethics" there is also an article by Selling himself called "Reframing Catholic Theological Ethics: Summary and Application".

past. What I find more disturbing is Selling's attitude towards other contemporary authors and colleagues. I confess that I do not know his personal background and original training, but guessing from what he writes, after the year 2005 he seems to have dedicated himself for several years to intensive study of some questions of Aquinas' Summa. I wonder if that is enough to simply call other renown Thomists' work "gratuitous" and accuse them of not actually referring to Thomas himself (p. 105). Do some missing quotations make the overall interpretation invalid? Rather, I think that the author intentionally looks to Aquinas' words for what he wants to see and tries to prove there isn't a trace of anything he does not want to find. In addition to that, can one person really have the competence to utter serious judgments on everything from biblical morality to virtue theory, from Thomistic ethics to the principle of double effect?

Moreover, the author requires that the criterion for evaluating goodness of some actions, especially in many difficult situations, is "the human person integrally and adequately considered." This is supposed to be the new and more suitable substitute for an out-dated theory of natural law and normative morality, as if they were pure alternatives. To this point, I cannot help agreeing with him on one hand, since the concrete being of a real person has to be considered *too*, but at the same time I have the impression that this is only a new label for "subjectivism," which, sadly, does not use the full potential of the profound expression "human person integrally and adequately considered." If we peruse the depths of this phrase, we can easily understand that what matters is the good of *every* human person as such and not of *this or that* human person, a good that often he or she fails to see and wish for. Not everything human or natural does have to be necessarily good (cf. p. 119). Not surprisingly, the aim of Selling's critique are topics such as the Magisterium's teaching on contraception, claiming that the uniqueness of each person makes it possible

that for some people, the biggest good is self-interest (calling it responsible parenthood). The underlying logic would be this: if there are cases where some kind of regrettable action is allowed for some good (as for example in inflicting the death penalty), there must be other cases too where the intention justifies similar violent acts that simply “lack perfection,” supposedly proportionate to the end. Ironically, the Vatican’s teaching on the death penalty, once officially tolerated as necessary, changed meanwhile in a radical way, now deemed unworthy of a human being and as such unjustifiable. My worry is, however, whether all acts that “lack perfection” are to be called natural evils straightforwardly (p. 81). Is the only other alternative to normative approach ethics a pure goal-oriented ethic? Must there be a “just cause” for everything, as it is in the case of just war theory? And more importantly, is there a difference between evils that would arise anyway, evils that the person chooses to commit, and goods that are intentionally being omitted? If similar behaviors are not necessarily the same, then it should be true that both avoiding and hindering conception are possible scenarios, though axiomatically different from each other despite the same result. The logic simply is not that, if an action can be considered licit under certain conditions (as a by-product of an intention oriented at another object), it must be itself a neutral act justifiable in other parallel circumstances too. In any case, I feel more than free to contradict this view endorsed and insinuated by Selling, since for the author “the most fundamental principles of ethical discourse are matters of belief” (p. 195 fn. 16) and thus he himself renounces on proving it.

Finally, despite some disagreements, I express my gladness that there are now – more than ever – different voices in Christian ethics, which will go on whether thanks to or despite such attempts of “re-framing.” I think that it can indeed be fruitful for moral reflection and discussion to question things for mutual intellectual stimulation. But I also worry that every interpretation faces

the danger of getting one-sided, looking for acceptance from the masses, putting its opponents on a new Index, or, sadly, considering oneself a martyr or a hero just because he or she stood up against authority. That, in my view, is unfortunately not sufficient. I would recommend this book for *critical* reading and discussion, but apart from being a good summary of existing proportionalist positions it does not provide a new convincing argument. I share the view that Christian ethics has to be re-thought, that normative ethics alone is not enough and that “for centuries, the official teaching of the Church has given the impression that it could offer guidance to each and every person facing each and every kind of ethical question” (p. 196). But I am not sure if calling everything good that simply “protects, promotes, or enhances the human personal integrally and adequately considered” is a tautology. My general impression is and remains that the pendulum just moved itself from one extreme to another, by criticizing the act-oriented ethics as “legalistic” and “normative,” while exaggerating the role of intention and goal in ethical discernment as the primary aspect.