Crucial concept or onerous burden?
Retrieving the idea of intrinsically evil acts

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1. Introduction

Since the beginning, one of the challenges Christians have faced is Christ’s calling to be a “light of the world”⁴. To be faithful to this mission, one needs constantly reflect on how to bring light to this world thorn by hatred, war, exploitation, injustice, racial divisions, etc. The one way to do so is to be a witness to Christian morality and stand firmly against the civilization of death⁵. Such philosophical trends influence Christians living in Western civilization as utilitarianism, subjectivism, and even intentionalism⁶. In all

⁴ See Matthew 5:14 (NJB).
these ways, the morality of the act is assessed solely according to its effects. Additionally, the influence of subjectivism and relativism makes it impossible to hold that acts have natures or that one can know the nature of an act apart from the agent’s intention and the circumstances in which he or she acts. The way to change this situation seems to be long and requires the involvement of all Christian virtues, namely, prudence. In all this, the traditional notion of *intrinsece malum* (Eng. intrinsic evil) plays a fundamental role. The idea of an intrinsically evil act assumes that certain human acts are so entirely against God’s plan for a human that they can never be perceived as good⁴.

In this paper, I will argue that the notion of intrinsically evil acts did not originate in the Middle Ages but was incorporated into Christian theology much earlier by St. Augustine of Hippo. Next, I will present the current position of Catholic moral teaching on that issue, quoting key papal and conciliar documents. I will also try to show how these concepts are understood and how commonly misunderstood they can be. Finally, I will argue that the idea of an intrinsically evil act is necessary for virtue ethics which became an essential way in which Catholics perceive moral theology.

2. Historical context

For contemporary historians examining moral theology in the Middle Ages, there is a question of whether the concept of *intrinsically evil acts* has a legitimate basis in the Christian ethic tradition⁵. One scholar, John Dedek, believes that the idea was not known until the work of the fourteenth-century thinker Durandus of St. Pourçain. Dedek’s study refers to the time of the theological discussions that consider God’s absolute power and ability to dispense from or command any human act. According to the scholar, if the thinkers in the thirteenth century believed that God could act in this way, then it follows that such thinkers did not hold any moral act to be intrinsically evil in and of itself⁶. That was precisely Thomas Aquinas’s position, as Dedek explains. But Durandus, Aquinas’s most significant historical detractor, held the opposite view⁷. This finding allowed Dedek to presume that it was Durandus from whom the concept of intrinsic evil originated. He also showed how the idea was vital in the nineteenth and early twentieth-century textbooks of Catholic moral theology. In those pastoral materials, the *intrinsically evil acts* were described as being so entirely disordered that not even

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⁵ Dedek, 388.
⁶ Ibidem, 389.
⁷ Ibidem.
God could allow them. The argumentation is identical to these of Durandus of St. Pourçain, not of St. Thomas Aquinas. Consequently, Dedek argued that the teaching of the Catholic seminary manuals of moral theology before Vatican II, which was Aquinas-centered lacked a historical basis and underwent a kind of doctrinal aberration when looking at the actual teaching of the thirteenth-century Doctors. Also, James Keenan pointed out that manualists referring to Thomas’ use of the concept of intrinsic moral evil are wrong because he never had the idea and never would have used it. Dedek’s and Keenan’s stances have been challenged recently by the work of Matthew McWhorter. He argues that the issue of divine dispensation was focused primarily on the theological question of God’s omnipotence rather than on the analysis of the structure of human acts, which is a fundamental element in moral theology. Consequently, the question of whether thinkers in the thirteenth century could have entertained a doctrine proscribing certain kinds of human acts as intrinsic moral evils should be set in a new context, namely, that of their reception of and response to two distinct currents of ethical thought coming from the twelfth century, the work of Peter Abelard and that of Peter Lombard.

I will take a close look at Abelard’s moral doctrine and then proceed to Lombard’s response to it, comprised in his influential *Libri sententiarum*, especially where he quotes Augustine at length to support the teaching that some kinds of human actions involve what would come to be called *intrinsic moral evil*.

Abelard’s *Scito te ipsum* teaches that when God evaluates a person’s moral character, He is concerned with that agent’s intention, not with their action. Also, Abelard believed that while objective criteria regulate the morality of intentions, no human act separated from the agent’s intention has a moral character in itself. The consequence of such a position is an inability to qualify any act as intrinsically good or evil without further considering the agent’s end or goal. Abelard also taught that whereas the agent’s intention can be described by the terms of good in itself (*bona in se*), the work can never be regarded as good or bad in itself because it is always

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9 Dedek, 410.
12 Ibidem, 412.
14 Ibidem, 45.
inseparably linked with the intention\textsuperscript{15}. For this medieval thinker, the acts or works are solely physical entities deprived of a moral character.

Calling the act morally good or morally evil is only by extension or by improper use of language. Such a position, however, was not widely shared by Abelard’s contemporaries\textsuperscript{16}. Their main concern was the issue of the existence of sins of ignorance because it places the person in the position where they have to pay careful attention to the teaching of the Magisterium, and by this, the authority of the Catholic Church will be strengthened.

For Abelard, sin was connected and defined by the agent’s intention only, and there was no such thing as sins of ignorance\textsuperscript{17}. The thinker believed that moral ignorance could be understood as a mistaken intention. He also thought that one could not perform an exterior act with a moral character without regarding the agent’s intention\textsuperscript{18}. This issue found its final decision at the local council of Sens in 1140 or 1141, where the Abelardian thesis that there are no sins of ignorance was condemned by theologians and bishops\textsuperscript{19}.

In response to this position, Peter Lombard formulated his stance in his \textit{Libri sententiarum}. First, Lombard establishes a hierarchy of goodness, referring to a natural or essential level, a generic moral level that considers the moral act only, and then an absolute moral level which also takes into consideration the cause and end of the moral act (i.e., the agent’s will, intention, and circumstances). Next, he formulates three different understandings of sin: (1) the evil will alone, (2) evil will and evil acts, (3) neither, all actions are good and by God and from God as their source, while evil is nothing\textsuperscript{20}.

The first understanding is supposed to be Abelard’s position, whereas the second is Lombard’s. The third understanding of sin is believed to be held by Abelard’s teacher Anselm of Laon\textsuperscript{21}. Further, Lombard summarizes his position on the nature of moral act by showing that an action can be good nature (inasmuch as it exists), but at the same time, it can be morally evil since it transgresses the moral law and/or lacks a due end. In one of his works, he says:

\begin{quote}
Some not unlearnedly teach that an evil will and evil actions, insofar as they are, or insofar as they are actions, are goods; but insofar as they are evils, they are sins. They say that every will and every action is a good nature of God insofar as it is an action or a will, and it is from God as an
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\textsuperscript{15} Ibidem.
\textsuperscript{16} McWhorter, 411.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibidem.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibidem, 412.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibidem, 417.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibidem, 419.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibidem.
author. But insofar as it is done in a disorderly manner and against the law and lacks a due end, it is a sin\textsuperscript{22}.

Finally, Lombard explains how he understands generic moral goodness, which lies between natural and absolute moral goodness. According to the thinker, this kind of goodness applies to the exterior act and is considered in itself apart from the agent’s will and intention\textsuperscript{23}. These beliefs led Lombard to the conviction that certain human acts can be either good in themselves or evil in themselves. He supported his stance by evoking the teaching of Augustine presented in his book entitled \textit{Contra mendacium} (Eng. \textit{Against lying}). Quoting its crucial fragment Lombard writes:

It is always relevant for what cause, to what end, with what intention something is done. But those things which we know to be sins are not to be done with any claim of a good cause, for any apparent good end, with any allegedly good intention. For those works of men which are not in themselves sins are now good, now evil, according to whether they have good or evil causes\textsuperscript{24}.

In this fragment, we see that Augustine considers three essential elements which constitute the moral act: the cause, the end, and the intention. At the same time, he acknowledges that they are some things “we know to be sins” regardless of their ends, intentions, or causes. Augustine did not specify how we know that some things are sins. He likely assumes some common “moral understanding” based on the Scripture. He did identify actions that are not in themselves sins, and their moral quality depends on their ends, intentions, and causes.

He provides examples of such acts: giving food to the poor and sexual intercourse within marriage. However, Augustine was also convinced of the existence of human acts, which are “in themselves sins” regardless of their end. On this point, Augustine states: “But when the works themselves are sins (opera ipsa peccata sunt), like thefts, rapes, blasphemies, who would say that they are to be done for good causes, or are not sins, or, what is more absurd, that they are righteous sins.”\textsuperscript{25}

Augustine further gives examples of such situations, which involve committing sins for good ends, such as stealing to give to the poor, lying to protect the innocent, committing adultery to save a life, or forging a will,

\textsuperscript{22} Ibidem, 420.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibidem, 49.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibidem.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibidem, 53.
so it benefits a charitable person. In all these situations, according to Augustine, it is „just to punish one who commits a work which is a *peccatum per se* for the sake of a good end.”26. St. Thomas Aquinas commented on Augustine’s stance in *Summa Theologiae* question 66. Here, Aquinas considers „whether it is lawful to steal through stress of need.”27. Aquinas quotes Augustine in these words: „Further, a man should love his neighbor as himself. According to Augustine (Contra Mendac. vii), stealing to succor one’s neighbor by giving him alms is unlawful. Therefore, neither is it lawful to steal to remedy one’s own needs.”28. Aquinas further explains:

If the need be so manifest and urgent, that it is evident that the present need must be remedied by whatever means be at hand (for instance, when a person is in some imminent danger, and there is no other possible remedy), then it is lawful for a man to succor his own need by means of another’s property, by taking it either openly or secretly: nor is this properly speaking theft or robbery29.

Addressing Augustine’s position, Aquinas says expressly:

It is not theft, properly speaking, to take secretly and use another’s property in a case of extreme need: because that which he takes for the support of his life becomes his own property by reason of that need30.

In this same way, we can consider lying in an extreme situation. There are still people alive who are honored by the State of Israel as „Righteous Among the Nations” for risking their lives during the Holocaust to save Jews from extermination by the German Nazis. All of them lied about hiding Jews in their homes. Even the Catholic Church highly praised those heroic attitudes. In this situation, it is justified to say that not every untruth is a lie using Aquinas.

Augustine, in his work, uses the expression *peccata sunt*, emphasizing a condition of sinfulness, not evilness31. Later, moral writers will use the term evil instead of sin. It will be interesting to find a reason for this change and see if those two words are interchangeable. But this is a topic for a separate paper.

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26 Ibidem.
27 Ibidem.
28 Ibidem, 55.
29 Ibidem.
30 Ibidem.
31 Ibidem, 59.
For Lombard, Augustine’s standpoint seems fundamental to his understanding of the doctrine that proscribes certain kinds of human acts as intrinsic moral evils. The context of Lombard’s response to Abelard’s moral doctrine provides us with clear evidence that the *intrinsically evil act* is not, as John Dedek claimed, the thirteen-century “novelty” but is actually deeply rooted in the Church’s tradition of moral theology and goes back to the time of the early Church Fathers, namely Augustine of Hippo (354-430). This finding is significant to the contemporary discussion of this moral concept because it makes the interlocutors look at this issue more reliably.

In the next section, I will present the concept of an intrinsically evil act through the lens of Catholic moral teaching. Using magisterial documents like Second Vatican Council’s Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*), John Paul II’s encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, I will argue that this moral concept is essential for virtue ethics, which plays a vital role in handling on the Catholic moral tradition.

3. Intrinsic evil- Catholic moral teaching

One of the many theological questions that appeared after Vatican Council II gained particular interest. The precise meaning of the term *intrinsically evil acts* became one of the sharpest debates in contemporary moral theology. Contextually, we need to start by carefully examining the claim for *intrinsically evil acts* that Pope John Paul II put forth in *Veritatis Splendor (VS)*, his 1993 encyclical on Fundamental Moral Theology. In this document, the Pope expresses his concern that contemporary morality has become excessively relativistic and denies the existence of an objective moral order and the possibility that we can know and act under this order. VS speaks specifically of *intrinsically evil acts* as follows:

Reason attests that there are objects of the human act which are by their nature „incapable of being ordered” to God because they radically contradict the good of the person made in his image. These are the acts which, in the Church’s moral tradition, have been termed „intrinsically evil” (intrinsic malum): they are such always and per se, in other words, on account of their very object, and quite apart from the ulterior intentions of the one acting and the circumstances. (VS no. 80)

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32 Dedek, 311.
Later in this paragraph, the Pope provides some concrete examples of such *intrinsically evil acts*, quoting a list that is given in Vatican II’s Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*:

Whatever is hostile to life itself, such as any kind of homicide, genocide, abortion, euthanasia and voluntary suicide; whatever violates the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, physical and mental torture and attempts to coerce the spirit; whatever is offensive to human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution and trafficking in women and children; degrading conditions of work which treat labourers as mere instruments of profit, and not as free responsible persons: all these and the like are a disgrace, and so long as they infect human civilization they contaminate those who inflict them more than those who suffer injustice, and they are a negation of the honour due to the Creator. (VS no. 80, quoting GS no. 27)

An important note is that the official Vatican English translation of the encyclical changes the quotation in *Gaudium et Spes* by one keyword, replacing “murder” with “homicide.” In the official Vatican English translation of *Gaudium et Spes*, we still read: “any kind of murder” is wrong, but in the translation of *Veritatis Splendor*, we have a different version: “any kind of homicide” would be intrinsically evil. This change is symptomatic as it shows the importance of linguistic and moral distinction while translating one term from the other language. In this case, if we understand “homicide” as the “killing of a human person,” then either this encyclical seems to be reversing centuries of Roman Catholic moral teaching in this regard, or its position needs to be translated and nuanced more carefully to be correctly understood and applied\(^\text{33}\).

At this point, we can evoke St. Thomas Aquinas’ stance on homicide, where he argues that in the situation of intended defense, one can kill an unjust aggressor. This position is fundamental not only for the principle of the double effect but also for a whole range of other actions, including the just war theory and the moral justification of capital punishment\(^\text{34}\). Also, when we look at the legal tradition, we see a different moral understanding of what constitutes a homicide. We could have self-defense (justifiable homicide), manslaughter (involuntary and voluntary), or various levels of pre-meditation involved in the murder (e.g., first-degree, second-degree, and so on)\(^\text{35}\).

\(^{33}\) Bretzke, 72.
\(^{34}\) Keenan, 65.
\(^{35}\) Ibidem.
In the situation of killing a man, as Aquinas and legal tradition point out, we cannot have any complete moral analysis of the act in the concrete without attending both to intention and circumstances\textsuperscript{36}.

Consequently, while murder is intrinsically evil, not every act that results in a person’s death is murder. The only thing that differentiates these actions is intention and circumstances. Nevertheless, in these instances, when human life is taken, we can say that a specific good was lost, and it is always something terrible. From this point, we can understand the papal intention to name any homicide as a disgrace.

4. **Intrinsic evil- attempt to define**

The concept of an *intrinsically evil act* is essential to Catholic moral tradition. It details actions that should never be done because they fundamentally contradict human flourishing and God’s goodness. To define which particular acts are intrinsically evil, we need to analyze their intention and circumstances\textsuperscript{37}.

The simple physical performance of a set of activities that formulate the action is morally neutral. The intention and freedom of the moral agent give the action the moral quality. In this place, we must mention the distinction between *actus homini* and *actus humanus*. *Actus homini* is an activity of a human person, but without the necessary freedom and intention to make it a genuinely moral act – *actus humanus*. The common element for *actus homini* and *actus humanus* is the presence of circumstances\textsuperscript{38}. What separates them is the presence of intention. Building on this critical distinction, we can say that every moral act, intrinsically good, bad, or indifferent, requires a constitutive element – “freedom” – and furthermore, this freedom is engaged primarily through forming a moral intention\textsuperscript{39}.

The act which is deprived of circumstances or intention cannot be performed by any human being since we must act in time and space, and that, without exception, provides at least a minimum of “circumstances”; an act performed without any prior, corresponding freedom instantiated in intention may be an act of a human being (*actus hominis*), but it cannot be by defection a moral act (*actus humanus*). If an *intrinsically evil act* is a moral act, then it is natural that, to some extent, intention and circumstances must already have been included in an act described as *intrinsece malum in se*, and the *in se* is where these crucial components are acknowledged\textsuperscript{40}. What, *The

\textsuperscript{36} Ibidem, 60.
\textsuperscript{37} Bretzke, 81.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibidem.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibidem, 83.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibidem.
Catechism of the Catholic Church in no. 1755 says about the *intrinsically evil acts* seems to be in some tension with Bretzke’s position. We read there:

A morally good act requires the goodness of the object, of the end, and of the circumstances together. An evil end corrupts the action, even if the object is good in itself (such as praying and fasting ‘in order to be seen by men’). The object of the choice can by itself vitiate an act in its entirety. There are some concrete acts – such as fornication – that it is always wrong to choose, because choosing them entails a disorder of the will, that is, a moral evil. (CCC no. 1755)

The Catechism states clearly that moral acts comprise the composite of the three traditional elements: the action in se, the circumstances, and the intention. When the text refers to the object of the choice, which can by itself vitiate an act in its entirety, it could be that the authors already assumed that the object contains some elements of circumstances and intentions. Perhaps we can introduce some distinction between the act’s primary and secondary intention. In this way, the primary intention would be, according to Bretzke, already embedded in the act, as a necessary condition for *actus humanus*. The human act’s primary intention would be understood as its *telos*. The secondary intention is given by the subject of the action, who also has their *telos* as a human being. For example, the fornication’s first intention (*telos*) is to have sexual intercourse between people not married to each other. The secondary fornicator’s intention could vary, even saving someone’s life. From this perspective, Bretzke’s theory does not contradict the Catechisms.

The Catechism also emphasizes that circumstances and intentions alone cannot furnish the moral meaning of an act. According to what is stated, we can understand them as secondary intentions and circumstances because actions already have their “teols,” which made them always gravely illicit. In number 1776, we read:

It is therefore an error to judge the morality of human acts by considering only the intention that inspires them or the circumstances (environment, social pressure, duress or emergency, etc.) which supply their context. There are acts which, in and of themselves, independently of circumstances and intentions, are always gravely illicit by reason of their object; such as blasphemy and perjury, murder and adultery. One may not do evil so that good may result from it. (CCC no. 1756)
5. **Intrinsic evil- interpretation difficulties**

Both texts, *Veritatis Splendor* and *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* speak about *intrinsically evil acts*, but the way they are presented leaves room for misunderstanding and generalization. It is not uncommon for people to have a problem understanding and correctly applying this moral concept in their everyday lives. When asked why some actions are intrinsically evil, they will respond that it means something awful, i.e., grave evil. The term *intrinsically evil* is often used instrumentally as a final argument closing every moral and cultural discussion. To illustrate how the Catholic population either understands or misunderstands intrinsic evil, I will use Bretzke’s taxonomy. The author distinguishes four main categories and provides a specific description for each. The first one is defined as a high and represents the position where intrinsic evil is perceived as a separate “species” of a moral act. This “high” group is further divided into two subgroups; automatic and symbolic. Automatic holds that a merely physical commission of action can violate the intrinsic evil prohibition, and no circumstances or intention can factor into the moral evaluation. Many people misunderstand the concept of intrinsic evil, which also seems to be presented in *the Veritatis Splendor* and the Catechism.

An example of this could be the standpoint regarding using the progesterone pill. Some people are firmly convinced that under no circumstances could those pharmaceuticals ever be taken, regardless of intention and circumstances, since the medicine is a contraceptive, and the Catholic Church considers all kinds of artificial contraception as an *intrinsically evil act*. Moreover, using this medication for any reason would be morally wrong. This way of understanding the concept of *intrinsically evil acts*, disenable the person to think about other possible circumstances in which the use of the pill would be medically indicated. The whole consideration is ended by calling the medicine intrinsically evil. Pope Paul VI challenges this approach in the encyclical *Humane Vitae*, where He states:

> The Church, on the contrary, does not at all consider illicit the use of those therapeutic means truly necessary to cure diseases of the organism, even if an impediment to procreation, which may be foreseen, should result there from, provided such impediment is not, for whatever motive, directly willed. (HV no. 15)

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41 Ibidem, 119.
42 Ibidem.
The Pope introduces the circumstances and intention, and in light of this text, one can no longer claim that the Catholic Church forbids any use of contraceptive pills. For example, we can show such a situation when the use of progesterone pills helps to regulate a woman’s menstrual cycle. This is morally right, even though the contraceptive effect could be foreseen.

The second sub-groups of Bretzke’s taxonomy is “symbolic.” In these situations, knowing and the free commission of an intrinsic evil symbolically implies the will to perform the intrinsic evil act. The moral object cannot be changed from evil to good regardless of a defective moral intention or lack of circumstances. The example of this position can be recognized in the “Inseparability Principle” applied to the unitive and procreative dimensions of the marital act.

The second leading group is “medium-high,” in which the intrinsic evil works as tutelary prohibitions. This position is held by many moral theologians and most magisterial documents. According to this understanding, norms designed to protect critical values are absolute and exception-less, and discussion is closed on the possibility of prohibited actions. An example of such a position is the prohibition of abortion, even if there are mitigating circumstances such as poverty or psychological stress.

In the third leading group, “medium-low,” intrinsic evil is understood as a pedagogical guide to moral discernment. Moral laws bind the individual in most (but not all) cases and, therefore, serve as a guide for looking carefully at the moral “fonts” of the act in terms of the act in se, circumstances, and intentions.

The last main group is “low” and consists of three sub-groups (medium, lower, very-low). For all of them, intrinsic evil is an artificial construction with no positive value and application. Many “revisionist” moral theologians would probably place themselves in this category. For them, the concept of intrinsic evil is outmoded and fails to take into sufficient account circumstances and intentions, which will always be quite numerous, varied, and hard to interpret with adequate precision in advance for a judgment that would apply to all such “acts” in every time and place.

Moving towards an even more liberal direction, we have a few moral theologians (e.g., Daniel Maguire) who hold the position that there is no objective moral order that can be postulated outside of careful consideration of circumstances and intention. Only the intention and circumstanc-

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43 Ibidem, 121.
44 Ibidem.
45 Ibidem, 123.
46 Ibidem, 124.
es determine the moral rightness or wrongness of an action. This stance is reminiscent of Abelard’s position presented in the previous chapter. Finally, very few Christian ethicists and many philosophical ones hold the position that the notion of an „objective moral order” is false. They are mainly representatives of theories like; consequentialism, utilitarianism, emotivism, intuitionism, radical postmodernism, etc. In his taxonomy, Bretzke does not enclose his position, but we can assume that he would opt for „medium-low” with his Jesuit friends, Fuchs and McCormick.

Although the concept of intrinsic evil raises some interpretative difficulties, we must not forget that it belongs to the tradition of the moral teaching of the Catholic Church and cannot be recklessly removed from our heritage. In light of this, it seems reasonable to point out how fundamentally important this concept is for Christian virtue ethics.

6. Intrinsic evil- context of Virtue Ethics

Since the early 1980s, virtue ethics has increasingly become the way Catholics do fundamental moral theology. What encouraged them to delve into this realm was its focus on the agent and their development over time into a more virtuous and less vicious person, increasingly capable of love of God and love of neighbor48. Reflecting on virtue ethics from the perspective of the Catholic tradition, we need to consider two key elements; particular acts and the ability to say that certain types of acts are incompatible with the good or virtuous life in the Catholic Christian context. In this, we see that cultivating the Catholic moral tradition by the tool of virtue ethics is helpful to include an affirmation of the concept of intrinsically evil acts and, ideally, some shared agreement about what sorts of acts fall into that category49.

What lies in the center of virtue ethics is a connection between three key elements: the agent, their virtues, and the communal practice and vision of the goods and purpose of human life. The role of the community within which the agent is forming is not only pointing to the virtues and helping to integrate them into the person’s life but also the naming of particular kinds of acts that are simply incompatible with its vision of the good life50.

Alasdair McIntyre, whose work on virtue ethics is central, defines its three essential components: (1) the concept of „practice,” in which inheres a notion of communally held goods that can and should be developed through such practices; (2) a narrative account of human life and its goals or purposes that can reflectively connect particular practices to the sustainable

49 Ibidem, 132.
50 Ibidem.
and sustaining goods inherent to the common life; and (3) location in a community, sustained and sustainable over time in such a way that it constitutes a moral tradition51.

In light of this, we can say that the agent develops their virtues, specific skills, through engagement with the practices and must improve on them to protect, nourish, and pass on the community’s common life. As we can see, the role of community is vital for virtue ethics, and although the excellences (virtues) are inherent in agents, the practices and conceptions of the goods and ends involved are communally performed and collectively held. We can also say that although virtue ethics invites and demands an agent-centered approach, the virtuous agents are not understood in isolation, but defined through communal practices, communally held goods, ends, and purposes52. The ideal environment for virtue ethics is a community capable of having and sustaining a conversation about the goods and the purposes of human life. It is also crucial that this community can involve their participants in shared practices to help them understand better the goods and purposes and finally equip them with the skills to help all and each (personally and communally) better realize those purposes.

The other prerogative of the community is to name some acts as intrinsically evil. When a community name some acts as intrinsically evil, it calls those acts that cannot be performed in such a way that furthers the shared goods and ends to which the community is committed. This process takes place in time and assumes observation of the effects of specific acts that they have on the community. When we look at intrinsically evil acts through the lens of virtue ethics, we assert that such an act, done knowingly and willingly by an agent, undermines the community’s shared understanding of the goods and purposes of life. And denying the existence of intrinsically evil acts can be understood as refusing an important community-building element53. Additionally, how such ends and purposes are pursued is ultimately dependent either on individual choice or the particular situation that each agent finds herself in.

Contrarily, accepting that virtue ethics assumes the existence of the community, which is capable of forming virtuous agents who can engage in the practices of the community, learn its sustaining narratives, and be formed in its sense of the ends and purposes of its shared life54. The opposite situation is when a community is unable to recognize and name those actions which are in an obvious way contradicting its ends and purposes.

51 Ibidem, 137.
52 Ibidem, 140.
53 Ibidem.
54 Ibidem.
At the same time, the community cannot tell its members their ends and purposes and what narratives and practices will sustain and extend them. Here, we have to question whether such a community can form virtuous agents at all and, consequently, whether it is capable of sustaining itself. As we can see, community context is fundamental for virtue ethics, including arguments about acts, especially intrinsically evil acts.

7. Intrinsic evil- recovery of the concept

As mentioned before, the concept of intrinsic evil is endangered by misunderstanding or instrumental use. It may result in altogether rejecting this critical and fundamental moral concept. To prevent it, reflecting on how intrinsic evil should be presented and applied is necessary.

First, we must remember that moral theology’s whole purpose is to serve the Christian community. In this way, it will lead them to the love of God and their neighbor. Charity should mark our reflection on the acts, practices, and virtues and assume goodwill on all sides, trying to articulate the truth of what is required to grow in charity, holiness, and life in Christ55.

Next, it is necessary to avoid conformity in moral discussion and to continue to name certain acts as intrinsically evil. Our charity should not be confused with a silent attitude towards fundamental differences relating to moral issues. On the contrary, they should openly communicate the truth to one another and listen to the truth as the other names it. This approach will extend our perspective on truth and its sense. Additionally, it should be a shared practice that will form persons in virtue and constitute our community.

Another important thing is to avoid using the concept of intrinsic evil as a club in political discussions or other areas of moral life. We must remember that intrinsically evil acts are not necessarily and automatically worse than other evils and are not always clearer than other evil acts. We must also be aware that official Church teachings in moral matters have developed and changed. To give two classic examples of this phenomenon: slavery and capital punishment. Taking the long historical view, we can observe that official teaching once held that these actions were morally permissible and required. However, official teaching now prohibits both. Moving in the opposite direction, official teaching once prohibited usury and the toleration of religious difference, but the former is now thought to be permissible within limits set by a broader framework of economic justice, and the latter is now thought to be morally obligatory. Also, Catholic social teaching has not remained constant56.

55 Ibidem.
56 Jaycox, 159.
These dynamics in Catholic moral teaching cannot discredit, in general, the concept of *intrinsically evil*. Instead, it shows that along with cultural and civilizational development, our understanding and application of certain moral concepts have changed. But the basic fundamental meaning of *intrinsically evil* remained unchanged. It still stands that whatever is hostile to life itself, violates the integrity of the human person, and offends human dignity is incapable of being ordered to God and is *intrinsically evil*. The list of intrinsic evil acts is not complete, and it is possible that with the growth of human self-knowledge, it will be necessary to name new realities.

Finally, the discussion over evil acts should be accompanied by the Christian message of forgiveness. The inclination to sin is our shared human condition which can take the shape of *intrinsically evil acts* or „ordinary” acts of selfishness. Regardless of their different backgrounds, they all need to be overcome by the grace of God and our free decision to repent. A particular help in this could be examining the conscience, allowing the person to see the moments in which their behavior contradicted the primary call to be united with God. We are all called to grow in virtue, and it has to be realized in the community, which recognizes and fosters the proper moral code using concepts like *intrinsically evil acts*.

8. Conclusion

This article aimed to argue that in today’s culture of utilitarianism, the concept of *intrinsically evil acts* is still needed. Despite all the attempts to eliminate *intrinsically evil acts* from the space of moral considerations, it still serves as a fundamental concept of Christian morality. The fact that the origin of the idea was not in the fourteenth century, as some contemporary scholars have claimed, but reached the time of the first Church fathers, namely St. Augustine of Hippo, proves that the concept of *intrinsically evil acts* belongs to the oldest tradition of Christian moral theology. This work also showed that intrinsically evil acts are often instrumental in political or cultural discussions, where it serves as a “club” on the opponents. It was also mentioned that the common understanding of *intrinsically evil acts* is still insufficient to apply it to everyday situations correctly. It is particularly challenging for Catholic theologians to present the concept of *intrinsically evil acts* in such a way that it would be coherent with the Christian-life vocation to holiness, and secondly, be person-centered and emphasize virtue more than sin.
Bibliography


Crucial concept or onerous burden?
Retrieving the idea of intrinsically evil acts

**Summary**
The concept of intrinsically evil acts plays a vital role in the moral teaching of the Catholic Church. Such an important role requires constant critical reflection. In this text, I indicate that the origins of this idea must be sought in much earlier texts than previously thought and refer to the works of St. Augustine. In addition, I will cite the relevant teaching texts of the popes on this issue, pointing out how difficult it was to define the acts of intrinsece malum properly. Finally, I would like to point out the necessity of a proper concept of internally evil deeds for developing the ethics of virtues, which is becoming an essential tool through which contemporary Catholic moral theology is understood.

**Keywords**: Intrinsece malum, virtue ethics, st. Augustin, moral theology, Durandus