

THE FUNDAMENTAL OPTION: NOW YOU SEE IT, NOW YOU DON'T

When I was in grammar school at St. Stanislaus in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi we were entertained each year with a “magic show.” The performer was one of the Sacred Heart Brothers who used the stage name, Brother Nocando. It was all great fun as we were thrilled by his illusions. One of the trick I learned was cutting a rope in half, tying the two pieces together, then before the eyes of my audience making the knot disappear and the rope whole. Now you see it, now you don't!

What I learned much later as an adult was the illusion performed by another category of “magicians” who make sin disappear. Now you see it, now you don't! These performers prefer to be called theologians because their stage is the classroom or their writings. Thomas J. Centrella identifies some of the chief tricksters: Timothy E. O'Connell, Josef Fuchs, Richard McCormick, John W. Glaser, Bernard Häring, Charles E. Curran, and Karl Rahner.¹

At the center of their illusion is the *fundamental option theory*. It works by driving a wedge between human freedom and sin. It does so in a two-step process. First it invents a distinction between the free choices that determine our actions and a core or fundamental freedom. This fundamental freedom or fundamental option is said to be a mysterious deep inner inclination determining ones absolute orientation toward love or selfishness, between ego or God. However, and this is critical, it is claimed that this make-believe fundamental option is not determined by our free choices. So, for example, a man may freely chose to punch his wife or commit an act of adultery, but that does not necessarily alter his fundamental option, which alone defines his self-determination to love her. At this point the victim might be inclined to reflect on George Orwell's observation: “Some ideas are so stupid, that only intellectuals could hold them!”

Now the real fun begins. These illusionists claim that only core freedom, not free choices, determines moral responsibility. Therefore, only core freedom, the fundamental option or preference, makes a sin mortal. Let's illustrate: a person may freely chose to murder an innocent person with the full knowledge of its evil, but that action may not alter his fundamental orientation toward God. Now you see it, now you don't!

To accommodate this theory these illusionists invented a third category of sin – *grave sin* as something distinct from mortal sin. To accommodate this fiction they also redefine mortal sin. *Mortal sin*, which separates a person from the divine life, is not determined by free choices, but only by radically altering ones fundamental option in total opposition to God. Moral responsibility, they claim, is only associated with this fundamental preference. This option or preference is not described as an action, but more on the order of a basic attitude or stance. *Grave sins* they allege are those serious acts committed with full knowledge and free consent, but they do not separate one from God. In effect this distinction creates the illusion that guts serious moral acts of their meaning and its effect. Now you see it, now you don't!

¹ Thomas J. Centrella, “A Critical Analysis of the Fundamental Option Theory,” *Homiletic and Pastoral Review*, January 2006, pp. 22-29.

In his marvelous encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* John Paul the Great recognizes a fundamental choice, but he defines it correctly:

There is no doubt that Christian moral teaching, even in its biblical roots, acknowledges the specific importance of a fundamental choice which qualifies the moral life and engages freedom on a radical level before God. It is a question of the decision of faith, of the *obedience of faith* (cf. Rom 16:26) “by which man makes a total and free self-commitment to God, offering the “full submission of intellect and will to God as he reveals.” This faith, which works through love (cf. Gal 5:6), comes from the core of man, from his “heart” (cf. Rom 10:10), whence it is called to bear fruit in works (cf Mt 12:33-35; Lk 6:43-45; Rom 8:5-10; Gal 5:22).²

However, the Pope makes it clear that our fundamental choice “is actually exercised in the particular choices of specific actions, through which man deliberately confirms himself to God’s will, wisdom and law.”³ Therefore, as even common sense reveals, our fundamental option “*is always brought into play through conscious and free decision.*”⁴ It is precisely in our free choices that we are assigned moral responsibility. To illustrate the silliness of the fundamental option theory consider the following defense.

“Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, you have listened attentively to the prosecution’s case. It is clear from the facts presented, and from my client’s own admission, that he did bludgeon the innocent victim to death and mutilate his body in a single act of rage. However, individual acts willfully and consciously chosen do not reveal the complete picture. This is the vital reality that the prosecuting attorney failed to bring forward. After all, it is not individual choices that determine the morality and responsibility of actions, but the individual’s fundamental option. In the case of my client, his heart is basically good. He never deviated from his preference of keeping the law and living as a productive citizen. His deep-seated attitude toward others is loving and caring. Therefore, this case should never have been brought to trial as a felony, but merely as a misdemeanor. I trust, then, to your good judgment that you will render a just verdict and find my client NOT GUILTY.”

Only a fool would anticipate that the divine judge would accept such a defense for immoral behavior. Mortal sin is inseparately connected with concrete, conscious choices, not some make-believe fundamental attitude distinct from our free decisions. The fundamental option theory is fundamentally false.

² *Veritatis Splendor*, # 66.1 citing Vatican II, “The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Deo Verbum*, # 5; and Vatican I, “Dogmatic Constitution of the Catholic Faith, *Die Filius*, # 3.

³ *Veritatis Splendor*, # 67.1.

⁴ *Ibid.*