A MORALLY COMPLEX WORLD:
ENGAGING CONTEMPORARY MORAL THEOLOGY
By James T. Bretzke, S.J.
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Reviewed by Pasquale T. Giordano

This book should be of great interest in the Philippines since the author is a regular visiting professor of moral theology at the Loyola School of Theology in Manila. Bretzke begins by outlining a certain methodical approach, focusing on the rational claim axis of natural law and moral norms as well as the sacred claims axis of scripture and tradition, intersecting in the primacy of conscience. He manifests great pastoral sensitivity when he discusses how one is to approach concrete ethical issues and how one ought to move from moral theory to moral practice. The last word in our lives is not sin and judgment, but mercy, forgiveness, and reconciliation. The book ends with a glossary of Latin terms.

Bretzke knows the tradition well and presents it clearly. This is an invaluable service for students of moral theology. However, this reviewer finds himself disagreeing with many of the positions Bretzke takes when he moves beyond the tradition. One student approached him after he had explained a historicist approach to natural law. The student was genuinely disturbed by a prospect that such an approach to moral norms might entail the risk of leading people to believe that there are no fixed absolutes at all, and therefore, people could (and should) do just as they pleased. This is my concern as well.

I question the title of the book. There are certainly times in our lives when we are confronted with morally complex issues and questions, but these are the exceptions rather than the rule. It is the study of moral theology itself that is so complex, not living the moral life. Pastorally speaking, moral formation must be linked with
evangelization, forming and informing the consciences of people in which the teaching of the magisterium plays an essential role. This process of moral formation must lead towards a connaturalization of the heart, growing in virtue, one with our Lord Jesus Christ, the ultimate norm of the moral life, and alive to the New Law of the Holy Spirit, manifested in a life of active love. To focus on a morally complex world can lead people to confusion and relativism. Once they are fully formed with hearts one with Christ and alive to the Spirit as well as consciences aware of the teaching of the magisterium, it is then that they will be able to discern the proper moral response in complex moral decisions.

Bretzke clearly presents the areas of conflict and difference in contemporary moral theology. Among them are the classicist paradigm versus the historicist paradigm, physicalism versus personalism, the faith ethics school versus the moral autonomy school, the debate over intrinsically evil acts, and the role of the magisterium in the formation of conscience, as well as many others.

Allow this reviewer to present some areas of disagreement with Bretzke’s positions. Why use the term “physicalism?” It is already a perjorative term. Why not use the term “embodied spirit” or “unity of body and spirit”? Pope John Paul II is a strong advocate of the “unity of body and spirit” approach, but he is also a strong personalist. Basically the magisterium presents the Church’s teaching of sexual and bio-ethics works from a classicist paradigm with a “unity of body and spirit.” Those advocating a historicist paradigm are often in conflict with the Church’s teaching in these areas. Many of the contemporary moral theologians in the classicist paradigm advocate the “unity of body and spirit” as well as a personalism promoting a virtue ethic.

In discussing the debate over intrinsically evil acts, Bretzke makes a good point when he says that the debate over intrinsically evil acts could be ameliorated if not actually resolved by a more careful investigation into the precise meanings of terms that stand
behind the claims and counter-claims. However, when he discusses the position of Pope John Paul II presented in *Veritatis Splendor*, he misses the main point of the pontiff’s argument: “In order to be able to grasp the object of an act which specifies that act morally, it is therefore necessary to place oneself in the perspective of the acting person…. Rather, that object is the proximate end of a deliberate decision which determines the act of willing on the part of the acting person” (VS 78).

Bretzke places too great an emphasis on the autonomy of personal conscience. This is in conflict with the teaching of *Veritatis Splendor* quoting *Dignitatis Humanae* 14, “In forming their consciences, the Christian faithful must give careful attention to the sacred and certain teaching of the Church. For the Catholic Church is by the will of Christ the teacher of truth.” While he states that he in no way is seeking to attack or diminish the legitimate authority of the Church’s magisterium, Bretzke does point out issues where the magisterium has been wrong in the past like slavery and usury, citing the need to discern clearly what the truth is. “Often certain moral authorities do seem to present themselves as if the full splendor of the truth were contained in their utterances, and this kind of moral certitude is virtually impossible for any person or institution to achieve” (140).

In discussing these conflicting positions in moral theology, it is clear that no position captures all of the moral reality. What is needed is continual dialogue in searching for the truth. While Bretzke does call for discerning and broadening the common ground in our contemporary moral debates, he presents this point in discussing the problem of abortion and the conflict between the pro-life and the pro-choice groups. An even more important area to promote discernment is within the Church itself in the critical conflict between opposing positions in moral theology. He presents the historicist position quite well and is quite critical of the classicist position. Even the bibliography makes no reference to the works of significant
classicist theologians such as Benedict Ashley, Romanus Cessario, William E. May, Livio Melina, and Servais Pinckaers.

The value of the book is in its clear presentation of the teaching of the tradition, yet breaking new ground in carefully nuanced arguments. Despite my disagreements with the positions of Bretzke, I find that *A Morally Complex World* will be an excellent textbook for a course in fundamental moral theology. Many of the critical issues in contemporary moral theology are discussed intelligently. Bretzke vigorously presents his positions, positions which I believe are open to further discussion. Such an engagement will truly help in the discerning process and in the broadening of the common ground in contemporary moral debates.