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## Subjectivity and Objectivity in Postconciliar Views on Morality

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## SUBJECTIVITY AND OBJECTIVITY IN POST- CONCILIAR VIEWS ON MORALITY

**Abstract.** The purpose of this article is to draw attention to the differences in the perception of subjectivity and objectivity in the two perspectives of Catholic ethics dominant after the Second Vatican Council. Both ethical currents, i.e. autonomous ethics (*Autonome Moral*) and the ethics of faith (*Glaubensethik*) developed during the intensive theological study period around the time of the Council. The representatives of both currents interpreted some of the Council's concepts quite differently, which also led to different results. The concept of subjectivity is closely associated with the understanding of the role and importance of conscience, while the concept of objectivity with the theory of normativity. Many eminent theologians and philosophers took part in the discussion around these fundamental issues for moral theology, among others: A. Auer, J. Ratzinger, Hans Urs von Balthasar, B. Stoecke, J. Fuchs, B. Häring, D. Mieth and others. There was also the voice of the pope at the time, St. John Paul II, who in the enc. *Veritatis splendor* outlined a framework for the further development of moral theology, critically referring to some contemporary ethical projects.

**Keywords:** subjectivity, objectivity, *Veritatis Splendor*, John Paul II, autonomy

1. Introduction. 2. The concept of subjectivity and objectivity in two post-conciliar models of understanding ethics. 3. A critical analysis of the views and opinions of representatives of autonomous ethics. 4. The autonomists' response to objections. 5. Pope John Paul II's correction of Christian morality (ethics) in the encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*. 6. Conclusion.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This article attempts to investigate the relation between subjectivity and objectivity in ethics. I shall attempt to point out some important aspects of that problem by relating to the discussion that took place in the second half of the 20th century in Catholic moral theology – the discussion which was not irrelevant to moral philosophy. These essential issues are: to what extent can man decide about the good and evil by himself; which of the sources of morality are decisive for the ethical evaluation of a human act (in other words, what is the source of our morality); to what extent should man's decisions take into account natural law or the truth contained in Revelation; and how significant is (creative) human reason itself? According to autonomists, ethical norms do not “fall from the sky”, rather they are an effect of collective human experience, passed on to successive generations. It is the ethical values that play the key role in human experience: a man persistently asks himself about what is valuable for him and his contemporaries. It is the values that determine the direction of the development of society (civilization). The values are reflected in the norms in which they are codified. The process of shaping the norms is also heavily influenced by religion, which is a fundamental value for many people. The existing moral order (*ordo moralis*) does not relieve man from the individual pursuit of solutions to moral dilemmas. It happens sometimes, however, that in the face of changes taking place in the society, the perception of moral norms changes as well., the latter change being strongly connected with the understanding of moral objectivity. It must be remembered that the legitimization of objectivity depends on its subjective acceptance, while the lack of such acceptance does not mean that it has lost its validity, since the majority may also be wrong. There has always been a tension between subjectivity (individual experience of ethical values in their relation to moral norms) and objectivity, which may be called the “existing morality”. However, a creative search for the currently valid norms does not need to be understood as an attack on objectivity, since subjectivity is in fact the basic condition for taking responsibility for one's actions

I will first discuss the differences between the concepts of subjectivity and objectivity in two models of understanding ethics which emerged after the Vatican Council. The next section sums up the response of ethical autonomists to the critique of their position. The final section describes the essential role in the debate played by John Paul II, who presented his own, traditional conception of objectivity, combined with a distinct defense of subjectivity (individual response to the appeal coming from the objective ethical values).

## 2. THE CONCEPT OF SUBJECTIVITY AND OBJECTIVITY IN TWO POST-CONCILIAR MODELS OF UNDERSTANDING ETHICS

To understand what subjectivity is according to the representatives of the autonomous ethics, we need to refer to the forerunner of the ethics, the German theologian Alfons Auer. He developed this proposal as a response to the enc. *Humanae vitae*. In his opinion, the position of Paul VI was not convincingly justified. At that time, Auer had already published his 10 theses regarding a new organisation of Christian morality<sup>1</sup> and two years later he clarified his position in the main work of this stream, *Autonomous Morality and the Christian Faith (Autonome Moral und christlicher Glaube)*. A. Auer saw autonomy as self-government (*Selbstgesetzgebung, Eigengesetzlichkeit*) and self-determination (*Selbstbestimmung*). One of the representatives of this current, K.W. Merks believes that the concept of autonomy tells us in its core, that the moral order should be understood as a development of responsibility of a moral subject.<sup>2</sup> The opposite of such an understanding of morality is, according to K.W. Merks, the idea of moral heteronomy, which is understood as a foreign legislation (*Fremdgesetzgebung*) – foreign, i.e. controlled from the outside (*Fremdbestimmung*), meaning that the normative order is imposed from the outside. Merks defends autonomous

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<sup>1</sup> A. Auer, *Nach Erscheinen von „Humanae vitae“. Zehn Thesen über die Findung sittlicher Weisungen*, Theologische Quartalschrift 149(1969), 75–85.

<sup>2</sup> „In ihren Kern besagt Autonomie in diesem Kontext: Die moralische Ordnung ist als Entfaltung der eigenen Verantwortlichkeit zu verstehen“. K.-W. Merks, *Gott und die Moral. Theologische Ethik heute*, Münster 1998, 8.

ethics against accusations that it tries to eliminate or restrict God (*Theonomie*) as the One who is the Lawgiver (*Gesetzgeber*). However, there is no doubt that morality we read from the Revelation can sometimes be understood as something foreign, imposed and alienating (*Verfremdetes Gesetz*). According to Merks, one does not need to associate the divine commandments with something foreign. The autonomous ethics attempts to demonstrate, that we have the capacity to reach the divine commandments on our own and through this they become ours, personally accepted – in the experience of our own responsibility we find the will of God.<sup>3</sup> What the autonomists try to achieve is the construction of a model in which theonomy becomes *autonomy*. It remains an open question, however, whether and how it can be done.

The representatives of both types of understanding ethics have the same aim, though they have different starting points. For the ethicists of faith the starting point is the Revelation as well as the divine and natural law, which doesn't mean that the authors in question do not appreciate the subjective dimension of morality. For the protagonists of autonomous ethics it is the man who is crucial – the man with his conscience and his will to pursue practical solutions to life challenges and acquire knowledge of reality – and ultimately it is he, who makes moral decisions. In the framework of the new moral theology emerged the concept of the creative mind. It is based on the idea of existential ethics of K. Rahner, to which the concepts of other supporters of autonomous ethics, such as that of J. Fuchs, are related. Fuchs pays special attention to intentionality as a source of morality. According to him, choosing Christ takes place in the intentional sphere, at an athematic level of freedom that cannot be contextualized and is sometimes referred to as basic, fundamental or transcendental (K. Rahner). It is not the moral value of separate human acts that determines its being good or evil, but the intentions. The deciding factor, is the degree to which a person, freely choosing between good and bad deeds and aims, defines himself as a whole, i.e. he defines himself as good or bad in his basic freedom and organizes

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 9.

his deeds and aims according to this.<sup>4</sup> This basic freedom allows us, in turn, to decide about the moral aspect (self-determination) of a person.

It is precisely this concept that John Paul II criticized in the enc. *Veritatis splendor*, where he wrote that “a complete sovereignty of reason in the domain of moral norms, regarding the right ordering of life in this world. Such norms would constitute the boundaries for a merely “human” morality; they would be the expression of a law which man in an autonomous manner lays down for himself and which has its source exclusively in human reason” (VS, 36).

### 3. A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE VIEWS AND OPINIONS OF THE REPRESENTATIVES OF AUTONOMOUS ETHICS

A. Szostek is also one of the critics of the new perception of Christian morality. The author, who comes from the same scientific environment as Pope John Paul II and was part of the group of people engaged in the work on the enc. *Veritatis Splendor*, analysed the term “creative mind” and discovered the source of this concept. Special attention should be paid to the publication *Natura-Rozum-Wolność (Nature-Reason-Freedom)*, published in Polish in 1989 and two years later in German, so in a time, when work on the enc. *Veritatis Splendor* had already begun. One of the reasons of its development was a fear of committing a naturalistic error, that is logically unauthorized derivation of ‘should’ from ‘is’. J. Mill and other utilitarianists had previously faced this accusation. This error can be avoided – writes A. Szostek – if the creative mind becomes useful for practical cognition.<sup>5</sup> The basic accusation that Szostek formulates against the concept of “the creative mind” regards the danger of subjectivism, i.e. the removal of the objective criterion of the moral qualification of human acts and replacing it with a free act of self-determination that doesn’t undergo objective assessment – thus

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<sup>4</sup> J. Fuchs, *Teologia moralna*, transl. L. Bobiatyński, E. Krasnowolska, Warszawa 1974, 98.

<sup>5</sup> A. Szostek, *Natura, Rozum, Wolność. Filozoficzna analiza koncepcji twórczego rozumu we współczesnej teologii moralnej*, Fundacja Jana Pawła II, Rzym 1990, 261.

a determination of values.<sup>6</sup> According to A. Szostek, some of the proposals, for example that of J. Fuchs, move towards the extension of the notion of objectivity, so that was the degree of basic freedom updates were an essential of the *obiectum actus*.<sup>7</sup> This is where we reach the next sensitive point, i.e. the understanding of human nature. It seems, and John Paul II drew attention to this in the enc. *Veritatis splendor*, that the ones, according to whom the anthropological concept of man as auto-projection, where the decisive role is played by (basic) freedom, is crucial, are not quite right. Defending against biologism and naturalism, we abandon many very important categories (proclivities, *Neigungen*). This reduction misunderstands the moral meaning of the body and behaviour involving it (cf. 1 Cor 6:19) (VS, 49). A. Szostek holds a similar view: “When it (nature – RC) is treated as ‘external’ to the unique human individuality and thus deprives it of any permanent, morally binding elements; when the ideas of dignity and justice are brought down to noble contextual elements not rooted in this nature, the human mind ‘simply doesn’t have the basis to create this kind of norms’”.<sup>8</sup> A void is created which is then managed by an autonomous and formative entity.

How should the proposals put forward by autonomist ethicists be evaluated from the perspective of the orthodox Catholic moral theology? Szostek distinguished two trends. The first aims at elevating man’s personal freedom to the highest rank while the second aims at undermining the traditionally recognised objective norm of morality, including the importance of human nature. This absolutisation of freedom is expressed in the ethical concept of Fuchs, for whom individual actions are less important; it is the general direction of life that matters. Fuchs writes that nothing can match a free and basic self-engagement of man, leading to denying oneself or sacrificing oneself in the love of God. Fuchs sees self-realization in the primary freedom as a total act in the extent that means a self-determination of the person as a whole in the face of

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 262–263.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 262.

<sup>8</sup> A. Szostek, op. cit., 263. Szostek refers to T. Ślipko, *Rola rozumu w kształtowaniu moralności*, *Studia Philosophiae Christianae* 24(1988)1, 131.

their calling by God.<sup>9</sup> At the same time Fuchs himself compromises his earlier opinions, as he is aware that such total self-determination, self-realization of freedom is only an ideal very uncommon in life.<sup>10</sup> But is it really? I have read the remaining part of Fuchs' argumentation: „Never are we committed to the ultimate meaning of our existence – it is either one's complete entrustment to the Absolute or a refusal of such entrustment”.<sup>11</sup> Is it really so? Is a mature man capable of an ultimate decision, opting for or against God, which may also have an impact on individual judgements (categorical judgements)? Fuchs defends a basic freedom, presents it as an ethical ideal, which is difficult to realize and in the end destroys the coherence of moral life by separating the ideal, from the possibility of making choices. Of course, some kind of processuality of moral development of man does take place; man develops, matures and becomes capable of sacrifice.

Fuchs is also of interest to us as he openly undertakes the topic of the articles, in the already cited publication *Moral theology*. Fuchs associates the Absolute with non-willfulness and objectivity. He lists three sources of absolute norms, i.e.: the Revelation, teachings of the Church and the natural law. However, this German theologian refers to the formulation of absolute norms by the Church with reservation; he believes that formation of norms is a gradual process requiring reason and therefore regards all areas of *humanum*, which may include the context of the Christian Revelation, which sets the overall direction of our normative searching. The author draws attention to the fact that human reality is variable and therefore, “(...) valuation, recognition of the states of human reality and human consciousness can change.”<sup>12</sup> Various judgments are also made within the same culture. Must the consideration of context, situation or the plurality in moral evaluation necessarily lead to relativity? Who ultimately decides about the validity, universality, non-discretion and absoluteness of an ethical norm?

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. J. Fuchs, op. cit., 100.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 101.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 219.

Such vision of intentionality of freedom and morality was welcomed with criticism by other theologians. Jarosław Merecki, an author of a critical monograph dedicated to the concept of J. Fuchs asks: “If the option is not a specific (conscious and free) personal act, if it cannot be considered conceptually, one may be free to ask whether a person can be in any way responsible for it”.<sup>13</sup> The option therefore prevents one from coupling freedom and the truth of the good, which becomes the aim and should be made at each decision (choice). Ultimately, this leads to the contestation of human subjectivity.

The division between *Weltethos* and *Heilethos* must surely also be rejected. Both dimensions of Christian science should be integrated. It is worth remembering that reason also works because of grace, thus exposing it to the process of strong secularisation serves no purpose apart from fulfilling, previously accepted objectives. Sometimes, indeed, in the case of the representatives of autonomous ethics it seems justifiable to ask whether or not they try to adjust the whole process of norm justification (*Normfindung, Begründung*) into norms convergent with the expectations of the “world”. The method of standardisation, valuation and justification has an impact on the choice and explication of standards. Therefore, the conflict that exists between the ethics of faith and the representatives of autonomous ethics is essential to the practice of morality (Christian morality). The consideration of the *humanum* should not and needs not lead to its exclusion from subordination to God and His laws. Fuchs formulates a new definition of objectivity by interpreting natural law in his own way and by limiting the Church’s norm-setting powers in the inner-world context (*Weltethos*). A reference to the immutable natural law and the Revelation is not enough, it is also necessary to consider specific conditions. At this point Fuchs refers to his Italian colleague, Enrico Chiavacci, who takes the view, that objectivity of morality does not necessarily have to have its origins in a permanent entity, but in a total responsibility of actions and existence.<sup>14</sup> Chiavacci redefines human nature reducing to self-understanding, which

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<sup>13</sup> J. Merecki, *Dokument nie pozwalający przejść obojętnie „Veritatis splendor” w komentarzach anglosaskich*, *Ethos* 7(1994), 255–261.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. *Ibid.* 221–222.

is precisely where the subjectivity of this concept is demonstrated, as each of us can perceive and hence define ourselves differently. This self-understanding also depends on many other factors, like time and culture and the permanent aspects of the human nature are a mere ability of man to learn, set goals and choose the means, while it is the consciousness that may undergo change.<sup>15</sup> What, then, according to Chiavacci has an absolute character (meaning)? According to the Italian theologian it is “the action for the purpose of the implementation of the ultimate meaning of human existence”.<sup>16</sup> Who gives the meaning? Man, given specific conditions, values, searches for appropriate measures to achieve a goal and defines himself.

The main problem with autonomous ethics, as indicated by T. Ślipko and A. Szostek, lies in the fact, that the creative mind reformulates the basic concepts of ethics, which in turn can lead to the legitimisation of unethical practices.<sup>17</sup>

#### 4. THE AUTONOMISTS' RESPONSE TO OBJECTIONS

Allegations made by ethicists of faith and Pope John Paul II in relation to the autonomists was also met with their response, especially those most famous. An attempt at issuing such a collective response is a famed book edited by D. Mieth *Moraltheologie im Abseits? Antwort auf die Enzyklika “Veritatis splendor”*. One of the co-authors of the said publication, K.W. Merks, defends himself against the accusation of subjectivisation of morality and, asking the question, proposes the reversal of perspective. Does conscience indeed mean subjectivisation

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<sup>15</sup> „Das Selbstverständnis des Menschen variiert und hat immer variiert: im menschlichen Geist existiert nicht und ist nicht repräsentierbar eine Geschichte des Gedankens, eine Geschichte der Philosophie, eine jeder Kultur interne Geschichte. Man kann vielleicht den Menschen ein für alle Mal in seiner Fähigkeit beschreiben; man kann ihn nicht ein für alle Mal in seinem Selbstverständnis beschreiben“. E. Chiavacci, *Für eine Neuinterpretation des Naturbegriffs*, in: *Moral im Abseits? Antwort auf die Enzyklika „Veritatis splendor“*, ed. by D. Mieth, Herder, Freiburg im Breisgau 1994<sup>3</sup>, 120.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> T. Ślipko, op. cit., 133.

and arbitrariness in morality?<sup>18</sup> Merks' main thesis is: there is no contradiction between subjectivity and objectivity, between conscience and the norm. Where the relationship between the 'norm' and conscience is experienced as a conflict, it means that something alarming is happening to the moral order.<sup>19</sup> According to Merks both realities, that is conscience and the norm, lie in one line and complement each other. He is in favour of a new form of moral thinking – the ethics of responsibility – which again balances the norm in relation to conscience<sup>20</sup>. It is therefore about the transition from norm to responsibility, from normative ethics (*Normative Ethik*) to ethics of responsibility (*Verantwortungsethik*), which nobilitates subjectivity and does not have to mean subjectivisation of morality, it does, however, restore the central role of conscience.

More often, than non – representatives of autonomous ethics they are faced with accusations of abandoning St. Thomas and his contribution to the understanding of Christian morality. Merks opposes this and in his dissertation he tries to demonstrate that the recommendations of autonomous ethics are in line with the teaching of St. Thomas. It is also about how to read Thomas, as set by M. Vidal in *Die Enzyklika "Veritatis Splendor" und der Weltkatechismus. Die Restauration des Neothomismus in der katholischen Morallehre*. According to Vidal, St. Thomas' teaching has been used quite unilaterally in the enc. *Veritatis splendor* and earlier, in the CCC; this can be seen primarily in the application of the category of casuistry (sophistry) and scholasticism,<sup>21</sup> and concerns mainly the topics of natural law and the morality of the human act.<sup>22</sup> Vidal does not agree with the interpretation of the teaching of Thomas regarding *fontes moralis* and believes, that it is attributed with ideas, that do not suit his spiritual tradition. This objectivity so strongly emphasised by the authors of the encyclical does not match

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<sup>18</sup> „Aber bedeutet 'Gewissen' hier wirklich Subjektivismus und Willkür in der Moral?“, K.-W. Merks, op. cit. 131.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Cf., Ibid., 139.

<sup>21</sup> M. Vidal, *Die Enzyklika „Veritatis splendor“ und der Weltkatechismus. Die Restauration des Neothomismus in der katholischen Morallehre*, in: *Moral im Abseits?*, op. cit., 265.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Ibid., 267.

the moral concept of St. Thomas, for whom a moral life contains an intentional structure.<sup>23</sup> According to Vidal the encyclical excessively highlights the importance of the object, neglecting other sources of Christian morality, that is the circumstances, intentionality or focus on the ultimate aim. The “object” cannot be considered as an abstract reality and disembodied (*fleischlose*), but should be regarded as a “human situation”. It is, therefore, about integrating in the “subject” all the other circumstances, which are relevant for the ethical evaluation of the act, together with intentionality.<sup>24</sup>

Although Fuchs himself disagrees with this – in his view, it is completely opposite – the option emphasises the relationship and those specific personal acts may lead to its change.

#### **5. POPE JOHN PAUL II'S CORRECTION OF CHRISTIAN MORALITY (ETHICS) IN THE ENCYCLICAL *VERITATIS SPLENDOR***

In the enc. *Veritatis Splendor* Pope John Paul II opposes such relation between subjectivity and objectivity, which is about granting an individual conscience the prerogative of the highest authority of moral judgment, which shall categorically and infallibly decide on what is good and what is bad. The Pope, therefore, opposes granting the conscience and the reason complete, moral autonomy. In his ethical considerations John Paul II refers to the Bible. Explaining the need for a universal truth he evokes an excerpt from the book of Genesis of the tree of the knowledge of good and bad. “You are free to eat from any of the trees of the garden, except the tree of knowledge of good and bad. From that tree you shall not eat; the moment you eat from it, you are surely doomed to die” (Gen. 2, 16–17). The Pope uses this image to teach us that “the power to decide what is good and what is evil does not belong to man, but to God alone” (VS, 35). In the same paragraph of the encyclical, John Paul II reminds us of the truth, that only God is good and that His commandments, which He has engraved in our

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Ibid., 268–269.

hearts, do not restrict man's freedom, but on the contrary, they favour and guarantee its development.

The Pope's opposition towards the attempts at subjectivisation of morality is expressed mainly in the criticism of the new views on human nature, in which the subject himself equipped with a creative conscience would have the dominant importance. Such views could lead to a certain flexibility in handling human nature, which could be relegated to the role of biological material, which in turn could be freely manipulated.<sup>25</sup> It is the reason, independent from eternal law, that would play the decisive role in the understanding of the above-mentioned authors. According to the St. Thomas, cited by both sides of the conflict, the natural law is a law, as long as the reason reads the eternal law from the cognitive reality, especially the human reality, in all its richness. When considering the transcendentalist interpretation of the natural law, as presented by many contemporary theologians, it is difficult to find a real relationship of the human reason (*ratio humana*) with the *ratio Dei*, which is intended to be the first principle of human acts.<sup>26</sup>

John Paul II also stated a critical opinion on the fundamental option in the enc. *Veritatis splendor*. In no. 65 we read: "Some authors, however, have proposed an even more radical revision of the *relationship between person and acts*. They speak of a "fundamental freedom", deeper than and different from freedom of choice, which needs to be considered, if human actions are to be correctly understood and evaluated. Consequently, such position leads to a separation of the two spheres of freedom, the moral "good" and "evil" would only be considered transcendently and acting in the inner-world area, where man turns to himself, others and the material world, would be regarded in the category of "right" or "wrong"." We see here a specific reference to the views of K. Rahner and J. Fuchs, although they are not named *expressis verbis*. The problem with such a concept, is that it moves the weight away from the action understood as a personal act (*actus humanus*) to *actus hominis*, which is what takes place inside a human (although on a deeper level).

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<sup>25</sup> Cf. VS 46, 48.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. A. Szostek, *op. cit.*, 282.

It is no wonder that John Paul II defends the freedom of man as well as man himself by binding it with the truth. Only the truth shall set man free, yet in some ethical concepts it is eliminated and the criteria for evaluating the moral rightness of an action are drawn from the weighing of the non-moral or pre-moral goods.<sup>27</sup> Carriers of the truth about the good are Negative norms, which protect values and should never be questioned, are of particular importance. In the enc. *Veritatis splendor*, John Paul II reminds us that “On the other hand, the fact that only the negative commandments oblige always and under all circumstances does not mean, that in the moral life prohibitions are more important than the obligation to do good indicated by the positive commandments. The reason is this: the commandment of love of God and neighbour does not have in its dynamic any higher limit, but it does have a lower limit, beneath which the commandment is broken. Furthermore, what must be done in any given situation depends on the circumstances, not all of which can be foreseen; on the other hand there are kinds of behaviour which can never, in any situation, be a proper response – a response which is in conformity with the dignity of the person” (VS, 52).

At the same time, John Paul II points out, that in moral life one cannot only regard prohibitions, but obligations to do good are also important. In paragraph 53, the Pope notes that in contemporary culture, which is characterized by a great sensitivity to the historical and cultural considerations, some authors doubt about the sustainability of objective, moral norms. John Paul II opposes such perception of Christian morality. The key to proper recognition of the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity is the proper interpretation of the teaching on the sources of morality, with a particular focus on the object. The morality of the human act – reminds the Pope referring to the teachings of St. Thomas Aquinas – depends primarily and fundamentally on the “object” rationally chosen by the deliberate will, and to a lesser degree on the intentions, though they are also important.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Cf. VS 74.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. VS 78.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The concept of Christian morality proposed by Alfons Auer and the other representatives of autonomous ethics leads to the subjectivities of morality: moral truth becomes replaced by authenticity, which is a value in itself but remains wholly subordinate to the value of the truth about good. Although the proposal gained many followers, it has met with a strong opposition from pope John Paul II, who in the Encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* reinforced the traditional moral teaching regarding the moral qualification of a human act. In the view of the pope, the objectivity of moral assessment of an act decisively depends on the subject matter of the act, while the subject's intention and the circumstances are of auxiliary character.

The approach towards Christian morality proposed by the John Paul II does not impair moral subjectivity, which is an important element of moral life and is expressed in the judgements of the conscience and the experience of freedom. It does, however, show its limits. A separate problem pointed out by John Paul II is that concerning the reinterpretation of basic ethical terms: freedom, reason, conscience, human nature (an important aspect of the last one being self-understanding, as defined by E. Chiavacci. And yet everyone can understand and define himself/herself (his/her purposefulness, vocation in life, etc.) differently. Such a situation is not conducive to the proper assessment of the moral act: it causes confusion and opens the gates to any interpretation of its character. This kind of approach to morality undermines the category of "intrinsic malum", referring to acts which are *semper et pro semper* bad, regardless of the circumstances.

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