

Truth in Life and Action

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Abstract: *This article seeks to challenge the prevailing disillusionment with established structures and consequent emphasis on personal moral autonomy by recalling the meaning and function of personal responsibility in the context of prudence, the virtue of responsibility. Distinguishing responsibility for one's conscience from responsibility before one's conscience in making sound moral decisions, the author highlights two entirely distinct types of truth: objective truth belonging to conscience and consisting in conformity with reality and practical truth belonging to the virtue of prudence and consisting in conformity with the person's rightly disposed affective nature. For Aquinas this practical truth is moral truth in the strict sense and vital for living as a morally good person, even if one's conscience is in error.*

Key Words: conscience; moral responsibility; prudence; ethical autonomy; freedom; choice; practical truth

Australia's secularised society seems to be marked by a growing loss of confidence in the structures of the establishment, both civil and ecclesial. About accepted standards of the past many are disillusioned, apathetic, even cynical. In civic life religion, and especially Christianity, have moved to the margin for many. Catholics do not escape the influence of the society in which they live. Mass attendance has dropped sometimes dramatically. Many act as if what the Church has to say is irrelevant. About moral issues there is a growing relativism.

Coupled with this cultural change there is a shift towards moral autonomy and independence in the area of conscience. Many Catholics today see religious participation as a personal decision, not an obligation, with individuals free to make up their own minds on matters of both faith and morals. The 1993 Papal Encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* reacted strongly against this exaggerated exaltation of personal freedom and its offshoot, "a claim to a *moral autonomy* which would actually amount to an *absolute sovereignty*" and make conscience a law unto itself (35:3). On this basis it criticised unidentified moral theologians, who, it claims, have distorted the true understanding of conscience "in relation to human freedom and God's law" (55:1-56:2).

Freedom and Moral Responsibility

Human freedom is rooted in the very mystery of our personhood and therefore is an essential human characteristic. As Vatican II noted with approval, "a sense of the dignity of the human person has been impressing itself more and more deeply on the contemporary consciousness. And the demand is increasingly made that human beings act on their own judgment, enjoying and making use of responsible freedom, not driving by coercion and motivated by a sense of duty" (*Declaration on Religious Freedom* 1:1). Freedom is an essential condition for the exercise of moral responsibility; it is not moral responsibility

itself. Moral responsibility is the exercise of freedom in a positive sense, that is, as freedom of choice, freedom as self-determination, freedom as challenge to be answered and task to be achieved, freedom as “quest of the values proper to the human spirit” (1:2). And the document continues: “It is accordance with their dignity as persons - that is, as beings endowed with reason and free will and therefore privileged to bear personal responsibility – that all should be at once impelled by nature and also bound by a moral obligation to seek the truth” (2:3).

The exercise of such responsibility obviously requires a degree of maturity, some experience of life and of what normally happens, perspicacity and ability to sum up situations reasonably well. In a word, it presupposes personal growth, which is an ongoing, developmental process. Nor is it enough to have reached the level of maturity necessary to exercise freedom in a responsible way. One needs to be able to do so with consistency and with a fair degree of ease, not just on occasion or sporadically. For this one needs a good habit, a virtue, of responsibility. Aristotle spoke of the person of practical wisdom and emotional balance. Translating the Greek, St Thomas Aquinas called this the virtue of *prudential* (prudence). Practical wisdom or prudence is not an innate gift; it has to be acquired by repeated efforts until a pattern of good behaviour is built up and established as a virtue, a dimension of the person’s character. An essential aspect of this vision is that one cannot develop or exercise the virtue of prudence without the other moral virtues, which are necessarily interconnected. One cannot make a right decision in some circumstances unless one has control of one’s aggression, or in another situation without being able to overcome timidity. A morally mature person needs to have all those virtues that are relevant to his/her normal lifestyle. Only then may we really speak of a person “endowed with reason and free will and therefore privileged to bear personal responsibility.” But more of this later.

Responsibility for the Judgment of Conscience

In the act of conscience one judges the good that ought to be done and the evil that ought to be avoided. Moral responsibility requires of the individual person first of all to ensure that as far as possible that judgment is in accord with objective truth. In this sense, prior to being responsible before one’s conscience, one is responsible *for* one’s conscience. As *Veritatis Splendor* says, “the maturity and responsibility of these judgments – and, when all is said and done, of the individual who is their subject – are not measured by the liberation of conscience from objective truth, in favour of an alleged autonomy in personal decisions, but, on the contrary, by an insistent search for truth and by allowing oneself to be guided by that truth in one’s actions” (61:2).

As regards morality, truth is enunciated in moral principles, statements that contain value judgments about the morality of human actions. They are meant to protect the basic human values that cluster around the absolute and inviolable value of the human person. The most fundamental of these principles (primary precepts of the natural law), derive for Aquinas from the principle that one ought to love and do good and shun evil. Like the principle of contradiction, this principle is a purely formal one. It lays out the ground rules for practical reasoning.¹ It tells us how to think about ethical questions, it does not tell us though what to think. Other fundamental moral principles have more content and sketch in broad terms the indispensable conditions for living as a human person in community. They define the sort of person one should be, ‘loving,’ ‘honest,’ ‘compassionate,’ ‘just,’ in

¹ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, 94,2.

short the values which are the ends or goals of the moral virtues. Aquinas sums up these principles under the headings of the preservation of personal life and social relationships and the search for truth and social order. Respect for these values, both in oneself and in others, constitutes a responsible task in human moral activity.

Nevertheless these fundamental moral principles remain very general. They do not give specific information about what to do in order to be loving, compassionate, honest or fair-minded. But, since it can never be morally good to be unloving, dishonest or unjust, no matter what the circumstances, these fundamental principles are therefore universally valid, known to everyone and always true.² One ignores them, puts them out of mind, transgresses them, at one's peril, at the cost of failing to be fully human. And that raises the possibility of sin.

Because they are so general, these fundamental principles need to be made more specific and so we need more detailed principles setting out what should or should not be done in particular situations in order to be just, compassionate, honest, loving. These more detailed principles attempt to spell out in some detail and in concrete terms the human goods we should promote and the evils we should proscribe. These concrete moral principles are not mere deductions from the fundamental moral principles. One cannot logically deduce the desirability of open-heart surgery from the desirability of health, even though the former is based on the latter; and also, although it is true that in all cases health is a good thing, it is not true that open-heart surgery will in every case be a good thing.³

A long moral tradition deriving from Aquinas maintains that, because of differential application from situation to situation, *concrete* moral principles or, as they are often referred to today, "material moral norms," cannot be stated so as to exclude all possible exceptions. These more detailed good things to be done are less clear than the fundamental ones and so the more the attempt is made to arrive at the particulars about how general principles are to be realised in the concrete the more difficult it is to cover every situation and to preclude every exception.

A brief perusal of the origin of material moral norms illustrates this. Most people have inbuilt checks and balances in the way of at least some basic concrete moral principles, particularly negative ones like not telling untruths, not killing innocent people, not taking the goods of others, to which they subscribe and which serve them as guides for living morally. They have been formulated in the course of human history through the experience of what should be done and what should be avoided in order to become a genuine human person in oneself and in personal relationships. A great deal of pain, trial and error, besides many mistakes, has accompanied this learning process. Not only does the individual person mature and develop through life, but society and social groups too mature and develop and evolve over time. Many things that in an earlier age were not considered wrong at a later stage of evolution are judged differently. Slavery and the taking of interest on a loan are cases in point. Similar differences of moral evaluation are to be found across different cultures.

Clearly then there is development in human understanding of what it means to be and to live as a human person in community, and so in the enunciation of concrete moral rules for living, which cannot be hard and fast for everybody forever. There is no universal consensus either about the rules themselves or their formulation or their obligatory force. Of course, actions such as lying, stealing, killing, committing adultery have been experienced by the human race as so destructive of human relations that no culture or

² *Summa Theologiae* I-II, 94, 4,5 and 6.

³ Cf. Gerard Hughes, "Natural Law" in *Christian Ethics* (Cassell: London, 1998), 53-55.

time frame would ignore them, but people still disagree about their application in diverse circumstances and about what is to count as lying, stealing and unjustified killing. Material moral norms admit then of variability and exceptions. They are not universally true. Therefore, in following a material moral norm in an individual case, even with the best of intentions, one could be wrong. The judgment of conscience that, in this instance, on the basis of its conformity with the material norm, "This is the good that should be done," is thus not in accord with objective truth; it is erroneous.

Another problem with making objective truth co-extensive with material moral norms is this. Because of the complex fabric of human relationships, it is not unusual for persons to be faced with conflicting moral norms, for example telling the truth when to do so may mean serious injury or even death to an innocent person. Conflicts like this when one is confronted by more than one different moral claims are often fairly easy to resolve, for example, breaking a promise to be at a party in order to assist an accident victim and save a life when one happens upon such a situation en route to the party. One would not have to think very long or very hard to make a judgment that to come to the aid of the injured person in this situation is the right moral response. But other conflicts of moral claims can be quite difficult to work through, especially in a situation where one feels obliged to injure or even risk killing someone in order to prevent injuring or killing oneself or someone else. The problem lies in determining which norm should prevail in circumstances where more than one seems to bear on the situation. If, for example, one could construe terminating the life of a person suffering intolerable and unrelievable pain as doing good to that person, should the norm that imposes doing good to another prevail over the norm forbidding the direct killing of that person? Moralists have developed strategies for resolving such conflicts, but in the last analysis the decision has to be made prudentially.

It is also worth noting that concrete moral principles or norms cannot possibly cover the whole gamut of the demands of living a moral life. Clearly, in a rapidly changing world, moral norms that were considered sufficient to deal with life's problems in the past may have little relevance to the complexities of today. One thinks of the norms for a just war and the questions raised by the spectre of nuclear warfare. The issues raised by space age technology or genetics escape the limits of traditional moral norms.

Moral norms give us valuable enlightenment about the morality of a class of actions that bear a resemblance to one another but they cannot be expected to exhaust the infinite variability of human actions or to cover every conceivable case. This does not lessen their importance or their continuing relevance, but there is much more to moral life than what is laid out in this way and more is required of the individual person than mere observance of moral norms of this kind. Law, in the sense of obligatory directives imposed on us from outside ourselves, is not an adequate medium to convey the moral teaching of Jesus, who rejects, not law itself, but a morality that is limited to law. Perhaps this is why Vatican II prefers to speak of conscience, less in terms of conformity to an objective moral order enunciated in moral norms, and more in terms of an objectivity of persons and personal relationships.⁴

Objective truth thus considered is not laid out in advance nor co-extensive with material moral norms. It has to be sought and discovered by each individual person facing the complex reality of daily living. And this insistent search for the truth of one's situation measures the maturity and responsibility of one's judgments of conscience and indeed of

⁴ See my "Vatican II and Roman Catholic Moral Theology – 40 Years After," *Australasian Catholic Record* 80 (July 2003): 13-15.

the individual who makes them. This does not mean that the person is made the measure of truth; rather, the searcher must allow himself/herself to be measured by the fullness of the reality being faced, including the known moral rules or principles bearing on the situation. These are helps in seeking objective truth and can sometimes determine it decisively but they often provide only a limited indication of it and therefore are not always and in every circumstance true. They enlighten and inform the searcher after the objective truth, who will normally be more or less conscious of them, but the quest is ultimately not just a question of the application of something already given. It is a search, a discovery, in the light of what is presented in the actual situation with its attendant circumstances.⁵

Moral Responsibility and Free Choice or Decision

We are responsible not only *for* our conscience but also *before* our conscience for the choices we make. The most important exercise of moral responsibility is to ensure the goodness and truth of the moral decisions we make. This is the task of prudence, the virtue of moral responsibility.

As St. Thomas says in the Prologue to the second section of the second part of the Summa, every moral question comes back to a consideration of the virtues. As the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity seek to perfect personal relationships with God, so the moral virtues seek to realise the “human good... which is to live according to reason.”⁶ We grasp in our minds the goals of the moral virtues, for instance, to be compassionate, courageous, unselfish, big-hearted, just, and desire to be such a person, but we still have to work out how to realise these goals in the concrete situation. Virtue consists in the mean, the middle point between extremes. Sobriety, for example, involves recognising the difference between moderate and excessive drinking. The task of prudence is to determine the virtuous mean in the concrete.⁷

Prudence is much more than mere native shrewdness or caution. It is a virtue of reason. The person with the virtue of prudence listens to experience, seeks counsel from wiser heads, looks to the future to anticipate difficulties and size up the foreseeable consequences, in order to reach a decision that fits the particular configuration of circumstances, and so armed is disposed to make an elective judgement or decision about the means to take to achieve the end intended – the best way to do the virtuous action here and now. This decision directing the virtuous mean for this particular virtuous action between too much and too little is the principal act of the virtue of prudence. Prudence dictates, one might say *divines*, the decisions to be made in particular situations in order to act virtuously and so it penetrates the very act of the moral virtue itself. It is thus numbered among the moral virtues. It participates in the vital activity of the person acting in all that he or she is, as both cognitive and affective, and thus in the great source of action, which is not intelligence but affectivity. Perhaps the meaning of this virtue would be better brought out by calling it *wisdom of the heart*.

Light is shed on the meaning of this by what Aquinas says about the gift of wisdom.⁸ A person judges divine things either by using human reason perfectly or by a certain

⁵ Cf. Josef Fuchs, *Christian Ethics in a Secular Arena* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 1984), 9-41.

⁶ *Summa Theologiae* II-II, 47,6.

⁷ The classic treatise on prudence of course is *Summa Theologiae* II-II, 47-53. I am indebted in the following discussion to the unpublished notes commenting on the text by the late M-Michel Labourdette, O.P.

⁸ *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, 45, 2, 4.

connaturality or union with divine things, somewhat like the way a chaste person instinctively judges what is chaste because of a certain harmony with chaste behaviour. Only through the wisdom which is one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is a person enabled to resonate harmoniously with divine things. Similarly it is only by the virtue of prudence that a person resonates harmoniously with what is the virtuous course of action in this situation and decides upon it. And in this the prudent person, whose reason is rightly disposed by the virtue of prudence, is especially helped and perfected by the movement of the Holy Spirit through the gift of counsel.⁹

Practical or Moral Truth

An important and interesting facet of this teaching, which is often overlooked by students of Aquinas, is that as affective, as the inner regulation or directive thrust of the virtuous action, prudence or wisdom of the heart ensures the moral truth of the action. It enters the order of practical or moral truth strictly speaking and thus satisfies the infallibility necessary for the perfection of an intellectual virtue. For Aquinas moral truth in the strict sense is not conformity to objective reality as such, but harmony with the person's rightly disposed affective nature¹⁰ – and one's affective nature is rightly disposed for personal life in the right relationships with other persons and with one's world through the presence of the moral virtues. It might be said that moral truth, as Shakespeare suggested, means being "true" to oneself. It is practical truth, the truth of life and of action in all its human complexity.

The judgment of conscience is of course practical and obligatory, but it has truth more of the speculative type, by conformity with reality, with what in fact is. It can therefore be true or false, for conscience in complex questions is a fragile and fallible guide. We commonly speak of an erroneous conscience, arising either from voluntary or involuntary ignorance. People are sometimes responsible for their own ignorance and false, even anaesthetised, conscience. In that case they are not justified in following their conscience and their obligation is to correct it. But if one's judgment of conscience is inculpably and invincibly ignorant, although Aquinas maintains that one may not act against it, for him, in following it one is excused from fault but does not thereby perform a morally good act.¹¹ However, for Aquinas conscience is not all that is required for the truth of the action. The morally mature person has other resources for "doing the truth" in making right decisions, namely the virtue of prudence or wisdom of the heart. In the exercise of this virtue the person ensures the truth of the action in a judgment characterised by moral truth in the strict sense, a truth of a strictly practical rather than a speculative type, a truth that consists in the conformity of the action to the supreme principle of moral action – the goods intended by the moral virtues.¹² The decision made under the influence of the virtue of prudence is therefore morally good and true.

As a virtue of reason, prudence must be assured, under pain of ceasing to be virtue, of the objective moral goodness of the action chosen as far as this is possible in contingent matters. Given the infinite variability of human action, the degree of certainty about objective truth is necessarily limited. Certainty in moral judgments cannot be put on the

⁹ *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, 52, 1, 2.

¹⁰ "Verum autem intellectus practici accipitur per conformitatem ad rectum appetitum," *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, 57, 5 ad 3.

¹¹ *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, 19, 6.

¹² *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, 19, 5, 6 ad 4. Cf. *De Veritate*, 17, 1.

same footing as speculative or even scientific certitude. Moral certitude excluding the reasonable fear of being in error is all that is possible – and this is sufficient for human prudence.¹³ Prudence is certainly in no way opposed to the objectivity of the judgment of conscience. Rather it postulates and demands it. However, for Aquinas prudence ensures the truth, not directly of the judgment of conscience, which precedes it, but of the judgment of election, the moral decision. The judgment of conscience is only one regulatory element of moral action and its objective truth is less important for Aquinas than the moral truth of the action ensured by prudence. As already noted, it is prudence, wisdom of the heart, that realises in practice the pattern of the loving, faithful, generous, courageous, just way of life and that sorts out the priority among the various demands of virtue in particular situations. This is vital for living as a morally good person.

Experience confirms that situational moral decisions are not infrequently an arena of tension between subjective factors and objective ethical principles of moral evaluation. Catholic moral theologians have traditionally resolved this tension by holding that an individual's moral choice may be made in good faith and so may be subjectively without moral fault even though the object of that choice is in itself morally wrong. Although the distinction between objective and subjective moral goodness is a valid one, for there is indeed objective good and evil, it is important to remember that this order of good or evil becomes a norm for acting and is converted into moral truth *only when it is grasped by the person and chosen*. Morality does not have an abstract objectivity, but an objectivity mediated by reason in the judgment of conscience. It is transformed into a truth of life and of action in the judgment of choice, the moral decision which is the fruit of prudence. Perhaps we could say that here objectivity and subjectivity coincide. The insights contained in an objective appraisal of a particular situation and the individual person seeking moral truth 'encounter one another' and lead to a new understanding, both of the self and of the situation.

It is worth noting that theories of conscience adopted by many contemporary moral theologians and psychologists come close to what Aquinas had to say about the virtue of prudence and identify the judgment of conscience with the prudential judgment. Aquinas himself never does this. Conscience and prudence are quite distinct and are characterised by entirely distinct types of truth. Provided this is kept in mind and allowance made for it, there would seem to be no grave difficulty in extending the notion of conscience to include moral decision making, although *Veritatis Splendor* is unhappy with doing this.

What practical implications follow from the foregoing reflections? In the first place, material moral norms, rules and regulations, authoritative moral teachings, whether of parents, educators or church leaders, are vitally important for the formation of conscience. The child needs discipline and direction. The adult often needs guidance on the part of mature, well-informed people. The person who lives by faith listens to and learns from the fruit of the distilled wisdom of the church. Personal freedom cannot be used to justify purely arbitrary judgments of conscience. But at the same time laws, norms, rules and teachings cannot contribute to the development of moral responsibility unless they also lead to people internalising genuine human and religious values, fostering in this way the growth of moral virtue, and learning to take control of their own lives and decisions. Laws of any sort are ultimately made for the protection and development of these values. The values are more important than the measures taken to enshrine, protect and cultivate them, just as moral truth as understood by Aquinas is more important than conformity with objective truths.

¹³ *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, 47, 3 ad 2.

In consequence, the prime challenge facing parents, educators, pastors and others is to encourage, inspire and inculcate by example, teaching, and every means in their power the moral development of those for whom they care. If presented as they should be, the good of virtue, the value of the ends or goals of the moral virtues, will exercise their own attraction. It is true that not all become virtuous nor do we always act virtuously. St. Paul put his finger on it when he said: "I do not understand my own behaviour; I do not act as I mean to, but I do the things I hate. While I am acting as I do not want to, I still acknowledge the law as good" (Rom 7:15-16). Our failures hopefully are not for the most part serious and do not mean that we lose the moral virtues and cease to be in the main virtuous people. The attraction in all human persons towards goodness and truth outweighs the attraction of evil and untruth. In their hearts people want to do what is good and true. They yearn for God even if they are not aware of this. To accept this is surely evidence of our trust in human nature, made by God and for God. And this is especially so if we believe in the presence of the Spirit, who breathes where he will, in all persons of good will.

In his discussion of the virtue of prudence St. Thomas Aquinas is of course presenting an ideal. He makes no judgment about the actual achievement of the ideal in real life. This he left to others. In an era of rigorism, St. Alphonsus was such a one. A staunch follower of Aquinas, he learned from his experience working among the shepherds and goatherds scattered through the rugged hills behind the Amalfi coast to trust in the moral goodness of the ordinary often ignorant person. In the light of this, he taught that confessors not only may, but indeed must, leave honestly mistaken people in peace, unless of course the common good or the rights of innocent parties are at stake. Not only are they not guilty of any moral fault in following their invincibly erroneous conscience, but on the understanding that they are acting with prudence and out of love for God or neighbour their decisions are good and meritorious. For St. Alphonsus, Patron of confessors, this is how real people actually live and act. One could hardly be called rash in echoing his trust in the goodness of normal human beings.

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