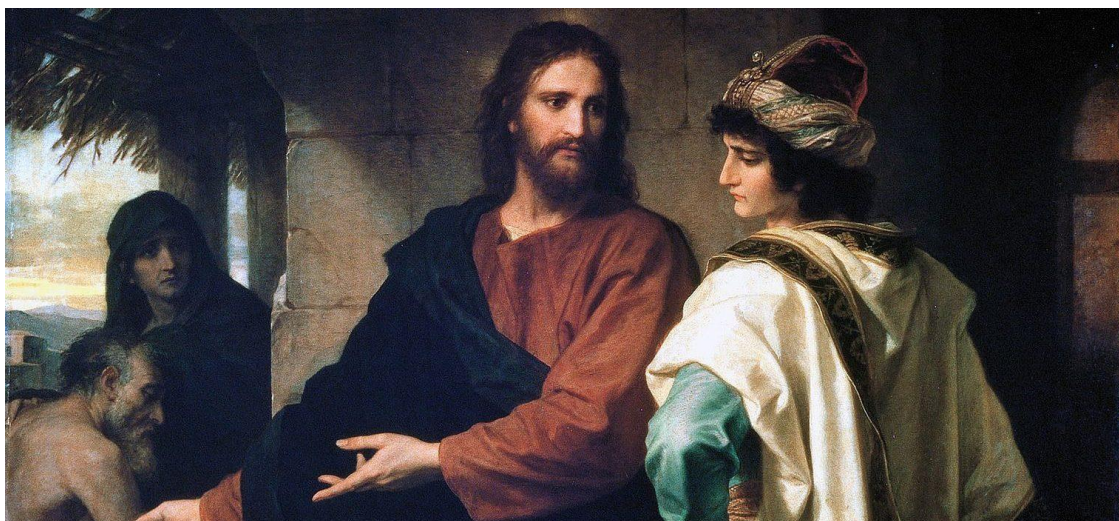


## THE DYNAMISM OF ACTION AND THE TRUTH OF LOVE

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“Morality could be established in a solid and incontestable manner; but to ply it to use, a new type of logic quite different from that which we have up to now would be needed.” With this quotation from Gottfried W. Leibniz, Maurice Blondel begins his insightful 1903 essay dedicated to the search for “The Elementary Principle of a Logic of the Moral Life.”<sup>[1]</sup> The French philosopher laments that “too frequently logic has been seen as a sort of Canon standing outside what it is meant to judge and regulate.”<sup>[2]</sup> Abstract logic, based on the principle of contradiction, proposes absolute oppositions and determinations in the very heart of the ephemeral and relative that makes up the moral life. How can logic and morality, the contingencies of life and the absoluteness of obligation, be reconciled?

Blondel proposes to move from the artificial point of view of formal logic to a new kind of logic, namely that of “living truth”<sup>[3]</sup>: the real logic of life that “put[s] abstract thought back in contact with thinking and acting thought.”<sup>[4]</sup> He recalls that “action reveals something new to us always and its logic outstrips all analytic deduction”; in fact “since freedom [is] necessarily engendered in us by the spontaneous dialectic of life ..., it is this dynamism which is antecedent to, accompanies, and follows upon

freedom, which logic should clarify,”<sup>[5]</sup> if one wants a kind of thinking truly in consonance with life.

## 1. The Point of View of the Acting Subject

The ingenious reflection of the philosopher of Aix-en-Provence highlights the need of overcoming an extrinsic, rationalistic approach that focuses on the task of forming an objective judgment on human acts with the help of codified moral norms. Ethical rationalism takes on the point of view of an external observer (the judge or the confessor).<sup>[6]</sup> It is a “third-person” ethics, which prevailed since the beginning of the modern era, focusing on the concepts of duty and moral obligation. These concepts were meaningful in the context of a worldview that saw God as a lawgiver, but they have become obsolete and empty in the post-modern era.<sup>[7]</sup>

The opposite position, that is, that of the subjectivism of conscience, is likewise entirely inadequate. By refusing any external normative reference or by radically subordinating any such reference to private judgment or feeling, subjectivism simply reverses the terms of the question without however resolving the dichotomy between the universality of the norm and the singularity of the case and between the objectivity of the act and the subjectivity of the person. Here, again, we are dealing with a judgment applied to action from the outside, although now the judge is one’s own individual conscience.

It is necessary to start afresh from moral experience, that is, to recover the original perspective that is able to grasp the dynamism of action in its tendency toward the good. Aristotle begins his reflection in the *Nicomachean Ethics* precisely from this perspective.<sup>[8]</sup> Along these very lines, the encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* (n. 78) suggests that in order to grasp the object of human action in its specifically moral dimension and in order to overcome the aporias of modern ethics, it is necessary to place oneself into the perspective of the acting subject. This is the perspective those who “in the first person” construct their actions as acts that tend toward particular human goods—the objects of their desire—and that at the same time determine the goodness of the subjects themselves, inasmuch as they want these goods in view of the ultimate good of happiness. This is the specific perspective of moral praxis, that is, of the subject who acts on the basis of an end and aspires to the good that can make the agent happy, giving fullness to his or her life.



The acting subject realizes that his or her acts not only procure certain goods and change the outside world, but they also change the agent, making him or her good or bad not according to a particular technical skill (e.g., a good craftsman, a good doctor, a good professor, etc.), but in reference to the overall goodness of the will and one's being a human person (a "good" craftsman, a "good" doctor, a "good" professor, etc.). This is the perspective of "acting" and not only of "making" (in Greek: *praxis / poiesis*, in Latin: *agere / facere*).

The decisive question of *praxis* consists in understanding the criterion that establishes whether what "appears" good to me is also "good in truth." It is the question of the truth of the good, which from the point of view of the subject is the truth of one's desire of the true good: it is the truth of the subject who in his or her free aspiration directs him or herself toward the proper end. Ethics therefore needs a theory of action, which is also a theory of the acting subject and of the principles that allow the acting subject to achieve the truth of his or her person. Along these lines, Blondel accurately referred to "the standpoint of living truth," in which the destiny of the person is involved in acting: "We are always more or less what our action is; what we do makes us; likewise, what we do not do contributes to defining us."<sup>[9]</sup>

Karol Wojtyła has dedicated one of his fundamental writings to the question of the relationship between person and act, taking the point of view of an anthropology that is at the service of ethics.<sup>[10]</sup> He showed how it is precisely the dependence of the will on truth that makes possible the transcendence of the subject with respect to the particular objects that attract us on the immediate appetitive level. The "truth about the good" is therefore presented as a condition of the transcendence of the subject in acting and therefore of his or her free self-determination. Wojtyła's analysis, however, is anthropological and not ethical: that is, it proceeds from the act to the person, "factoring out," as he puts it, the moral dimension, which for us is what specifically interests us here.

To elucidate the moral dimension, the method to be followed is not that of going upstream but that of following the direction of the current, reflecting on moral *praxis* in a way that captures the subject's free dynamism with which he or she tends to his or her fullness. This is the approach that St. Thomas Aquinas adopts in the *Secunda Pars* of the *Summa Theologiae* and that he succinctly expresses as the "motus rationalis creaturae in Deum—the rational creature's movement toward God."<sup>[11]</sup> The freedom of human persons specifically reflects their being in



the image and likeness of God. Freedom is not exercised in a transcendental option outside of time, but in the discursive context of temporality with its drama of fragmentation, of searching, of revocability, of the necessity to adapt to different and variable situations, and of the need for choices without certainty about the path to take.

How to give a firm, coherent, integrated orientation to the choices through which human freedom decides its eternal destiny in time? And how is it possible to think of the synergy of our finite freedom with the action of divine grace in us? This great word “synergy,” which some Fathers used to explain the mystery of the divine-human action of Christ and the human-divine action that is our own,<sup>[12]</sup> was recalled by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger to indicate the fundamental task of Catholic moral theology. According to him, its task is to envision “the collaboration of human action and divine action in the full realization of the human person.”<sup>[13]</sup>

The theory of action on which a coherent moral theology is based seeks the conditions that allow the person who acts to be an authentic moral subject, the author of a moral conduct that gives shape to a truly good life, in synergy with divine grace. Without violating the rational and voluntary nature of the human dynamism proper to action, God’s grace works from within to sustain, heal, inspire, sustain, and elevate it. The inner principles of action are the virtues, and for this reason moral reflection is structured as a theory of the virtues. This is how St. Thomas Aquinas thought of it, who in the prologue of the *Secunda Secundae* affirms that “all moral matters are reduced to the consideration of the virtues,” both the theological virtues, which, through grace, dispose the subject in his or her order to the ultimate end that is God, and the cardinal virtues, which render the subject capable of moral excellence with regard to human goods, which are the object of choices.

A significant current of contemporary moral theology is characterized by a deliberate “rediscovery of the virtues.” This rediscovery mainly had two sources: in the Anglo-Saxon context, it came with a neo-Aristotelian note, following the vision of Alasdair MacIntyre. In the French-speaking realm, it was part of a renewal of authentic Thomism, mostly at the hands of Father Servais Pinckaers.<sup>[14]</sup> These two currents have rediscovered what is original to virtue ethics of an Aristotelian and Thomistic inspiration, understanding the virtues not simply as yet another topic to be studied by morality, but as the key factor of a fundamentally different approach to morality as a whole.<sup>[15]</sup>





To place oneself into the perspective of the subject, the author of the action, means first of all to grasp the particular action in the context of the overall dynamism that unites the action both to the final end and to the proximate ends of the virtues. In this way one avoids perceiving individual acts as atoms or unrelated monads and inserts them into a dynamic of personal fulfillment. Taking on the perspective of the acting person also permits us to identify the object of the act in a non-physicalist manner, in accordance with the previously mentioned wish expressed by *Veritatis Splendor*. As the Angelic Doctor affirms, what morally specifies the act (*species moralis*) is not its external aspect (*species physica*), but its intentional content, grasped by practical reason. “Species moralium actuum constituuntur ex formis prout sunt a ratione conceptae— species of moral actions are constituted by forms as conceived by the reason.”<sup>[16]</sup>

Intentionality involves practical reason. The so-called “intentional basic action,”<sup>[17]</sup> which is also referred to as the “object of an action” and which specifies it morally, arises from the convergence of two elements: “*what is done*” (*what* in the outward physical sense) and “*for what purpose one acts*” (*why* as the intrinsic end of the act).<sup>[18]</sup> It is only in the convergence of these two factors that we can identify human actions in their proper object—which is the intrinsic end that makes them specifically a certain type of action: the *finis operis*—and then qualify them from the ethical point of view. Otherwise, one has only “facts that happen.” An act seen according to its *genus naturae* (its physical aspect or natural species) is one thing, while an act understood in its *genus moris* (its moral species), which is grasped by practical reason, is quite another.<sup>[19]</sup> Thus one can avoid both objectivism, which focuses solely on the object seen from the outside, and subjectivism, which one-sidedly emphasizes the interior intention (*finis operantis*).

## 2. Moral Truth as Practical Truth About the Good

In its specifically moral dimension, practical reason has the task of enlightening and guiding the acting subjects in the choices that lead them to the fulfillment of their vocation to happiness.<sup>[20]</sup> The moral perspective enables us to grasp the proper sense in which persons can be qualified as “good.” Persons are good not only because they exist (ontological goodness), but also because through an act of the will, that is, through their free actions, they are oriented toward goodness (moral goodness).<sup>[21]</sup>



Here “the good of the person” comes into play, which, according to *Veritatis Splendor* is “the goodness of the will of the person who acts” (n. 52). And in fact, “The ultimate perfection of the person is an act of the person: the act by which the person—and no one else in his or her place—dynamically reaches out toward the good and actualizes him or herself.”<sup>[22]</sup> What is at stake here is not a perfection of individual operative powers or individual faculties, nor is it a question of the perfection of only certain sectors. Rather, at issue here is the perfection of the subject as such, insofar as he or she acts. In this way, one overcomes an idea of the good based on mere desirability, as in Aristotle, who defines the good as “what all desire,”<sup>[23]</sup> and now comes to connect it with the idea of perfection, based on the good as a free act of self-determination.<sup>[24]</sup>

In the light of the “good of the person,” which is the perfection of the acting subject, one can also determine the specific goodness of the particular acts that the agent performs and that aim at realizing or achieving the “goods for the person,” which are the objects of specific desires (life, food, sexuality, sociality, knowledge of the truth, etc.). These goods correspond to natural inclinations and have a heuristic function in revealing the significance of these inclinations. In the concrete, however, the goods for the person must not be evaluated on the merely ontic level. The criterion for evaluating them must rather be whether or not the choices that concern them can be ordered to the comprehensive and concrete good that the person is called to achieve. Therefore, while it is true that “the good of the person” cannot be realized apart from willing individual “goods for the person,” it is nonetheless also true that these goods assume moral value only in the light of the “good of the person” as such, in its fullness. This good thus has a hermeneutical value and permits the natural inclinations to assume the form of the moral virtues, that is, to aspire to the goods of nature in a way that conforms to the complete personal good. We can therefore say that the moral virtues shape the natural inclinations and particular desires in such a way as to bring them into harmony with the moral good of the person. They thus aspire to ends that are not merely natural, but virtuous (*finis virtutum*).

The task of practical reason is therefore to order particular goods, which are the objects of our spontaneous tendencies, toward the moral good as such. What is required to this end is, first of all, a healing of our disordered orientations, which are the result of concupiscence deriving from original sin.<sup>[25]</sup> Further, our appetitive tendencies need to be integrated, so as to allow us to will and do the good with steadfastness, ease, and joy. Finally, from a Christian perspective, these tendencies need



to be elevated toward the supernatural end of our loving and beatifying union with God.

Here, then, one must refer to human bodiliness, which is the place where the fundamental tendencies toward human goods take root and manifest themselves, and it is also the space in which the person opens up to the world and especially to the world of those persons with whom he or she enters into relationship. The human being, in fact, is a personal unity of body and soul, “*corpore et anima unus*” as the Second Vatican Council expresses itself in *Gaudium et Spes*.<sup>[26]</sup> In this way the document warns against dualistic ideas that favor a disembodied spiritualism or an illusory autonomy of conscience. In the human being, consciousness itself is bound to the experience of bodiliness.<sup>[27]</sup> Giving the proper importance to our bodiliness allows us to understand the interplay between “the good of the person” and “the goods for the person” in a personalistic and realistic way, which is of decisive importance for practical rationality. In this context it is worth quoting in full a passage from the encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*:

The person, by the light of reason and the support of virtue, discovers in the body the anticipatory signs, the expression and the promise of the gift of self, in conformity with the wise plan of the Creator. It is in the light of the dignity of the human person—a dignity which must be affirmed for its own sake—that reason grasps the specific moral value of certain goods towards which the person is naturally inclined. And since the human person cannot be reduced to a freedom which is self-designing, but entails a particular spiritual and bodily structure, the primordial moral requirement of loving and respecting the person as an end and never as a mere means also implies, by its very nature, respect for certain fundamental goods, without which one would fall into relativism and arbitrariness.<sup>[28]</sup>

In its openness to the world and to relationships, the bodily dimension attests to the importance of the affections in the cognitive dynamics of practical reason. In today’s cultural climate, the realistic character of affectivity has been obscured by the emergence of the category of emotion. The corresponding “emotional subject” judges the value of acts solely on the basis of the emotions they provoke and therefore consigns him or herself to fragmentation and closure in private individualism, except when seeking public compensation in a mere utilitarianism.<sup>[29]</sup> For this reason, we rightly speak of an “emotional-utilitarian subject.” He or she is content with authenticity, that is, with a perceived coherence in his or momentary emotion.<sup>[30]</sup> The psychological category of emotion has replaced and absorbed the various categories of classical anthropology,



such as appetites, passions, feelings, affections. These had allowed for a wide range of nuances when it came to interpreting experience and, above all, had permitted an understanding of emotion as rooted in the world, ensuring the realistic and cognitive character of affective experience.<sup>[31]</sup>

In fact, by considering the affections within the dynamic unity of action one can overcome the dichotomy between subject and object and avoid falling prey to emotivistic privatization.<sup>[32]</sup> Knowledge by connaturality, proper to the affection, allows for a correlation by which the object is present in the subject him or herself. Moreover, especially when it is connected to love as the root of every affection, affective knowledge involves a specific mode of universality, which is very different from a merely rationalistic understanding of universality, because it is neither deductive, as proposed by Descartes, nor transcendental, as Kant has it. The concreteness of love is due to love's original mode of contact with reality, taken in its individuality. Here reality, without losing anything of its personal implication, manifests itself in a communion in the good that has universal significance. The recognition of this original gift, which comes from the love of the Creator and which moves the dynamism of action, metaphysically guarantees the dimension of universality. It is missing in Blondel's analysis. Precisely here is, moreover, the specific novelty of Christianity: Balthasar's idea of a "concrete universal" allows us to recognize the singular eschatological character of the Christ event, and it permits us to answer Lessing's—and in general the Enlightenment's—objection that it is allegedly impossible to base universal ethical demands on particular historical facts.<sup>[33]</sup>

An affection is an *impressio*, an *affici*, a being touched and changed by an external reality that provokes a reaction, that attracts or repels.<sup>[34]</sup> Through the affection, the reality that touches the subject becomes an interior presence that elicits a movement, an appetite or a repulsion. This reality is therefore the first mover of the appetite, the latter thus emerging as a reaction or response to an initial intervention that has its origin on the outside. What primarily and fundamentally produces this affection is the relationship with another person. The person of the other provides the context for the most fundamental passion, the passion of love, with decisive importance for the emergence of responsibility and moral truth, which therefore has an irreducible affective dimension.<sup>[35]</sup> Here, as will be seen, the inner presence, which is given in the affection and stirs to action, is that of the beloved in the lover.





When Aquinas distinguishes practical truth from speculative truth, he states that the latter has its criterion in the conformity of the intellect with reality, while practical truth “depends on conformity with right appetite.”<sup>[36]</sup> Practical truth does not consist, therefore, only in pure knowledge, but involves the integration of two elements: first, the appetite, which is stirred by affection and which also implies the will; and second, rectitude, which is determined by reason as it orders things to their end. This means that the attainment of moral truth is not the work of a purely intellectual effort, but involves the presence in the subject of ordered affective dispositions. According to Aristotle’s saying, fully shared by St. Thomas, virtuous persons are the living measure of moral truth, because that which is good in truth seems good to them.<sup>[37]</sup> They can be the measure insofar as they represent the perfect realization of what it means to be human.

### 3. The Logic of Love

The category of “the truth about the good,” so dear to Karol Wojtyła,<sup>[38]</sup> is illuminated precisely by the interpersonal experience of love and is thus integrated into the broader category of “the truth of love.” In fact, St. Thomas affirms that “good is loved inasmuch as it can be communicated to the lover.”<sup>[39]</sup> Something appears to us as good in relation to another person whom we love and to whom we want to give it. Love therefore reveals itself as a cognitive factor with its own original logic that prevents the reduction of moral knowledge to any rationalist system.<sup>[40]</sup> Love, in fact, cannot be deduced: it is an event that happens and not the conclusion of an argument. It has its own reasons and its own requirements.<sup>[41]</sup> Love is a light that makes us see the reasons for the goodness of reality, directing these toward the realization of communion and becoming the driving force of action. Saint Gregory the Great, in the context of a theological reflection, affirms love’s cognitive primacy: “we already know the things we love, because love itself is knowledge.”<sup>[42]</sup>

The reference to the experience of love is not strategic or phenomenological in nature, but responds to the internal logic of love, as it appears in the relationship that is established between the person and the act of loving. This experience also corresponds to a profound intuition of personalism, which recognizes three specific levels of interpersonality,<sup>[43]</sup> as summarized in the categories of presence, encounter, and communion. These categories can be understood as three phases of a moral dynamism that arises from the experience of an originally



interpersonal union: an antecedent, existential and final phase. The presence of the other in affective union (*unio affectus*) is the initial gift of love, which is then revealed existentially in the personal encounter that in turn sets in motion a dynamism tending to real union (*unio realis*) in the communion of persons.<sup>[44]</sup> Articulating matters this way allows for a more complete and precise understanding than is provided by Martin Buber's merely dialogical approach or Blondel's view that is based exclusively on the dynamism of desire and what he calls the "willing will" (*volonté voulante*). These three levels of the experience of love can moreover be linked to the Blessed Trinity, referring respectively to the original creative foundation in the Father, to the historical encounter with the Son, and to the dynamic fulfillment inspired by the Holy Spirit.<sup>[45]</sup>

The basic structure of love as an act is defined by the fact "that the lover wills the good for his beloved."<sup>[46]</sup> This structure shows that the relationship of love is of unique importance for grasping the good, and it also reveals that the mediation of human goods is necessary in order to realize the goal of communion: in the relationship of a subject with another subject the good's objective reality emerges as a necessary mediation of love.

The primacy of love in action is also at the same time the primacy of the gift, because human love is essentially a response to a Love that precedes it and calls it to give a response. Before being an action (to love), love is a passion, and as an action it is a response to an event that has happened inwardly and that is experienced as a gift of great promise. "Since God has first loved us (cf. 1 Jn 4:10), love is now no longer a mere 'command'; it is the response to the gift of love with which God draws near to us."<sup>[47]</sup> Love is at the root of the dynamism of action. It is the driving force that impels action and the guiding light that directs it. "Amor praecedit desiderium," love precedes desire.<sup>[48]</sup> Desire thus turns out to be the response to a vocation, a vocation that is not to be understood as a mere verbal appellation, but, more profoundly, as a grace that inspires and moves us.

By its very structure human freedom takes the form of a response. Considering it an autonomous initiative without presuppositions, as the construction of oneself from oneself, is short-sighted and presumptive. Freedom is rather the consent to a prior initiative. To be precise, freedom has a Marian form, both as creaturely freedom and as correspondence to divine grace. It has the form of the Blessed Virgin Mary's "fiat" to the Angel Gabriel's annunciation. Here, within the horizon of love, we



rediscover the synergy between the human and the divine that underlies the dynamism of Christian action.

In his Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, Pope Benedict XVI reminds us that love has the character of an event, that is, a fact of freedom which involves the person in his or her very identity. “Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction” (n. 1). In his encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, Saint John Paul II places the origin of Christian morality precisely in the encounter with the Lord Jesus, so that it takes the form of the vocation to follow Christ. In the encounter with Him, persons experience that they are called to perfection, that they are summoned to “be more” through the sincere gift of self (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 24).

The encounter with Christ is the foundation of Christian morality insofar as it is a “vocation to love,” in which the divine initiative provokes and sustains the human response, revealing the person in his or her deepest mystery. “Man cannot live without love. He remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself, his life is senseless, if love is not revealed to him, if he does not encounter love, if he does not experience it and make it his own, if he does not participate intimately in it.”<sup>[49]</sup> Speaking of Jesus’ encounter with Zacchaeus, St. Augustine magnificently expresses the precedence of God’s love over our response: “Ut videremus, visi sumus; ut diligeremus, dilecti sumus—in order to see, we have been looked at; in order to love, we have been loved.”<sup>[50]</sup>

#### 4. Charity, Norms, and Virtues

Commenting on the Gospel of John, the great bishop of Hippo asked about the reciprocal order between God’s commandments and love in Christian morality: “Does love bring about the keeping of the commandments, or does the keeping of the commandments bring about love?” He answered, “But who can doubt that love comes first? For the one who does not love has no reason for keeping the commandments.”<sup>[51]</sup> This is a text cited by *Veritatis Splendor*, in the context of the reflection on the encounter with Jesus as the foundation of morality, a text that clarifies in a definitive way the primacy of love in the moral life.<sup>[52]</sup>

The question just mentioned brings into play a debate that has run through Catholic moral theology for more than half a century. It is not simply a matter of more or less emphasizing one element to the detriment



of another. Rather, two divergent approaches are at stake here, marking the difference between classical morality and “modern” morality as two alternative ethical figures.<sup>[53]</sup> The former takes the perspective of the first person or the acting subject and is centered on the categories of virtue and prudence, while the latter adopts the perspective of the third person, or the judge or confessor, and is based on the categories of law and conscience. The classical approach unfolds morality as a dynamism of action in pursuit of the good and the achievement of happiness; the modern approach focuses on the assessment of individual acts in their conformity to the requirements of justice as established by the precepts of the law.

Of course, even in an ethics of the first person, the concept of “law” plays an important and indispensable role. However, situated in the dynamism of action, it is not seen primarily as an obligation flowing from the will of the human or divine legislator. Rather, the law is a wise ordering of wisdom, which arranges things with regard to their end. This is also how it is understood biblically: it is an *opus sapientiae* and *ordo rationis*, a work of wisdom and an order of reason, instructing us on the path to go so we may achieve happiness.<sup>[54]</sup> The law is not the product of an arbitrary and inscrutable will, but the expression of a truth about the good, which does not oppose freedom as an incomprehensible limit but rather assists it in its most intimate aspiration.

There is a truth that precedes and establishes the law. In this sense, Saint Thomas’ preferred metaphor for the law is instructive. It is the metaphor of light, which he uses above all when referring to the natural law, understood as a natural light on the good. It is in this sense that he resorts to citing Psalm 4, providing an explanation that is also taken up by the encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*:

“After saying: Offer right sacrifices (*Ps* 4:5), as if some had then asked him what right works were, the Psalmist adds: *There are many who say: Who will make us see good?* And in reply to the question he says: *The light of your face, Lord, is signed upon us*, thereby implying that the light of natural reason whereby we discern good from evil, which is the function of the natural law, is nothing else but an imprint on us of the divine light.”<sup>[55]</sup>

For the approach prevailing in modernity, in contrast, the law is understood primarily as a moral “norm,” i.e., a rule that is imposed on freedom by force of obligation, often in an arbitrary form (legalism). Thus, William of Ockham reverses the fundamental terms of the relationship between command and moral value of the action by stating: “malum quia





prohibitum, bonum quia iussum—an action is bad because it is prohibited and good because it is commanded.”<sup>[56]</sup> This vision had its origin in the voluntarism and nominalism of the Franciscan school of the late Middle Ages.<sup>[57]</sup> It developed further in the laxist currents of post-Tridentine casuistry. These accepted and further developed the Ockhamist idea of the absolute will of God, on which basis some even maintained that God could change the commandments of the Decalogue and make committing fornication an act of virtue and honoring one’s parents a vice.<sup>[58]</sup> Such a legalistic conception also has harmful consequences for pastoral care, because it understands pastors as arbitrary legislators invested with full powers, rather than teachers of the truth about the good.<sup>[59]</sup>

According to virtue ethics, moral norms are subordinate to the virtues in a twofold manner: epistemologically, norms formulate a reflective judgment on the excellent choice made by the virtuous subject; educationally, they exist to make human beings virtuous.

Recognizing the moral virtues, one fully assumes the point of view of the acting subject. The virtues are part of the moral dynamism. Inasmuch as they are “stable dispositions to do the good,” they render the subject such that he or she is capable of performing excellent actions. Entirely different from a habit that diminishes or takes away freedom,<sup>[60]</sup> they perfect the ability to choose in a way that is appropriate to the circumstances: virtues are a *habitus electivus*,<sup>[61]</sup> which does not predetermine the object of choice (*id quod eligitur*), but molds an excellent way of choosing (*id cuius gratia eligitur*). For this reason, virtue, in contrast to vice, produces an increase in spiritual freedom.

Moreover, the doctrine of the virtues corresponds to an integral and unitary anthropology. As mentioned above, according to it the human person is the subject of action insofar as he or she “exists as a whole — corpore et anima unus”<sup>[62]</sup>—one in body and soul. The moral subject is not pure reason or autonomous freedom: he or she is also body, instinct, emotion, sensitivity, passion. None of these components can be simply repressed, but all must be integrated into a harmonious whole, which finds its point of reference in reason and in the truth about the good as apprehended by the reason. The key concept of an ethics of virtues is indeed that of *integration*, by which a plurality of components is brought into a harmonious and dynamic unity by being ordered to the authentic end, the complete human good. In the light of the truth about the good, reason can order each dimension in view of the end. Far from being impervious to reason, the various components are naturally disposed to receiving its form,



inasmuch as they carry within themselves an implicit orientation towards the good in its integrally human quality (*bonum hominis*).<sup>[63]</sup> The human faculties are predisposed to being perfected by acquiring the virtuous *habitus*. The good of the human being is the *bonum rationis*, insofar as it is also *bonum virtutis*.

The virtues are thus rooted in practical reason. Hence, at their heart there lies a rational and universal principle: the “seeds of the virtues” (*semina virtutum*) that are also, at the same time, truths about human goods, which freedom is called to love and pursue. In other words, they are the basic principles of the natural law.

The virtues make us love what is truly worthy of love: the true human good that brings the desire for happiness to its fulfillment. Reference to the truth about the good removes the discourse of the virtues from the danger of subjectivism and historical relativism. The virtues are not mere “character traits,” which the subject acquires as a question of individual interest.<sup>[64]</sup> Nor are the virtues social qualities that arise within the life of a community and must be explained in this context, as some contemporary “communitarians” have it, adopting a neo-Hobbesian approach. Both the individualistic and communitarian theories of virtue ultimately prove insufficient in that they are incapable of distinguishing between virtues and vices. They lack a theory of practical reason, which allows virtue to be rooted in a truth about the good, excluding from the virtuous life acts that are intrinsically evil.<sup>[65]</sup>

The perspective of the virtues, in contrast, is at the same time and more radically the perspective of love. In fact, as Saint Thomas says, basing himself on Saint Augustine: “Virtus dependet aliquo modo ab amore—virtue depends in some way on love.”<sup>[66]</sup> Love is at the root of the virtues not only because love is the fundamental passion of the will on which the virtues are based, but also because love creates connaturality. Connaturality, in turn, offers the light for the intelligence peculiar to love, which the virtuous person needs in order to know and choose the good. Exploring connaturality as the primary mode of moral knowledge is still an unfinished endeavor.<sup>[67]</sup> The truth about the good from which the virtues draw their sustenance is thus properly the truth of love, on which we have previously reflected.

Finally, the theological synthesis of virtue ethics is assured by the idea of charity as the form of the virtues.<sup>[68]</sup> In fact, charity orders the person’s intentionality towards the ultimate, supernatural end, ensuring the intentionality’s ultimate and true dimension. However, as it orders the



person's intentionality to the ultimate end, charity does not absorb the individual virtues. Rather, these maintain their moral identity on the basis of their own ends established by reason. Only what conforms to the truth about the human good can be elevated by charity so as to become a factor in the supernatural good.

Charity, then, has its minimum requirement, which is detachment from evil and the person's fundamental orientation toward God. This lower limit concerns one's being bound to God in a covenant, in a personal union that either exists or not, without possible middle term. Once there is this fundamental union, charity can gradually grow infinitely, without any higher limit. The function of negative moral norms, which prohibit acts that are intrinsically evil, has to do with the lower limit of charity: the deliberate choice of these acts is incompatible with charity, precisely because it is incompatible with the moral virtues.<sup>[69]</sup>

Charity is defined by Aquinas as a certain form of friendship with God: "amicitia quaedam est hominis ad Deum."<sup>[70]</sup> This definition preserves at the same time charity's gratuitous character as a relationship given by grace and charity's acting as a *habitus*. In the dynamism of the moral life, friendship with God operates as a virtuous disposition, permeating every choice and directing it toward the supernatural fulfillment of communion with God. Charity also has a Christological dimension: in fact, Christ is the most excellent Friend: "maxime sapiens et amicus,"<sup>[71]</sup> who instructs us with his counsel and accomplishes with his grace what we would not be able to do on our own, so that by turning to him through our free will, we can attain beatitude, and it is as if we had attained it by ourselves. For what is made possible for us through our friends is done, in a sense, by ourselves.<sup>[72]</sup> Thus, it is in terms of friendship and virtue that Aquinas explains the synergy that moves and sustains the dynamism of Christian action.

## Conclusion

In order to reconcile morality with life, Blondel had hoped to find an alternative to a rationalist logic that applies rules to cases: a logic of life, in harmony with the intimate dynamism of life, a logic that does not renounce the absolute demands of martyrdom, without which there is no morality, but which grasps these demands from within the subject who aspires an end that transcends any order immanent to nature.



Exploring the experience of the dynamism of action from the perspective of the “first person,” we have been able to discover the logic of love as the original source of our aspiration toward the good. In this way, we have been able to see that the logic of love is at the same time the logic of the gift. The gift is given freely. It is at the root of our freedom. The gift does not limit our freedom, but stimulates it, so as to come to its fulfillment by giving itself in turn. The truth about the good, expressed by the law and realized in the virtues, is therefore not a limitation, but rather the condition for an adequate response to the vocation of life itself, which is the vocation to love, giving oneself in turn.

*Translated by Stephan Kampowski*

*Endnotes:*

1. Maurice Blondel, “The Elementary Principle of a Logic of the Moral Life,” in *The Idealist Illusion and Other Essays*, Springer, Dordrecht 2000, 95. [↑](#)
2. Blondel, “Elementary Principle,” 110n5. This is taken from Blondel’s letter to Enrico Castelli, dated December 8, 1924, which was used as a preface to the Italian translation of this work. [↑](#)
3. Blondel, “Elementary Principle,” 104. [↑](#)
4. Blondel, “Elementary Principle,” 109. [↑](#)
5. Blondel, “Elementary Principle,” 107. [↑](#)
6. On this subject see: Giuseppe Abbà, *Felicità, vita buona e virtù. Saggio di filosofia morale*, LAS, Roma 1989, 97-104. [↑](#)
7. See: G.E.M. Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy” (orig. 1958), in *Human Life, Action and Ethics*, Essays by G.E.M. Anscombe, ed. by Mary Geach & Luke Gormally, “St. Andrews Studies in Philosophy and Public Affairs,” Imprint Academic, Exeter UK 2005, 169-194. Reference must also duly be made here to Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue. A Study in Moral Theory*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, Ind. 1981. [↑](#)
8. Cf. Martin Rhonheimer, *The Perspective of Morality. Philosophical Foundations of Thomistic Virtue Ethics*, CUA Press, Washington, DC 2011, 46-65. [↑](#)
9. Blondel, “Elementary Principle,” 104. [↑](#)
10. Karol Wojtyła, *Persona e atto*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City 1982, in particular 161-166. [↑](#)
11. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q, 2, prologue. For a full appreciation of the Thomistic novelty of this perspective, subsequently lost in modernity: Giuseppe Abbà, *Lex et virtus. Studi sull’evoluzione della dottrina morale di san Tommaso d’Aquino*, Las, Rome 1983, 160-164. [↑](#)
12. The theologian of divine-human synergy is above all Saint Maximus the Confessor. In this regard, see the accurate and thoughtful study by Luis Granados, *La*





*synergia en San Máximo el Confesor. El protagonismo del Espíritu Santo en la acción humana de Cristo y del cristiano*, Cantagalli, Siena 2021. [↑](#)

13. Joseph Ratzinger, “Il rinnovamento della teologia morale: prospettive del Vaticano II e di *Veritatis splendor*,” in Livio Melina and José Noriega, eds., *Camminare nella luce. Prospettive della teologia morale a partire da Veritatis splendor*, Lateran University Press, Rome 2004, 35-45. [↑](#)

14. Servais Pinckaers, *Les sources de la morale chrétienne. Sa méthode, son contenu, son histoire*, Cerf, Paris 1985; *Plaidoyer pour la vertu*, Parole et silence, Paris 2007. [↑](#)

15. For an articulate theoretical synthesis, I refer to the final, weighty study of Giuseppe Abbà, *Le virtù per la felicità. Ricerche di filosofia morale – 3*, Las, Rome 2018. [↑](#)

16. *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 18, a.10. [↑](#)

17. Cf. Rhonheimer, *Perspective of Morality*, 101-105. [↑](#)

18. Decisive here is the contribution of G.E.M. Anscombe, *Intention*, 2d ed., Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1963, §§ 22, 35. [↑](#)

19. Rhonheimer, *Perspective of Morality*, cit., 143-162. [↑](#)

20. For what follows see: Juan José Pérez-Soba, *La verità dell'amore. Una luce per camminare. Esperienza, metafisica e fondamento della morale*, Cantagalli, Siena 2011. [↑](#)

21. Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *De Malo*, q. 1, a. 5: “bonum enim et malum dicitur simpliciter quidem secundum actum; secundum quid vero secundum potentiam.” See: Joseph De Finance, *Être et agir dans la philosophie de Saint Thomas*, 3rd ed., PUG, Rome 1965. [↑](#)

22. Carlo Caffarra, “Primum quod cadit in apprehension practicae rationis” (I-II, q. 94, a. 2). *Variazioni su un tema tomista*,” in *Attualità della Teologia Morale. Punti fermi-problemi aperti. In onore del Rev. P. J. Visser, Csr*, Urbaniana University Press, Rome 1987, 143-164. [↑](#)

23. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, I, 1, 1094a 1-3. [↑](#)

24. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 5, a. 1: “unumquodque est appetibile secundum quod est perfectum.” [↑](#)

25. Johannes Paul Andre, *Concupiscentia und temperantia: auf der Suche nach einem realistischen Bild christlicher moralischer Tugend mit Thomas von Aquin*, EOS, Sankt Ottilien 2019. [↑](#)

26. Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 14, quoted in *Veritatis Splendor*, n. 48. [↑](#)

27. This was brilliantly comprehended by Vladimir Solovyov, *The Justification of the Good: An Essay on Moral Philosophy*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 2005. [↑](#)

28. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Veritatis Splendor*, August 6, 1993, n. 48. [↑](#)

29. Cf. Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought. The Intelligence of Emotions*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge MA 2001. [↑](#)

30. Cf. Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA 1992. [↑](#)



31. Very instructive on the subject: Thomas Dixon Jr., *From Passions to Emotions. The Creation of a Secular Psychological Category*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge UK 2005. [↑](#)
32. Cf. Francesco Botturi, “Etica degli affetti?” in Francesco Botturi and Carmelo Vigna, *Affetti e legami*, Vita e Pensiero, Milan 2004, 37-64. [↑](#)
33. Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Nine Propositions on Christian Ethics,” in Joseph Ratzinger, Heinz Schürmann, Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Principles of Christian Morality*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1986, 82-84. [↑](#)
34. Cf. Pérez-Soba, *La verità dell’amore*, 48-53. [↑](#)
35. Cf. Roman Ingarden, *Sulla responsabilità*, Cseo, Bologna 1982. [↑](#)
36. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 57, a. 5, ad 3: “verum intellectus pratici aliter accipitur quam verum intellectus speculativi, ut dicitur in VI Ethic. 2,3. Nam verum intellectus speculativi accipitur per conformitatem intellectus ad rem. (...) Verum autem intellectus pratici accipitur per conformitatem ad appetitum rectum.” For this see Livio Melina, *La conoscenza morale. Linee di riflessione sul commento di san Tommaso all’Etica Nicomachea*, Città Nuova, Roma 1987. [↑](#)
37. Thomas Aquinas, *Sententia Libri Ethicorum*, III, 10, 89-90; cf. Melina, *La conoscenza morale*, 11-114. [↑](#)
38. Cf. Wojtyła, *Persona e atto*, 161-174. [↑](#)
39. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 28, a. 4, ad 2; III, q. 18, a. 5, ad 2; cf.: D.M. Gallagher, “Person and Ethics in Thomas Aquinas,” in *Acta Philosophica* 4 (1995), 51-71. [↑](#)
40. Cf. Juan José Pérez-Soba and Luis Granados, eds., *Il logos dell’agape. Amore e ragione come principi dell’agire*, Cantagalli, Siena 2008; Pérez-Soba, *La verità dell’amore*, 86-87. [↑](#)
41. Harry G. Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ 2004. [↑](#)
42. Gregory the Great, *XL Homiliarum in Evangelio libri duo*, 2, h. 27, 4 (CCL 141, 232): “amata iam novimus, quia amor ipse notitia est.” [↑](#)
43. Cf. Juan José Pérez-Soba, *La pregunta por la persona, la respuesta de la interpersonalidad. Estudio de una categoría personalista*, Facultad de Teología San Damaso; Madrid 2004. This work takes its main bearings from Maurice Nédoncelle, *Vers une philosophie de l’amour et de la personne*, Aubier-Montaigne, Paris 1957. [↑](#)
44. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, I, 1, c. 91 (n. 760): “affectus amantis sit quodammodo unitus amato, tendit appetitus in perfectionem unionis, ut scilicet unio quae iam inchoata est in affectu, compleatur in actu.” [↑](#)
45. In Livio Melina, José Noriega, and Juan José Pérez-Soba, *Camminare nella luce dell’amore. I fondamenti della morale cristiana*, 3rd edition, Cantagalli, Siena 2017, we have elaborated a treatise of moral theology that corresponds to the approach illustrated here: one that is based on a Trinitarian articulation and on the threefold distinction of the levels of the interpersonality of love. [↑](#)



46. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, III, 90 (Marietti, n. 2657): “in hoc precipue consistit amor, quod amans amato bonum velit” [↑](#)
47. Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Deus Caritas Est*, 25 December 2005, n. 1. [↑](#)
48. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 25, a. 2. Cf.: Livio Melina, “Amor praecedat desiderium. Razionalità pratica e relazioni nella visione tomista dell’esperienza etica,” in Paolo Gomasca, Paolo Monti, and Giacomo Samek Lodovici, eds., *Critica della ragione generativa*, Vita e Pensiero, Milan 2017, 83-96. [↑](#)
49. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptor Hominis*, 4 March, 1979, n. 10. [↑](#)
50. Augustine, *Sermones* 174, 4, 4. [↑](#)
51. Augustine, *In Iohannis Evangelium Tract.*, 82, 3 (CCL 36, 533). [↑](#)
52. Cf. John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, n. 22. [↑](#)
53. Cf. Livio Melina, *Il discernimento nella morale coniugale*, Cantagalli, Siena 2019, 129-162; see also the fundamental studies of moral philosophy by MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, and by Giuseppe Abbà, *Quale impostazione per la filosofia morale? Ricerche di filosofia morale I*, Las, Rome 1995. [↑](#)
54. Cf. for example: Deuteronomy 30; for a summary of biblical theology on the law: Paul Beauchamp, *La loi de Dieu*, Seuil, Paris 1999 ; Carlos Granados García, *El camino de la ley. Del Antiguo al Nuevo Testamento*, Sígueme, Salamanca 2011. [↑](#)
55. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 91, a. 2, quoted in n. 42 of the Encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*. For a recent comprehensive view of Thomist doctrine on the law: Giorgio Maria Carbone, *Morale della legge. La legge senza timore*, ESD, Bologna 2020. [↑](#)
56. William of Ockham, *Quaestiones in librum secundum Sententiarum*, q. 4 and 5, St. Bonaventure University, St. Bonaventure NY 1981. [↑](#)
57. Cf. A. Poppi, “Il problema dell’intrinseco malum in Guglielmo d’Ockham,” in *Studi sull’etica della prima scuola francescana*, Centro Studi Antoniani, Padova 1996, 123-143. [↑](#)
58. This thesis, argued by Juan Caramuel y Lobkowitz, was condemned by the Holy Office in 1679: DH 2148-2149. [↑](#)
59. Cf. Germain Grisez, “Legalism, Moral Truth and Pastoral Practice,” in Thomas J. Herron ed., *The Catholic Priest as Moral Teacher and Guide, Proceedings of a Symposium Held at St. Charles Borromeo Seminary, Overbrook, Pennsylvania – January 17-20, 1990*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco CA 1990, 97-113. [↑](#)
60. Cf. Servais Pinckaers, “La vertu est toute autre chose qu’une habitude,” in *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 82/4 (1960), 387-403. [↑](#)
61. Cf. Angel Rodriguez Luño, *La scelta etica. Il rapporto tra libertà e virtù*, Ares, Milan 1988. [↑](#)
62. *Veritatis Splendor*, n. 48, which quotes *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 14. [↑](#)
63. On this subject: Eberhard Schockenhoff, *Bonum hominis. Die anthropologischen und theologischen Grundlagen der Tugendethik des Thomas von Aquin*, Grünewald, Mainz 1987. [↑](#)

64. This is the position of Philippa Foot, *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy*, B. Blackwell, Oxford 1981. [↑](#)
65. Cf. James F. Keenan, *Virtues for Ordinary Christians*, Sheed and Ward, Kansas City, MO 1996. [↑](#)
66. *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 56, a.3, ad 1. Cf. Daniel Granada Cañada, *El alma de toda virtud, “Virtus dependet aliquantulum ab amore”*: una relectura de la relación amor y virtud en Santo Tomás, Cantagalli, Siena 2016. [↑](#)
67. Cf. José Miguel Pero-Sanz Elorz, *El conocimiento por connaturalidad. La afectividad en la gnoseología tomista*, Universidad de Navarra, Pamplona 1964; Rafael Tomás Caldera, *Le jugement par inclination chez saint Thomas d’Aquin*, Vrin, Paris 1980. [↑](#)
68. *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 62, a. 4: “Sic enim caritas est mater omnium virtutum et radix, in quantum est omnium virtutum forma”; II-II, q. 23, a. 8. Cf. José Noriega, “Guiados por el Espíritu” *El Espíritu Santo y el conocimiento moral en Tomás de Aquino*, Pul-Mursia, Rome 2000. [↑](#)
69. *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 24, a. 12; *Veritatis Splendor*, n. 67; John Finnis, *Moral Absolutes. Tradition, Revision, and Truth*, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington DC 1991. [↑](#)
70. *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 23, a.1. [↑](#)
71. *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 106, a. 1. Cf. Eugen Biser, *Der Freund. Annäherung an Jesus*, Piper, München 1989. [↑](#)
72. *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 5, a. 5. [↑](#)

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