

To Be Good Is to Do the Truth: Being, Truth, the Good, and the Primordial Conscience in a Thomist Perspective¹

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*For Richard Schenk, O.P., on the Occasion of His
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The Dominant Self-Image of Late Modern Humanity: The Sovereign Subject

IN THE EARLY DECADES of the twenty-first century, an observant spectator might perceive the striking ambiguity that haunts the self-image of late modern humanity in the Western Hemisphere. The rapidly accelerating progress of the scientific penetration of the natural world and the ensuing technological domination of the whole planet seem to have advanced humanity into a quasi-divine position, into a collective Demiurge. Sovereignty, once upon a time an exclusive attri-

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bute of divinity, seems now to fall to humanity collectively, and to each individual human subject in rather far-reaching specific ways.

In the affluent parts of the Western Hemisphere, subjective sovereignty is exercised by way of the unfettered rule of one's will over (ideally) everything exterior to one's will, from myriads of consumer goods to varyingly branded identities and, last but not least, ideological and religious affiliations. The precious and tenaciously defended privilege of subjective sovereignty is, of course, choice. The scope of choice is seen as directly proportional to the degree of subjective sovereignty—an increase in the former indicates an increase in the latter.

However, the interpretation of reality that the natural sciences communicate to the public presents a jarringly different picture—a picture that puts into question the very possibility of subjective sovereignty. The human mind is understood as an epiphenomenon of the brain's neurological processes, and human choices are predicted with statistical precision and unmasked as ultimately driven by nothing other than the interests of the “selfish gene.” According to the naturalist savants of the most advanced life-sciences, humans are nothing but highly sophisticated primates that will eventually be transparent without remainder to the scientific gaze and, therefore, open to comprehensive governance by way of the most advanced psychological and technological means of manipulation.

Thus, the modern subject vacillates between two competing self-images. On the one side, we find the gnostic angelism of the putatively disembodied sovereign self that may submit to its will an absolutely malleable and fluid exteriority. And on the other side, we find the materialist animalism of a super-primate that is the accidental product of the intricate interplay between random genetic mutation and specific ecological niche preferment. The extremes touch each other insofar as trans-humanism (an outgrowth of the fantasies of the sovereign self) and post-humanism (the reductive understanding of the human being as super-primate) coincide in their de facto erasure of the embodied rational being, the *animal rationale*.

As always, so also in our contemporary context, deeply shaped by the utopian pretenses of trans-humanism and post-humanism, sovereignty has two aspects: the sovereign agent and the objects upon which sovereignty is exercised. The interminable struggle in late-modern technologically advanced, economically consumer-capitalist, and politically putatively liberal societies of the Western

Hemisphere is to avoid at all costs being subjected to—and thereby objectified by—the sovereignty of others and simultaneously to maximize one’s possibilities of exercising subjective sovereignty.

In our robustly secular and deeply skeptical Western societies, subjective sovereignty is the one transcendence the modern subject remains certain of, since it is self-produced. This particular form of transcendence is a decidedly immanent transcendence, for its outer horizon is death. Death defies all strategies of maintaining or increasing subjective sovereignty—albeit with one significant exception: the unique strategy of folding death into the last act of one’s own subjective sovereignty by sovereignly determining the terminus of oneself and the subsequent annihilation of one’s body. It is this deeply ironic, yet equally deeply consistent, consequence that betrays the profound pretention and falsehood of the self-image of subjective sovereignty.

The Metaphysics of Being and Its Three Fundamental Premises Regarding Being, Truth, and the Good²

What might be the cure from this pervasive but profoundly false self-image? I would submit, in all due modesty, that the only lasting cure will be nothing short of recovering and reconsidering an alternative that is truly radical in that it attends to the roots from which the false self-image of subjective sovereignty arises. This radical alternative is nothing else but divine sovereignty. But note well that divine sovereignty does not denote the contradictory to subjective sovereignty, meaning the competitive sovereignty of the “Other” (as most moderns would misunderstand divine sovereignty), an alternative sovereignty that would annihilate or at least curtail subjective sovereignty, a threatening sovereignty that, in the service of protecting subjective sovereignty, must be placated, ignored, or simply declared non-existent. Such a cure would quite obviously not get to the root of the problem at all. It would only intensify the stratagems of sovereign subjectivity. Rather, getting to the root of the problem means nothing less than to undertake the labor of recovering and reconsidering the primordial reality of the transcendent Good and its non-competitive sovereignty. This recovery and reconsideration would afford once again direct access to an objective moral reality in the light of which we can begin

² The whole essay, especially the following section, is deeply indebted to Josef Pieper’s interpretation of Aquinas in his *Reality and the Good*, which (in the English translation) forms the second part of the book *Living the Truth*, trans. Lothar Krauth (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989).

to understand the deeply problematic nature of the anthropocentric turn. This program of recovery forms an important part of the Thomist engagement of modernity.

At the heart of this program stands the comprehensive retrieval of the metaphysics of being, which, in its full depth, is necessarily a metaphysics of creation. It rests on the fundamental Thomistic principle that “*creare est dare esse*,” that to create is to give existence. This principle marks the crucial onto-theological difference between the transcendent creative source of all existence, the subsistent act of being, on the one hand, and on the other hand, the participated act of being, the “*dare esse*,” the term of which is the “*datum*,” the gift of the contingent existence of discrete beings. Nothing less than such a recovery will reach deep enough to eradicate the bitter roots which feed the self-images of gnostic angelism and materialist animalism.

This Thomist metaphysics of being entails three fundamental premises, premises I cannot develop (let alone defend) in this essay, but only name and in the following suppose as true, because I intend to focus on one, albeit crucial consequence of these premises—the primordial conscience. It is the reality of the primordial conscience that allows us best to confront the problem of subjective sovereignty and, in principle already, to overcome it. But first, the three fundamental premises entailed in the metaphysics of creation must be examined.

The first is the *ontological premise*: “*Deus omnium entium est mensura*”—God is the measure of all things. Through the creative knowledge of God, all real things are what they are. Differently put, all created things have their pre-form, their model, in the intellect of God; the divine knowledge is their exterior formal cause. Aquinas puts it thus: “Natural things from which our intellect gets its scientific knowledge measure our intellect. Yet these things are themselves measured by the divine intellect, in which are all created things—just as all works of art find their origin in the intellect of the artist. The divine intellect, therefore, measures and is not measured; a natural thing both measures and is measured; but our intellect is measured and measures only artifacts, not natural things.”³

³ *De veritate*, q. 1, a. 2, resp., in Aquinas, *Truth*, vol. 1: *Questions I–IX*, trans. Robert W. Mulligan, S.J. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), 11. For an astute and lucid treatment of this important topic, see Gregory T. Doolan, *Aquinas on the Divine Ideas as Exemplar Causes* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2008).

In the last sentence, Aquinas refers to the realm of *technē* or *ars*, the vast realm of human creative ingenuity. But the intellect's ability to give the measure depends on the antecedent reception of the measure by the intellect. Aquinas states, "The human intellect is measured by things, so that a human concept is not true by reason of itself, but by reason of its being consonant with things, since *an opinion is true or false according as it answers to the reality*."⁴ Thus, the second premise, the *epistemological premise*, follows directly from the ontological premise: Pace Kantian critical idealism and Husserlian transcendental phenomenology, human cognition attains the truth of real things. In the order of being, the measure that the extant thing receives by way of the original gift of being is its essence, its substantial form. In the order of knowledge, the measure that the intellect receives from the extant thing by way of the senses is the intentional form. The measure that constitutes the thing, its substantial form, and the measure that the object communicates to the intellect, its intentional form, are identical in essence but subsist in different modes of being, *esse reale* and *esse intentionale*.

From the epistemological premise follows the third premise, which pertains to *the order of action*. Here is one of Aquinas's many formulations of this principle: "The will does not have the character of a first rule; it is rather a rule which has a rule, for it is directed by reason and the intellect."⁵ The intellect's relation to reality antecedes the will's relation to it. As the rational appetite, the will's execution of specific acts depends on the prior deliveries of the intellect. The intellect's proper object is being and the intellect's proper end is truth. Affirming the primacy of the intellect over the will, Aquinas states that "the good, as truth, is related more primarily to knowledge than it is related, as good, to the will."⁶ The human good is therefore not

⁴ *Summa theologiae* (hereafter, *ST*) I-II, q. 93, a. 1, ad 3. All English citations from *ST* are taken from the translation of the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Bros., 1948; repr. Christian Classics, 1981), and alterations are indicated by brackets. Consider the superior luminosity of Aquinas's Latin rendition: "Intellectus . . . humanus est mensuratus a rebus, ut scilicet conceptus hominis non sit verus propter seipsum, sed dicitur verus ex hoc quod consonant rebus, *ex hoc enim quod res est vel non est, opinio vera vel falsa est* [Aristotle, *Categories* 5.22]" (available at <http://www.corpusthomicum.org/sth2093.html>).

⁵ *De veritate*, q. 23, a. 6, in Thomas Aquinas, *Truth*, vol. 3, *Questions I–IX*, trans. Robert W. Schmidt, S.J. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), 119.

⁶ *ST* I-II, q. 19, a. 3, ad 1; see also *De veritate*, q. 21, a. 3.

what the will sovereignly determines it to be. Rather, the human good is that which is first and foremost in accord with reality. But what is “reality”?

“Reality” is one of those concepts that belong to the very bedrock of Aquinas’s metaphysics. According to Josef Pieper’s lucid characterization in *Reality and the Good*, for Aquinas, “reality” means primarily two things expressed by the two Latin words *realis* and *actualis*: one derived from the Latin *res*, thing, and the other from *actus*, action. *Res* signifies everything “that is ‘presented’ to our sense perception or our intellectual cognition, all that has being independently of our thinking.”⁷ *Actualitas*, on the other hand, signifies the opposite to whatever is merely potential. “Reality in this sense means the realized potentiality.”⁸ And thus, to be good means not only to be directed toward realization, or actualization, but rather also to be “realized” and hence fully in accord with reality. Aquinas states, “Each thing is perfect in so far as it is actual [i.e., realized], since potentiality without act [i.e., without realization] is imperfect.”⁹ Of course, absolute *actualitas*, the *Ens Actualissimum*, is the sovereign good, God. *Nota bene* that the divine absolute *actualitas* does not entail that, in God, all potentialities are actualized. Rather, it denotes that, without anything having been actualized, God is simply pure act in infinite plenitude.

The Eternal and the Natural Law

According to the ontological constitution of participated being, each being is directed first and foremost to its own perfection, to the full actualization of its nature. Simultaneously, by the self-same actualization of its nature, every being is directed to the twofold good of the universe: the order among the parts and the ordering of the whole universe to God.¹⁰ Aquinas holds it to be a sovereign manifestation of the sovereign good, God, that, in all eternity, by an act of the divine will informed by divine wisdom, God intends the end of a perfect universe. No single being, however, is able perfectly to manifest this surpassing

⁷ Pieper, *Living the Truth*, 111.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ ST I-II, q. 3, a. 2. “Realized” and “without realization” are my own alterations, rather than those of the translators.

¹⁰ See esp. *Summa contra gentiles* I, ch. 29, and III, chs. 23–32. On this topic, now available in English, see the important essay by Charles de Koninck, “The Primacy of the Common Good against the Personalists,” in *The Writings of Charles de Koninck*, vol. 2, ed. and trans. Ralph McInerny (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 63–108.

goodness. Therefore, God created an abundance of diverse beings with a plethora of different perfections. The universe as a whole thereby more perfectly manifests and participates in God's goodness. However, beings are more like God when they act and cause being. For this very reason, Aquinas argues, God created all things in a state of potency to their particular type of action. When each being performs its particular type of action, it contributes to the perfection of the universe. And because God creates and guides creatures to their proper perfection in light of the same end (the perfection of the whole), each being acts in accord with its particular mode of participation in the act of being that is its primary perfection, the substantial form. Through these acts, which are its secondary perfections, each being reaches its specific end. These secondary perfections are the way each being participates in the eternal law, the *ratio* by way of which God governs the universe.¹¹ God's *ratio*, the eternal law, has imprinted upon all beings natural inclinations to their proper natural ends. Precisely by following their natural inclinations, all beings pursue their own perfection and contribute to the perfection of the whole universe.

Rational beings participate in this *ratio* in a unique way, a way proper to their rational nature. In analogy to the eternal law, Aquinas calls this natural cognitive participation of rational beings in the eternal law "natural law."¹² In virtue of the natural law, rational creatures are "partakers of a share of providence, by being both provident for [themselves] and for others."¹³ This participation occurs by way of the natural inclination of practical reason to the proper act and end of the rational being: "On the part of practical reason, [the human being] has a natural participation of the eternal law, according to certain general principles."¹⁴ Aquinas calls this natural participation of the eternal law by the human being *synderesis*, which denotes the primordial conscience.

But what is *synderesis*? Aquinas distinguishes two aspects of the

¹¹ For a lucid discussion of this complex topic, from which I learned a lot, see John Rziha, *Perfecting Human Actions: St. Thomas Aquinas on Human Participation in Eternal Law* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2009).

¹² *ST* I-II, q. 91, a. 2. Aquinas understands the natural law fundamentally as the rational creature's participation in the eternal law, which "is nothing else than the type of Divine Wisdom, as directing all actions and movements" (*ST* I-II, q. 93, a. 1, resp.). For an instructive treatment of this crucial aspect of Aquinas's sapiential moral theology, see Rziha, *Perfecting Human Actions*, 199–230.

¹³ *ST* I-II, q. 92, a. 2, resp.

¹⁴ *ST* I-II, q. 91, a. 3, ad 1.

human intellect: speculative reason and practical reason. The end of each is truth: for speculative reason, truth in the order of being, and for practical reason, truth in the order of agency. Speculative reason and practical reason are able to pursue and achieve their end, truth, only in virtue of certain fundamental principles that reside in the intellect as innate habits or dispositions. The innate habit of speculative reason contains the first principles of abstract reason, and the innate habit of practical reason contains the first principles of action. The principle of non-contradiction is based upon the concept of being, which is the proper object of the speculative reason; the first principle and the first precept of *synderesis* are based upon the concept of the good, which is the proper object of practical reason.

Synderesis—the Primordial Conscience

Synderesis, the primordial conscience, is a natural, innate *habitus* of the human mind. In virtue of this unique *habitus*, human beings are enabled, and indeed ordered, “to have a primary infallible judgment about the good as the end and the meaning of human action.”¹⁵ This destination toward such a primary and infallible judgment is possible because this innate natural *habitus* contains the first principle and the first precept of practical reason. Its first principle is “good is that which all things seek after,” and its first precept is “good is to be done and pursued, and evil is to be avoided.”¹⁶ As the foremost Thomist moral theologian, Servais Pinckaers, rightly stresses, it is important to realize that the first precept “does not primarily signify an obligation to do the good. Rather, it expresses the attraction of the good. . . . It is this urgency of the truth within the good, within the very attraction of the good, that is at the heart of the intimate awareness of duty and obligation.”¹⁷ The first precept expresses the inherent attraction of the good as understood good. The natural *habitus* of first principle and first precept enables the rational creature not only to move to some perceived good but also to realize the *ratio finis*, the character of good. Because good

¹⁵ Pieper, *Living the Truth*, 153.

¹⁶ *ST* I-II, q. 94, a. 4, resp. Aquinas explains: “*Good* is the first thing that falls under the apprehension of the practical reason, which is directed to action: since every agent acts for an end under the aspect of good. Consequently, the first principle in practical reason is founded on the notion of good, i.e., that *good is that which all things seek after*. Hence this is the first precept of law, that *good is to be done and pursued, and evil is to be avoided*” (ibid.).

¹⁷ Servais Pinckaers, O.P., *Morality: The Catholic View*, trans. Michael Sherwin, O.P. (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2001), 100.

is the perfection that all beings desire and to which all beings move as their final end,¹⁸ the primordial conscience, *synderesis*, enables the human qua *rational* being to realize the teleology of the good by participating, by way of the natural law, in the eternal law. Genuine human freedom arises precisely from the rational being's proper *rational* participation in the eternal law and is perfected when the rational being acts fully in accord with the eternal law.¹⁹

Incidentally, on the supposition of the fundamental teleological ordering of the universe, the so-called naturalistic fallacy (the illicit transition from "is" to "ought," from the order of being to the moral order, a putative fallacy invented by David Hume and named by G. E. Moore) is a moot concern.²⁰ For, belonging all the way down to the extant teleologically ordered universe, human beings—as all other beings—are teleologically constituted by way of their natural inclinations.²¹ As a tendency to its proper end or good, the "ought" is embedded in the "is" of every being, and especially in those beings that realize their perfection through the exercise of practical reason. The primordial conscience, *synderesis*, is not only a formal but also a teleological principle interior to practical reason itself.

There is one further implication given with the interior teleological constitution of practical reason. Because *synderesis*, the primordial

¹⁸ ST I, q. 5, aa. 1 and 4.

¹⁹ Rziha, *Perfecting Human Actions*, 265: "For Thomas, freedom does not come from a blind movement of the will or sense appetites but comes from the will and sense appetites being determined by human reason to intend and choose acts in accord with the ultimate end of humanity. . . . Hence, freedom is bound up in rationality, which derives its light and intellectual forms from the eternal law. . . . Authentic human freedom is first and foremost caused by the eternal law and only caused by the human through the soul's participation in the eternal law."

²⁰ One can, of course, argue that *synderesis* does not exist. But the burden of the proof rests with the one who advances such an argument, for the overwhelming empirical evidence in human history speaks for the existence of *synderesis*. For a modern discussion of the problem raised by Hume expressly in his anonymously published 1739/40 *Treatise of Human Nature, Being an Attempt to Introduce the Experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects* (III, I, 1), coined as "naturalistic fallacy" by G. E. Moore in his 1903 *Principia Ethica* (ch. 2), see *The Is-Ought Question*, ed. William Donald Hudson (London: Macmillan, 1969), and for a substantive treatment of this problematic and an in-depth analysis of Aquinas's philosophical justification for the transition from "is" to "ought," see Piotr Lichacz, "Did St. Thomas Aquinas Justify the Transition from 'Is' to 'Ought'?" (STD diss., University of Fribourg, 2008).

²¹ ST I-II, q. 94, a. 2, resp.

conscience, is a habitual light, it prevents the dictates of conscience from ever becoming heteronomous. For, the dictates of conscience are nothing but the concretization, by way of judgment, of those principles and precepts that are constitutive of the teleological ordering of practical reason itself. For this very reason, an objective teleological ethics grounded in the primordial conscience and in the natural inclinations remains untouched by the false binary of heteronomy and autonomy, the direct result of the anthropocentric turn that haunts most modern moral philosophy.²² Turning away from the primordial conscience and, with it, from the teleological order of reality and embracing instead the negative freedom of sovereign self-determination, the anthropocentric turn and the consequent ascendancy of the subjective sovereignty give rise to a pervasive counterfeit of conscience, the presumptuous “authenticity” of self-will. This counterfeit is condemned to a never-ending vigilance against the constant threat of a hostile “takeover” by other sovereign self-wills, be they human “others” or a supposed divine “Other” misconceived in the false self-image of subjective sovereignty.

The Primordial Conscience and Its Act, *Con-scientia*

We must now turn to the *act* of the primordial conscience. Aquinas calls this act *con-scientia*, “knowing together.” Recall that Aquinas defines *synderesis* as “a natural *habitus* of first principles of action, which are the universal principles of the natural law.”²³ *Synderesis* names practical reason as “perfected by a completely determined *habitus*.”²⁴ The natural determination of practical reason consists in “a primordial perception of the good proper to [the human being].”²⁵ The intellect, in its theoretical and practical aspects, intuitively self-evident principles that are antecedent to rational deliberation but consequent to learning the terms of these principles through basic sense experience. Aquinas explains this matter succinctly in the context of discussing the question of whether any *habitus* is natural, meaning innate: “The understand-

²² See J. B. Schneewind, *The Invention of Autonomy: A History of Modern Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

²³ *De veritate*, q. 16, a. 1, resp., in, Thomas Aquinas, *Truth*, vol. 2, *Questions X–XX*, trans. James V. McGlynn, S.J. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), 304 (*Truth II*). See also his *In II Sent.*, d. 24, q. 2, a. 3, and *ST I*, q. 79, a. 12.

²⁴ *De veritate*, q. 16, a. 2, ad 5 (*Truth*, 2:310).

²⁵ Servais Pinckaers, O.P., *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, trans. Sr. Mary Thomas Noble, O.P. (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1995), 384.

ing of first principles is called a natural habit. For it is owing to the very nature of the intellectual soul that [a human being], having once grasped what is a whole and what is a part, would at once perceive that every whole is larger than its part: and in like manner with regard to other such principles. Yet what is a whole, and what is a part—this he cannot know except through the intelligible species which he has received from phantasms: and for this reason, the Philosopher at the end of the *Posterior Analytics* shows that knowledge of principles comes to us from the senses.”²⁶

But what does all of this mean on the operational level?²⁷ *Con-scientia* signifies the actualization of the natural *habitus* of the first principles of moral truth in two respects.²⁸ There first occurs a concrete judgment of practical reason, which is then followed by a command of reason that applies this knowledge to action.²⁹ The judgment of *con-scientia* normally occurs prospectively, antecedent to the execution of a specific exterior act. But it also may occur retrospectively, consequent to the execution or the omission of some specific exterior act.

Conscience and the Virtue of Prudence

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the objective nature of primordial conscience and its actualization in *con-scientia*, we must appreciate how *con-scientia* relates to the principal cardinal virtue, prudence, which Aquinas defines as “right practical reason.” “Prudence imprints the inward seal of goodness upon all free activity of the human being.”³⁰ Hence, “what is prudent and what is good are substantially one and the same; they differ only in their place in the logical succession of realization. For what is good must first have been prudent.”³¹ What difference does the virtue of prudence make if, indeed, as Aquinas claims, “*synderesis* moves prudence [the knowledge of truth in the

²⁶ ST I-II, q. 51, a. 1, resp.

²⁷ The Greek term for this actualization is *συνείδησις*, and its Latin literal translation is *con-scientia*. By the time the Apostle Paul wrote his letters, both terms were common in popular everyday usage of Greek and Latin. Paul uses *συνείδησις* frequently: Rom 2:15; 1 Cor 8:7, 10, 12; 10:28–29; 2 Cor 1:12–13; 1 Tim 1:19; Titus 1:15.

²⁸ ST I, q. 79, a. 13, resp. See also *De veritate*, q. 17, a. 1, and *In II sent.* d. 24, q. 2, a. 4.

²⁹ ST I-II, q. 19, a. 5, resp.

³⁰ Josef Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues: Prudence—Justice—Fortitude—Temperance* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), 7f.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

practical order], just as the understanding of principles moves science [the knowledge of truth in the theoretical order]”?³²

To be sure, the virtue of prudence does make a crucial difference. For this particular virtue concretizes the third premise from above, the premise that pertains to the order of action. Recall Aquinas’s formulation of this premise: “The will does not have the character of a first rule; it is rather a rule which has a rule, for it is directed by reason and the intellect.”³³ Consistent with this rule, Aquinas conceives of prudence as having a cognitive as well as a commanding quality.³⁴ Willing and acting depend upon prudence in precisely this: the concrete moral action of the will receives its measure from the command (*iudicium*) of prudence.³⁵ Aquinas puts this matter quite explicitly in article 13 of his treatise *On the Virtues in General*: “Reason . . . relates to the things that it puts into effect as being *their* standard and measure. . . . By contrast, it relates to the things about which it reflects, as something that is measured and regulated relates to *its* standard and measure. For the good of our intelligence is what is true, and our intelligence attains that precisely by corresponding to the thing that it understands.”³⁶ Note well that, in this function of giving the measure of the concrete moral action to the will by way of command, prudence, as the perfective excellence of practical reason, is precisely an extension of speculative reason. Unlike the divine intellect, the human intellect must receive the measure before it can give the measure. Josef Pieper puts the matter as clearly as one could wish:

Knowledge of being is “lengthened” and transformed into decision and command. The imperative is founded upon the indicative, the latter makes the former possible. Essentially prior to the decision and command is the purely perceptive statement. The “image” of the real precedes and underlies the “plan” of all realization. . . . Decision and command, in which the practical reason is realized, signify, then, a knowledge which turns towards the will. But knowledge is an essential

³² ST II-II, q. 47, a. 6, ad 3.

³³ *De veritate*, q. 23, a. 6 (*Truth*, 3:119).

³⁴ ST II-II, q. 48, art. unicus.

³⁵ ST I-II, q. 64, a. 3.

³⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Disputed Questions on the Virtues*, ed. E. M. Atkins and Thomas Williams, trans. E. M. Atkins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 98.

identity of the mind with the objective reality. The relation between these two facts reveals the measure and the manner in which the practical reason proper, which on its part determines the free act, is essentially bound up with the objective reality which is perceived in our knowledge of being.³⁷

Aquinas's account of practical reason comes thus to stand in the sharpest possible contrast to all modern accounts of practical reason, accounts that, in the wake of the anthropocentric turn, move the human into a quasi-divine position: "practical" reason becomes now essentially creative, indeed, constructive—that is, in short, sovereign.

The utterly realist nature of the virtue of prudence firmly established, the question remains as to how the act of *con-scientia* is to be understood in relationship to prudence. Among the three acts of the virtue of prudence—to take counsel (*consiliari*), to judge (*iudicare*), and to command (*praecipere*)—*con-scientia* comprises the second act when this judgment is right and certain, when it is indeed properly formed by the virtue of prudence.³⁸ But note well that *con-scientia*, in and of itself, is not efficacious in choosing and doing the good. Consider the morally weak person. Following Aristotle, Aquinas calls such a person incontinent. The incontinent person "knows what he ought to do, his conscience is all right, but his knowledge of the good is not complemented by an effective appetitive disposition to good as good. That is why in the crunch, in choosing . . . he goes wrong."³⁹ While judgments of *con-scientia* are absolutely indispensable for moral goodness, simple *con-scientia* lacks the power of execution.⁴⁰ What remains indispensable for efficaciously choosing and doing the good is that the

³⁷ Pieper, *Living the Truth*, 144.

³⁸ *ST* II-II, q. 47, a. 8.

³⁹ Ralph McInerny, "Prudence and Conscience," *The Thomist* 38 (1974): 291–305, at 303.

⁴⁰ Command (*imperium*) is an act of the intellect moved by the will (*ST* I-II, q. 17, a. 1). When *imperium* is an act integral to the virtue of prudence (instead of being the result of precipitation or thoughtlessness), Aquinas calls it *praecipium*, command as informed by right judgment. Indeed, he regards the act of command (*praecipere*) as the principal act of prudence. Practical reason is directed to action. Therefore, after counsel or deliberation and judgment, the third act of prudence is "to command [*praecipere*] which act consists in applying to action the things counseled and judged. And since this act approaches nearer to the end of practical reason, it follows that it is the chief act of the practical reason, and consequently of prudence" (*ST* II-II, q. 47, a. 8, resp.).

two other acts of the virtue of prudence (counsel⁴¹ and command) act in concert with the remaining cardinal virtues (justice, fortitude, and temperance). At its very best (that is, when it is right and certain), the antecedent judgment of *con-scientia* is an integral component of the virtue of prudence.

Once the *habitus* of prudence has been diminished or completely lost due to contrary acts of imprudence⁴² and the act of counsel prevented by precipitation⁴³ or by thoughtlessness⁴⁴, the flight from the *synderistic* indicator of moral truth prepares the indulgence in the counterfeit of conscience, the presumptuous “authenticity” of self-will. Regarding its own decisions as intrinsically infallible expressions of a sovereign self-determination, the counterfeit foregoes counsel. The decisions the counterfeit posits create the semblance of a true, and therefore good, conscience precisely because the counterfeit’s decisions are held as infallible. By feigning authenticity, the sovereign self-determination produces a counterfeit that blocks access to the *synderistic* root of right judgment.

The Erroneous Conscience

But how does this phenomenon, the counterfeit of conscience producing a simulacrum of the true and, therefore, good conscience, relate to the phenomenon of the erroneous conscience? Could the counterfeit

⁴¹ In *ST* II-II, q. 53, a. 3, resp., Aquinas lays out the contours of the ideal act of taking counsel, which comprises five steps: “*Memory* [*memoria*] of the past, *intelligence* [*intelligentia*] of the present, *shrewdness* [*solertia*] in considering the future outcome, *reasoning* [*ratiocinatio*] which compares one thing with another, *docility* [*docilitas*] in accepting the opinions of others. He that takes counsel descends by these steps in due order.” That these five steps are not solitary events in the agent’s soul but, on the contrary, reflect primarily distinct aspects of the dynamic of social interaction of deliberation becomes clear when one considers Aquinas’s important statement in *ST* I-II, q. 14, a. 3, resp: “Counsel properly implies a conference held between several; the very word (*consilium*) denotes this, for it means a sitting together (*considium*), from the fact that many sit together in order to confer with one another.” I am indebted to Raymond F. Hain IV for having learned to think about counsel as a primarily social activity; see the section “Is Consilium a Social Activity?” in his instructive dissertation, “Practical Virtues: Instrumental Practical Reason and the Virtues” (PhD Diss., University of Notre Dame, 2009), 177–82, and more recently his important essay “*Consilium* and the Foundations of Ethics,” *The Thomist* 79 (2015): 43–74.

⁴² *ST* II-II, q. 53.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, a. 3.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, q. 53, a. 4.

of conscience not be understood as an instantiation of the erroneous conscience? That this is not the case will become plain when we understand the characteristics of an erroneous conscience.

The judgment of *con-scientia*, the application of the universal principles of *synderesis* to a particular case, is not infallible. When properly informed by prudence—that is, when conformed to right intention according to the principles and precepts of *synderesis* and when subjectively certain—the judgment of *con-scientia* is practically true and right. But the agent might suffer from ignorance and might therefore be objectively burdened by an erroneous conscience. Hence, the characteristic deficiency of an erroneous conscience is ignorance. Such ignorance can be voluntary or involuntary, vincible or invincible.⁴⁵

Since the dictate of conscience binds and must be obeyed, a dictate issuing from an objectively erroneous conscience must nevertheless be subjectively obeyed. Aquinas rightly insists upon this point. But does such an insistence not open the door to the authenticity of self-will, the counterfeit of conscience? Consider how Aquinas distinguishes between the objective and the subjective perspective:

Conscience is said to bind in so far as one sins if he does not follow his conscience, but not in the sense that he acts correctly if he does follow it. . . . Conscience is not said to bind in the sense that what one does according to such a conscience will be good, but in the sense that in not following it he will sin. . . . A correct conscience and a false conscience bind in different ways. The correct conscience binds absolutely and for an intrinsic reason; the false binds in a qualified way and for an extrinsic reason.⁴⁶

Aquinas holds that the correct conscience binds absolutely and for an intrinsic reason because a judgment of *con-scientia* that is practically true is necessarily also right.

The erroneous conscience does indeed bind, not because it is correct, but because the judgment of *con-scientia* is all a person can go by—at the moment. Nevertheless, the erroneous conscience can be identified eventually as such because it depends upon the logical priority of the correct conscience, which applies the principles of

⁴⁵ *ST* I-II, q. 76.

⁴⁶ *De veritate*, q. 17, a. 4, resp. (*Truth* 2:331–32). See also *ST* I-II, q. 19, a. 5, resp.

synderesis rightly. From the agent's perspective, the way to find out whether one has acted from an erroneous conscience or not occurs in light of instruction, counsel, or self-examination by way of a consequent judgment of *con-scientia*, either in the form of a moral self-critique that elicits regret and remorse (in the case of a formerly erroneous conscience) or in the form of a simple retrospective affirmation that one's true, and therefore good, conscience has indeed also been right. Precisely because of the innate *habitus* of *synderesis*, the principle, and therefore the concrete possibility, of self-correction always obtains. For this reason, it is the case that, while the erroneous conscience indeed binds, it does not automatically excuse. Aquinas explains: "If . . . reason or conscience should err voluntarily, either directly or because of negligence, being in error about something one is held to know, then such error does not prevent the will which is in accord with erring reason or conscience from being evil."⁴⁷ He then adds, "Similarly, supposing error of reason or conscience which proceeds from a non-excusing ignorance, evil in the will necessarily follows. However, such a [person is not perplexed], because he can correct his error, since his ignorance is both vincible and voluntary."⁴⁸

Culpable erroneous conscience is caused either by negligence,⁴⁹ which makes it indirectly voluntary, or by willful ignorance,⁵⁰ which makes it directly voluntary. In his *Commentary on the Sentences*, the young Aquinas offers a pithy summary of this complex matter: to follow one's erring conscience means to be unable to avoid sinning (*peccatum non evaditur*), but to act against one's conscience means to directly incur sin (*peccatum incurritur*).⁵¹ To turn intentionally against the judgment of conscience is always culpable because it means that one cuts oneself off from the very possibility of following moral truth. To follow one's erring conscience means to do what seems subjectively right but what is objectively wrong.

The Erroneous Conscience and the Counterfeit of Conscience

We have reached the point where we can name the difference between the erroneous conscience and the counterfeit of conscience. First,

⁴⁷ ST I-II, q. 19, a. 6, resp.

⁴⁸ ST I-II, q. 19, a. 6, ad 3.

⁴⁹ See ST II-II, q. 54 (lack of due solicitude).

⁵⁰ See ST I-II, q. 76.

⁵¹ *In II sent.* d. 39, q. 3, a. 3. See also his later *Quodlibet* III, q. 12, a. 2, ad 2.

from the objective perspective afforded by the Thomist metaphysics of the good and its entailed moral science, the reality of an erroneous conscience presupposes an objective moral order and reliable knowledge of it. For a consistent moral subjectivism and the concomitant rule of self-will, on the contrary, an erroneous conscience is an utterly meaningless notion. By positing its own dictates of self-will, the subjectivist counterfeit of conscience is, by definition, infallible. Because it is the law of its own dictates, there is nothing in light of which the counterfeit of conscience can possibly err.⁵² In the wake of the anthropocentric turn, “sincerity,” “authenticity,” and “being at peace with oneself” become the new criteria of a radically subjectivist conception of moral judgment in service of the sovereign subject. These new criteria are intended to mute the voice of the primordial conscience and, thereby, to unhinge the “rule of ethical truth.”⁵³

Second, from the agent’s perspective, the very possibility of an erroneous conscience entails an antecedent and a consequent personal duty. The antecedent duty is to avoid ignorance and imprudence. Formulated positively, the antecedent duty is always to seek counsel, to have one’s conscience formed by those one regards as wiser and better informed than oneself, and first and foremost, to avail oneself of the instruction by and guidance of those whose specific vocation is to instruct conscience by teaching the secondary precepts of the natural law. The consequent duty is to avoid negligence and indifference by way of a regular examination of conscience, a sincere review of past judgments, and repentance of acts done due to an erroneous conscience.

Third, in light of Aquinas’s doctrine of conscience, the counterfeit of conscience is objectively a result of willful ignorance, or at least of negligence and thoughtlessness. In the worst case, the counterfeit is an intentional, self-conscious flight from conscience: by positing decisions of the self-will, a person acts in direct opposition to the judgments of a correct conscience.

Does this mean that the counterfeit of conscience is able to extinguish *synderesis*? Aquinas addresses this question explicitly. He denies that *synderesis* can be extinguished in its root through a loss of the

⁵² Johann Gottlieb Fichte’s subjective idealism offers probably the most consistent, but also most problematic, account of the inherently infallible conscience.

⁵³ John Henry Cardinal Newman, *Certain Difficulties Felt by Anglicans in Catholic Teaching*, vol. 2 (London: Longmans, Green, and Co, 1888; repr. Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1969), 175–378, 246.

innate *habitus*, “for this light belongs to the nature of the soul, since by reason of this the soul is intellectual.”⁵⁴ But regarding the actualization of the *habitus*, *synderesis* can indeed be deflected toward the contrary of *synderesis* whenever “the force of concupiscence, or of another passion, so absorbs reason that in choice the universal judgment of *synderesis* is not applied to the particular act.”⁵⁵ It is here that Aquinas points to what we might call the dark secret of the counterfeit of conscience. What looks to the person fleeing primordial conscience like the sovereignly posited decisions of self-determination are indeed the products of a profound self-deception. The flight from primordial conscience actually makes the moral agent subject to the power of the sensual passions and the variegated desires of the will to which they give rise. However, because the primordial conscience cannot be destroyed, but only fled from or suppressed, the counterfeit of conscience must be willfully maintained, directly or—more frequently—indirectly. For, all the decisions the counterfeit sovereignly posits remain exposed to the “habitual light” that the first principle and the first precept of *synderesis* shed on the agent’s reason. The counterfeit is therefore inherently unable to gain the peace that is characteristic of a conscience that is both subjectively true, and therefore good, and objectively correct.⁵⁶

To Be Good Is to Do the Truth—From Metaphysics to Mystagogy

Where have we arrived? At Aquinas’s sobering suggestion that to be good is to do the truth. For, good is that which is in accord with reality—a reality whose measure is the First Truth who is the Sovereign Good. Every human being qua rational being has received a natural, innate *habitus* that reflects the measure that the rational being received in its rational nature: while the sphere of theoretical thinking is governed by the fundamental principle of non-contradiction, the sphere of practical thinking is governed by *synderesis*, the first principle of the natural law. In Aquinas’s words: “The original direction of all our actions toward the end is necessarily brought about by the natural

⁵⁴ *De veritate*, q. 16, a. 3, resp. (*Truth* 2:312).

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ But even for a conscience truly so called, such a peace remains a fragile reality unless it is one of the fruits of the Spirit (*ST* I-II, q. 70) arising from the gifts of wisdom and counsel (*ST* II-II, qq. 45 and 52).

law.”⁵⁷ The whole moral motivation of rational beings depends upon the voice of primordial conscience, the natural habitual awareness of the precepts of the natural law. From a Thomist perspective, the typically modern crisis of moral motivation—Why should I pursue the good? Why should I be moral in the first place?—is a direct consequence of the anthropocentric turn and the subsequent flight from the encompassing teleology of which the primordial conscience is an integral part.

This flight produces the counterfeit of conscience, the authenticity of self-will that interminably vacillates between three versions of self-justification: moral nihilism (“There is neither good nor evil”; “Good and evil are strictly subjective success terms”), moral skepticism (“Human beings are inherently incapable of discerning reliably moral good and evil”), and moral sovereignty (“I am the creator and arbiter of my own moral code”). These accretions of the anthropocentric turn commit those who come under their spell to constant performative self-contradictions in everyday life because persons who hold these views nevertheless continue to act toward ends that are first perceived as goods. And it is precisely this that makes these actions intelligible in the first place. However, intelligible actions are, as G. E. M. Anscombe and Alasdair MacIntyre have shown, the basic units of human moral agency.⁵⁸ And these units have an irreducible teleological structure, a structure that, as Aquinas has argued, necessitates a single final end. Hence, modern agents, beholden by the false self-image of subjective sovereignty, de facto display the first principle of practical reason, follow the first precept of the natural law, and (for the most part) acknowledge an at least tacit knowledge of some of the secondary precepts of the natural law.

As MacIntyre has pointedly stated in his still eminently relevant study from 1990, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, “the Thomist discerns in the continuous reappropriation of [the deracinated and fragmented moral rules of European modernity], and in the recurring resistance to discarding them, evidence of the work of *synderesis*, of that fundamental grasp of the primary precepts of the natural law, to which cultural degeneration can partially or temporarily blind us

⁵⁷ ST I-II, q. 91, a. 2, ad 2.

⁵⁸ G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention*, 2nd ed. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1963); Alasdair MacIntyre, “The Intelligibility of Action,” in *Rationality, Relativism, and Human Sciences*, ed. J. Margolis, M. Krausz, and R. M. Burian (Dordrecht: Nijhoff, 1986), 63–80.

but which can never be obliterated.”⁵⁹ In the following conclusion, MacIntyre makes the implicit organizing principle of my reflections explicit: “So the Thomist claims to be able to render intelligible the history of both modern morality and modern moral philosophy in a way that is not available to those who themselves inhabit the conceptual frameworks peculiar to modernity. They cannot hope to understand themselves in the only terms which they and their institutions allow themselves for understanding. And their own theories, the theories of those imprisoned within modernity, can thus provide only ideological rationalizations, the rationalizations of modern deontology, modern consequentialism, and modern contractarianism.”⁶⁰ Modern deontology, consequentialism, and contractarianism are moral theories that emerge in the wake of the anthropocentric turn. As the history of modernity has demonstrated, these moral theories turned out to be utterly unfit to contain the power of subjective sovereignty that the anthropocentric turn unleashed.

Aquinas’s teleological metaphysics of the good, with its special emphasis on *synderesis*, natural law, and the virtue of prudence, advances a compelling account of why this is the case and, thereby, offers a powerful analytic device that allows us accurately to gauge the profoundly problematic implications of the anthropocentric turn for moral theory and especially for the moral life. Aquinas’s realist metaphysics opens up the ontological and epistemological horizon in which the philosophical errancy of the anthropocentric turn comes into full light—as well as in the reality of actual self-transcendence.

Aquinas’s metaphysics of being and the good culminates in the moral constitution of the human person, that is, in the primordial conscience as the condition for the possibility of actual self-transcendence. Because of the primordial conscience, the human person as moral agent can do the truth, meaning the person has a truth-capacity in the practical order. And because a good conscience (resulting from doing the truth in the practical order) is the source of the well-being of the human person as moral agent, actual self-transcendence is the condition for the possibility of genuine well-being. But, as we have seen, actual self-transcendence presupposes a “frame of genuine transcendence.”

⁵⁹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 194.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

What Aquinas's metaphysics of being and the good cannot do, and of course was never meant to do, is to turn us back efficaciously from the perennial existential crisis, a crisis that the anthropocentric turn has only intensified. Even when we do not flee the voice of primordial conscience but are attentive to it, there remains a pressing question: How can one be good and, therefore, do the truth without first encountering the truth in such a direct and personal way that we not only find ourselves claimed by the truth but fall in love with its surpassing goodness such that we become effectively good?

Aquinas, of course, holds to the faith characteristic of an orthodox Christian, which is the faith of the Church, that the Sovereign Good has become incarnate. Yet, with this claim, Aquinas beckons us to ascend from metaphysics to mystagogy, from the philosophy of the sovereign good to the elevated science he called *sacra doctrina*, sacred teaching. This sacred teaching rests on one breathtakingly simple and breathtakingly outlandish axiom: the First Truth and the Sovereign Good are at hand in the utter humility and vulnerability of the human nature that the incarnate Logos assumed from among a people God created for that purpose. Here is the ultimate stumbling block for the sovereign subject, its pride and despair, and simultaneously the concrete hope to enter a new life in which death has been definitively overcome precisely by the incarnate Sovereign Good. In this new life, the pursuit of subjective sovereignty can be relinquished because the cage of immanent transcendence has been opened from the outside by the Sovereign Good. In the personal encounter with the one who says, "I am the truth," the one who gives his life for his enemies and calls us to become his friends, it becomes obvious: Primordial conscience tells us, "To be good is to do the truth." This is the fundamental principle that subsists as habitual light in the practical reason and enjoins the first precept of the natural law. But in order to *become* good in the first place—that is good *simpliciter*, not merely *secundum quid*—so that we can effectively do the truth, we must be united by way of the infused theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity with the one who is the truth *simpliciter*. For the incarnate Sovereign Good also said, "Without me you can do nothing."