

Self-Knowledge, Friendship, and the Promulgation of the Natural Law

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Know Thyself.

—Inscription on the pronaos of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi

Christian, remember your dignity, and now that you share in God's own nature, do not return by sin to your former base condition. Know who is your head and of whose body you are a member. Do not forget that you have been rescued from the power of darkness and brought into the light of the kingdom of God.

—Pope St. Leo the Great

In this essay, I wish to discuss the relationships between self-knowledge, ethics and political life, and our knowledge of the natural law. I hope to show that our knowledge of natural law depends to a large extent on what we take ourselves to be, simply as human beings, and that our knowledge of what it is to be human is foundational for and textured by our social and political life. It is through the lens of these interconnected issues that I will engage Pierre Manent's thoughtful and provocative book, *Natural Law and Human Rights: Toward a Recovery of Practical Reason*. I will not simply provide an exegesis of Manent's work, which is rich and repays careful reading, nor will I argue directly for or against his fundamental points; rather, I take his work as a springboard to discuss the connection between our knowledge of ourselves, our ethical and political lives, and our knowledge of the natural law. In so doing, I will perhaps confirm and strengthen what I take to be Manent's central thesis.

Manent claims that the project of human rights, with the modern “state” understood as the guarantor of such rights, is inextricably tied to an erroneous understanding of human beings as naturally isolated and apolitical individuals. He shows that this impoverished modern understanding of human nature, and of human rights protected by the state as its offspring, distorts our self-understanding and saps the intelligibility of law, natural or otherwise, as well as the fecundity of human action. According to Manent, and contra Jacques Maritain, modern human rights must be understood as a feeble replacement for, not founded upon, the classical understanding of natural law.¹ Further, Manent argues that it is modern political philosophy that generates the modern state as the “sovereign instrument” wielded to protect human rights, with the result that civic and political friendship becomes more difficult as the state becomes more powerful. Modern political philosophy is therefore at the basis of our distorted understanding of ourselves and our inability to engage in the friendships that hold polities together.

Before discussing these issues in detail, it will be helpful to say a word about the way in which Manent approaches them and about how my own approach relates to his. Manent says that he is “inside a triangle: politics, philosophy, religion.” He claims that he has never been able to devote himself entirely to any one of those three poles and that he finds “a fragile equilibrium, or rather a productive disequilibrium, in this questioning . . . concerning the very manner in which these three dimensions are articulated throughout Western history.”² Manent’s book on natural law and human rights evidences this fecund triangulation of politics, philosophy, and religion. Manent also says that, through his studies, he has come to adopt a “classic’ view of political life, which gives . . . a better view of the eternal play between the few and the many, beyond the democratic enthusiasm characteristic of modern societies.”³ Aristotle, as the political scientist and philosopher par excellence, occupies a prominent place in Manent’s classical

¹ See Jacques Maritain, *The Rights of Man and Natural Law*, trans. Doris C. Anson (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1943). In *Man and the State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), Maritain says: “With regard to Human Rights, what matters most to a philosopher is the question of their rational foundations. The philosophical foundation of the Rights of man is Natural Law. Sorry that we cannot find another word!” (80). See also Heinrich Rommen, *The Natural Law: A Study in Legal and Social History and Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1998), 261.

² Pierre Manent, *Seeing Things Politically: Interviews with Bénédicte Delorme-Montini*, trans. Ralph C. Hancock (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2015), 59–60.

³ Manent, *Seeing Things Politically*, 105 (see also 3 for the role of Aristotle in Manent’s thinking).

view of political life, and the central role of Aristotle's ethics and political philosophy is also on display in Manent's work on natural law, especially in the book's final chapter. Manent's knowledge of modern political philosophy and his Aristotelian view of political life give him a sharp awareness of the differences between ancient and modern approaches to philosophical, ethical, and political questions, an awareness that permeates his previous work on political form and his recent book on natural law.

I will concentrate on the philosophical point of Manent's triangle, and I will present my philosophical reflections as a recapitulation, a "creative retrieval," of Aristotelian and Thomistic thinking within a modern context, a recapitulation that extends and complements Manent's. After discussing distinct kinds of self-knowledge and their connection to ethical and political life, I will use Manent's work on natural law and human rights to show how the Aristotelian and Thomistic foundations for natural-law thinking have been rejected in modern thought. I will describe how this rejection has distorted our understanding of ourselves, thereby occluding our knowledge of the natural law and corrupting our ability to achieve civic and virtuous friendship. In the final section, I will discuss how this philosophical point can be connected to a Catholic theological reflection on Jesus Christ's revelation of God to man and of man to himself.

Four Forms of Self-Knowledge, and a Fifth

In an essay discussing Allan Bloom's *Love and Friendship*, Manent provides something of a key that we may use to open our topic:

We are not condemned to remain disillusioned or sober romantics, sterilely oscillating in politics, as well as in love and friendship, between a deliberately constructed illusion and an ironically anticipated deception. A mysterious but luminous energy circulates among the different levels of human life and the variety of human connections, and it does not circulate in vain. In the end, eros, because there really is an "end," is one with the desire for understanding and self-knowledge, and this desire, too, is not in vain. I would summarize the humanity and the severity—and hence, the gravity—of [Bloom's] book as follows: life is worthy of being loved because it is capable of being understood.⁴

⁴ Pierre Manent, "Recovering Human Attachments: An Introduction to Allan Bloom's *Love and Friendship*," in *Modern Liberty and Its Discontents*, ed. and trans. Daniel J.

Because eros is natural and teleological, because we are erotic beings with the natural end of attaining the truth of things—including of ourselves as the ones who achieve truth—we are capable of friendship with others. The human soul is unified by its eros, and the natural end of eros is friendship in truth. Manent therefore asks us to “keep in mind the relationship between understanding and friendship,” and he shows that the rejection of the classical view of human beings as naturally erotic for truth and self-knowledge as the basis of friendship leads to an inability to understand ourselves and an incapacity to be friends with others.⁵

Manent is correct to insist upon the link between self-knowledge and friendship and to highlight the differences between ancients and moderns on this point. However, before we discuss Manent’s argument concerning the differences between classical and modern approaches to this issue, we must ask: (1) What exactly do we mean by “self-knowledge”? (2) Why is such knowledge important, and indeed necessary, for the moral life? We will discuss the second question in the following section, but let us now specify and extend Manent’s work by noting that “self-knowledge” is said in many ways, and let us distinguish five ways it is said. Articulating this array will enable us to understand more fully the relationship between self-knowledge, knowledge of the natural law, and friendship, and thus it will allow us to appreciate the results of the rejection of classical thinking that Manent claims has shaped the modern world.

Self-Awareness

First, we have what we may call self-awareness, a natural and immediate perception of ourselves as engaged in various actions. As Aristotle says, “The being of living things is life,” and for human beings, living is “in the authoritative sense, perceiving or thinking.”⁶ To be human is to live a life of perceiving and thinking, and when we perceive and think about things, we are aware that we perceive (those things) and think (those things). “The result is that if we are perceiving something, we also perceive that we are

Mahoney and Paul Seaton (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), 165.

⁵ Manent, *Seeing Things Politically*, 5.

⁶ The first quote comes from Aristotle, *On the Soul* 2.4.415b13, trans. Joe Sachs (Santa Fe, NM: Green Lion, 2004); the second is from *Nicomachean Ethics* [NE] 9.9.1170a18–19, trans. Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011). Paraphrasing Aristotle, St. Thomas says, “Vivere viventibus est esse” (*Summa theologiae* [ST] I, q. 18, a. 2). Unless otherwise attributed (as here), translations are my own; for ST, I consult and sometimes modify the Alfred Fredosso’s translation at www3.nd.edu/~afredosso/summa-translation/TOC.htm).

perceiving; and if we are thinking, that we are thinking. And to perceive that we are perceiving or thinking is to perceive that we exist—for to exist is to perceive or to think.⁷ As human beings, our life is active and self-aware not only in perception and thought, but also in desire for and action toward those goods recognized in the activities of perception and thought, for when a living thing has perception, it also has appetite. We live not only by perceiving and thinking speculatively, but also by desiring and acting practically, and we are aware of ourselves as desiring and acting, just as we are aware of ourselves as perceiving and thinking. As St. Thomas says, to live for living things is to be, and to live as a human being is to exist in a nature that enables one to engage in perception, thinking, and deliberate actions, all of which are accompanied by self-awareness, by knowledge of myself as acting thus and thus as living.⁸

Our self-awareness has important ethical consequences because it provides the cognitive foundation for voluntary actions, which originate with us (they are not necessitated by external forces) and are performed knowingly (they are not done in ignorance of the relevant concrete features of the action). At the basis of the knowledge of voluntary actions is the awareness of myself as the one doing this action, this way, at this time, toward this person, within these circumstances, with this instrument, and for this end. “Now, no one could be ignorant of all these things, unless he were mad; and it is clear that he would not be ignorant of the man who is acting either, for how could he be ignorant of himself?”⁹ Self-awareness enables voluntary actions, which require that I know what I am doing and that I am the one doing it. We could not engage in voluntary actions, including the choices that consolidate and express our moral character, if we did not have a natural awareness of ourselves as perceiving, as thinking, and as acting in specific ways within concrete situations and in relation to particular persons or groups. We perceive, think, and act, and there is a halo of self-awareness surrounding our perceptions, thoughts, and actions that allows us to perform those actions knowingly, that is, voluntarily. If we did

⁷ NE 9.9.1170a32–35. For a discussion of Aristotle on self-awareness, see Joseph Owens, *Aristotle: The Collected Papers of Joseph Owens*, ed. John R. Catan (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981), 74–98. For a discussion of St. Thomas on self-awareness, see Therese Scarpelli Cory, *Aquinas on Human Self-Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

⁸ Such self-awareness clearly has a biological, neurological foundation. It is not yet infused with logic, reasoning, or syntax. Higher animals have some level of this self-awareness, even though in their form of life it is not enrolled into the higher activities of reason and choice.

⁹ NE 3.1.1111a6–8.

not have this natural self-awareness, we would not be able to act voluntarily, and therefore we would not be able to deliberate and to choose freely, and thus the moral and political life, including the friendships that are its *telos*, would not be possible for us.

Consciousness is therefore intentional, in the sense that it is always consciousness of something, and it exhibits a kind of duality, as its name indicates. It is a “knowing with” because consciousness is consciousness of something and of itself as conscious of that thing. As Robert Sokolowski says, “To be conscious is not just to know something, but to be aware that I am knowing it, to have some distance to myself as I know it.”¹⁰ For human persons, to live is to subsist in a nature that enables us to perceive, to understand, to act freely, and to have the distance from our activities that allows us to be aware of ourselves. Thus, Robert Spaemann claims that the capacity for reflection, for achieving “the inner distance on its own states, . . . is the hallmark of the person.”¹¹ The phenomenon of distance from oneself deserves our attention, as it is crucial for distinguishing the five kinds of self-knowledge.

A visual image can help us understand this intellectual distance. If we wish to see an object with our eyes, for example, then we must not remain too close to it; if we linger in close proximity to the object, then we cannot take it in visually, and we remain in perceptual darkness about it. However, if we take a distance from the object, if we move into the proper space in relation to it, and if we find the appropriate light within which it can show itself, we can take it in and perceive it as a whole, a one. To see it properly, we must establish the optimal distance between ourselves and the object, and this distance depends not on us, not on our desires or psychological neuroses, but on the object itself. The appropriate distance from which to see an ant is different from the appropriate distance from which to see Giovanni Baglione’s *Sacred Love and Profane Love*. In each case, we have to find the distance that clarifies, the distance that allows us to see properly, and this clarifying distance is called for by the nature of the thing we wish to see. To be human is to be active in thoughtful perception, in perceptive thinking, and in deliberate action, and it is to have a natural distance from my actions that enables me to be aware of myself. We have a natural distance

¹⁰ Robert Sokolowski, “Parallelism in Conscious Experience,” *Daedalus* 121, no. 1 (1992): 87–103, at 99.

¹¹ Robert Spaemann, *Persons: The Difference between ‘Someone’ and ‘Something,’* trans. Oliver O’Donovan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 182.

from ourselves that comes from our being rational animals, and that allows us to be aware of ourselves as rational animals.¹²

Psychological and Moral Self-Knowledge

The phenomenon of clarifying-distance-from-self as a precondition for self-awareness provides a bridge to the second form of self-knowledge, which we may call psychological and moral self-knowledge. Our natural self-awareness enables us to act voluntarily, but to act well we must know ourselves in a more detailed, personal way. We must take stock of our temperament, our emotional tendencies, our strengths and weaknesses, neuroses and settled preferences, and our moral character. As Aristotle says, we “must examine what we ourselves readily incline toward, for some of us naturally incline to some things, others to other things.” He says that our inclinations can be known from what it is that we tend to enjoy or to shun, and based upon this self-understanding, “we must drag ourselves away from it towards its contrary; for by leading ourselves far from error, we will arrive at the middle term.”¹³ We therefore need this psychological and moral self-knowledge in order to develop virtue and to live well, but we can obtain it only by “increasing” the natural distance to ourselves that allows us to be self-aware. We must take “another step back” from our desires, and our actions and relationships if we are to understand and evaluate our individual psyche and moral characteristics in the hope of improving them.

Carl Jung’s work can be understood as an attempt to deepen this form of moral, psychological self-knowledge. He describes self-knowledge as the activity of “exploring our own souls”; it is a “self-searching,” an “occupation

¹² We should add that free choice demands that we be able to “step back” from multiple options so that we may select one possibility from among others. To choose freely, we must have a distance from the possible, alternative ways of achieving an end so as to compare them and then to prefer one to the other(s), and to choose well we must also be able to distance ourselves from the objects of our immediate desires. Incontinent action includes a failure to achieve the proper distance between myself and the object of my sensual desire. On choice, see *ST* I-II, q. 13, especially a. 6, and Aristotle, *NE* 3.2–3 and *On the Soul* 3.9–12. One should not overlook the kind of distance needed for the activities of the virtue of justice. Sokolowski says, “Justice involves another kind of objectivity than do the virtues of courage, temperance, and the like. *It requires that I take a distance to my situation* and judge with a kind of neutrality about it, not giving too much of the benefits and too little of the burdens to myself” (“Phenomenology of Friendship,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 55, no. 3 [2002]: 451–70, at 457 [emphasis added]).

¹³ See *NE* 2.9.1109b1–8.

with and meditation on one's own being."¹⁴ He says that it is something of a virtuous mean between sterile, narcissistic "brooding" over oneself and "thoughtless superficiality," and he stresses the individual and practical nature of this kind of self-understanding. Anyone who "feels in need of improvement, anyone who in brief wishes to 'grow,' must take counsel with himself" so as to understand himself and his situation in society in the hopes of unifying his life and "growing" in responsibility and virtue.¹⁵ Jung says that, in psychological self-knowledge, "whether it is a question of understanding a fellow human being or of self-knowledge, I must in both cases leave all theoretical assumptions behind me." As distinct from self-awareness, psychological self-knowledge is more purely intellectual and reflective, but it is not theoretic insight into human nature and its essential properties done for the sake of knowing the truth of what it is to be human. Rather, it is intimate knowledge of the self, considered as an individual with all its particularities, both its conscious activities and unconscious processes, and it is pursued for the sake of the individual's psychological wholeness and growth in moral virtue.¹⁶ It is therefore important for the development and maintenance of friendship, for anyone who cannot see his own flaws and the source of those flaws will be incapable of the common life characteristic of friendship with others. In an Aristotelian echo, Jung says: "When a man lacks self-knowledge he can do the most astonishing or terrible things without calling himself to account and without ever suspecting what he is doing."¹⁷ As Aristotle himself says, a mark of the vicious man is to be unaware of himself in this way, to lack this form of psychological and moral self-knowledge, "for vice escapes the notice of one who has it."¹⁸

One need not agree with Jung's theory of the unconscious in whole or in part to recognize the existence and importance of this kind of self-knowledge and to see that we can achieve it only because we are able, as rational animals, to take a distance from ourselves and our immediate situation. This clarifying distance allows the space for reflection, which, if done well, can improve our understanding of ourselves, and thus enhance our capacity for noble action and friendship. Thus, in order to live well in friendship with others, we must

¹⁴ Carl G. Jung, "Depth Psychology and Self-Knowledge," in *The Symbolic Life*, trans. R. F. C. Hull, vol. 18 of *Collected Works*, ed. Herbert Read, Michael Fordham, and Gerhard Adler (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 817.

¹⁵ Jung, "Depth Psychology," 815.

¹⁶ See Carl G. Jung, *The Undiscovered Self: With Symbols and the Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. R. F. C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 58.

¹⁷ Jung, "Depth Psychology," 811.

¹⁸ NE 7.8.1150b35–36.

not only be aware of ourselves as agents; we must also develop a personal and practical self-understanding so as to improve our moral and social lives.

Pre-Philosophical Knowledge of Human Nature

Let us move to the third form of self-knowledge, which has for its object human nature itself. In the course of their lives, human beings naturally develop an inchoate sense of what it is to be human; by living with others, by perceiving, thinking, acting, and interacting, we tend naturally to attain some vague understanding of human nature, just as such. As the condition for the possibility of its existence, such self-knowledge requires that I am able to take yet another step back, not only from my particular desires, habits, neuroses, or actions, but from myself as an individual. It requires that I take a distance to my life as a whole so that I may think, not about *how* I am constituted in my particular psychological or moral qualities, but rather *what* I am simply as a human person. It requires that I transcend thoughts about what individuates me as a unique personality with a unique history in to order to think about what is common to human nature, to reflect upon what is shared between myself and all human beings.

Such self-knowledge is more reflective because its object is more general than psychological self-understanding, but it is not less personal; it is rather more personal, but in a different way. With Stephen Brock, we may say that it is quite natural and somewhat spontaneous “to understand oneself to be a human being” and to grasp “that human nature is our own nature.” That is, we grasp human nature as our own *nature*, “not just as a feature that we happen to have, but as what we are, constitutive of our very being.” Included in this self-knowledge of what we are by nature is a recognition of “the things that befit human nature as befitting ourselves.”¹⁹ Our inchoate and nebulous self-knowledge of human nature is therefore not merely universal and un-erotic, as if it were a vision of mathematical certainties, but a grasp of what we are, and thus of what is fitting for us because of what we are. As Sokolowski says, “Our understanding of ourselves as human beings is related to our understanding of the good and virtuous human life.”²⁰ To grasp human nature is to have a sense of human excellence, and to see human excellence displayed is to grasp human nature.

It is important to note that this incomplete and often somewhat incoherent grasp of human nature is not the result of disciplined philosophical

¹⁹ These three quotations are taken from Stephen Brock, *The Light That Binds: A Study in Thomas Aquinas's Metaphysics of Natural Law* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2020), 163.

²⁰ Robert Sokolowski, “What Is Natural Law? Human Purposes and Natural Ends,” *The Thomist* 68, no. 4 (2004): 507–29, at 507. See Aristotle, *Politics* 1.2.1252b31–1253a2.

thinking. It does not come to us for the first time when we enter into the philosophical life, and we do not achieve it based upon philosophical description and argument. It is likely more spontaneous than psychological self-knowledge, as we achieve some sense of human nature even before engaging in the psychological and moral self-searching described above. This understanding of ourselves, of our human nature, “is achieved in light of our understanding of the human world around us and of our belonging to that world.”²¹ Our inchoate knowledge of human nature is necessarily mediated by our social setting. It comes to us, or rather we develop it, as entangled with the folk wisdom that we encounter in our family and social groups, and it is textured by our political, artistic, and intellectual culture. Such self-knowledge of human nature thus forms an important dimension of our “world view,” which is inevitably shaped by the world in which we live.

This quasi-reflective but pre-philosophical self-knowledge of human nature, especially insofar as it includes a sense of the good for human beings, should be connected to Charles Taylor’s discussion of “social imaginaries.” Taylor defines a social imaginary as “the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations.”²² He sharply distinguishes a “social imaginary” from a “disengaged” theory characteristic of the philosophical and theoretic life. As distinct from a theory, which is had by only a few intellectual elites and is expressed in precise terms, a social imaginary is the possession of “ordinary people” and is “carried in images, stories, and legends.” It is therefore much wider and more influential than pure theory, shared as it is by whole groups and societies, and it constitutes the “common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy.”²³

Taylor says that a social imaginary is complex; it is both descriptive and normative because it gives us “a sense of how things usually go, but this in interwoven with an idea of how they ought to go, of what missteps would invalidate [our collective practices].”²⁴ Behind this descriptive and normative sense of things “stands some notion of a moral or metaphysical order, in the context of which the norms and ideals make sense.”²⁵ The social imagi-

²¹ Brock, *Light that Binds*, 163.

²² Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 23.

²³ Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 23.

²⁴ Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 24.

²⁵ Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 25.

nary of a given society is therefore quite extensive as a background for our individual actions and collective practices; it has “no clear limits” because it represents “our largely unstructured and inarticulate understanding of our whole situation, within which particular features of our world show up for us in the sense they have.”²⁶ Included in the extensive background of any social imaginary, and mediated by its characteristic images, is a pre-theoretic “sense of moral order” through which we come to understand “human life and history.”²⁷ Human beings come to know themselves insofar as they know and are immersed in the world around them; they develop a sense of what they are, of what it is to be human and to identify and achieve goods, by engaging with their familial, social, political, and intellectual setting. The distinction between *physis* and *nomos* is critical for self-knowledge and decent moral action, but our “original,” pre-philosophical knowledge of the human *physis* is mediated by our engagement with the *nomoi* of our society, including what Taylor describes as our social imaginary.

Philosophical Self-Knowledge and Its Completion

Because we are *rational* animals, human beings develop a sense of themselves and of what is naturally good for them, and our knowledge of ourselves both forms and is shaped by our sense of how we are situated in the whole of things. Because we are *familial and political* animals, this knowledge of our nature, of our natural goods, and of how we fit in the whole of things is sculpted by our familial life and our social and political culture, by what Taylor calls our social imaginary. When this vague, background knowledge of ourselves and of the whole is brought to the foreground, when we move from thinking prompted by practical necessities and shaped by (more or less) unexamined opinions about ourselves and about the whole to thinking done for the sake of truth itself, in which we take ourselves and the whole of things as the explicit target of contemplative activity, we may be said to move toward the fourth kind of self-knowledge: philosophical understanding of ourselves. In order to achieve this philosophical self-understanding, we must once again take another step back and extend the distance from ourselves and our practical lives. We must find the philosophical distance that clarifies, that enables us to see clearly the nature of the human person as the one who is capable of knowing the whole and the principle of the whole and of acting responsibly toward others.

Each in his own way, Plato and Edmund Husserl describe this

²⁶ Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 25.

²⁷ Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 28.

philosophical distance and thus display the distinction between philosophical contemplation and the more narrow, practical view of human things obtained in pre-philosophical thinking. In the *Theaetetus*, Plato's Socrates claims that the philosopher does not concern himself with the practicalities of "the serious business of clubs for gaining office, and meetings, banquets, and revelries with flute girls." As distinct from practical men whose "small, sharp" minds are constantly occupied with such machinations, the philosopher "doesn't even know that he does not know all these things."²⁸ The philosopher has "truly become unaware of his neighbor next-door, not only as to what he's doing but almost to the point of not knowing whether he is a human being of some different nursling. But what [a] human being is and in what respect it's suitable for a nature of that sort to act or be acted on that's different from all the rest—[the philosopher] seeks that, and all his trouble [*pragmata*] is in exploring it."²⁹ Plato uses the image of the philosopher as being "hung up on high" and "dragging others up" with him so that they can transcend questions concerning "how I am wronging you, or you me?" and debates about whether "a king who has much gold is happy." Rather, the proper intellectual distance enables the philosopher to examine the nature of man along with the nature of "justice itself and injustice, what each of the pair is and in what respect they are distinct from everything else and from each other." By becoming a "disinterested spectator," the philosopher is able to discuss human nature itself, the nature of kingship itself, and especially the nature of happiness itself and misery itself, "of what sort the pair [happiness and misery] is and in what way it's suitable for the nature of [a] human being to acquire one and avoid one of the pair." It is the philosopher who asks and attempts to answer such questions by taking a steady look to the whole, and thus it is the philosopher who knows "how to tune the strings of common speech to fitting praise of the life of gods and happy men."³⁰

Yet, we can achieve this philosophical knowledge of human nature and its *telos* only if we are able, as Husserl says, to achieve a perspective that enables us to inquire back into those intellectual activities that allow us to achieve truth. We must reorient our intellectual focus in order to reflect theoretically upon the correlation between our subjective activities and their objective correlates. Husserl shows that philosophy is occupied with "the knower's reflecting upon himself and his knowing life," and he says that the

²⁸ Plato, *Theaetetus* 173d–e, in *The Being of the Beautiful: Plato's Theaetetus, Sophist, and Statesman*, trans. Seth Benardete (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

²⁹ Plato, *Theaetetus* 174b.

³⁰ These texts may be found at Plato, *Theaetetus* 175c–e. I modify the translation of the final quotation.

philosophical perspective lies “here, situated above” our default, practical orientation toward the objects with which we must deal in our quotidian activities.³¹ From this philosophical perspective, we contemplate beings and the subjective activities through which they manifest themselves to us, and in so doing the philosopher “loses nothing of their being and their objective truths and likewise nothing at all of the spiritual acquisitions of his world-life of those of the whole historical communal life; he simply forbids himself—as a philosopher, in the uniqueness of the direction of his interest—to continue the whole natural performance of his world-life.”³² Thus, for the philosopher, all practical, unreflective interests are “put out of play” so that he may achieve the distance from which philosophy “helps us think about the first and final issues and helps us to know ourselves.”³³

Because the philosopher must take a contemplative look at the whole of things and at the principle of the whole, he must look especially at the nature of the one who knows the whole, the human being, and at how the human being ought to live within the whole. That is, he must know himself and the ways in which he displays being to himself and to others, and he must contemplate his distinctive place in the whole of things and reflect upon how he ought to act, given what he is and “where” he lives. As Plato and Husserl help us to see, the turn to philosophy requires a radical kind of distance, yet one that is prepared for and completes the various kinds of distancing we have discussed. The philosopher requires this special distance from individual practical concerns and activities, not so that he may escape from human life into some unknown mystical realm, but rather for the sake of contemplating the natures of things, especially human nature, so that he may glimpse their relation to the whole and to the ultimate source of the whole. This philosophical distance from particular beings and from every practical concern is the most reflective, the most illuminating and clarifying form of distance; it is the “view from nowhere” that allows us to see into the depths of things, to look at what makes them to be what they are.

Before we enter into philosophical thinking, we are concerned with who and what we are, with human goods, with political authority and friendship, and with truth. We speak to others and to ourselves about these things and we take the various kinds of distance from ourselves that enable us to

³¹ Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. David Carr (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 97, 152.

³² Husserl, *Crisis*, 152.

³³ Robert Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 209 (the phrase “put out of play” is from Husserl, *Crisis*, 152).

achieve them. When we shift up into philosophical thinking, we begin to look at the things that we normally live through. We seek to understand human nature, the nature of the good, and the essence of political life and friendship, not just to have or to live them, and we try to come to the truth about truth itself; as Aristotle says, "Rightly then is philosophy called the science of truth."³⁴ While engaged in philosophy, we speak about speech, about how it manifests being and about how being shows itself to use through language, and we contemplate how thinking in the medium of words displays the goods that naturally perfect us. We contemplate how language provides a doorway into social and political life and how it punctuates the life of friendship with others, and we identify, name, and describe a social imaginary just as such. Further, in the pre-philosophical life, we recognize and live according to the natural law to a greater or lesser extent, but from the philosophical perspective we contemplate the "nature" of the natural law, its origin, "content," mode of being known, and connection to human nature. The natural law is not originally promulgated with the turn to philosophical thinking.

For his part, Manent says that "the most interesting questions of human life play out in the realm of motives: what are the motives of human beings?" Manent concludes that "philosophy is finally self-knowledge since, obviously, one cannot really know human motives without being capable of knowing one's own motives. Self-knowledge, in effect, is not the knowledge of the *self*, of the 'I,' the knowledge of one's individual, incommunicable or incomparable particularity; this self-knowledge consists in discerning how human motives, the motives *common* to all human beings, are configured in one's own soul."³⁵ According to Manent, the issue of human nature insofar as it expresses itself in the motives common to all human beings provides the lever to move up into philosophy, and philosophy "culminates in, or at least results in, self-knowledge. This is what the Greeks call 'putting one's soul in order.'"³⁶

Throughout this paper, we have been speaking from the philosophical perspective. We have contemplated what it is to be human precisely by distinguishing and comparing self-awareness, psychological and moral self-knowledge, and the vague knowledge of human nature achieved by human beings in conjunction with their social imaginary, but we have not engaged directly in any one of these forms of self-knowledge (except for

³⁴ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 2.1.993b20.

³⁵ Manent, *Seeing Things Politically*, 57–58.

³⁶ Manent, *Seeing Things Politically*, 58.

self-awareness). Yet, there is a fifth kind of self-knowledge that must be identified. At this point, we only mention this form of knowing ourselves, as we will return to it in the final section of this essay. The fifth form of self-knowledge comes through the Incarnation of God in Jesus of Nazareth. The life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ shows us what it is to be human, and this knowledge gained through faith in God as revealing the truth to us in Christ completes and extends the natural forms of self-knowledge that we have discussed. At the close of this paper, we will show that Jesus's revelation of man to himself has important consequences for our knowledge of the natural law.

Two Conclusions Concerning Self-Knowledge and the Moral Life

We may draw two important conclusions from our reflections on the various kinds of self-knowledge. First, these forms of self-understanding are interlaced; they are built upon each other and influence each other. Self-awareness provides the foundation for all the other kinds of self-knowledge, and psychological, moral self-knowledge is structured by what we take ourselves to be, simply as human beings. As Jung points out, our psychological self-searching is to a large extent shaped, both in form and content, by what our cultural, social, and political setting explicitly or implicitly claims human nature to be. We might say that the pre-philosophical grasp of human nature gleaned in part from our social imaginary shapes our ability to look truly at ourselves as individuals. For its part, our social imaginary is an expression of the dominant sense of human things and of the whole of things, an expression that textures the thinking of those who enter into it.

We have discussed the ways that philosophical understanding of human nature must transcend the more practically oriented forms of thinking and action, but it is crucial to note that there can be, and often is, an overflow of philosophical ideas back down onto the realm of social imaginaries. Philosophy can infiltrate individuals' psychological and moral sense of themselves, both directly through serious study and indirectly by being filtered through a cultural sieve. Just as there is a "reflux" of art and poetry back on life, a reflux of artful imitation back on imitated action, so too there is often a reflux of philosophical thinking back on the social imaginaries and *nomoi* that both express and serve to shape our understanding of ourselves.³⁷ It is within this interplay of different forms of knowledge of the self and of the

³⁷ On the "reflux" of art back onto life, see Thomas Prufer, *Recapitulations: Essays in Philosophy* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1993), 12–21, esp. 18–19.

whole of things that the natural law is made known or occluded to human beings, who must act in accordance with what they take themselves to be.

The second conclusion concerns not the connection between the forms of self-knowledge themselves, but that of each form of self-knowledge, and all together, with ethics. While each is fundamental in its own way, the questions concerning what it is to be human and how it is that we ought to live do not merely run parallel to each other; they are interwoven, with the answer to one texturing the approach to the other. For, how we ought to live depends upon what we are, and the truth of what, or rather who, we are shapes how we ought to conduct ourselves. To grasp what we are in any form of self-knowledge is to have some sense of what is good for us, of what is perfective of us as human beings. Therefore, “the working out of a description and definition of human nature is at the same time the formulation of what we ought to be as human beings, because the good or perfected state of man, which is the issue for ethics, is what defines human being. The normative is also the definitional. We cannot describe what man is without specifying the human good, without showing what it is to be a good (and consequently ‘happy’) man.”³⁸ Knowledge of human nature, even in pre-philosophical thinking, is always a hendiadys—a one through two—of being and the good, of anthropology and ethics. Part of knowing ourselves truly is grasping that our nature is just that, an active source of life and a potency to become more fully what we are by nature. As Remi Brague says, “Man’s humanity is not simply an immutable given; man must achieve his excellence by developing what he begins with. He achieves this through an activity that is entrusted to him: for man, to be a man is a task; his humanity must, literally, be brought to perfection. The impact of cosmology on anthropology will thus also, and inseparably, be an ethical impact.”³⁹ Because we are naturally open to development yet directed, because we are laden with potential but teleological, we must realize or complete ourselves, and we must do so according to the rule of our natural perfection.

Even when articulated vaguely and confusedly as it so often is, the answer

³⁸ Sokolowski, “What is Natural Law?,” 527. Remi Brague makes much the same point: “An anthropology is not just a collection of considerations that might be made about certain dimensions of human existence—the social, economic, or anatomical dimensions. . . . Nor is it limited to a theory that seeks to isolate the essence of the human being; it also encompasses a reflection on the way in which man can fully realize what he is—an ethics” (*The Wisdom of the World: The Human Experience of the Universe in Western Thought*, trans. Teresa Lavender Fagan [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003], 5).

³⁹ Brague, *Wisdom of the World*, 217.

that we give to the question of human nature contains the seed of a certain way of life. There is a moral weight that comes along with any and every conception of human nature and human life, a kind of teleology that runs from our conception of human things to our action in relation to them. We tend to live in accordance with what we take ourselves to be. If we are convinced that human beings are nothing more than so many materially determined bags of molecules resulting from pure chance through the blind mechanism of evolutionary biology, or if we are persuaded that being human is nothing more than being a blank slate awaiting self-creation through technology and artifice, then simply holding such views puts us on the road to a certain kind of moral life.⁴⁰ Our incipient understanding of human nature provides the contours of our view of what is base or noble, if there be such, in the realm of human action. As we have seen, our choices, along with the moral character they consolidate and the relationships they facilitate or vitiate, are made within an intellectual horizon containing questions and answers about human nature and the nature of reality; our actions are surrounded by a halo of self-understanding, a halo that sheds light on a path to take in one's conduct with others, even as it leaves other paths in darkness. It is not accidental that the Delphic maxim to know oneself is immediately tied to an injunction at the heart of moral virtue: nothing to excess.⁴¹

The Cause of the Necessity of the Link between Self-Knowledge and the Moral Life

We are now in a position to answer the second question raised at the beginning of the previous section: Why is self-knowledge important, and indeed inevitable, for human beings? Why must we know ourselves truly in order to live well? St. Thomas's subtle ontology of personhood can help us to answer this question. Aquinas argues that the word "person" . . . is not used to refer to an individual in the aspect of its nature, but to a reality subsisting in that nature [ad significandum rem subsistentem in tali natura].⁴² As individual

⁴⁰ Cormac McCarthy's novel *Child of God* may be understood as a vivid illustration of what human moral life looks like if we take ourselves to be merely material beings seeking bodily pleasure, and if we follow this understanding of ourselves to its logical practical conclusion.

⁴¹ According to Pausanias (ca. 110–180): "In the fore-temple at Delphi are written maxims useful for the life of men, inscribed by those whom the Greeks say were sages. . . . These sages, then, came to Delphi and dedicated to Apollo the celebrated maxims, 'Know thyself,' and 'Nothing in excess'" (*Description of Greece*, trans. W. H. S. Jones [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1918], 507). See also Plato, *Protagoras* 343b.

⁴² *ST I*, q. 30, a. 4.

substances of a rational nature, human persons are indeed substances, but the presence of intellect “in” us means that our mode of being an individual substance is unique.

As distinct from “accidents” like “how much a thing is” or “where it is,” (primary) substances or entities exist in their own right. While an accident exists and is individuated by inhering in and modifying an entity, substances are the most fundamental subjects of being. Substances are individuated through themselves, unified in themselves and distinct from other things. Accidents are present in and predicated of substances, but substances are not present in or said of anything else. St. Thomas argues that free choice, the characteristic mode of action of persons, manifests that we hold a unique place even among substances. He says that “there is an even more special and perfect mode in which particulars and individuals are found among rational substances, which have dominion over their acts and which are not just acted upon like other substances, but act on their own. Now, actions belong to singular things. And so, among the other substances, singular substances with a rational nature likewise have a special name. And this name is ‘person.’”⁴³ A human person is unified and specified by his rational soul, which shapes the human body toward the intellectual pursuit of truth and toward freely chosen expressions of love. It is the intellect and its eros for truth that make us more radically individualized than other animals. Reason gives us the ability to choose freely to love others through bodily actions, to have intellectual “dominion over our acts,” and it is reason that grants us the inner “distance” from those actions that allows us to reflect upon who we are and how we ought to live.

Because we are human persons whose intellect and will give us dominion over our choices, but not over our nature, knowing our nature truly is necessary if we are to live in accordance with who we are as rational animals. Because our nature is intellectual and free, we must understand who we are, as human persons, in order to be perfected through free choice and friendship. The ontology of human personhood, the unique way that intellect and will enable human persons to exist and act, is the deepest reason why self-knowledge of our unified being is necessary and important for our moral lives.

The recognition of this unique mode of existing of human persons enables us to avoid two extremes that plague our contemporary culture. The first is the scientistic extreme that claims that human beings are nothing more than materially determined bodies held together by DNA formed by chance

⁴³ *ST I*, q. 29, a. 1.

events, and the second is the existentialist extreme that claims that we are radically free to create ourselves according to our whims. The first submerges human beings into “nature” understood in a deterministic way, and therefore denies the individuality and dignity proper to reason and freedom, while the second exalts “freedom” and individuality to the point of denying the existence of human nature itself. The first plunges us into a deterministic, materialistic “nature,” while the second cuts all ties to nature and drifts into flights of mythical self-creation *ex nihilo*.

Aquinas’s subtle ontology of personhood enables us to avoid both extremes, and therefore helps us to understand adequately the unique being of human persons and why that being requires various forms of self-knowledge. The scientistic extreme claims there is no reason and freedom with which to direct ourselves well or poorly, only a materially determined nature to which we are utterly subject, and the existentialist extreme claims that there is no human nature, only reason and freedom to create ourselves according to no rule other than our subjective whims. Contra the scientistic extreme, we note that to be a person means to have an intellectual distance from our actions and to be open to the whole of things through knowledge, free choice, and love; contra the existentialist extreme, we note that human persons subsist in a rational nature with an inner structure that provides a rule and measure for our free choices. To be a person is, as Spaemann says, to be someone, not something, and thus to be a person is to have the task of understanding the truth about ourselves in order to live according to who we are.⁴⁴

St. Augustine provides an excellent description of this relationship between true self-knowledge and freely chosen action in accordance with human nature. Augustine says that “the mind” is commanded to know itself because it “should think about itself and live according to its nature, that is it should want to be placed according to its nature, under him it should be subject to and over all that it should be in control of; under him it should be ruled by, over all that it ought to rule. In fact many of the things it does show that it has twisted its desires the wrong way round as though it had forgotten itself.”⁴⁵ It is interesting to note that Augustine says that the mind ought to think about itself, that the thinking itself is essential and must be done, both for the sake of the knowing and so that we may be able to live according to our human nature as thought about and understood. Further,

⁴⁴ Spaemann, *Persons*, 5–40.

⁴⁵ St. Augustine, *De Trinitate* 10.2.7, trans. William Hill (Hyde Park, NY: New City, 1991), 292.

Augustine suggests that our vicious and sinful actions include a failure to see the truth about ourselves. In vicious action, it is as if the mind has “twisted its desires the wrong way round as though it had forgotten itself,” and therefore needs to be reminded to know itself properly.

Thus, self-knowledge is inextricably linked to a human nature that must be understood in order to be perfected through free choice, and St. Thomas Aquinas says that these three aspects—self-knowledge of human nature setting the stage for free choice that perfects the human person—are linked from the “first instant” of the moral life. According to St. Thomas, the ability to choose freely and the moral pressure that comes with free choice prompts us to think (1) about ourselves as the agent of our actions, (2) about the end that is fitting for us, and (3) about how we ought to relate ourselves to our due end. Discussing the first free action of an unbaptized child, Aquinas says that, when we begin to think actively and to engage in properly moral deliberation, “The first thing that occurs to a man to think about at that time is *to deliberate about himself*.” Aquinas says that if he thinks about himself properly and orders himself to his due end (*debitum finem*), “He will receive the remission of original sin through grace. On the other hand, if he does not order himself to his fitting end, then to the extent that he is capable of discretion at that age, he will commit a mortal sin because he fails to do what he is capable of doing.”⁴⁶ For our purposes, let us bracket the theological implications of Aquinas’s argument and concentrate on the philosophical claim that undergirds it. Aquinas says that “the first thing that occurs to a man who has discretion is that he think, *with respect to himself*, what end he should order other things toward.”⁴⁷ Moved by the natural desire of the will for happiness, the human person must begin to consider the truth about himself as he considers the end for which he should act. The end is the first in intention for the human person, and this desire for the end inclines the human person to think about himself in relation to that end.

St. Thomas is obviously not attributing a “scientific” or philosophical knowledge of human nature to young children on the precipice of the moral life, nor is he referring to an intimate psychological grasp of the self, and even less to the more basic self-awareness attendant upon each human action. It seems clear he is discussing something akin to what we have identified as the third form of self-knowledge, a kind of primitive intellectual sense of what it is to be human through which “we know man by a certain confused cognition before we know how to distinguish all the things that belong to

⁴⁶ *ST* I-II, q. 89, a. 6, corp.

⁴⁷ *ST* I-II, q. 89, a. 6, ad 3.

the definition of man.”⁴⁸ From the genesis of our active intellectual life, we are a question for ourselves, and because we are human persons, we must understand ourselves truly in order to move ourselves to our natural end by free choice. At the very least, we must see that we are not the end of all things, that we are not, as Aristotle would say, the best thing in the cosmos, but that we are toward the end that is above us, and thus perfective of us. Yet, this means that we can also misunderstand ourselves to varying degrees, with deleterious consequences for our moral lives. We can attempt to make ourselves the end of all things instead of seeing our life as being toward the end that is God.

Self-Knowledge and Friendship

Because of who we are as human persons, there is a necessary link between self-knowledge and the moral life, and this link can be specified by examining three texts on friendship from Aristotle and St. Thomas. Aristotle shows that self-love is of two kinds, one noble and one base, and he argues that proper self-love is the source of (virtuous) friendship with others. Aquinas incorporates this point into his discussion of the theological virtue of charity and claims that “the love by which one loves himself is the form and root of friendship [*forma et radix amicitiae*], since we have friendship with respect to others by the fact that we relate to them as we relate to ourselves.”⁴⁹ According to Aristotle, to have noble self-love is to love oneself well by wishing for and doing what is truly good for oneself, and to do those good things to ourselves for our own sake, without the inner tension and struggle that plagues the continent and incontinent agents due to their unruly appetites. The decent man loves himself for his own sake in a unified, intelligent way, and this self-love flows into friendship with others because the decent man “stands in relation to a friend as he does to himself—for the friend is another self.”⁵⁰

The decent man animated by noble self-love is capable of friendship because he loves his friend as he loves himself, and he wants the noble goods of virtue for himself, for his own sake. “For if someone should always take seriously that he himself do what is just, or moderate, or whatever else accords with the virtues, and, in general, if he should secure what is noble for himself, . . . this sort of human being would seem to be more a self-lover.”⁵¹

⁴⁸ *ST* I, 85, a. 3, ad 3. See also q. 87, a. 1.

⁴⁹ *ST* II-II, q. 25, a. 4.

⁵⁰ *NE* 9.4.1166a31–32.

⁵¹ *NE* 9.8.1168b25–28.

Yet, what does it mean for the decent man to want these noble goods of virtue for himself, *for his own sake*? What does “for his own sake” mean in the context of self-love? Aristotle says that the noble self-lover wants and does what accords with the virtues “for his own sake, since he acts for the sake of the thinking part of himself, which is in fact what each man seems to be.”⁵² The good moral agent, whose noble self-love provides the foundation for friendship with others, “allots to himself the noblest things and the greatest goods, [and] he gratifies the most authoritative part of himself, and in all things he obeys this part. Just as a city and every other whole composed of parts seem to be their most authoritative part above all, so too does a human being.”⁵³ Aristotle concludes that the man with noble self-love “is fond of and gratifies this authoritative part [the intellect]; and he is said to be either self-restrained or lacking in self-restraint depending on whether or not his intellect is in control, on the grounds that this part is the man himself. . . . It is not unclear, then, that each human being is this [rational] part, or is this above all, and that the decent man is fond of this especially.”⁵⁴ The intellect makes us to be who we are; it enables us to be free agents who can achieve the good for ourselves and others by thoughtful choice, and therefore the intellect is “most what we are.” Having some sense of this truth of human nature is necessary for proper self-love, which is the foundation for friendship with others.

Friendship is therefore founded upon noble self-love, and noble self-love is itself based upon true self-knowledge. We are capable of friendship only if we are “most of all fond of the intellect,” and thus able to will the goods of truth and virtue for ourselves, and we can do this only if we take ourselves to be rational, and thus familial and political, animals who are what we are due to the presence of intellect, with its natural eros for truth. We must take ourselves to be “agents of truth,” to be formed by our ability to achieve and to live the truth, if we are to be capable of the self-love and friendship that are the *telos* of the moral life. To extend Aquinas’s metaphor, if noble self-love is the root of friendship, then true self-knowledge is its seed. It is important to add that true self-knowledge is the necessary, but not sufficient, condition for decent moral action at the heart of friendship. Such knowledge opens the intellectual space within which the desires can be formed properly, but it does not guarantee the inculcation of moral virtue, which comes from consistently doing the right actions in the right ways. It was perhaps Plato’s

⁵² NE 9.4.1166a17–19.

⁵³ NE 9.8.1168b30–33.

⁵⁴ NE 9.8.1168b34–69a3.

mistake to imply that true self-knowledge is achievable only in philosophy and that it is both necessary and sufficient for moral virtue and friendship. If we may continue with our Thomistic metaphor, the presence of the seed of true self-knowledge does not guarantee the root of proper self-love or the flower of friendship, but the absence of the seed does ensure that neither the root nor the flower will develop.

Aristotle concludes his argument by showing that, when each person takes himself to be what he truly is by nature—when each knows himself to be a rational, familial, and political animal by nature—then he is in an intellectual position to desire what is fitting for him as so understood, and thus the common good of all is achieved. “All approve of and praise those who are preeminently serious about noble actions. And if all compete with a view to what is noble and exert themselves to the utmost to do what is noblest, then in common there would be all the necessities and for each individually the greatest goods, if in fact virtue is of such a character. As a result, the good person ought to be a self-lover—he will both profit himself and benefit others by doing noble things.”⁵⁵ In both its acquisition and consequences, self-knowledge is far from a private affair. The common goods of friendship in social and political union depend upon individuals knowing, even in a general and vague way, what it is to be human.

Alas, we can also fail to grasp adequately what we are by nature. Aristotle says that those who exhibit a base self-love, those human beings we may call selfish, “gratify their desires and, in general, their passions and the nonrational part of their soul.”⁵⁶ Aristotle suggests that base people take themselves to be their appetites most of all. Instead of identifying themselves primarily with the intellect and seeing the bodily desires as non-rational but open to reason’s direction, they identify themselves primarily with their desires for bodily gratifications, and thus they love themselves poorly by wanting for themselves the goods of money, power, and pleasure. Because they do not understand themselves and their nature, they fail to identify those goods that are truly perfective of human beings, for the end “does not appear to someone if he is not good. For corruption distorts and causes one to be mistaken about the principles bound up with action.”⁵⁷ Based upon a distorted self-knowledge, such people instrumentalize the mind to pursue the means to achieve bodily satisfactions, and these pursuits lead to competition and faction with others. They are therefore incapable of friendship. Aristotle

⁵⁵ *NE* 9.8.1169a7–13.

⁵⁶ *NE* 9.8.1168b20–21. For our purposes in this essay, I bracket the question of the moral culpability of this ignorance of human nature.

⁵⁷ *NE* 6.12.1144a34–36.

concludes that “the corrupt person ought not to be [a self-lover]—he will harm both himself and his neighbors, since he follows his base passions.”⁵⁸ In a remark similar to Augustine’s on the self-forgetfulness of the sinner, Aristotle says that base people seek the company of others with whom they are not capable of friendship in order to distract themselves from knowledge of their actions and moral character. “Corrupt people seek to pass their days with others, but they flee themselves because, when by themselves, they are reminded of many odious things and anticipate still others. When they are with others, however, they forget. And since they possess nothing lovable, they feel in no way friendly toward themselves.”⁵⁹ True self-knowledge opens the door to friendship and social union, while distorted self-knowledge leads to the shallow, superficial company of those who assemble together in order to use one another other to flee from themselves.

In these texts, we can identify four forms of self-knowledge enumerated in the previous section. We hear Aristotle speaking from a “philosophical distance” and reflecting upon human nature and experience. With philosophical precision, he describes the kind of pre-philosophical self-knowledge of human nature that decent human beings achieve and that makes them capable of friendship with others. He also alludes to the base man’s failure to achieve this knowledge of human nature and discusses his subsequent inability to achieve adequate moral self-knowledge, for such a man flees from himself by spending time with others with whom he is incapable of community and friendship. A distorted knowledge of human nature leads to base actions, and those actions in turn make psychological, moral self-knowledge difficult to achieve.

Nor is self-awareness unrelated to friendship. To perceive that we perceive and that we think is to perceive that we exist, and because life is by nature a good thing, to perceive that we exist is also good and pleasant, especially to those who are good. As a friend is another self, “one ought to share in the friend’s perception that he exists, and this would come to pass by living together and sharing in a community of speeches and thought—for this is what living together would seem to mean in the case of human beings, and not as with cattle, merely feeding in the same place.”⁶⁰ Thus, one’s friend’s perception, both of things and of himself in perceiving those things, is in a sense one’s own perception. Self-awareness is expanded in friendship to become a shared consciousness of goods, especially the good of life itself, and

⁵⁸ *NE* 9.8.1169a13–14.

⁵⁹ *NE* 9.4.1166b14–18.

⁶⁰ *NE* 9.9.1170b11–14.

of ourselves as knowing and desiring those goods together in a community of speech, thought, and life.

Aquinas develops many of these philosophical points in a theological question concerning whether or not sinners may be said to love themselves. He claims that self-love is predicated in three ways. In one way, it is common to all human beings, in a second way it is unique to the good, and in a third way it is held by the bad. Like Aristotle, he bases each form of self-love on the understanding that human beings have of themselves, “for it is common to everyone that he loves what he thinks himself to be.”⁶¹ Now, human persons may be said to be in two ways. First, we may be said to be in terms of our “substance and nature, and this way all think themselves to be what they are, that is, composed of soul and body. In this way too, all men, both good and wicked, love themselves, in so far as they love their own preservation.” Second, we may be said to be something in terms of what has preeminence “in” us; we may be said to be our principal part or our highest, most noble ability. In this more specific way of being and being known, “all do not think themselves to be what they are.” Aquinas says that the “reasoning mind” is the principle of man and that our “sensitive and corporeal nature” is secondary to what we are. “Now the good think their rational nature as being principal in them, . . . and therefore in this way they think themselves to be what they are.” However, the morally bad “think their sensitive and corporeal nature as being principal in them Therefore, since they know not themselves aright, they do not love themselves aright, but love what they think themselves to be. But the good know themselves truly, and therefore truly love themselves.” Within a theological context, St. Thomas specifies Aristotle’s philosophical thinking and provides excellent detail concerning true self-knowledge as the foundation for noble self-love and friendship.

Self-Knowledge, Political Life, and Our Knowledge of the Natural Law

I wish to claim that Manent gives us a contemporary, sophisticated, and explicitly political version of Aristotle’s argument concerning self-knowledge as the foundation for the self-love that opens to friendship. His book on natural law and human rights displays the fact that the modern state and its social imaginary distort our self-understanding in profound ways and mutilate our ability to love ourselves well and to form friendships. However, we can appreciate the strength of his argument only if we understand that

⁶¹ This and the following quotations from St. Thomas are taken from *ST* II-II, q. 25, a. 7.

the interconnected questions we have discussed—of what man is and of how he ought to live, of self-knowledge as a foundation for the moral life and friendship—culminate in a third question, critical both for the philosopher and for the one operating in the quotidian world of practical concerns. This third, culminating question concerns the nature of politics, and more specifically the best political form for human beings.

The question of what it is to be human is prompted by a situation that invites our thoughtful response, and our conception of human nature flows back into the question of how we ought to live, which in turn cannot be answered fully without raising the question of the nature and perfection of society generally and of polity specifically. Thinking about how we ought to live demands that we think about how we ought to live *together*, which requires that we raise the classical political question concerning the best regime, the regime for which one ought to pray. One's understanding of human nature affects one's understanding of political life because societies and political regimes are formed by human beings in view of governing themselves and others toward the common good. Human beings must be understood to be a certain way if they are to be capable of acting (or being acted upon) as citizens (or subjects) of a specific political form. Therefore, one's ethical life and one's political form are founded upon a conception of the nature of human beings, for one's anthropology includes an ethics that must harmonize with one's political teaching, and one's political teaching must be fitting for one's ethical anthropology.

*Manent on the Modern State and
Its Foundational Conception of Human Nature*

The various renditions of the state of nature given by modern philosophers are therefore not accidental to their political thought, and the epistemological developments in modern philosophy are not unrelated to its political upheavals. Despite their differences, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Immanuel Kant must present an understanding of human nature, especially the human mind, as the foundation for their arguments concerning political things. As Manent says, modern philosophers “justified their [political] theses, founded them on a certain interpretation of the state of nature, that is, ultimately of human nature.”⁶² The recognition of this necessary connection between human nature and

⁶² Pierre Manent, *Metamorphoses of the City: On the Western Dynamic*, trans. Marc LePain (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 26. See also Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, 205–6.

politics, between soul and city, is also foundational for classical thinking. Aristotle claims that, if the politician is to know how to rule, he must “know in some way about the soul.”⁶³ Moderns do not usher in “new modes and orders” by breaking this link itself between soul and city, but rather by redefining human nature in order to initiate a new political form fitting for their “new man”; they attempt to remake men so as to fit them for subjection to the sovereign of the modern state, the terrible and immortal Leviathan.⁶⁴

Politics both arises from and gives form to human life, and as such it is the arena in which our understanding of human nature reaches its maturity and most fully reveals itself. Manent therefore turns to “political things” in order to understand “human things.” Further, he argues that a science of political form is central to understanding the nature and activities of politics, and therefore his work on political form is central to his understanding of human things as they are displayed in political life. He understands political forms to be those widest modes of human association for the common good. Political form is that which shapes human life and activity, that which gives structure and stability to our associations aimed at the common good. Political form is the source of our common life and manifests the understanding of human nature upon which it is built. According to Manent, political form is distinct from and wider than the classical understanding of the six political regimes discussed by Plato and Aristotle. He discusses the political forms of the ancient Greek city (*polis*), the empire, the Church, the nations of Western Europe (especially after the Protestant Reformation), and finally the modern “state.” The modern state is distinct from the nation, but is in many ways built upon it, with aspects of the nation continuing to survive in modern “nation-states.”⁶⁵

⁶³ *NE* 1.13.1102a18. A few lines later, Aristotle says that “the politician too ought to contemplate the soul; but he ought to contemplate it for the sake of [promoting virtue and happiness] and up to the point that is adequate for what is being sought.” See also *Politics* 7.13–14.1332b24–34a10.

⁶⁴ Compare this approach with that of Aristotle, who observes that political life is natural to human beings and that legislators must receive men from nature and make them into citizens by cultivating in them virtues fitting for the regime through decent laws in keeping with natural justice (see *Politics* 1 and 7–8).

⁶⁵ See Manent, *Metamorphoses of the City*, 18–28, and *Seeing Things Politically*, 106–129; and Joe Wood, “Political Form in the Work of Pierre Manent” (PhD diss., The Catholic University of America, 2019). Manent’s work on political form is rich, and I suggest that Russell Hittinger’s discussions of social forms as providing a natural foundation for political life and activity fill a crucial gap in Manent’s argument. One could use Hittinger’s important work to show that Manent passes too quickly from conceptions of human nature to the role of political form; see Hittinger, “The Coherence of the Four

The modern state is not a natural political form as were the city and the empire, nor is it a temporal polity shaped by its subservience to the eternal City of God, as were the nations of Western Europe. The modern state is a philosophical construct cogitated into being by rejecting classical political forms and by refusing to acknowledge the truth and political transcendence of Christian Revelation. As Francis Slade says, “Modern political philosophy created a unique new political form, the state, one unassimilable to any of the well-known regimes because the state is intended to replace them all. It is a form that supplanted, one might say dissolved, all previous political forms in the West and which has been exported throughout the world.”⁶⁶ Georg Hegel and Hobbes are no doubt correct when each says, respectively, that “the state is universal in form, a form whose essential principle is thought” and that the modern state is “a creation out of nothing by human wit.”⁶⁷ Manent claims that the modern state is *cosa mentale*, a mental thing that originates with modern political philosophy and gradually comes to dominate human life.⁶⁸ It showed its true face during the French Revolution and came into its own during the National Socialist and Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century.⁶⁹

The state, according to Manent, is a “mental thing” marked by paradoxes, if not outright contradictions. It is nebulous but all-powerful, neutral but

Basic Principles of Catholic Social Doctrine: An Interpretation,” *Nova et Vetera* (English) 7, no. 4 (2009): 791–838, and “Social Roles and Ruling Virtues in Catholic Social Doctrine,” *Annales theologici* 16 (2002): 385–408. See also his essay “Three Necessary Societies,” in *On the Dignity of Society: Essays in Catholic Social Teaching and Natural Law*, forthcoming from Catholic University of America Press (originally published in June 2017 in *First Things*, firstthings.com/article/2017/06/the-three-necessary-societies). All the essays from Hittinger referenced in this article will be included in this collection.

⁶⁶ Francis Slade, “Two Versions of Political Philosophy: Teleology and the Conceptual Genesis of the Modern State,” in *Natural Moral Law in Contemporary Society*, ed. Holger Zaborowski (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 235–63, at 242.

⁶⁷ Slade quotes both of these passages. For Hegel’s statement, see *Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon, 1953), 172. See also Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen W. Wood, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 299–300. For Hobbes’s text, see *The Elements of Law Natural and Politic*, ed. Ferdinand Tönnies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1928), 84.

⁶⁸ Pierre Manent, *The City of Man*, trans. Marc A. LePain (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 177.

⁶⁹ See Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, 198–206, and “The Human Person and Political Life,” in *Christian Faith and Human Understanding: Studies on the Eucharist, Trinity, and the Human Person* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2006), 179–98.

tyrannical, artificial but governing nature. It subsists as the un-knowing and anti-philosophical creation of philosophers. The state is a tyrannical power erected to enforce the democratic will of the people that it represents, a “sovereign instrument” that stands outside the society it was brought into being to represent and to protect, a sovereign instrument that lurches ever closer to tyranny and censorship under the guise of protecting democracy and free speech.⁷⁰ It is the nameless, faceless impersonator of human persons, the all-powerful enforcer of the human rights proclaimed by the members of a society above which it is exalted yet upon which it is attendant. It is an impersonal arbiter of personal rights and liberties, and the understanding of human nature upon which it is founded is no less contradictory.

Manent argues that human rights, the protection and promotion of which are the *raison d'être* of the modern state, are rooted in the mental constructs of the state of nature that animate modern political philosophy. These modern discussions of the state of nature have two main targets: (1) Aristotle's philosophy such as we have discussed it, especially his “doctrine of ‘substance’ concerning nature in general or human nature in particular,” and (2) Catholic readings of the Book of Genesis.⁷¹ In these modern, anti-Aristotelian re-writings of Genesis exemplified above all by Hobbes, we find a human nature “that keeps human beings separate and available for equal freedom.” This is an understanding of nature that is “void of any quality that might indicate a bond and exempt from any difference of age, sex, or capacity.” This nature, strictly identical for all members, is “stripped of all complexity or inner fullness” and therefore “has nothing to teach us concerning the *human* being that we are—indeed it has little to tell us regarding ourselves as animals. This nature may *leave* us all equally free, but only for the negative reason that it bears no properly human characteristic, no *binding* characteristic.” This understanding of human nature is at the basis of “human rights,” and thus of the modern state, and it reduces us to the “most impoverished common denominator,” thereby offering itself “as a basis indifferently available for all imaginable human possibilities in their infinite variety.”⁷² We might say that, according to Manent's view, the modern state begins with philosophy muting human nature, rejecting natural

⁷⁰ See Pierre Manent, *Natural Law and Human Rights: Toward a Recovery of Practical Reason*, trans. Ralph C. Hancock (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2020), 61. Discussing Manent's work, Brad Lewis called the modern state a “sovereign instrument,” which captures well Manent's accurate portrayal of the contradictory character of the state. I thank Lewis for his insight.

⁷¹ Manent, *City of Man*, 113. This chapter is aptly titled “The Hidden Man.”

⁷² These texts are taken from Manent, *Natural Law and Human Rights*, 9.

political forms, and refusing Christian Revelation; modernity is born when nature and grace are silenced by philosophy.

Manent shows that the modern understanding of human nature that provides the foundation for human rights reduces human beings to “the fact of the separation of separate individuals,” and therefore we are left with the claims that human beings are nothing more than separate-living individuals who are simple, indeterminate, isolated, and asocial.⁷³ All that remains to this “nature” is the desire for power after power. Manent claims that Hobbes, so pivotal for modern political thinking, “both postulates the homogeneity of human motives—all human beings obey the same motives—and reduces all these to the desire for power.”⁷⁴ Manent concludes that in modernity we have in effect “contemptuously dismissed the very idea of a human nature” and “dismembered” the human world even as we continue to appeal clandestinely to the authority of nature.⁷⁵ We are therefore left with a mere vestige of the human that we call the individual with the power to claim his rights.

Yet, this modern reductionism that so profoundly and so artificially impoverishes human nature is but a first step, a preparatory move. Manent argues that nature is leveled so that the road may be clear to the myth of self-creation through human rights. If nature is mute because we silenced it, then we are free to speak for it by claiming a right to whatever we wish. The modern claim that by itself nature “tends toward nothing that is properly human” opens the door to the activities of *mentally adding* to nature “everything that reason, imagination, or human experience can observe or produce.”⁷⁶ This conception of human nature, this “unit of life—sexless and ageless, with no distinct capacities—has been isolated as the basis of human rights.”⁷⁷ Modernity is thus a project of “denaturalizing” the human phenomenon and isolating the remnant of human nature as the foundation for human rights that allow their claimants to construct themselves. The result is that, “Once the validity or the authority of nature has been limited to the brute fact of radical separation, what is properly human can be constructed and deconstructed as we wish, since it is devoid of the natural basis whose determining or inspiring force we should recognize. Regarding any human characteristic we can now say that it is ‘constructed’ and that it is therefore possible or even urgent to ‘deconstruct’ it.” The modern approach to human things is founded upon “the mute compactness of a nature that is enclosed

⁷³ Manent, *Natural Law and Human Rights*, 10.

⁷⁴ Manent, *Natural Law and Human Rights*, 21.

⁷⁵ Manent, *Natural Law and Human Rights*, 53.

⁷⁶ Manent, *Natural Law and Human Rights*, 9.

⁷⁷ Manent, *Natural Law and Human Rights*, 10.

in the individuality of the not-even-animal-living-being” and “transforms the human world into a Transformers toy.” Manent says that this sense of human nature is presented as “equality,” for “nature understood as without inclination or difference is equality, an equality that tends toward confusion with identity or similarity, since it neither recognizes nor nourishes any differences.” Human rights are therefore rooted in “nature without qualities” and “promote an equality that ignores differences,” with the result that “such rights are the moving force of an indefinite social, moral, and political movement that ceaselessly sets an undefinable and ever-deferred equality at odds with the inclinations and differences that human beings experience.”⁷⁸

The leveling of human nature to the rubble of separate packets of power armed with technology and human rights, all in service of “an equality that ignores natural differences,” raises a critical question: What does a life “according to nature” look like when nature “bears no properly human traits?” This is the modern specification of the classical question that Augustine answered so beautifully. According to Manent, a life in accordance with the modern understanding of human nature understands itself “as the seat of an unceasing effort to authorize and encourage the individual-living-being to recompose all the significant elements of the human world in order to make them conform to the idea that he has of himself. And this presupposes that these elements or determining factors of our being human are treated as so many artifacts that are held together by nothing but their connection with the individual-living-being. The power of nature so understood issues into the open-ended process of rendering the human world artificial.”⁷⁹ The modern conception of human nature demands a constant and ever incomplete “recomposition of the human world,” a recomposition “presented as the concretization of human rights in their full consequences, and of course as the ultimate fulfillment of freedom, since each individual is henceforth authorized and encouraged freely to compose the bouquet of characteristics constituting the humanity he has chosen.”⁸⁰ Because we have nothing “to give human form” to this desiring machine, “this un-known, this x” that is but the remains of human nature, rights become the tools of self-construction wielded by unknowable centers of desire for power, and living according to nature comes to mean no more, and no less, than creating oneself through state-sponsored rights. Manent highlights the inevitable consequence of this understanding of human life

⁷⁸ The previous quotes are taken from Manent, *Natural Law and Human Rights*, 10–11.

⁷⁹ Manent, *Natural Law and Human Rights*, 12.

⁸⁰ Manent, *Natural Law and Human Rights*, 12–13.

and activity: "Under the exclusive legitimacy of the principle of human rights, all aspects of the human world are delivered up to a *jus omnium in omnia*. Let us be clear here that this 'right' is understood in a more and more extensive way, indeed in a way that is properly unlimited: not only as the right to 'have it all' but, more troubling still, as *the right to be everything that we are or want to be*."⁸¹ Modern man not only demands that his rights be respected, but cogitates them into being in order to employ them in the task of self-creation.

The modern state is therefore based on the definition of man as "the being who possesses rights. It resonates as our self-definition and our perspective on humanity, one that we take to have fortunately replaced other definitions and perspectives, such as that man is God's creature or that man is a political animal."⁸² By detailing the modern repudiation of Genesis (man as God's creature) and Aristotle (man as political animal), Manent displays the contradiction inherent in the modern conception of human nature: there is a constant, clandestine appeal to human nature as separate-individual living being so as to authorize the triumph of artificiality and self-creation through the mechanism of human rights enforced by the law of the state. Modern man appeals implicitly to the authority of nature in order to remove any and all natural boundaries to his will to power and self-assertion, for we understand ourselves to be nothing more than "desiring machines" seeking to create ourselves and to assert ourselves as self-created through claims to rights that must be protected by law, which is not an expression of political prudence but of impersonal domination. *Physis* is presented so as to be swallowed up by *techne* and the *nomoi* of human rights. Manent concludes that "the doctrines of modern natural right are based on mental constructions—the state of nature, human rights—that, far from being especially pertinent for guiding action and ordering the political body, tend rather to throw the rule of action into indeterminacy and to obscure more and more the sources of common life."⁸³

We can now understand Manent's position that the state and its laws exist to protect human rights and that the philosophy of human rights is "constituted in opposition to the idea of natural law," especially as natural law thinking has developed within Christianity.⁸⁴ If human rights are inherently opposed to natural law, it is because these rights are understood to replace natural ends. The rejection of Aristotle and Christianity is motivated by,

⁸¹ Manent, *Natural Law and Human Rights*, 76.

⁸² Manent, *Natural Law and Human Rights*, 50.

⁸³ Manent, *Natural Law and Human Rights*, 57–58.

⁸⁴ Manent, *Natural Law and Human Rights*, 8.

or at least includes, the move from human nature understood as teleology and end—as eros for truth, beauty, and friendship with God and others in familial and political society—to nature understood as *carte blanche* for self-creation through the will to power asserted through the medium of human rights. For eros is not mere desire for power, but rather the love that seeks the eternal joy of union with the divine Beauty itself by itself. When eros is silenced and ends replaced by rights, then self-mastery in virtue is replaced by autonomy expressed in the idiom of authenticity, and reasoned speech in search of the truth about justice is replaced by ideological activism backed by violence.⁸⁵ It is this mutilated conception of human nature marked by the deletion of natural ends that provides the foundation for human rights and the modern state that must protect them, and conversely, it is this conception of human nature that the state sanctions and produces. As Manent says, “The modern state produces a social state that asymptotically approaches the state of nature as presupposed in its construction. The human being . . . called ‘modern’ or ‘democratic’ posits and produces himself according to a norm that has the authority of nature—human beings are born and remain free and equal in rights—but a nature posited and produced by the most powerful artifice [i.e., the state] ever conceived and constructed by human beings.”⁸⁶ In such an understanding of human nature and political life, the natural law has no fundamental role to play because the political form of the modern state will continue to “presuppose and thus produce this lawless humanity who founds himself on his self-relation.”⁸⁷ Instead of freedom under the natural law specified and extended by prudent positive law, we have a lawless humanity that creates itself according to human rights backed by force masquerading as law.

We see therefore something of a vicious circle: the state is founded upon a false conception of human nature and works to exacerbate and to extend this distorted conception through the production of an unhealthy social imaginary. While the Greek *polis* displayed human things themselves as political things and facilitated the formation of friendship, the modern state conceals us from ourselves and from our fellows while denigrating the public expression of Christianity. Manent says that the state “is the great instrument of modern politics because it orders individuals—because it institutes the political order founded on individuals,” but the state is also “the great obstacle to our understanding of ourselves because it masks or

⁸⁵ See Manent, *Natural Law and Human Rights*, 67.

⁸⁶ Manent, *Natural Law and Human Rights*, 62.

⁸⁷ Manent, *Natural Law and Human Rights*, 126.

deforms the collective bodies—the ‘cities’—of which the individuals are members.” The state therefore “interposes itself between us and ourselves; it hampers at the same time that it mediates our relation with the cities we are part of—the Church and the nation.”⁸⁸ Because the modern state claims superiority to revealed religion and operates through the deracinating mechanism of representation, “each of the soul’s two commitments [is] hampered in its manifestation and soon drained of its vitality.” The human soul “is hardly recognizable,” for the modern state “represses almost equally the two divergent movements of the soul: not only does it severely circumscribe the public expression of religious convictions and affects—religion is henceforth essentially a private thing—but it makes and is organized to make the ‘ancient freedom,’ that is, the direct expression of civic commitments, impossible: citizens can act only through their representatives.”⁸⁹ Manent shows that the modern state “thus rests on the repression, in any case the frustration, of the two most powerful human affects: on the one hand the passionate interest in this world as expressed in active participation in the common thing, and on the other the passionate interest in the eternal and the infinite as expressed in the postulation of another world and participation in a community of faith.”⁹⁰ The state comes between us and ourselves by repressing these two fundamental activities of the human person and offering in their place the protection of rights, with the result that “the soul no longer recognizes itself.”⁹¹ Because the state is a contradiction built upon a contradiction, it occludes and mutilates that which it is meant to manifest and perfect. It sanctions, and perhaps demands, the rejection and ignorance of human nature inherent in the existentialist extreme of self-creation. Friedrich Nietzsche is the modern state’s patron saint.⁹²

We may conclude that human rights are modernity’s fig leaves. Rooted in a false conception of human nature and sponsored by the state, human rights are the natural tools of our self-concealment from ourselves and others, and the state, existing to protect human rights, is the sovereign instrument of the occlusion of human nature and the natural law that governs us. Let us recall the Aristotelian argument that man loves what he thinks himself to be and that true self-knowledge is the seed of a noble self-love which

⁸⁸ Manent, *Metamorphoses of the City*, 222.

⁸⁹ Manent, *Metamorphoses of the City*, 217.

⁹⁰ Manent, *Metamorphoses of the City*, 217.

⁹¹ Manent, *Metamorphoses of the City*, 217.

⁹² See the remarkable, and remarkably fitting for our argument, text from Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, trans. Peter Preuss (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1980), §3.

provides the root of friendship with others, while false conceptions of the self lead to selfishness and enmity. It matters not upon which kind of soil the modern seed of self-knowledge falls, for the seed itself is corrupt and corrupting. Those tutored by the political form of the modern state and its social imaginary are no longer capable of knowing themselves truly, and thus they can neither love themselves well nor achieve the friendships at the heart of a happy human life. Manent says that the modern definition of man as the being who possesses rights leads to a conception of human life in which to live humanely is to assert one's rights. However, this new definition, along with its attendant mode of life, is insufficient because it retains something negative or polemical, for to assert one's rights is merely "to 'defend' them against those who deprive you of your rights, who harm or violate them, or against a society that is always curtailing them."⁹³ Thus, in order to govern or organize collective life sufficiently, "another, positive principle is needed, that of self-interest. The person who asserts his or her rights is also one who seeks his or her self-interests. Rights and self-interest are the two principles that allow for the ordering of the human world without recourse to law as the rule and measure of human action."⁹⁴ Manent acknowledges that we do, of course, continue to craft laws, but their goal "is no longer directly to regulate our actions but rather to guarantee our rights and equip us to seek our interests."⁹⁵ As a result, the modern person "who asserts his rights and seeks his self-interest is no longer the agent for whom law provides the rule and measure of action. As the being who has rights and pursues his interests, he defines himself first of all in relation to himself, a relation that is subjective or subjectifying and by which he guarantees his independence with regard to any objective rule, that is, any law of God or of nature."⁹⁶ Modern conceptions of human nature and human rights backed by state laws lead agents to seek their own self-interest—which is distinct from loving themselves truly—as they attempt to escape from the direction of the natural law. Claims to rights replace recognition of natural ends, self-interest grows in place of noble self-love, and faction reigns over friendship.

The result is that modern men and women are hidden from themselves, and thus incapable of the noble self-love that flows into friendship. Manent says that, in modernity:

⁹³ Manent, *Natural Law and Human Rights*, 120.

⁹⁴ Manent, *Natural Law and Human Rights*, 120.

⁹⁵ Manent, *Natural Law and Human Rights*, 120.

⁹⁶ Manent, *Natural Law and Human Rights*, 121.

We have no confidence in the capacity of human reason to grasp the human world. This conviction that reason gives no access to human things has now become the most widespread opinion under the name of relativism. Call it nihilism lite. We contemporaries, therefore, do not believe that we can understand human things, and consequently, we do not love human things; this is the other aspect of nihilism. We do not love them because we cannot understand them. It seems to us that we cannot understand them and thus, because of this distance between human things and ourselves, there cannot be this friendship for human life that we cannot, after all, help but desire.⁹⁷

The problem with human rights is therefore much more profound than their constant proliferation or the issue of adjudicating between competing rights claims. The very notion of human rights distorts our understanding of ourselves because it is based upon a false conception of human nature and promulgated by an artificial political form. To the extent that he is taught by the state and its social imaginary, modern man is incapable of true self-knowledge and the proper self-love that opens to friendship; “statesmen” are no longer friends in truth, but comrades in self-interested activism. Nature is neither contemplated by philosophy nor healed by grace, but rather occluded and mutilated by the artificial creation of modern political philosophers.

Let us connect these reflections on Manent’s work to our discussion of the four kinds of self-knowledge: (1) philosophical self-knowledge, (2) pre-theoretic knowledge of human nature, (3) psychological and moral self-knowledge, and (4) self-awareness. In each of these four, we see that modernity is marked by the inversion of the classical approach and by a distortion of human and political phenomena. Regarding (1), in modern political thought, philosophy no longer contemplates nature as it manifests itself for the sake of the joy of loving truth, but rather posits a state of nature that is unobservable in principle for the sake of creating the artificial political form of the state constructed upon man’s consent to representative government. As for (2), the bipartite philosophical construct of human nature ruled by the state engenders a social imaginary that is but a philosophically produced, state-sponsored form of the existentialist extreme of self-creation through the will to power. It is not accidental that this dominant conception of human nature that animates our social imaginary so often leads

⁹⁷ Manent, *Seeing Things Politically*, 4. As Prufer and Slade say, “for Hobbes, friendship is terrible” (Prufer, *Recapitulations*, 25).

individuals to a distortion of (3), an impoverished personal understanding of their psychological states and moral characters. Finally, self-awareness (4) remains, since it is too immediate and natural to be mutilated by this grasp of human nature, but it cannot be expanded and perfected in the shared consciousness of virtuous friendship.

We ought to recall that we must find the appropriate intellectual distance in order to know ourselves properly in each of the four ways enumerated. Each demands the right amount of distance from ourselves, the distance that allows us to see the truth of who and what we are. Modern political philosophers have to a great extent failed to achieve the proper philosophical distance. They do indeed speak about nature, the mind, truth, and God, but they do so for the sake of practical results. The mastery and possession of nature is often the ultimate end pursued, even in political thinking. Niccolò Machiavelli desires to dominate the mind of the prince, and thereby to rule Florence, and Hobbes wants his doctrine to be taught in the universities so that future statesman may be guided by his principles.⁹⁸ Their political success is in part the result of this failure to be fully philosophical; they did not follow Plato and Aristotle to the schools of philosophical contemplation on the outskirts of the city, but attempted to reign in the state by dominating the mind of its rulers. Their failure to achieve the appropriate philosophical distance is correlated with, indeed foundational for, their subsequent political influence and “success.”

Philosophy itself becomes paradoxical in modernity; to the extent that it is productive and not fully contemplative, it has not the distance that would allow it to see the truth about the whole of things. Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and René Descartes no longer display natural ends at work, but rather attempt to delete those natural ends to make room for the triumph of contract and artifice, and the dominant sense of human nature possessed by modern man is marked by this philosophical failure.

⁹⁸ In an excellent article discussing Francis Slade’s work in political philosophy, Sokolowski comments upon chapters 9–11 of Machiavelli’s *The Prince*: “For Machiavelli the real rulers in such governance are not the religious and historical figures themselves, such as Moses, Cyrus, Romulus, and Theseus, but the writers who construct them, such as Xenophon and the biblical writers. Machiavelli implicitly proclaims himself as such a ruler over minds, and he presents his philosophy as a form of ruling” (“Recovering Classical Philosophy in the Modern Context: The Work of Francis Slade,” *Perspectives on Political Science* 45, no. 1 [2016]: 4–8, at 7). See also Sokolowski, “Hobbes and Husserl,” in *Phenomenology in a New Key: Between Analysis and History. Essays in Honor of Richard Cobb-Stevens*, ed. Nicolas de Warren and Jeffrey Bloechl (Dordrecht: Springer, 2015), 51–62. Compare my approach to this issue with that of Manent at *Natural Law and Human Rights*, 20–34.

In a remarkable passage, Manent says, “The man who pursues ends that are . . . constitutive of his nature fulfills his definition, seizes upon his identity in this very pursuit. It is the *distance* between his empirical, real being, and the end he pursues—justice, wisdom, truth—a *distance* that is recognized so as to be eliminated, and yet always invincibly maintained by reason of the ‘sinful’ or simply ‘intermediary’ character of man, that *opens a space where he can reflect on himself and recognize himself as man*.”⁹⁹ The recognition of natural ends as perfective of human beings and the resultant pursuit of those ends—for we never fully arrive at our perfection in this life—provide us with the necessary distance from ourselves that allows us to see ourselves truly. The distance between who we currently are and who we ought to be by nature opens a space for reflection.

However, if philosophy claims to delete these natural ends, and if a political form and social imaginary shaped by such a philosophy comes to dominate the thinking of the man and woman on the street, then we are simply incapable of obtaining the proper view of ourselves, of our human nature and our moral character. Such is our current predicament, and it is the source of our inability to love ourselves well and to achieve the friendships that tie communities together. Manent continues: “But for the one who no longer has ends but rights, how shall this indispensable distance be opened, this interior space that allows man to think and speak of himself?” For the man armed with rights but not inclined to natural ends, “there is no longer any differential tension between empirical and completed being, between potency and act, between what is fulfilled and desired. Whether rights are guaranteed or scoffed at, it is in any case the empirical being himself who owns and holds them.”¹⁰⁰ The man who recognizes and pursues natural

⁹⁹ Manent, *The City of Man*, 136 (emphasis added).

¹⁰⁰ Manent, *The City of Man*, 136. The replacement of natural ends by “rights” manifests the distinction between classical discussions of *ius*, exemplified by St. Thomas, and modern doctrines of natural or human rights, exemplified by Hobbes. As we have shown, the deep divide between classical and modern approaches is therefore the role of nature and teleology, with the differing emphases on the objective *ius* (classical) or subjective right (modern) playing an important but secondary role. Clearly, our criticisms apply to the modern approach, which dominates our political form and social imaginary; see Dominic Legge, O.P., “Do Thomists Have Rights?,” *Nova et Vetera* (English) 17, no. 1 (2019): 127–47. For an excellent discussion of Pope St. John XXIII’s attempt to place the modern language of human rights within the classical framework of teleological order, see Russell Hittinger, “*Quinquagesimo Ante*: Reflections on *Pacem in Terris* Fifty Years Later,” in *The Global Quest for Tranquillitas Ordinis: Pacem in Terris, Fifty Years Later*, ed. Mary Ann Glendon, Russell Hittinger, Marcelo Sánchez-Sorondo, Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences Acta 18 (Vatican City: Pontifical Academy of Social

ends, the man “who seeks justice, wisdom, or truth knows that he does not possess them, but the one who declares his rights and demands that they be respected knows that he possesses them and that nothing he or anyone else does can change anything about this possession. Respected or scoffed at, human rights, whether a man be a scoundrel or a hero, are equally what they are.”¹⁰¹ Obsessed with our rights, which must be claimed as actual but cannot be achieved as potential, we no longer have the distance to see who we are. A fixation on inalienable human rights, as distinct from and in place of realizable natural ends, prevents us from achieving the clarifying distance that makes true self-knowledge possible. Unfortunately, one need not search far and wide for empirical confirmation of Manent’s arguments.

Manent’s Reflections and the Promulgation of the Natural Law

With these points in view, I wish to argue that Manent’s discussions of human nature, human rights, and the modern state should be understood as falling under the theme of the promulgation of natural law. His subtle arguments display how the natural law itself can be disclosed or occluded, and he traces the way that modern philosophy and politics have made it increasingly difficult to know and to live by the natural law. He helps us to see anew what St. Thomas saw so well: all law, especially the natural law, is a rule and measure for human action with the end, the *telos*, of forming friendships, either between men themselves or between man and God, and living according to the natural law demands that we know the truth about ourselves. Living by the natural law is therefore something of a middle term between friendship, the *telos* of the law, and a proper self-knowledge, the foundation of our ability to live under law.

St. Thomas says that the natural law is nothing other than the rational creature’s participation in the eternal law of God’s wisdom, by which he moves all things to their proper acts and ends in a manner proportionate to their natures. God promulgates this law to us in the creation of a world of natures culminating in the human person, but we can and must complete or extend this promulgation. God is the sole author of the natural law and its primary promulgator, but we are by nature called to be secondary,

Sciences, 2013), 38–60.

¹⁰¹ Manent, *The City of Man*, 136. Perhaps we may say that, if man is the being with rights, and if rights are always perfectly possessed and inalienable, our incessant claims to our rights constitutes something of a perverted imitation of God, who is the greatest good (*summum bonum simpliciter*), who is his goodness by his essence, and who communicates a participation in his goodness to creatures out of sheer love and generosity (see *ST I*, q. 6).

co-promulgators of a law that we disclose but do not create. If our social imaginary is shaped by a philosophy that denies the very existence of human ends and rebels against the supposed tyranny of nature and God, then we witness a massive human failure to co-promulgate, to make known to ourselves and others, the natural law that directs us to friendship.¹⁰²

Self-knowledge, especially of human nature, is at the core of ethics and political life, and as such it is foundational for our knowledge of the natural law as that which provides a foundation for both. In St. Thomas's discussion of the unified multiplicity of the precepts of the natural law, he describes the order of natural goods, and thus the order of the natural inclinations to these goods. It is clear that the goods at the heart of the natural law are human goods, things in accordance with and proportioned to human nature, for "all the things to be done or avoided that practical reason naturally apprehends as human goods are such that they belong to the precepts of the law of nature."¹⁰³ Naturally apprehended human goods are naturally understood to be fitting for and perfective of what we are as human beings, but the recognition of goods that perfect us presupposes some inchoate knowledge of the one they perfect. As we saw in St. Thomas's text concerning the first free moral act, knowledge of an end as an end—that is, as good—is founded upon knowledge of myself as the one desiring that good for me; a good is only recognized as good in some way for me, which means that I must have some sense of what I am in order to see something as fitting for the kind of thing that I am. As Brock says, "What we naturally apprehend as a human good is what we can all immediately see to be proportioned to human nature, as a perfection of it."¹⁰⁴ Such goods as the conservation of human life, the marital union of man and woman and the education of their children, the knowledge of the truth about God, and the goods of human life in society could not be seen as fitting for us if we did not have some grasp, however basic and vague, of ourselves as the ones for whom such goods are good—namely, of ourselves and of our nature as substantial, animal beings specified by our use of reason in pursuit of truth and friendship in familial and political society. Our natural grasp of human goods, which gives birth to our natural inclinations to those goods, is therefore based upon "a natural—non-scientific but nonetheless truly intellectual—understanding of human nature."¹⁰⁵ To the extent that we see the truth of what it is to be

¹⁰² See *ST* I-II, q. 91, a. 2; q. 93. Taylor also recognizes the impact modern political philosophy has had on our current social imaginary (*Modern Social Imaginaries*, 24).

¹⁰³ *ST* I-II, q. 94, a. 2.

¹⁰⁴ Brock, *Light That Binds*, 158–59.

¹⁰⁵ Brock, *Light That Binds*, 161.

human, and only to that extent, are we capable of living a life of familial, social, and political friendship based upon the natural law.

Because we are rational animals achieving the knowledge of our human nature foundational for our recognition of the natural law is a complex affair. Although Manent clearly disagrees with Maritain concerning the relationship between natural law and human rights, since Maritain argued that we ought to understand natural rights as founded upon and not in opposition to natural law, both Manent and Maritain understand well that gaining a proper understanding of human things is not automatic. Such understanding takes time and experience to develop, and Manent shows us the impediments to self-knowledge erected by much of modern philosophy and politics.

For his part, Maritain distinguishes between the ontological aspect of the natural law (the “normality of functioning of human nature”) and its “gnoseological,” or epistemological, aspect (the natural law as known). Regarding the epistemological aspect, he says that human agents know the natural law “with more or less difficulty, and in different degrees, running the risk of error here as elsewhere.”¹⁰⁶ With this distinction, Maritain points to the fact that, while the ontological aspect of natural law remains the same, the knowledge of the natural law increases and decreases throughout history, both the personal history of individual men and women and the history of cultures and civilizations. In agreement with Maritain’s claim that the knowledge of natural law can rise and fall, both for an individual human agent and for a culture, Russell Hittinger says, “Appropriation of the ‘evidences’ of natural law, either by the individual or by a culture, is a slow process requiring action and reflection.”¹⁰⁷ Manent’s work enables us to see that the truth about human nature is a central piece of the evidence that must be appropriated for the natural law to be more fully promulgated and more efficaciously directive of human action toward friendship.

St. Thomas also argues that the most general precepts of the natural law, including the primary precept that good is to be done and pursued and evil avoided, cannot be “erased entirely from the hearts of men,” even if men and women fail to apply them in a concrete action due to disorderly passions that cloud the intellect. However, he says that the secondary precepts of the natural law, which are as conclusions based upon the primary precepts and which include prohibitions against theft and vices

¹⁰⁶ Maritain, *Man and the State*, 90.

¹⁰⁷ Russell Hittinger, “Natural Law and Public Discourse: The Legacies of Joseph Ratzinger,” *Loyola Law Review* 60 (2014): 241–71, at 266.

against nature, can be erased from the hearts of men, “either because of bad arguments, in the same way that errors occur in speculative matters with respect to necessary conclusions, or because of depraved customs and corrupt habits.”¹⁰⁸ Manent has done us the great service of showing that much of modern political philosophy and politics constitute bad arguments concerning human nature, which have led to a political life marked by depraved customs promoting corrupt habits that erase the secondary precepts of the natural law from the heart of man and the state, thereby impeding the promulgation of the natural law and vitiating the possibility of proper self-love and friendship.

Jesus Christ’s Revelation of Man to Himself

“We do not know what man is. We only know that the moral notions that govern the life in common of men are artifacts and thus that society is not natural to man.”¹⁰⁹ According to Manent, we are ignorant not only of man, but even of how to pose the question itself of what he is. “What do we really mean when we use the word man today? Whom are we speaking of when we defend human rights or engage in the human sciences? Not only do we lack a clear answer to this question, we do not even know how to go about asking it.”¹¹⁰ Hidden as we are from ourselves, how might we regain the knowledge of our nature that will open to us the natural law and its direction to happiness in friendship? Who is able to keep alive the question of man’s nature and thus respond to the Delphic maxim to know ourselves?

Manent proposes that, contra the Hobbesian reduction of all human motives to that of power expressed through rights, we must recover the diversity and heterogeneity of the three natural human motives for the pleasant, the useful, and the noble. He argues that a proper integration of these three motives and the goods that activate them will ameliorate our self-knowledge and serve as a sign that a given person, community, or institution is acting in accordance with human nature and the natural law. It is not accidental that the natural motives to these three kinds of goods provide the foundations of Aristotle’s three forms of friendship.¹¹¹ Yet, Manent claims that it is primarily the Church that continues to pose the question of man. He says that the Church has submitted herself politically

¹⁰⁸ *ST* I-II, q. 94, a. 6.

¹⁰⁹ Manent, *The City of Man*, 124.

¹¹⁰ Manent, *The City of Man*, 5.

¹¹¹ See Manent, *Natural Law and Human Rights*, 99–117.

to democracy, but this submission is perhaps fortunate, at least in one way. "The church willy-nilly conformed itself to all of democracy's demands. Democracy no longer, in good faith, has any essential reproach to make against the church. From now on it can hear the question the church poses, the question that it alone poses, the question *Quid sit homo*—What is man?"¹¹² As we have shown, the democratic modern state cannot pose or respond to this question in any significant way, nor does it desire to do so. We therefore find ourselves in a situation in which "on democracy's side of the scale, we are left with political sovereignty and dialectical impotence. On the Church's side, we are left with political submission and dialectical advantage. The relation unleashed by the Enlightenment is today reversed. No one knows what will happen when democracy and the church become aware of this reversal."¹¹³ In our modern context, the lives of decent men and women and the recapitulations of classical philosophy can and do heal the human mind by disclosing our human nature to ourselves, but it is the Catholic Church, her teaching, and the philosophy that lives within her institutions that primarily keeps alive the question of man.

By continuing to ask and to answer the question of man, the Church elevates the discussion of political things. As Hittinger has shown, in her teaching on social issues since the French Revolution, the magisterium has largely bracketed the question of the best political regime.¹¹⁴ Yet, even though she has bypassed the classical political question of the best regime, the Church keeps the political question alive by raising and answering the question of man. Because politics is always based upon a conception of human nature, to ask and to answer the question of the human person is to influence in indirect but profound ways one's political situation.¹¹⁵

¹¹² Pierre Manent, "Christianity and Democracy: Some Remarks on the Political History of Religion, or, on the Religious History of Modern Politics," in *Modern Liberty and Its Discontents*, 97–116, at 115.

¹¹³ Manent, "Christianity and Democracy," 115.

¹¹⁴ See Russell Hittinger, "Pope Leo XIII (1810–1903)," in *The Teachings of Modern Roman Catholicism: On Law, Politics, & Human Nature*, ed. John Witte and Frank Alexander (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 63–66.

¹¹⁵ Hittinger made this point to me in a conversation about Manent's work in relation to the thought of John Paul II. I am grateful for his insight. The Church's teaching on the nature of the human person necessary includes the truth that human persons are social animals by nature and that the social dimension of human nature both provides the foundation for political life and is taken up into the social reality of the Church, the Mystical Body of Christ. See Russell Hittinger, "Toward an Adequate Anthropology: Social Aspects of *Imago Dei* in Catholic Theology," in *Imago Dei: Human Dignity in Ecumenical Perspective*, ed. Thomas Albert Howard (Washington, DC: Catholic

I wish to suggest that Pope St. John Paul II embodied in an extraordinary manner this service of integrating faith and reason in articulating the nature of man and his relation to God and the world. By his life and teaching, by his deeds and words, John Paul II disclosed the dignity of men and women created to the image and likeness of God. He says that God has entrusted the visible world to us as a gift and a task, and he adds that God “has assigned us a particular mission: to accomplish the truth about ourselves and about the world. We must be guided by the truth about ourselves, so as to be able to structure the visible world according to truth, correctly using it to serve our purposes, without abusing it. In other words, this twofold truth about the world and about ourselves provides the basis for every intervention by us upon creation.”¹¹⁶

Further, John Paul II shows that God does not assign us this task of achieving the truth about ourselves and then leave us wandering in darkness concerning who we are as men and women. He says that the Church enables us to fulfill our mission of accomplishing the truth about ourselves and the world by contemplating the human face of God in Jesus Christ:

In its penetrating analysis of “the modern world,” the Second Vatican Council reached that most important point of the visible world that is man, by penetrating like Christ the depth of human consciousness and by making contact with the inward mystery of man, which in Biblical and non-Biblical language is expressed by the word “heart.” Christ, the Redeemer of the world, is the one who penetrated in a unique unrepeatable way into the mystery of man and entered his “heart.” Rightly therefore does the Second Vatican Council teach: “The truth is that only in the mystery of the Incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light. For Adam, the first man, was a type of him who was to come (Rom 5:14), Christ the Lord. Christ the new Adam, in the very revelation of the mystery of the Father and of his love, *fully reveals man to himself* and brings to light his most high calling.” And the Council continues: “He who is the ‘image of the invisible God’ (Col 1:15), is himself the perfect man who has

University of America Press, 2012), 39–78. See also Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man*, trans. Lancelot C. Sheppard and Sister Elizabeth Englund, OCD (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988).

¹¹⁶ Pope John Paul II, *Memory and Identity: Conversations at the Dawn of a Millennium* (New York: Rizzoli International, 2005), 81; see also his discussion of the distinction between the nation and the state on 59–114, esp. 69–71. See also Pope Saint John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus* (1991), §§ 13, 53–55.

restored in the children of Adam that likeness to God which had been disfigured ever since the first sin. Human nature, by the very fact that it was assumed, not absorbed, in him, has been raised in us also to a dignity beyond compare. For, by his Incarnation, he, the son of God, *in a certain way united himself with each man*. He worked with human hands, he thought with a human mind. He acted with a human will, and with a human heart he loved. Born of the Virgin Mary, he has truly been made one of us, like to us in all things except sin." He, the Redeemer of man!¹¹⁷

Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, reveals the mystery of God to man and the mystery of man to himself. Faith in Christ grants us the "divine distance" from ourselves that enables us to see, and to hear, the truth about the human heart. It is therefore primarily in the preaching of Jesus Christ—of his life, mission, deeds, and teaching, of his crucifixion, death, resurrection, and ascension—that the Church manifests the nature of man to himself and fecundates the human, political world. By transcending politics but caring for the practical lives of her sons and daughters on their pilgrimage to the Father, by surpassing philosophy but incorporating it into her supernatural life and thinking, by exercising faithfully the supernatural *munera* of teaching, governing, and sanctifying, the Church contributes to our knowledge of man and woman created to the image of God and called to eternal life in Christ. The preaching of Christ as God incarnate, the Redeemer of man, and the teaching of the truth he reveals about human nature are the principal contributions the Church can make to our modern political situation.¹¹⁸

The Church is the supernatural society of truth and graced friendship with God and with each other, and as such it proclaims the natural law when it preaches Christ and him crucified. Because the natural law is nothing other than the eternal law as participated by the rational creature, and

¹¹⁷ Pope Saint John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis* (1979), §9, quoting *Gaudium et Spes*, §22. See also Russell Hittinger, "Human Nature and States of Nature in John Paul II's Theological Anthropology," in *Human Nature in Its Wholeness: A Roman Catholic Perspective*, ed. Daniel Robinson (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2006), 9–33. Spaemann's discusses the human heart as brought to light only by Christ and his Church in *Persons*, 16–21, 151–52, 216–35.

¹¹⁸ As John Paul II says, "The Church respects the legitimate autonomy of the democratic order and is not entitled to express preferences for this or that institutional or constitutional solution. Her contribution to the political order is precisely her vision of the dignity of the person revealed in all its fullness in the mystery of the Incarnate Word." *Centesimus Annus*, §47.

because the New Law of grace is a fuller disclosure of and participation in this same eternal law, the revelation of Jesus Christ includes a promulgation of the natural law. When Jesus reveals the depths of the human heart to man himself, he discloses the law written naturally upon it. We catch a glimpse of “part” of the eternal law when we display the natural law through the light of reason, and God reveals both this naturally knowable part and much more when Christ tells us everything he has heard from the Father.¹¹⁹ When Jesus reveals the Father to us through the grace of the Holy Spirit, he reveals us to ourselves, and this revelation of man to himself achieved by Christ refines and deepens our understanding of ourselves, enables us to grasp the profound truth of who we are, and thereby displays to us the natural law that directs us and that is taken up into the law of the Gospel. Grace heals, elevates, and perfects nature, and therefore it manifests the natural law and its place in the life of men and women created in the image and likeness of God and called to eternal beatific friendship with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The truth that Christ reveals about God and about the heart of man opens to us the possibility of friendship, not only between men and women in familial and political society, but also between us and God himself in the supernatural society of the Church. “I no longer call you slaves, because a slave does not know what his master is doing. I have called you friends, because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father” (John 15:15). God became flesh in Christ, disclosing the Father to us and us to ourselves and calling us to friendship with God and each other through the grace of the Holy Spirit. The graced knowledge of God and of ourselves as made in his image and redeemed by his Passion enables us to love ourselves with the same divine love by which we love God, and to love others as we love ourselves. As St. Thomas says, God makes us his lovers by loving us and revealing to us the truth in Christ.¹²⁰ The Aristotelian insight that self-knowledge provides the foundation for self-love, political life, and friendship is elevated into the Christian teaching of God’s creation of the world, of man and woman *ad imaginem Dei*, and of his offer of friendship in the revelation of Christ.

¹¹⁹ On the relationship between the eternal law, the natural law, the New Law of grace, and friendship with God, see Scott Roniger, “Natural Law and Friendship with God,” *The Thomist* 83 (2019): 237–76.

¹²⁰ See Aquinas, *Super Ioan* 15, lec. 3.

Concluding Question

Let us end with a question. If Manent is correct in his claim that human rights are rooted in a distorted conception of human nature and inevitably serve to hide us from ourselves, to hinder self-love and friendship, and to occlude the natural law, does the modern magisterium's continued insistence upon the language of human rights in her teaching on social issues amount to a failure of pastoral prudence? Can the Church transform the fig leaves of human rights into threads fitting for the garment of Christ that must be put on in the house of the Father? It is one thing to baptize Plato and Aristotle, but quite another to baptize Hobbes and Nietzsche.¹²¹

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¹²¹ I wish to thank Russell Hittinger for philosophical and theological conversations on many of the points discussed in this essay and for his very helpful comments on an earlier draft of it. I would not have come upon many of the insights discussed here apart from our conversations. I also wish to thank Stephen Brock, Brian Carl, Joe Wood, and Brad Lewis for philosophical discussions of Manent's work, and I am grateful to The Lumen Christi Institute for hosting a master class on Manent's book on natural law in the Spring of 2021. All errors are my own.