

Catholic or Utopian? Two Irreconcilable Views about Moral “Ideals” in *Veritatis Splendor*

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THE POST-SYNODAL apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* sparked criticism that some language used in chapter 8 could lead the reader to arrive at the view that the moral good, generally understood as *at least* requiring adherence to the commandments, is an ideal.¹ While this essay was instigated by such concerns, it is not its goal to assess their veracity. Rather, this essay will show that there is a history of describing the moral good as an ideal in papal teaching since at least Leo XIII, but that these Popes at the same time flag an illegitimate use of the term “ideal” to describe the moral good. It will then be claimed that Saint John Paul II’s encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* gives a sufficient outline of both the way in which the moral good can be referred to as an ideal, and the way in which it cannot. Finally, these two senses of “ideal” will be contrasted with each other, focusing especially on the capacity of the false understanding to rationalize sin.

Magisterial Usage of “Ideal”

Since at least the time of Pope Leo XIII, the popes have been using the word “ideal” in a positive sense to refer to what is desirable, normative, and

¹ E. Christian Brugger, “Five Serious Problems with Chapter 8 of *Amoris Laetitia*,” *The Catholic World Report*, April 22, 2016, <https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2016/04/22/five-serious-problems-with-chapter-8-of-amoris-laetitia/>; John Finnis and Germain Grisez, “The Misuse of *Amoris Laetitia* to Support Errors against the Catholic Faith: A Letter to the Supreme Pontiff Francis, to All Bishops in Communion with Him, and to the Rest of the Christian Faithful,” November 21, 2016, <http://www.twotlj.org/OW-MisuseAL.pdf>, 6–14.

objectively fulfilling for Christians.² These three properties (desirability, normativity, and objective fulfilment) can be taken to be properties of the moral good itself. In all the papal documents analyzed where the moral good is referred to as an ideal, even though the language may emphasize the desirability or difficulty of the good, it never implies a separation from what is normative for the individual. If the magisterium does wish to use “ideal” in a different sense, and one in which it is not referring to the true moral good, it is generally accompanied by an adjective such as “pagan,”³ “Communist,”⁴ “pseudo,”⁵ “earthly,”⁶ “simple,”⁷ “selfish,”⁸ “mere,”⁹ “abstract,” or “false utopian.”¹⁰

While references to a true or false sense of “ideal” are not uncommon in magisterial documents, there has been no attempt to define the distinctions and implications of the two senses of the term. Since *Veritatis Splendor* intentionally sets out to explore and state the foundations of the moral life, it is not surprising to find that we are provided with the tools to draw out this distinction between a legitimate and illegitimate description of the moral good as an ideal.¹¹ While these are not defined in one place in the encyclical, one could suggest that the entire encyclical unpacks what are two irreconcilable views, each hinging on a particular description of the moral good as an ideal. These clashing views will be called the “Catholic” and the “utopian.”

The Catholic Sense of “Ideal”

Commenting on Jesus’s encounter with the rich young man, Saint John Paul II states that, “even though he has followed the moral *ideal* seriously

² A sample of each Pontiff and Council’s usage includes: Leo XIII, *Pastoralis* (1891), §§5, 8; Pius X, *Il Fermo Proposito* (1905), §§4, 5; Benedict XV, *Humani Generis Redemptionem* (1917), §§4, 8–9; Pius XI, *Ubi Arcano Dei Consilio* (1932), §§8, 29, 41–42, 45, 48, 57, 69; Pius XII, *Evangelii Praecones* (1951), §§36, 54; John XXIII, *Sacerdotii Nostri Primordia* (1959), §§7, 35; Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), §46; Paul VI, *Sacerdotalis Caelibatus* (1967), §§19, 23, 24, 63, 95; John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus* (1991), §§4, 46; Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate* (2009), §13; Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013), §§31, 39.

³ Leo XIII, *Au Milieu des Sollicitudes* (1892), §29.

⁴ Pius XI, *Divini Redemptoris* (1937), §15.

⁵ Pius XI, *Divini Redemptoris*, §8.

⁶ Pius XII, *Summi Pontificatus* (1939), §3.

⁷ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi* (2007), §39.

⁸ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, §54.

⁹ Pius XI, *Mortalium Animos* (1928), §7.

¹⁰ John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, §41.

¹¹ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor* (1993).

and generously from childhood, the rich young man knows that he is still far from the goal."¹² I will be referring to this usage of "ideal" as the Catholic sense, and suggest that it is simply synonymous with the moral good itself. In that sentence one is able to exchange the word "ideal" for "good," "law," "rule," or "norm" and its meaning would be essentially the same. Therefore the following section will now attempt to present a synthesis of the notion of the good as found in *Veritatis Splendor*, intending it to be simultaneously an explanation of the Catholic sense of the word "ideal."

By stating that "only God is good" (Mark 10:18), Jesus himself indicated to the rich young man that it is he who is "the absolute Good which attracts us and beckons us."¹³ It is the divine nature which is the source and model of the moral law and virtue.¹⁴ The goodness of the creature, whether it be in the order of nature, grace, or glory, is always a participation in the one, eternal, perfect goodness of God.¹⁵ These metaphysical roots of the good (or ideal) which Jesus immediately directs the young man to consider show that God himself is the one unique ground of all other goods, and that aspects of the moral good such as desirability and objective fulfilment ("eternal life") are inseparable from its normative aspect ("what must I do?").¹⁶ Hence, in the Catholic sense, ideal is intrinsically related to the nature of both God and creation.

While many aspects of the reality that surrounds us are beyond our capacity to change, in every choice there is "a *decision about oneself*" and a setting of one's own life for or against the Good, for or against the Truth, and ultimately for or against God."¹⁷ The entire moral life is "the obedience of faith" or "fundamental response" to the gratuitous initiative of, and invitation to, the divine communion.¹⁸ The "ultimate purpose of our life" is that each of our actions manifest the truth that we are "made in the image of the Creator, redeemed by the Blood of Christ and made holy by the presence of the Holy Spirit," for the glory of God.¹⁹ In choosing and performing good acts, "man strengthens, develops and consolidates within himself his likeness to God."²⁰ As we are transformed more into the Image of the Son, we increase our participation (and therefore manifestation) of

¹² John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §16 (italics mine).

¹³ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §7; cf. §§9, 35.

¹⁴ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §§10, 40, 99.

¹⁵ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §12.

¹⁶ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §8.

¹⁷ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §65; cf. §§72, 78.

¹⁸ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §§10, 66–67, 88.

¹⁹ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §10; cf. §73.

²⁰ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §39; cf. §§51, 71.

God's glory. While this transformation is only completed in the beatific vision, the wayfarer is already a child of the kingdom insofar as they live and act from the grace they have received, which is the seed of glory that constitutes that very kingdom.²¹

The best description for this whole structure of the moral ideal (or good), ranging from the natural law to the gifts of the Holy Spirit, is "participated theonomy."²² That is, degrees of natural and supernatural participation in the eternal wisdom and love of God by which the rational creature guides himself to his beatific end.²³ Both the natural and divine law are the promise and sign of this life, and they reach their highest expression in the new law by the gifts of the Holy Spirit and the Beatitudes.²⁴ The incarnate Word is the fulfilment of the law in that he first exegetes its fullest significance, and then lives it out by making "a total gift of himself."²⁵ Christ's call to follow him and live out the law of the Spirit is meant for everyone regardless of their circumstances.²⁶ He "transcends a legalistic interpretation of the commandments," and empowers others to do the same by his grace.²⁷

In this Catholic sense of the moral good as ideal, "the commandments . . . represent the basic conditions for love of neighbour; at the same time they are the proof of that love," apart from which "genuine love for God is not possible."²⁸ The multiplicity of precepts (which reflects the multiplicity of human powers and circumstances) should not obscure the reality that

²¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [ST] I-II, q. 114, a. 3, ad 3 (trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province [New York: Benziger Bros., 1948]).

²² John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §41.

²³ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §§41–43, 72.

²⁴ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §§12, 16, 24, 45, 51, 72. Servais Pinckaers, whose entire career has been committed to emphasising this point, applauds the encyclical which, without denying the truth about obligation of obeying the Ten Commandments, situates them properly in the context of the new law as understood by St. Thomas (Servais Pinckaers, "The Use of Scripture and the Renewal of Moral Theology: The Catechism and *Veritatis Splendor*," *The Thomist* 59, no. 1 [1995]: 8–9).

²⁵ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §§15, 20, 83, 85, 87, 89.

²⁶ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §18–19. See also Reinhard Hüter, "(Re-)Forming Freedom: Reflections 'After *Veritatis Splendor*' on Freedom's Fate in Modernity and Protestantism's Antinomian Captivity," *Modern Theology* 17, no. 2 (2001): 131: "Yet the freedom that is the Spirit's presence, does not lead away from God's will as expressed in God's commandments. Life in the Spirit does not mean that the Decalogue . . . is abolished."

²⁷ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §16; cf. §§17, 21, 102.

²⁸ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §§13–14, 17, 26, 35, 76.

they simply reflect the simple goodness of God and *the unified good* of the whole person.²⁹ This is the basis of the inseparable unity of the commandments, and also the reason why they must be kept in every time and place.³⁰ To the extent that we do this we are truly free, since we are prompted to act from the center of graced personality. Alternatively, those who act from "blind impulse or external pressure" experience God's law as a burden.³¹ If this leads to an act in which one "knowingly and willingly, for whatever reason, chooses something gravely disordered," the person's fundamental orientation to God is lost.³² This is not due to an external, arbitrary punishment by God, but because these acts harm deeply and profoundly those who choose them.³³

Finally, in regard to the Catholic sense of ideal, while *apparent* conflicts may be endless, since Christ cannot contradict himself there cannot be a real conflict between the magisterium and the Catholic conscience. Both are at the service of proclaiming and applying the truth about the moral ideal. The magisterium is the external voice of Christ authentically interpreting and proclaiming these moral principles, and the Catholic conscience is the internal voice of Christ, judging here and now whether this or that act is to be done or avoided.³⁴ The source of the great dignity of both the magisterium and the conscience is that neither is the ultimate author of the law they speak of.

The Utopian Sense of "Ideal"

Yet as seen above in the section on the magisterial usage of the term, not all uses of the term "ideal" are compatible with Catholic moral truth. Saint John Paul II explicitly states this in §103 of *Veritatis Splendor*: "It would be a very serious error to conclude . . . that the Church's teaching is essentially only an 'ideal' which must then be adapted, proportioned, graduated to the so-called concrete possibilities of man."³⁵ In his encyclical, John Paul II

²⁹ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §§13, 45, 48–50, 72, 79, 90.

³⁰ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §§14, 25–26, 80, 82, 90.

³¹ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §§17–18, 35, 42, 84–87, 96.

³² John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §70; cf. §80.

³³ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §§80, 92. Romanus Cessario puts it this way: "Every disordered deed yields its own punishment, each attempt to construct a pattern of moral behaviour outside of what conforms to God's wise providence for the human race leads to some form of moral dissolution" (*Introduction to Moral Theology*, 2nd ed. [Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2001], 98).

³⁴ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §§27, 29, 32, 54, 59.

³⁵ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §103.

targets a variety of these false moral theories which share a common underlying denial that makes them incompatible with reason and revelation: the denial of universal negative norms. This false usage of the word “ideal” to describe the moral good will be called the “utopian” ideal.³⁶ What follows is a synthesis of this general approach as described in *Veritatis Splendor*.

The most distinguishing feature of this illegitimate use of the word “ideal” to describe the moral good is that it is constantly being contrasted with the “real,” “personal,” or “concrete.” The commandments cannot be absolutely normative for “daily decisions,” since one “cannot be expected to foresee and to respect all the individual concrete acts of the person in all their uniqueness and particularity.”³⁷ Proponents of the utopian sense “stress the *complexity* typical of the phenomena of conscience, a complexity profoundly related to the whole sphere of psychology . . . emotions . . . social and cultural environment.”³⁸ In light of this, absolute negative norms could only be exhortations which the individual’s reason adapts to “the concrete historical situation.”³⁹ This would be an instance of adopting a “pastoral solution” which involves prioritizing the “more concrete existential consideration” over “doctrinal and abstract” laws; that is, by taking account of circumstances, one may allow an “exception to the general rule,” even if it is considered by the magisterium to be something intrinsically evil.⁴⁰

In order to understand how it is that one may act contrary to the natural and divine law with moral sanction, a distinction is made between two orders of the good.⁴¹ The first is the ethical order, which consists in “inner-worldly” norms about how we act toward the world, others, and self. The second order is the order of salvation, and involves how one acts toward God and considerations regarding divine wisdom. Accompanying this two-tier structure of the good is a two-tiered freedom: “a ‘fundamental freedom’ (which is) deeper than and different from freedom of choice,” with the former playing the key role in the order of salvation and the latter regarding particular acts in the ethical order.⁴² In the ethical order, to make the “right” decision, the individual should weigh the various values and take note of the proportion between good and evil effects.⁴³

³⁶ John Paul II uses this phrase himself in *Centesimus Annus*, §41.

³⁷ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §§4, 55, 75.

³⁸ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §55.

³⁹ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §37.

⁴⁰ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §56.

⁴¹ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §§36–37, 88.

⁴² John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §65.

⁴³ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §§74–75, 79.

It is essential to note that the "rightness" or "wrongness" of the chosen act does not affect the "goodness" or "evil" of the choosing person, since this would depend on their intention in choosing the act, an intention which assumedly is in positive or negative relation toward God apart from others.⁴⁴

Since the order of salvation concerns only "certain intentions and interior attitudes toward God and neighbour," one cannot say that God has revealed some acts to be intrinsically evil always and everywhere in the ethical order.⁴⁵ The magisterium's clear stance on certain kinds of acts as evil is "the cause of unnecessary *conflicts of conscience*."⁴⁶ An individual could "remain faithful to God independently of whether or not certain of his choices and his acts are in conformity with specific norms or rules."⁴⁷ What is most important is that the conscience adopts "a criterion of sincerity, authenticity and 'being at peace with oneself.'"⁴⁸ Only an explicit rejection of God could be categorized as a mortal sin.⁴⁹ This means that one is able to make choices which positively neglect or even attack the realizing of the ideal. They can consider themselves children of the kingdom as long as they do not deny the ideal as *ideal*, even though it does not have actual normativity for them at present.

A Tale of Two Ideals

Describing the moral good as an ideal in the utopian sense attempts to retain the sense of the moral good's *desirability* for a given subject, but disjointed from truths about God and nature in such a way that it is not considered *possible*, and therefore not *normative* for them in this concrete situation. The problematic conceptual framework of the utopian ideal is not merely a post-Conciliar phenomenon. In a prophetic address on April 18, 1952, ten years before the Second Vatican Council and forty-one years before *Veritatis Splendor*, Pope Pius XII identified a danger so serious that he said there are "few . . . as great and far-reaching."⁵⁰ He called this by various labels such as "the new morality," "ethical existentialism," and "situation ethics." According to him, its distinctive mark is that "it does

⁴⁴ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §§75, 82.

⁴⁵ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §§4, 37, 75.

⁴⁶ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §55.

⁴⁷ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §68.

⁴⁸ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §32.

⁴⁹ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §69.

⁵⁰ Pius XII, Address to the Participants in the Catholic World Federation of Young Women, April 18, 1952, w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/fr/speeches/1952/documents/hf_p-xii_spe_19520418_soyez-bienvenues.html.

not rely on universal moral laws, such as the Ten Commandments, but on the real or concrete conditions or circumstances in which we must act, and according to which the individual conscience must judge and choose.” Its criteria for choice are “good intentions” and “sincerity.” What Pius XII describes bears an uncanny resemblance to John Paul II’s description in the above section. This is indicated by two key features of the utopian sense of “ideal”: firstly, the explicit contrasting between a universal moral law and real, concrete circumstances; secondly, in light of the alleged incapacity for universal negative laws to apply to all scenarios, a falling back upon a subjective sincerity as the criteria of acting well. This is an excellent example of the Holy Spirit ensuring the Church is prepared for a future crisis by preempting it in her teaching. Unfortunately however, it is also an excellent example of how this warning is able to be neglected or overlooked in the decades that follow.

The call to repentance was foundational in the preaching of Jesus (Matt 4:17; Luke 5:32) and his apostles (Acts 2:38; 17:30), and therefore it retains a permanent and essential place in Catholic moral teaching (Luke 24:47). Those who do not repent of their sin reject the call to be an adopted child in the Son and thereby bring judgment on themselves (John 3:19). In fact, failure to repent provides the unique condition for blocking the forgiveness of God, whether it be in this life or the next (Matt 12:31–32). If one does not repent of their sins, they cannot consider themselves immune from the punishments received by those who have gone before them (Luke 13:1–5; 1 Cor 10:6–11). Since the fullness of Revelation has taken place, culpability for sin and the hardness of heart involved in failing to repent are worse than in the past (Matt 11:20–24). In the light of all this, it is fair to conclude that any set of ideas which makes the idea of repentance unintelligible, or which blocks an individual’s capacity to repent of their own sin, is a lethal threat to the spiritual life. The rest of this paper will show how describing the moral good as an ideal in the utopian sense leads to the rationalizing of sin, and therefore failure to repent.

It Confuses Knowing with Doing Good

Firstly, the Catholic sense of “ideal” correctly distinguishes the knowledge of what is good from the actual pursuit of the good in such a way that merely knowing what is good does not make one a good person. This is why the intellectual virtues can only be called virtues in a restricted sense.⁵¹ Unlike the moral virtues, they do not make a person good per se. This is an essential distinction, since in light of *synderesis*, the natural law, and revela-

⁵¹ Aquinas, *ST* I-II, q. 57, a. 1, ad 1.

tion, people can be expected to grasp at the level of knowledge the distinctions between good and evil in general. This does not mean the majority of people are wise, but only that they know *enough* for the proper "guidance of life."⁵² If this is the case, merit is not in simply knowing what is good, but in actually doing it (Luke 6:46; Matt 7:21). In fact, failing to distinguish good from evil on some occasions, far from allowing one to revel in a lack of culpability, could be a sign of serious moral degeneracy (Rom 1:20–21).

The reason these observations are important is that, as seen above, the utopian ideal isolates Church teaching (and the moral law) to the level of intellectual apprehension, and hence it cannot provide the direction or measure of a concrete decision. One can *know* that adultery or contraception is forbidden by his church, but not believe it is thereby ruled out as a legitimate option *for him*. It is an impotent belief with no practical import, and as such is capable of accompanying acts of the will which would seem to contradict it. As long as one nods respectfully to such teaching in public forums as general advice and acknowledges the undesirability of *everyone* contravening the law, one is able to believe it does not apply to him in his particular circumstances. For example, Jack may hear the priest preaching about the impossibility of remarriage and consent to it at some intellectual level as *ideal*. Yet Jack believes that factoring in the infidelity of his wife, as well as his overwhelming sexual desires, it is not reasonable to think it is applying to him personally. He believes that if he was with a wife that did not cheat on him, and if he had a different temperament, it truly would be sinful to seek out another marriage—but those are not his concrete circumstances. Jack thinks the main thing is that he loves God, and that it would be unreasonable for the Church to suggest failing to meet this ideal would affect that. Hence for Jack, his adoption of the moral law as ideal in the utopian sense means the promulgation of the law is not a call for him to repent. It is simply a call to acknowledge an ideal.

*It Makes the Object of Moral Analysis the Circumstances
and not the Acting Person*

The Catholic sense of ideal provides an explanation for how it is that people can be convicted by their conscience that they sinned, and hence potentially repent. In many cases, it is simply that this particular act violated what they understood to be a general moral precept. However, on the basis of the utopian sense of ideal, how can one repent from violating what was always merely an ideal, and one which they continued to acknowledge as an ideal the whole time? At most, one could regret the

⁵² Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 23, a. 7, ad 3.

circumstances they find themselves in and wish they were different, so that they could act differently. This is a judgment about one's situation and not one's own choice in that situation, and yet it is the latter which must be the focus for moral analysis. The question about whether a situation is ideal must be distinguished from whether the moral law is an ideal.

Often, perhaps even most of the time, it is appropriate to refer to the circumstances surrounding one's act as not ideal. For example: "If you are going to go out for dinner, it would be ideal to leave before 5pm to avoid the traffic"; "Only sleeping two hours last night was not ideal for doing an exam today"; "This is not the ideal chair to be sitting in for eight hours a day"; "Ideally, it won't be too hot on the day of the marathon"; "I know it's not ideal that your mother left us, but we have to work out our new dinner roster." In all these cases, the lack of an ideal situation affects exactly how the virtue of prudence instantiates a positive precept, and it may even force the acting person to rule out good acts they would otherwise have liked to accomplish. However, as will be seen further below, unideal circumstances can never hinder a person from not doing an evil act.⁵³

Every situation in our fallen world is *not an ideal situation*, not merely externally, but also internally with regard to our physical and psychological make-up.⁵⁴ If one insists that given the ideal situation and the ideal internal state, the ideal would be morally binding and they would have chosen it, then one fails to take account of the nature of moral choice in our fallen and redeemed world. Contrary to being made for an alternative reality, since the Christian moral life involves the redemptive dimensions of forgiveness of enemies, carrying one's cross, and offering up of one's sufferings, it is manifest that the Christian ideal is for *this* world, since in a perfect world none of those things would be required.⁵⁵

It Leads the Faithful to be Swept Away by False Ethical Theories

The capacity for Jack (our hypothetical character attempting remarriage) to sustain this rationalization is maintained by the utopian sense's distinction between the other-worldly order of salvation and the this-worldly ethical order repudiated in *Veritatis Splendor*. This is revealed by Jack's belief that the command to love God can require no particular demand on (at least some of) his activity in the world. Yet if Jack believes this to be true, he must subscribe, consciously or not, to an ethical theory from elsewhere in order

⁵³ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §52.

⁵⁴ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §1.

⁵⁵ See Germain Grisez, *Way of the Lord Jesus*, vol. 1, *Christian Moral Principles* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald, 1983), ch. 28, question B, no. 6.

to assess what to do here and now. By calling the moral law an ideal in the utopian sense, the faithful are turned to the surrounding culture to discover daily or practical guides and norms. In a previous period of history this may have led to the adoption of a this-worldly capitalist ethic.⁵⁶ Yet there can be no doubt that in the post-Conciliar period it has generally meant the adoption of various secular, post-modern, or leftist ideologies by the faithful.⁵⁷ The end result is that people dress up the moral norms and concepts of liberalism, relativism, or Marxism in a now hopelessly vague Christian language. It leads to entirely different views of Christ's teaching, since he has simply become the front-man for an alien ideology. For example, one person insists that Jesus taught simply to forgive, do not judge, and let people be. Yet behind them is a person who insists that Jesus was an anti-institutional revolutionary who put social activism ahead of all else. In any case their willingness to look past the Church's moral tradition flings the door open to the disordered influence of the popular or academic ethical theory of their time, all made possible by an adoption of the Christian moral good as an ideal in the utopian sense. Not only is this a failure to "not be conformed to this world . . . that you may prove what is the will of God" (Rom 12:2), but it is the confusing of the will of God with the flux of human culture.

This confusion of the ways of the world and the ways of God is part of the reason for the Pope's plea to return to Jesus for answers about good and evil, not the latest sociological or philosophical school of thought.⁵⁸ Not to look to God's revelation for the answers or to insist he has only revealed general guidelines because he is unaware of the complexity of life bespeaks "a lack of trust in the wisdom of God, who guides man with the moral law."⁵⁹

It Fails to Appreciate Moral Realism

Moral realism is at the heart of the Catholic moral tradition.⁶⁰ John Paul

⁵⁶ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells (London: Penguin Books, 2002).

⁵⁷ See James V. Schall, *Liberation Theology* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982).

⁵⁸ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §8.

⁵⁹ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §84. John Paul makes this accusation of failing to trust the wisdom and providence of God also in an earlier address: "It is believed that it is not suitable for every man, for every situation, and you therefore want to replace it with an order different from the divine one" (Address to Priests Participating in a Course on Responsible Parenthood, September 17, 1983, §3, w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/speeches/1983/september/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19830917_procreazione-responsabile.html [translation mine]).

⁶⁰ Cessario, *Introduction to Moral Theology*, xvi-xvii.

II reminds the faithful that, since the moral precepts are grounded in the permanent nature of God and man, and not the flux of human culture, it is the role of the moral precepts to judge culture; culture does not judge them.⁶¹ When we “disregard the law . . . whether culpably or not, our acts damage the communion of persons, to the detriment of each.”⁶² Ignorance, even widespread, cannot make the false true, or the evil good.⁶³ One cannot change the moral *quality* of an act by pointing out the vast *quantity* of those acts in a particular culture.⁶⁴ Intrinsically evil acts always harm the acting person and those around them, and this is why their accompanying universal precepts “oblige everyone, regardless of the cost.”⁶⁵

Describing the moral law as an ideal in the utopian sense subscribes to a nominalist metaphysic which suggests that any given act can be “rubber-stamped” as good, since this goodness is accidental to the act, and is simply the approval of the will of the legislator. This leads to the rationalizing of sin in that one falsely believes there is no harm done as long as one was “sincere.” It also undermines the Church’s evangelistic call to repentance in that the faithful can wonder whether others would be “better off” not knowing the Church teaching, as it may unnecessarily distress the others’ consciences. After all, if the evil associated with sin is only imputed by an external authority and God cannot demand that people obey laws they do not know about, is it not perhaps malevolent to make them aware? These are all questions and lines of argument which undermine the call to repentance, even in the face of the most manifest signs of moral crisis. In an ironic twist, the utopian sense leads one to believe that the more disastrous the moral climate becomes, the more one needs to compromise the law rather than manifest it.

⁶¹ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §§53, 97, 99, 101.

⁶² John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §51. Germain Grisez, *The Way of the Lord Jesus*, vol. 2, *Living a Christian Life* (Quincy, IL: Franciscan Herald, 1993), ch. 9, question E, no. 7.

⁶³ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §63.

⁶⁴ This is simply a more elaborate version of every child’s favorite excuse: “But everyone was doing it!”

⁶⁵ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §§51–53, 77. See also Alasdair MacIntyre, “How Can We Learn What *Veritatis Splendor* Has to Teach?” in *Veritatis Splendor and the Renewal of Moral Theology*, ed. J. A. DiNoia and Romanus Cessario (Chicago: Midwest Theological Forum, 1999), 78: “Obedience to these negative precepts. . . frees us from a variety of hindrances and frustrations that would otherwise bring to nothing the pursuit by each of us of our own positive good and that of others.” John Finnis gives a good historical overview of the Church’s Tradition in regard to exceptionless norms in “Grounds and Preparations for the Main Thesis of *Veritatis Splendor*,” *Studia Philosophiae Christianae* 51, no. 2 (2015): 11–21.

It Promotes Discerning the Application of Negative Precepts

Another way in which the utopian sense of "ideal" allows for the rationalizing of sin is that it confuses a basic distinction made between the positive and negative precepts of the law. The Catholic sense makes room for discerning the application of the positive precepts in a given time and place, but not the negative.⁶⁶ The utopian wishes to extend discernment even to the negative precepts. Father John Neuhaus explains the fault in this reasoning in a succinct way: "We cannot always do the good that we would, but we can always refuse to do evil."⁶⁷ As creatures who are essentially finite, on any given occasion in our life we will be unable to accomplish all the goods we could conceive of. We must inevitably choose which good to instantiate amongst a range of possible goods. For example, a husband and wife discover they have another baby on the way, and this forces them to decide between getting a larger car and renovating the house. Each is possible on its own, but they cannot afford both. They discern which to choose. However, even the range of goods we choose from may not itself include all the goods desirable in the abstract. For example, the husband may have loved to be a religious and dedicate his whole life to contemplative study, but it is not reasonable for him to have this on the table as a possible option to choose. Yet regardless of how limited one's options are for attaining various goods through various means, one never has to choose evil. The choice of evil is the refusal of the reason and will to acknowledge one's finiteness and select among the options that the Father in his providence has made possible at this time. One cannot claim in any way whatsoever that God wills them to sin, since this would amount to a denial of what he is.

This mistaking of the legitimate role of discernment in the execution of positive precepts, with a false discernment about whether the universal negative precept applies to oneself here and now, leads to rationalizing sin. The reason this is the case is that when one has set before them the range of acceptable actions, they must choose which to enact. They may choose one which is *less good* though not evil, and there would be no need to repent properly speaking. For example, the husband in the above situation bought the reliable car with the better paint job, although later he thinks the reliable car that has travelled fewer kilometres but is slightly scratched would have been better. All things being equal (that is, he was not motivated by vanity for example), he may regret his decision, but he

⁶⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *De malo*, q. 7, a. 1, ad 8.

⁶⁷ Richard John Neuhaus, "The Splendor of Truth: A Symposium," *First Things*, January 1994, firstthings.com/article/1994/01/the-splendor-of-truth-a-symposium.

should not repent of it. The car salesman may like the idea, but the priest should not. Rather, the husband should take it as a lesson in humility, intend to take more counsel before deciding next time, and make an act of trust in divine providence. However, say the husband adopts the moral law as an ideal in the utopian sense. Due to his family's apparently desperate financial situation, he considers it a valid option to threaten to beat the car salesman if he does not receive a staff discount. This would already be a sign of moral corruption. Say the husband were to choose this means and act on it but later come to regret it, it would be entirely wrong for him to treat this as the equivalent of choosing a lesser good. In fact, apart from repenting of the act under the *ratio* of evil, he may only regret it because of accidental effects of the action which could have been prevented or contained by a more cunning plan. Hence the utopian sense of "ideal" frustrates the capacity to repent, since it allows people to see their sins only as mistakes.

It Pretends to Assess the Culpability of Future Chosen Actions

In Catholic moral thought, one can evaluate a past action and come to the conclusion that a properly human act (one which originates in knowledge and freedom) was not performed, and hence the merit or blame for an action is reduced. If there was a lack of freedom or control, one would expect the person to repent of their act immediately on regaining that freedom or control. If it involved a lack of knowledge of the facts of the situation or the moral law, one would expect repentance once those facts or law became known. It is essential to note that this assessment of culpability cannot take place in regards to future actions. It is impossible for one to evaluate *in advance* the culpability of actions they are planning on carrying out. If one is planning on having inhibited freedom or control, then they are choosing it and they are culpable.⁶⁸ If one is planning on being ignorant, this too is self-defeating.⁶⁹ In contrast to this, the utopian sense of ideal, in light of its presuppositions, is willing to grant pardon or reduced culpability to the person who plans in the future to freely and knowingly carry out an act in violation of a general precept. For example, next month when I choose to sleep with this person who is not my spouse, I will not be culpable because we have known each other for a long time and have a common set of commitments. A person must be converted away from the utopian sense of ideal for the process of contrition to even begin.

⁶⁸ Aquinas, *ST* I-II, q. 77, a. 7.

⁶⁹ Aquinas, *ST* I-II, q. 6, a. 6.

It Views God as Absent or Impotent in the Moral Life

The utopian sense of "ideal" aids in rationalizing sin in that it leads one to see God as essentially absent and not able to help in the moral life. It promotes speaking much of God's mercy, yet separated from the moral law in such a way that God's mercy is not effective, powerful, and transformative. Rather it simply appears to be some superhuman capacity to empathize and forget. On the one hand, God is thought to be so far away that he is either uninterested or unable to help one choose the good. On the other hand, he is thought to be so immanent to the circumstances that it is as if he himself is bound by the unfortunate, unforeseeable situation and condones merely "doing your best." But this is exactly John Paul II's question: what is one's best? Is it the best of one "dominated by concupiscence or man redeemed by Christ? For this is what is in question: the reality of Christ's redemption."⁷⁰ This is not an abstract theological question, but the essence of the moral life since, "only in the mystery of Christ's redemption do we discover the 'concrete' possibilities of man."⁷¹ Allowing the wounded human condition to dominate one's moral thinking is a failure to appreciate that it is the second Adam, not the first, "who fully discloses man to himself and unfolds his noble calling."⁷²

This is why the Council of Trent declared it a dogma that obeying the commandments is possible for the justified: "If anyone says that the commandments of God are impossible to observe even for a man who is justified and established in grace, let him be anathema."⁷³ Yet it also anathematized those who say that the commandments can be fulfilled without God's grace: "If anyone says that, without divine grace through Jesus Christ, man can be justified before God by his own works, whether they be done by his own natural powers or through the teaching of the law, let him be anathema."⁷⁴ John Paul II took up this two-pronged attack, realizing exactly what is at stake.⁷⁵ In order to preserve the great truth of the redemption, the Church can compromise neither on the truth of the

⁷⁰ John Paul II, Address to Priests Participating in a Course on Responsible Parenthood, March 1, 1984, §4, w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/speeches/1984/march/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19840301_procreazione-responsabile.html (translation mine).

⁷¹ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §103; cf. §102.

⁷² John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §2.

⁷³ Heinrich Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum* [DH], ed. Peter Hunermann, 43rd ed., English ed. Robert Fastiggi and Anne Englund Nash (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), no. 1568.

⁷⁴ DH, no. 1551; cf. Aquinas, *ST* I-II, q. 109, a. 8.

⁷⁵ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §§22–24, 44.

moral law nor on the transformative power of Christ's grace.⁷⁶ Either one without the other is unintelligible. Once again we see that it is a theme that Pius XII also addressed when he said, "It is clear: he who does not want to master himself is not able to do so, and he who wishes to master himself relying only upon his own powers, without sincerely and perseveringly seeking divine help, will be miserably deceived."⁷⁷

Hence the promotion of the utopian sense encourages failure in regard to the supernatural hope. The willingness to depart from the law for the sake of personal gain or avoidance of loss could only be an act of despair or presumption: on the one hand, despair of God's capacity or willingness to save and the denial that in his wisdom he has provided what is needed to endure all temptation (1 Cor 10:13), or on the other hand, presumption in that one believes they can attain the joy of Christ apart from being supernaturally conformed to him in mind, heart, and body (Matt 10:38). Hence, yet again, the utopian sense of ideal leads to the rationalizing of sin.

Centuries before the Council of Trent and *Veritatis Splendor*, Saint Thomas Aquinas addressed this question of our future sins. In response to the question of whether it is lawful to kill oneself, the objector suggests that if one knows they are going to commit a grave sin in the future, they may kill themselves to "avoid a greater evil, for example an unhappy life, or the shame of sin."⁷⁸ Thomas gives a beautiful response which includes the nature of free will, the problem of consequentialism, and what true love of self requires. But at the end, he includes a brief word which those who promote the utopian sense ought to remember: "It is uncertain whether one will at some future time consent to sin, since God is able to deliver man from sin under any temptation whatever."⁷⁹ This reveals the mindset of one who has allowed the Second Adam to determine what the "concrete" possibilities of man are.

It Shirks from the Cross

The definitive blow against the anti-witness of the utopian sense of "ideal" is the witness given by the martyrs whom the Church has never lacked and

⁷⁶ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §104. See also Hütter, "(Re-)Forming Freedom," 141: "Thus God's law awakens from both the daydream of Promethean freedom—by unmasking human entanglement in sin—and the nightmare of a total eclipse of freedom—by precisely holding humans accountable for their deeds."

⁷⁷ Pius XII, Address to the Italian Catholic Union of Midwives, October 29, 1951, w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/it/speeches/1951/documents/hf_p-xii_spe_19511029_ostetriche.html (translation mine).

⁷⁸ Aquinas, *ST* II-II, q. 64. a. 5, obj. 3.

⁷⁹ Aquinas, *ST* II-II, q. 64. a. 5, ad 3.

never failed to revere from her birth until now.⁸⁰ Yet at the same time, the Church did not venerate them for discerning with their pastors whether their conscience would convict them of sin in light of their physical, psychological, emotional, cultural, and financial conditions. Even if they had attempted such, it would have been futile, as it is impossible to predict and evaluate all the effects of even a single act over the course of a one day in one's own life, let alone its effects on generations over the next century.⁸¹ Rather, the martyrs are the true role models of discernment for the rather plain reason that they were everyday Christians. Their life in Christ was essentially no different from that of any faithful Catholic. On a given day, under a very specific set of circumstances, they simply found themselves in a situation where they had to pay the ultimate price for their fidelity to God, and their refusal to disintegrate the humanity of either themselves or others.⁸² They understood that the carrying of one's own cross is an essential part of one's transformation in Christ, not an unfortunate accident. Their unideal concrete circumstances did not suffocate the Catholic ideal but became its hour of glory. Contrary to the utopian sense, no one can say a heroic commitment may not be asked of them by the crucified Christ.⁸³

Conclusion

The Catholic sense of "ideal" is not some mere imaginary place full of imaginary people carrying out imaginary acts—rather, it is always and everywhere present. This is because Jesus insists that the Catholic ideal is not merely an idea, an image or any written code, but the living God himself: "Why do you call me good, only God is good?" (Mark 10:18). In virtue of being the eternal Act of Being who creates and sustains us at all times, he is the Good who is in contact with everyone in every situation. Since he is always present and we are in a real dependence on him, there can be morally neutral acts in the abstract (like walking), but not once individualized in reality (where are you walking and why?).⁸⁴ Every choice is for or against God, either perfecting or tarnishing his image within us.⁸⁵

⁸⁰ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §§90–91.

⁸¹ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §77. The completely unpredictable effects of decisions are well recorded in the narratives found in Scripture.

⁸² John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §92.

⁸³ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §§93, 102. See also John Paul II, Address to Priests Participating in a Course on Responsible Parenthood, 1983, §4: "We are all, including spouses, called to holiness, and this vocation can also demand heroism. We must not forget it."

⁸⁴ Aquinas, *ST* I-II, q. 18, a. 9.

⁸⁵ Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 93, a. 4.

The kingdom of God truly is at hand (Mark 1:15), and one chooses for or against it in everyday situations even when they do not realize it (Matt 25).⁸⁶

Far from being something to be contrasted with the ideal, the concrete is the only place one encounters the ideal himself. It was in a particular time and place that the rich young man met Jesus, that Peter let down the nets, that Judas kissed Jesus on the cheek, that the woman at the well answered Jesus's question, and that Stephen was stoned. Jesus is adamant that an encounter with him entirely trumps the complexity of one's situation up until that moment: one is to let the dead bury the dead, accept the wedding invitation, and sin no more (Matt 8:22, Luke 14:15–24; John 8:11). Any use of the word “ideal” to describe the moral law that does not take these truths on, does not factor in the one who, as Aquinas said, “is able to deliver man from sin under any temptation whatever.”⁸⁷

This paper has demonstrated that describing the moral law as an ideal has some history in magisterial teaching. Nonetheless there is the need to be careful, since the word can also apply to erroneous or evil positions. It was then shown that Saint John Paul II's *Veritatis Splendor* provides the explicit distinctions required for separating a Catholic from utopian sense of the moral law as “ideal.” Finally, these distinct and incompatible approaches were compared, and it was proposed that the utopian sense is most dangerous in its capacity to rationalize sin and, therefore, provide an obstacle to repentance. N.V

⁸⁶ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §67.

⁸⁷ Aquinas, *ST* II-II, q. 64, a. 5, ad 3.