

# The Certainty of Moral Knowledge in Thomistic Anthropology

Craig Payne

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## 1. Anthropology and Morality

Perhaps a good place to begin this paper is with the title, especially the term “Thomistic Anthropology.” The word “anthropology,” from the Greek *anthropos*, “man,” may require explanation, especially since the philosophical and theological use of the term “anthropology” is much different than the more popular use of the word in other disciplines (including the social science discipline of anthropology itself). For the purposes of this paper, the term “anthropology” does not refer to physiological anthropology, the study of humanity in its physical dimension only, nor does it refer to cultural or social anthropology, the study of humanity in its cultural institutions and social behavior. Philosophical and theological modes of anthropology do not examine some aspect of humanity, but rather “man as such, man as a whole biological, acting, thinking, etc. being.”<sup>1</sup> Anthropology in this sense does not examine what human biology is like (solely), nor what human cultures and societies are like (solely). Rather, it examines what a human *is* in the totality of that human, the very nature of human-ness.

Thomistic anthropology, then, is the view of human nature held by medieval Christian philosopher Thomas Aquinas, who is widely considered to be the exemplar of classical Christian philosophical theology. To place him within the debate over the constitution of human nature: Aquinas would disagree with the strong dualism of

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<sup>1</sup> M.J. Inwood. “Philosophical Anthropology.” *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*. Ted Honderich, ed. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995. 38-9, p. 38.

Descartes, who thought of humans as non-corporeal souls located in corporeal bodies.

Aquinas also would disagree with the materialist idea that humans are merely corporeal bodies alone, a view memorably stated by Francis Crick: “You are nothing but a pack of neurons.”

Rather, Aquinas thinks of a human being as the *union* of a non-corporeal soul with a corporeal body, what he calls a “hylomorphic union.” In other words, a human being has to have both a human body and a human soul in order to *be* a human being. Both the body and the soul are necessary but not sufficient conditions for the existence of a human being. One or the other is not enough by itself.

Occasionally the objection is raised that these are “religious” claims and therefore unsuited for the framing of public policy, the constructing of technical philosophical arguments, or the defining of personhood under the law.<sup>2</sup> One theologian points out, “The empirical and reductionistic cast of modern thought worries over the abstract character of [descriptions of] human nature. Considering all the dynamics and structures implied in what and who we are, no simple description seems possible today.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For example, according to Leonard Glantz, “Although the law rarely lends itself to blanket statements, it can be clearly stated that a fetus is not a person under the law. However, this does not mean that we may not offer it certain protections or rights. This conclusion means, instead, that fetuses are not required to be protected” (“Is the Fetus a Person? A Lawyer’s View.” *Abortion and the Status of the Fetus*. William B. Bondeson et al., eds. Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel Publishing, 1983: 107-17, p. 116). However, even though this confident assertion may be accepted (everyone, after all, knows that abortion-on-demand is legal in the U.S. and the U.K., and that fetuses are not required to be protected under the law as persons), it is somewhat beside the point. The question is not “What does the law require?” but rather “What does the moral nature of the fetus require?” Should the fetus be considered as a human being, or perhaps as a “person”? If it should be so considered, how must the law be changed? In the U.S. at one time in its history, a black slave also was “not a person under the law,” as seen in the 1857 Dred Scott decision. One presumes that the change in the law did not thereby change the moral nature of black slaves, but only recognized the moral status the slaves possessed all along. Similarly, appealing to the current laws regarding the rights of the unborn does little to aid discussion regarding those rights or regarding the morality of those very laws.

<sup>3</sup> Anthony J. Kelly. *An Expanding Theology: Faith in a World of Connections*. Sydney: E.J. Dwyer, 1993, revised 2003: Section 7.1. For a more extended critique, see also Pauline C. Westerman, *The Disintegration of Natural Law Theory* (Leiden: Brill, 1997).

However, a close relationship does exist between philosophical and theological anthropology and applied moral knowledge. As professor Robert Sokolowski puts it, “Ethics in general, and medical ethics in particular, are obviously related to human self-understanding, to what we could call philosophical and theological anthropology.”<sup>4</sup> He goes on later to say:

Our understanding of ourselves as human beings is related to our understanding of the good and virtuous human life. This end or *telos* of human being is disclosed by virtuous action, by human beings existing and acting well as human beings.<sup>5</sup>

Our understanding of the human *telos* is foundational to the idea of a “natural law” for humans, a set of principles by which humans fulfill themselves and flourish as humans *qua* humans. Further, this set of natural principles serves as a natural moral boundary, especially in the area of *bioethics*—what humans *are* as humans (anthropology) immediately circumscribes what humans *should and should not do* to themselves and to fellow humans (ethics):

The idea of a natural law has long served as a framework within which to draw out the moral implications of centrally important theological doctrines, including the goodness of creation and the status of the human person as a free participant in God’s universal providence.<sup>6</sup>

Although a view more characteristic of modernity would place these value-laden “moral implications” within the realm of “culture” rather than within the fact-laden realm of “nature,” such a dualistic division between culture and nature does not seem representative of the unclassifiable complexity of humanity’s lived experience.<sup>7</sup> More

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Sokolowski. “What Is Natural Law? Human Purposes and Natural Ends.” *The Thomist* 68 (2004): 507-29, p. 507.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 527.

<sup>6</sup> Jean Porter, *Nature as Reason*, p. 45.

<sup>7</sup> Consider the following statements as examples of this unclassifiable complexity: “Washington, D.C., is the capitol of the United States of America” is clearly factual. “God’s love is manifested to all humanity in the goodness of creation” is not so readily empirically proven. But what about a statement such as “Jesus

specifically, the Incarnational and Eucharistic elements of the Christian faith enable us “to overcome the separation of nature and culture and the division's current collapse.”<sup>8</sup>

Therefore, to define one’s ontological status as a human must at least implicitly, and perhaps explicitly, also define what it is one must be and do in order to be an example of a “good” human. It must also define what sort of attitude and behavior we should adopt when it comes to other human beings who possess the same ontological status as we have and consequently deserve the same treatment as we do, both in the private domain and under public law.

This is not to say that a correct understanding of human nature will necessarily lead directly to a correct cataloging of ethical prescriptions. Again in Sokolowski’s words, “It is not the case that we could work out a comprehensive description or definition of human nature as a purely theoretic enterprise and then apply this knowledge to practical issues.”<sup>9</sup> Although this paper may seem like just such an attempt, such is not my intent. Rather, from beginning to end, I hope with this paper to bring out the idea that the *telos* of humanity, the mature, normal condition of the species *Homo sapiens*, not only defines but simultaneously prescribes, so that the moral applications will arise naturally out of the definition of human being and even be contained *within* the

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rose from the dead on the third day”? Is this to be seen as a “factual” statement or as a culturally based “value” statement? Most Christians would dispute this artificial division, arguing that factual statements can have clear cultural, moral, and religious implications: “If Christ be not raised from the dead, your faith is vain” (1 Corinthians 15:17). Likewise, moral implications for human behavior (natural law) may be derived from the facts of human nature discernible by deduction and by induction based on lived experience.

<sup>8</sup> Simon Oliver. “The Eucharist Before Nature and Culture.” *Modern Theology* 15.3 (July 1999): 331-53, p. 331.

<sup>9</sup> Sokolowski, “What Is Natural Law?” p. 507.

definition. These applications will be “a set of ethical imperatives drawn from human nature and known through reason.”<sup>10</sup>

Another way of saying the same thing is to say that, in Thomistic anthropology, moral laws themselves are “natural” to humans because they are inherent to human “nature.” The prescriptions surrounding human behavior exist as they do because of their rootedness in the human constitution, a constitution discovered through both observation and introspection. An anthropological description of human nature will thus also be at least partially a moral description.

## 2. The Intellectual Soul

What is Aquinas’s description of a human being? To begin with, Aquinas divides souls into three different kinds: the vegetative soul, the sensitive soul, and the rational soul.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, each successive kind supervenes upon those coming before. For example, plants, possessing the vegetative soul, live but do not sense; some animals both live and sense, possessing both vegetative and sensitive souls, but do not move;<sup>12</sup> some animals live, sense, and move; lastly, humans live, sense, move, and think: “There are some living things which with these [i.e., along with possessing the vegetative and sensitive souls] have intellectual power—namely, men.”<sup>13</sup> The vegetative soul contains within itself three powers: the power to procreate, to “produce another like unto itself” (“generative” power); the power to ingest and digest sustenance, and thus to develop

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<sup>10</sup> Stephen J. Grabill. “Foreword” to David VanDrunen’s *A Biblical Case for Natural Law*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Acton Institute, 2000, p. i.

<sup>11</sup> ST I.78.1.

<sup>12</sup> Aquinas’s rather dubious example of this “non-locomotive” type is shellfish.

<sup>13</sup> ST I.78.1.

(“augmentative” power); and the power to grow as a unified living organism (“nutritive” power).<sup>14</sup> Likewise the sensitive soul contains five powers, namely the five senses.<sup>15</sup>

However, the intellectual powers are contained exclusively within the rational soul and are therefore powers speciating the human animal apart from other animal forms. The intellectual power of human nature is both “passive” (perhaps “receptive” would be a clearer term) and “active.” In the “passive” mode, the intellect is something like a *tabula rasa*; as Aristotle says, the intellect is “like a clean tablet on which nothing is written,”<sup>16</sup> and so the intellect exists in a state of “potentiality with regard to things intelligible.”<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, Aquinas does not take this view to Locke’s extreme, for the intellect is also “active”—that is, the soul contains both passive and active powers within itself. This active power converts the impressions humans receive via their senses from being potentially intelligible to being actually intelligible; in other words, the intellect converts human sense impressions from potentiality to act, from potential knowledge to actual understanding:

Now the human soul is called intellectual by reason of a participation in intellectual power. . . . Moreover it reaches to the understanding of truth by arguing, with a certain amount of reasoning and movement. . . . [So it is] necessary to assign to the human soul some power participating in that superior intellect, by which power the human soul makes things actually intelligible.<sup>18</sup>

There exists an ongoing philosophical controversy over whether the mind’s operations gain knowledge via *a priori* or *a posteriori* means. Even though for the most part Aquinas may be placed solidly in the ranks of the empiricist, *a posteriori* epistemologists,

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<sup>14</sup> ST I.78.2.

<sup>15</sup> ST I.78.3-4.

<sup>16</sup> *De Anima* III.4.

<sup>17</sup> ST I.79.2.

<sup>18</sup> ST I.79.4.

here one can see that he makes the major exception that in addition to the “passive” powers of the intellect, the soul also actively engages through the active intellect the impressions passively received. The human soul’s ability to gain understanding thus seems to be *a priori* in nature, although this ability to gain understanding first requires our *a posteriori* impressions. Consequently, in the debate over *a priori* and *a posteriori* categories of knowledge, as is the case in most philosophical controversies, we find Aquinas staking out a position somewhere in the middle.

Somewhat remarkably, the human intellect, in its limited fashion, participates in the mode of intellectual activity enjoyed fully only by God. Since God by definition has no potential for improvement or for additional knowledge to be imparted to Him, God exists eternally in the state of completely Active Intellect; God has no “potentiality” which could be converted to “act,” possessing as He does the complete knowledge humans do not possess. However, by means of participation in the divine life, “the active intellect is something in the [human] soul,”<sup>19</sup> incorporating within itself both memory and rationality.<sup>20</sup> Aquinas has already discussed understanding as the soul’s operation, and now points out that rationality is a virtually identical operation: “For to understand is simply to apprehend intelligible truth, and to reason is to advance from one thing understood to another, so as to know an intelligible truth.”<sup>21</sup>

Can this *description* of the rational human soul become a *prescription* for ethical human behavior? This question raises the specter of G.E. Moore’s “naturalistic fallacy,” the Humean principle that one cannot derive “ought” conclusions from “is” premises, or

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<sup>19</sup> ST I.79.4.

<sup>20</sup> ST I.79.7-8.

<sup>21</sup> ST I.79.8.

assertions of what one “should do” from statements of “what is in fact the case.”<sup>22</sup>

However, Aquinas here neatly avoids the naturalistic-fallacy trap by arguing that the theoretical (“speculative”) and practical intellects “are not distinct powers,”<sup>23</sup> and so whether or not the intellect is directed to only the object of understanding (the theoretical intellect) or to the object of an operation (the practical intellect) does not involve the substance of the intellect:

Now, to a thing apprehended by the intellect, it is accidental whether it be directed to operation or not, and according to this the speculative and practical intellects differ. For it is the speculative intellect which directs what it apprehends, not to operation, but to the consideration of truth; while the practical intellect is that which directs what it apprehends to operation. [However] the speculative and practical intellects are not distinct powers.<sup>24</sup>

### 3. Moral Knowledge and Synderesis

Earlier in this paper, the goal was noted to bring out the idea that the *telos* of humanity, the mature, normal condition of the species *Homo sapiens*, not only defines but simultaneously prescribes, so that the moral applications will arise naturally out of the definition of human being and even be contained *within* the definition. Given Aquinas’s description of the practical intellect and its operation, we can see any number of illustrations of this principle in action. For example, a Thomistic argument against murder might go like this (with regard to this point): The theoretical examination of human nature reveals within human souls, in the “law written in our hearts” (Romans 2:15), a rejection of the unlawful taking of an innocent human life. However, this is not merely a statement of a factual understanding of the human emotive self (“We don’t like murder”) which in itself cannot lead to the moral prescription “We should not murder”;

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<sup>22</sup> G.E. Moore. *Principia Ethica* [1903]. Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 1988, Chapter 1, § 10.

<sup>23</sup> ST I.79.11.

<sup>24</sup> ST I.79.11.

rather, the moral prescription “We should not murder” is *itself* a factual understanding humans have of themselves, known by the *practical* intellect, and therefore just as much an object of knowledge as anything known by the speculative intellect.<sup>25</sup> “The speculative intellect by extension becomes practical,” as Aquinas puts it, “but one power is not changed into another.”<sup>26</sup> For Aquinas, to describe a human just *is* to describe a being with a *telos*, a natural end, and thus humans possess practical knowledge of their natural rights and wrongs based upon recognition of their natural end:

So “such and such is the good of all human beings by nature” is always a factual judgment, which when recognized as true by someone moves that person toward that good. Evaluative judgments are a species of factual judgment concerning the final and formal causes of activity of members of a particular species. . . . There is then no form of philosophical enquiry—at least as envisaged from an Aristotelian, Augustinian, or Thomistic point of view—which is not practical in its implications.<sup>27</sup>

So the voice of conscience within humanity speaks exactly as its root meaning says it should speak: *Con scientia*—“with knowledge.” Basic natural law moral prescriptions are “what we can’t not know,” as J. Budziszewski writes; at some level of our being, “Everyone knows them; even the murderer knows the wrong of murder,”<sup>28</sup> unless perhaps the murderer has a defective *understanding*, i.e., is psychotic. In the cases of many murderers, this may very well be the fact, since a soul (*psyche*) which is actually incapable of recognizing the first principles of morality would be a severely damaged

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<sup>25</sup> As Alasdair MacIntyre puts it (*Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* p. 133), the “peculiar task of human beings” is “to evaluate, to choose, and to act *qua* rational beings.” He notes later, paraphrasing Aristotle and through Aristotle Aquinas, that a human’s “taking pleasure or pain in something is never by itself a reason, let alone a good reason, for action” (p. 305). Thus the *telos* of humanity really has nothing to do with Bentham’s “two sovereign masters” of pleasure and pain.

<sup>26</sup> ST I.79.11.

<sup>27</sup> MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, pp. 128, 134.

<sup>28</sup> J. Budziszewski. *What We Can’t Not Know: A Guide*. Dallas: Spence Publishing, 2003, p. 3. In some respects, the assertion of the objectivity of natural conscience is a commonplace; in other respects, it is a “staggering assertion,” as one writer puts it: “The claim that all people, of whatever culture, historical milieu, or religion, know the basics of what is right and wrong at the core of their being is a staggering assertion” (David VanDrunen, *A Biblical Case for Natural Law*, p. 1).

(psychotic) soul. However, even in these cases, Aquinas only allows for defective moral understanding in those whose actual organs connected with reasoning ability are actually damaged; apart from that, the knowledge of moral claims is as absolute as the knowledge of first principles of inferential reasoning.<sup>29</sup> Our theoretical knowledge of ourselves as humans is indissolubly linked with the practical knowledge of ourselves as humans who understand right and wrong, and who prescribe right actions: “We must have, bestowed on us by nature, not only speculative principles, but also practical principles.”<sup>30</sup> Thus Aquinas here rejects “the emotive theory of value [which reduces] conscience to a subjective feeling”<sup>31</sup>—right and wrong are not merely what humans *want* them to be, but what humans *know* them to be: “Conscience is said to be the law of our minds because it is the verdict of the reason, deduced from the law of nature.”<sup>32</sup>

This habit of conscience, by which humanity has knowledge of the first principles of moral action,<sup>33</sup> Aquinas calls *synderesis*. Again, all humans possess this habit of conscience: “The wicked, like all people, have knowledge of universal practical principles by means of synderesis, which is a ‘natural habit’ that parallels the natural knowledge of the first principles of reason.”<sup>34</sup> Our wrongful habits of self-justification and avoidance arise in humanity’s unnatural, fallen state precisely because humanity cannot avoid this moral knowledge: “In a particular activity [synderesis] may be said to be destroyed whenever one sins by choice. . . . But this does not destroy synderesis altogether, but only in some respect. Hence, absolutely speaking, we concede that

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<sup>29</sup> *De Veritate* 16.3.

<sup>30</sup> ST I.79.12.

<sup>31</sup> Peter Kreeft, *A Summa of the Summa*, p. 282n32.

<sup>32</sup> *De Veritate* 17.1ad1.

<sup>33</sup> These first principles of moral action are equivalent to the foundational natural law prescriptions.

<sup>34</sup> Nicholas M. Healy. *Thomas Aquinas: Theologian of the Christian Life*. Aldershot, Hants, and Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate Publishing, 2003, p. 159n11.

synderesis is never destroyed.”<sup>35</sup> Synderesis includes both knowledge of the first principles of moral facts and the inner pressure to obey those facts; it is said “to incite to good, and to murmur at evil, inasmuch as through first principles we proceed to discover, and to judge of what we have discovered.”<sup>36</sup> Synderesis is not therefore another of the powers of the speculative intellect, but rather the first principles of moral knowledge all humans know through the practical intellect, and also the habits of action based on that knowledge<sup>37</sup>; the action itself (of which synderesis forms the habit) is the action of obeying the voice of conscience: “Properly speaking conscience is not a power, but an act.”<sup>38</sup> The “act” of conscience arises out of synderesis; the habit of moral action is founded on the moral truths “that are in the common domain, truths everybody knows.”<sup>39</sup>

Aquinas explains this more clearly in another work:

Thus, just as there is a natural habit of the human soul through which it knows principles of the speculative sciences, which we call understanding of principles, so also there is in the soul a natural habit of first principles of action, which are the universal principles of the natural law. This habit pertains to synderesis. . . . The act of the natural habit called synderesis is to warn against evil and to incline to good.<sup>40</sup>

This knowledge of the universal principles of the natural law, according to Aquinas, cannot be mistaken in its immediate apprehension, although humans may be mistaken in its *application*. He uses the example of those within Judaism who persecuted the

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<sup>35</sup> *De Veritate* 16.3.

<sup>36</sup> ST I.79.12.

<sup>37</sup> “In Thomas’s language, habitus (from the Greek *hexis*) is a key notion, which our English word ‘habit’ not only does not translate properly but suggests almost the contrary of the true meaning. Habit is a fixed mechanism, a routine; habitus is, instead, an inventive capacity, perfecting the human faculty in which it is rooted, to which it gives perfect liberty in its exercise. A worker’s know-how is a habitus; so is the skill of a doctor or the knowledge of a scientist. Midway between a nature and its action, habitus is the sign and expression of its full flowering” (Jean-Pierre Torrell, O.P. *Saint Thomas Aquinas Volume 2: Spiritual Master*. Robert Royal, trans. Washington, D.C.: CUA Press, 2003, p. 13).

<sup>38</sup> ST I.79.13.

<sup>39</sup> Ralph McInerney. “Are There Moral Truths that Everyone Knows?” *Common Truths: New Perspectives on Natural Law*. Edward B. McLean, ed. Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2000: 1-15, p. 5.

<sup>40</sup> *De Veritate* 16.1.

disciples within the early Church; since the persecutors “thought they were offering worship to God” by their actions, in one sense they were seeking to act rightly, for they were following “the universal judgment of synderesis, that worship should be offered to God.” However, Aquinas argues that their actions were in fact wrongful because they were following a “false judgment . . . which considered the killing of the Apostles as pleasing to God.”<sup>41</sup> In an inferential syllogism in which one premise is true and the other false, the wrong conclusion is blamed on the wrong premise and not the right one. Just so, according to Aquinas, it is not synderesis itself which leads to wrongful applications of moral beliefs, for “there can be no error in it.” In this the basic principles of practical moral knowledge are like the basic principles of theoretical knowledge:

All speculative knowledge is derived from some most certain knowledge concerning which there can be no error. This is the knowledge of the first general principles, in reference to which everything else which is known is examined and by reason of which every truth is approved and every falsehood rejected. If any error could take place in these, there would be no certainty in the whole of the knowledge which follows. As a result, for probity to be possible in human actions, there must be some permanent principle which has unwavering integrity, in reference to which all human works are examined, so that that permanent principle will resist all evil and assent to all good. This is synderesis, whose task it is to warn against evil and incline to good. Therefore, we agree that there can be no error in it.<sup>42</sup>

Taken as stated, it almost sounds as if Aquinas were arguing for the inerrancy of synderesis based on utilitarian considerations—that is, since no certainty of moral knowledge could be possible unless humanity as a whole adopts conscience as a basic, “unwavering” guide and agrees “that there can be no error in it,” and since certainty of moral knowledge would be good even if only in a utilitarian sense for humanity to have,

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 16.2.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 16.2.

this stance toward the soul's moral knowledge should in fact be adopted. Would not a person dedicated to moral relativism rightfully dismiss this argument with contempt?

However, as Aquinas points out, all inferential knowledge, even in the speculative and theoretical realm, is derived from principles about which there can be no doubt, not derived from utilitarian considerations. If some honestly doubt that  $A = A$  (which Aquinas would not think possible for normally functioning humans), one cannot *force* recognition of that truth upon them, just as one cannot force the recognition of green upon one who is color-blind. As Aquinas writes, "Hence, the human soul, according to that which is highest in it, attains to that which is proper to angelic nature, so that it knows some things at once and without investigation." In the recognition of some things "at once and without investigation," the human soul is linked to angelic intelligence because "divine wisdom joins the ends of nobler things with the beginnings of lesser things"<sup>43</sup>; so it is that humanity is joined together with animal natures at one end of its existence due to its corporeal nature, and with created non-corporeal rational intelligences (i.e., angels) at the other end. Therefore, humans, upon consideration of their sensory experiences, can know by way of their intellective soul some truths immediately and without further argument or proof, such as the truth "The whole is greater than the part."

Furthermore (proceeding to the main point), the same thing is also true regarding the practical intellect, since angels also possess a "double knowledge": the first is speculative and the second practical. By means of the practical intellect, angels serve God and are assigned their various duties, "according to which the orders of angels are distinguished." Aquinas, who in this passage is not really concerned with the nature of angelic intelligence, concludes: "Hence it is that *human* nature, insofar as it comes in

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 16.1.

contact with the angelic nature, must both in speculative and practical matters know truth without investigation. . . . Furthermore, this knowledge must be habitual so that it will be ready for use when needed. Thus, just as there is a natural habit of the human soul through which it knows principles of the speculative sciences, which we call understanding of principles, so, too, there is in the soul a natural habit of first principles of action, which are the universal principles of the natural law.”<sup>44</sup>

Therefore (to summarize this discussion), the knowledge of moral truths is just that—*knowledge*, not emotive preference—and not a sort of societal indoctrination or cultural heritage, although both of these have their pedagogical part to play.<sup>45</sup> The primary moral natural law principles are known to the practical intellect by *synderesis*, which forms the natural habit of first principles of action; from this natural habit proceeds the specific act of the conscience, a moral act “with knowledge.” Actions contrary to conscience are not therefore contrary to society or culture as such, but rather contrary to the soul’s certain knowledge.<sup>46</sup> As Aquinas writes, “Just as in the speculative part of the soul understanding of principles never errs, so in the operative part of the soul *synderesis* never errs.”<sup>47</sup>

None of this entails that humanity in itself is naturally capable of meritorious good actions before God, a viewpoint Aquinas dismisses as a form of Pelagianism. Since *synderesis* is not a power of action in itself, but rather a habit of action based on the

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<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.1.

<sup>45</sup> “A rule like the prohibition of murder reflects not a mere illusion or projection, but genuine knowledge. It expresses the actual moral character of a certain kind of act” (J. Budziszewski, “Natural Law,” p. 473).

<sup>46</sup> A wonderful example of this is found in Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Huck Finn debates within himself whether or not to give up to the law the runaway slave Jim, his friend. His “conscience,” deformed by the society in which he has been raised, insists that he give up Jim to the authorities and return him to his life as a slave. However, Huck’s *true* conscience, the act based on the knowledge of first principles of right action, eventually wins out; not only does Huck not give up Jim to the authorities, but he helps Jim escape, even while thinking that he will “go to Hell” for doing so.

<sup>47</sup> *De Veritate* 16.1.

soul's moral knowledge, God's gracious empowerment is still necessary for a human to perform a meritorious good action; as Aquinas writes, "A habit together with a power is enough for the act of that habit. But the act of the natural habit called synderesis is to warn against evil and to incline to good. Therefore, men are naturally capable of this act. However, it does not follow from this that a man with purely natural gifts can perform a meritorious act. To impute this to natural capability alone is the Pelagian impiety"<sup>48</sup> — that is, to think that humans can perform meritorious actions before God with purely natural gifts is to deny the necessity of God's grace to counter the effects of original sin. Synderesis in itself, as a natural gift, cannot enable humans to perform meritorious acts before God, although it can and does point out to humans what actions would be, in fact, truly meritorious.

#### 4. The Practical Application of Moral Certainty in Public Witness

So if the basic principles of synderesis cannot be in error, why do so many of us seem to err morally? At this point, I would like to highlight a basic agreement between Aquinas and the Apostle Paul. Writing in his Epistle to the Romans, Paul speaks of the Gentiles who did not receive the Torah, and yet "do by nature the things contained in the law"; he says that they "show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the meanwhile accusing or else excusing one another" (2:14-15). According to Paul, all humans have at least foundational moral principles "written in their hearts," whether one refers to these principles as a "general revelation" or as a "natural law," as Aquinas does.

However, the possession of these moral principles does not automatically put humans into a better position relative to God; in fact, Paul refers to them as "without

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 16.1.

excuse, because that, when they knew God, they glorified Him not as God, neither were thankful, but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened” (1:20-21). Paul also gives the explanation as to why this gloomy scenario takes place: “The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness” (1:18). This last phrase is key to the point being made; other translations render it as [those] “who suppress the truth in unrighteousness” (New American Standard Bible); “who keep truth imprisoned in their wickedness” (Jerusalem Bible); “who hold back the truth” (American Bible Union Version); “who smother the truth” (Centenary Translation); and even more explicitly “who keep down the truth which they know by the wickedness whereby they live” (Conybeare). In other words, the problem is not lack of knowledge, but suppression of knowledge. As John’s Gospel puts it, “This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil” (3:19, New International Version).

Many times in our attempts at public witness, we face statements and attitudes something like the following: “Well, one person thinks such-and-such is wrong, but another thinks it is right. I don’t really know which is right or wrong. In fact, how do we know what is right or wrong? I do not want to judge, since I don’t think certain moral knowledge is possible. After all, who are we to say what is right and wrong?”

Given Paul’s words in Romans and Aquinas’s discussion of the *synderesis* of the practical intellect, to such statements I think it would be entirely appropriate to respond simply with disbelief: “I do not believe you. I do not believe your professed lack of knowledge. You are not suffering from lack of moral knowledge; you are suffering from

lack of desire to obey the moral knowledge you have. You are looking for self-justification to disobey what you actually know is right; you are looking for reasons to continue suppressing and ignoring the moral knowledge within you.” Of course, if one responds in this way, one should try to muster as much charity as possible when doing so. On the other hand, at times confrontation can be charitable.

I would like to close by relating two stories from the book *The Revenge of Conscience* by political and moral philosopher J. Budziszewski. Here is the first story: “A young man proclaimed, ‘Morality is all relative anyway. How do we even know that murder is wrong?’ My colleague asked him, ‘Are you at this moment in any real doubt about murder being wrong for everyone?’ After a long uncomfortable silence the young man realized that he wasn’t. My colleague replied simply, ‘Good. Then let’s talk about something you really are in doubt about.’”

Here is the second story: “Many people are able to realize their self-deceptions, if only they realize what they have actually been saying. All that is needed is to play back the tape, to hold up a mirror. I gently pointed out to one challenger that he had interrupted each one of my answers by asking another question from a different direction. Ordinarily a courteous fellow, he was abashed. ‘I guess I do,’ he said. ‘Why do I do that?’ When I asked him why *he* thought he did, he frankly replied, ‘I must not want to hear your answers.’ I merely suggested, ‘Okay, then, let’s talk about why you don’t,’ and we were soon able to speak of what he really knew—but had been suppressing.”<sup>49</sup>

What each of these examples has in common is that the students involved actually did have the moral knowledge necessary to address their separate questions and

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<sup>49</sup> J. Budziszewski. *The Revenge of Conscience: Politics and the Fall of Man*. Dallas, Texas: Spence Publishing, 1999, pp. 142-43.

situations—but each was in fact *suppressing* that moral knowledge until someone pointed out to them that that was what they were doing. I would like to suggest that this tactic, of reminding people of the moral knowledge they according to Aquinas already possess and which cannot entirely be destroyed in them—this tactic of pointing out the obvious moral truths we all know and *have* to know—may have good effects not only in the case of individuals, but also in the case of societies and cultures as a whole.