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The Christian Conscience: Where Our Freedom and the Truth Intersect

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THE SAINT PAUL SEMINARY SCHOOL OF DIVINITY
UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS

The Christian Conscience: Where Our Freedom and the Truth Intersect

A THESIS

Submitted to the Faculty of the School of Divinity

Of the University of St. Thomas
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree
Master of Arts in Theology

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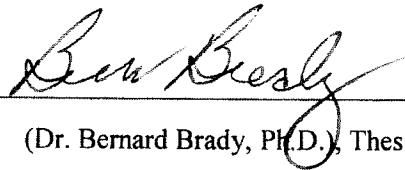
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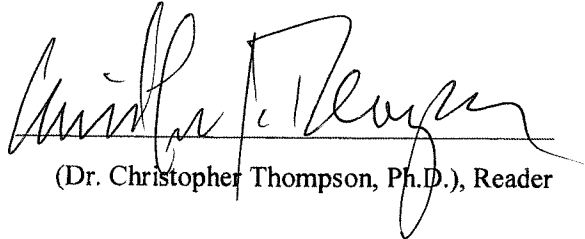
St. Paul, MN

2018

This thesis by Shannon Voelker fulfills the thesis requirement for the Master of Arts degree in Theology approved by Dr. Bernard Brady, Ph.D. as Thesis Adviser and by Dr. Christopher Thompson, Ph.D. and by Dr. Christian Washburn, Ph.D. as Readers.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Bern Brady", written over a horizontal line.

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Sedes Sapientiae, ora pro nobis!

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Introduction

Introduction

In modern, popular language, *conscience* has taken on all sorts of meanings, many of which conflict with one another. Our purpose here is to define *conscience* according to Catholic tradition. The thesis of this paper is that genuine human freedom is founded upon truth, and conscience is the meeting place of our subjective freedom with the objective truth. Throughout the paper, we will establish that man uses his freedom properly when he subjects himself to that truth which will ultimately set him free (Jn 8:32).

Chapter 1: The Historical Development of the Concept of Conscience

The paper is divided into four chapters. In the first, we will examine the history of the notion of conscience. From the earliest records of the term, found in ancient Greek and Latin literature, we will discover that it references both past and future acts of both good and evil qualities, and that it is associated with the voice of God.

Next, we, explore the biblical background of conscience, starting with the Hebrew notion of *leb*. While the Old Testament does use a direct translation of the term “conscience,” the Hebrew *leb* translates into “heart” and is closely analogous to conscience, meaning that inner core of man, whence flow his actions and fidelity to God.

Then we proceed to the New Testament, exploring the new meaning of *conscience* as inspired by Christian faith. We find that a life lived in faith is inseparable from a good

conscience, as the integrity of the Christian's faith entails that he walks closely with God in both his heart and in his actions.

Finally, we address the shift that took place in the postmodern era from a balanced emphasis on both objective truth and subjective experience to an overemphasis on the subjective aspect. While each stage of development from ancient times through the New Testament were constructive to the Christian understanding of *conscience*, the shift during the postmodern era made a seriously negative impact on this progress. This regression in the understanding of conscience, especially for the Christian, demands an urgent clarification. Motivated by such a pressing need, this paper seeks to ground authentic freedom and moral goodness in the truth that comes from God's wisdom.

Chapter 2: Understanding the Meaning of Conscience, Its Manifestations, and Man's Responsibility to Form It

In the second chapter, we take up the question of "What is conscience?" with a discussion on three commonly conceived manifestations of conscience: the inner voice, the practical judgment, and the lifelong process of faith. All of these are consistent with one another and with the teachings of the Church. In addition, we address the misunderstanding that conscience is merely a personal feeling or subjective understanding. We end this chapter with a discussion on our responsibility to follow our conscience, since it carries with it the authority of God—and our responsibility to form our conscience—since we can err in our perception of what is true and right.

Chapter 3: The Components of Conscience: Subjective Freedom and Objective Truth

The third chapter addresses the topics of freedom and law, attempting to show that both natural and divine laws are sources and guardians of the objective truth. Natural law reveals to us that which is needed to achieve natural goodness. However, in order to attain the supernatural good of relationship with God and eternal life, we rely on God's revelation and the divine law. We find this throughout both Old and New Testaments.

In the Old, we have the Decalogue, a collection of direct commandments issued by God to the Hebrew people as prerequisite conditions for a covenant between them. We also discover in the Old Testament several instances in which God pleads with the people, especially through prophets, that they turn to him with all their hearts. This call for a conversion of heart reveals that God does not want mere actions, but internal dispositions as well. Our obedience to his law must be both outward and inward, sustained by an attitude of willingness and love.

In the New Testament, we receive a new commandment, one of love, which encompasses all the others. It is novel because it was issued by Christ, who set the standard by his own example of boundless love. He also commanded that we show this love not only to God but to one another as well. Thus, every faithful Christian must strive to love both God and neighbor with the same generous love that Christ loved the Church.

Finally, we also access the divine law through the Magisterium of the Catholic Church. In the Magisterium, we have God's voice, speaking to our current moral issues, offering us advice and guidance to help us navigate difficult problems. Thanks to the Magisterium, many otherwise ambiguous moral dilemmas are given clear direction. While the directives of the Magisterium may be difficult to follow, they can be trusted to carry God's genuine authority.

After discussing the law, we distinguish between several definitions of *freedom*, aiming to establish that genuine freedom is in fact based on and inseparable from objective truth. Rather than the mere independence of autonomy from external hindrances, human freedom is meant to take us to our personal perfection and fulfillment. Freedom at its best will always choose the greatest good and will keep us close to God. Because of this, freedom depends upon the divine law especially, that we may know the ways of God and do what he desires of us.

Chapter 4: Reconciling the Experienced Manifestations of Conscience with Thomistic Tradition

In the fourth and final chapter, we will bring several themes together to show a common thread throughout our understanding of conscience and Thomistic teaching. Specifically, we will pair the notion of conscience as an inner voice with the Thomas' natural inclinations, explaining that they both work to prompt us spontaneously toward the good. Second, conscience as a practical judgment is shown to clearly pair subjective freedom with objective truth, especially in light of John Paul's "participated theonomy," by which we willingly and lovingly participate in God's divine wisdom in our practical discernments. Lastly, we pair conscience as a lifelong process with St. Thomas' teachings on virtue and connaturality with the good.

In the end, we will find that conscience is indeed the meeting place of objective truth and subjective freedom and that our varied ways of thinking about conscience all point to this same fact. We will also discover that the misunderstandings of our age concerning conscience—namely, that conscience is merely a subjective and personalistic sense—is the result of an imbalance between the subjective and objective aspects of conscience with an overemphasis of value on the subjective. A healthy understanding of conscience requires that the two aspects are

balanced and harmonious, genuine freedom hinging upon the truth of God's wisdom as found in divine law.

Chapter 1: The Historical Development of the Concept of Conscience

Introduction

In modern times, conscience has taken on varying definitions. Indeed, “perhaps nowhere more than in the theological and philosophical problem of the nature and structure of moral conscience is a greater diversity of opinion or greater confusion of thought to be found.”¹ We therefore begin this paper with a chapter on the historical development of the notion of conscience, hoping to uncover many layers of meaning and complexity. First we take up the earliest records of *conscience* as it was first used in literature. We then explore the biblical foundations for *conscience*, attempting to gain appreciation for the development of its meaning within a Christian context. We end with a discussion on how postmodern thought gave rise to a problematic shift in how we understand *conscience*.

Greek and Latin Background

The notion of conscience can be found in ancient literature of both Greek and Latin languages. We look first to the Greek, wherein we find a more limited meaning than in Latin. Our modern term “conscience” is a direct translation from the Greek “συνειδήσει,”² which originated in popular Hellenistic thought.³ Its literal meaning is “with (*con*) knowledge

¹ C. Williams, “Conscience: In Theology,” in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 4 (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), 198.

² *Ibid.*, 199.

³ *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, 19th ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), s.v. “Conscience,” 672.

(*science*)”; “being ‘with knowledge,’ using one’s conscience, implies being aware of oneself, conscious, and having a level of functioning mental processes.”⁴

The earliest known Greek document that employs this term is written by Democritus of Abdera and dates back to the 5th century B.C. The passage refers to men suffering “from distress and fear because of their consciousness of the evil-doing in their lives.”⁵ He describes an awareness of the moral quality of one’s actions—especially of evil actions. This awareness is something that is universal; it is an introspective power that all human persons have regarding their behavior. By employing this awareness, man can reflect on his actions and have sure knowledge about its moral quality, especially if what he has done is evil. This sense of conscience is now known as consequent evil conscience, and will be taken up further on in this paper, along with its counterparts: antecedent and good conscience.

In ancient Latin literature, conscience is found more frequently and with deeper meaning than in ancient Greek literature. Among the Greeks, Epicureanism, for instance, “counseled the avoidance of wrongdoing for fear of the reproaches of conscience.”⁶ Early Latin authors viewed conscience as “the rule and motive for conduct...not only punitive but also directive.”⁷ Beyond the mere reactive Greek sense of reproaching man for his wrongdoing (past acts), conscience here motivates and directs actions that are not yet committed (future acts). Thus, in Latin literature, we encounter both antecedent and consequent conscience—antecedent conscience directs the will before it acts, and consequent conscience signifies moral quality of acts already

⁴ Bernard V. Brady, *Be Good & Do Good* (New York: Maryknoll, 2014), 143.

⁵ *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, “Conscience,” 671.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 672.

⁷ *Ibid.*

done. All of this occurs inside each person; conscience is an active and dynamic process of self-awareness concerning one's own behavior.

Alongside the distinction of antecedent and consequent conscience is another distinction between positive and negative conscience. In the Greek, we find a clear emphasis on the negative: man's conscience reproaches and punishes him after he commits evil. In Latin, however, man's conscience gives him reason to act or not to act. In the case of evil acts, conscience directs him away or motivates him to avoid the act; in the case of good acts, conscience directs and motivates him toward that good. Likewise, in the cases of acts already committed, conscience punishes the evil acts and rewards the good. Cicero, for instance, noted that "the consciousness of a life well spent and the remembrance of numerous deeds well done...is the cause of the greatest joy."⁸ Conscience is responsible for that joy that comes from doing good and living well.

Seneca left one of the richest and most complex accounts of conscience from his time, incorporating all of these aspects: conscience as antecedent and consequent, as good and evil, and even as identified with God's voice. He writes to his friend Lucilius,

God is near you, he is with you, he is within. Thus do I say, Lucilius: a sacred and august spirit resides within us and takes stock of our good and evil actions and is the guardian or avenger of our deeds... Just as he is treated by us so does he treat us.⁹

⁸ Williams, "Conscience: In Theology," 199.

⁹ Ibid.

Within our very selves dwells a spirit—a judge—accounting for all that we do, guarding us in good and avenging us in evil. This “spirit” treats us as we treat it. It is interesting, as Seneca refers to conscience as a spirit, as though it as another within us, elevating it to match God’s very presence in each person. It is also noteworthy the authority it holds over us. We cannot escape the scope of its witness nor its unfailing response to our actions.

Conscience in the Old Testament

We now turn to the use of conscience in the Old Testament, which illustrates the notion of conscience within Hebrew tradition. While there is no direct translation for the word “conscience” into Hebrew, the concept is present in other terms. The Hebrew “idea of *leb*,” translating into the English term *heart*, “is compatible with the general conception of *suneidesis* in the Greco-Roman world”.¹⁰ The Old Testament “scarcely ever uses *leb* for the ‘heart’ as a physical organ”¹¹; rather, *leb* refers to the interior of the person. It encompasses all those aspects that are proper to human persons exclusively: “vital, affective, noetic, and voluntative.”¹² It is not considered a biological or anatomical part of the person, but an aspect concerning man’s relationship to God.¹³ This term refers to “the center of human self-consciousness devoted to making decisions in accord with the word of God.”¹⁴ It is identified with the “heart” as the “center of personal action,”¹⁵ Much more than a vague or sentimental significance, *heart*

¹⁰ David Freedman (ed), *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), s.v. “Conscience,” 1129.

¹¹ G. Johannes Botterweck, Heinz-Josef Fabry, and Helmer Ringgren (eds), *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 7 (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1995), 411.

¹² *Ibid.*, 412.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 412-413.

¹⁴ Freedman (ed), “Conscience,” 1129.

¹⁵ Botterweck, Fabry, and Ringgren (eds), *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 400.

signifies “the inward man made by and known only to God [thus constituting] the veritable seat of conscience under the watchful eye of God.”¹⁶ Practically indistinguishable from the concept of “will,” the “*leb* functions as the driving force behind the voluntative endeavors of the individual”,¹⁷ whereby man either conforms himself to God’s word or deviates from it.

Underlying the perspective of the Hebrew people was a constant awareness of Yahweh and His law. Their whole system of morality was based upon this, and consequently, conscience as man’s inner voice also signified God’s voice in their hearts. “Conscience is hearing in the sense of willing adherence. The voice of God and one’s own voice agree, not in the sense of rational autonomy, but in that of the harmony of the I with God’s will.”¹⁸ Such harmony is described in Psalm 40: “I delight to do thy will, O my God; thy law is within my heart” (Ps 40:8 RSV).

It should be mentioned here that already in the Old Testament, God calls the heart, meaning he calls the whole person. Psalm 119 states,

Blessed are those who keep his testimonies,
who seek him with their whole heart,
who also do no wrong,
but walk in his ways! (Ps 119:2-3 RSV)

¹⁶ Williams, “Conscience: In Theology,” 199.

¹⁷ Botterweck, Fabry, and Ringgren (eds), *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 423.

¹⁸ Gerhard Friedrich (ed), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. by Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 7 (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1971), 908.

We also read in Deuteronomy 6, “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD; and you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (Deut 6:4-5 *RSV*). Not only does God demand that we adhere to his commandments, but he requires our hearts as well. “Devotion to God with one’s ‘whole heart’ is demanded.”¹⁹ There is an interior disposition involved, not merely an exterior fulfilling of commands.

In contrast to some modern notions of conscience, the Ancient Hebrew conscience or *leb* was not “an inviolable criterion of one’s life and actions,”²⁰ or “accorded the status of a supreme tribunal of moral judgment,”²¹ as John Paul II put it in *Veritatis Splendor*. Rather, for the Hebrew people, any subjective sense of knowledge in the heart is contingent upon the body of God’s law that is exterior to the self. Since the Hebrew sense of conscience is inseparable from their covenant with God, this alliance set the standard of morality. God’s law is the objective rule against which the moral quality of subjective man’s acts is measured. The task of man’s *leb* is to conform to God’s will. The best he can do is to adhere to the law with utmost, sincere loyalty.²² This is because God’s will was the determining factor for goodness and evil. “There is knowledge of good and evil only in remembering and keeping God’s statutes.”²³

¹⁹ Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy, *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1990), 547.

²⁰ Williams, “Conscience: In Theology,” 199.

²¹ John Paul II, Encyclical Regarding Certain Fundamental Questions of the Church’s Moral Teaching *Veritatis Splendor* (6 August 1993), §32.

²² It may seem that Hebrew morality rests entirely upon the obedience of man to God’s law in the external sense, as many priests and scribes tended to mistakenly emphasize. However, while exterior obedience was required, even more important was man’s interior disposition of the heart toward God and his sincere, loving, loyalty to Him. This was the message time and again of the Prophets (Williams, “Conscience: In Theology,” 199.).

²³ Friedrich (ed), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. by Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 908.

It is evident in Scriptures that man's righteousness is based on how faithfully he walked with God. Noah, for example, "was a righteous man, blameless in his generation; Noah walked with God" (Gen 6:9 *RSV*). Moral goodness is equated to fidelity to God. Noah is considered "a just man in an unjust world...alone blameless among his peers, walking with God."²⁴ There is a direct correlation between his justice and his closeness to God. God's will defines moral quality, and man's goodness is measured by how closely he walked with God.

Job was also "blameless and upright, one who feared God, and turned away from evil" (Job 1:1 *RSV*). His righteousness consisted of his fearing God, which "means realizing one's relationship to him by showing him reverence and obedience."²⁵ This speaks to both his interior disposition (reverence that flows from the heart) and exterior disposition (obedience as manifest through actions) to God. Job's turning away from evil "affirms a good conscience deliberately and constantly choosing the good."²⁶ Job's conscience was clear; he walked closely with God and enjoyed righteousness as a result.

All of this is to emphasize the point that Old Testament morality revolved around their relationship with God. Their goodness was determined by a standard or rule outside of themselves that became internalized. Their *leb*, or their *conscience*, was good insofar as they walked with God in the form of external obedience to his commands and internally belonging to and reverencing him.

²⁴ Brown, Fitzmyer, and Murphy, *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 16.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 469.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

Conscience in the New Testament

We now take up the meaning of conscience as found in the New Testament. The term is most frequently used in the Epistles—especially those of St. Paul, who is credited with taking the popular Hellenistic term and giving it a fuller meaning in light of revelation.²⁷ While he uses the term to reference man’s inner witness,²⁸ he also elevates conscience, placing it side-by-side with faith. Writing to Timothy, Paul states, “whereas the aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and sincere faith” (1 Tim 1:5 RSV). Interestingly, *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* compares “a good conscience” with “sincere faith” as synonymous.²⁹ The idea here is that if one has sincere faith, one lives that faith out with integrity and consistency, maintaining a good conscience.

The implications of pairing (and even equating) conscience with faith are enormous. From this perspective, a good conscience is more than simply “blameless.” The New Testament sense of conscience was one that incorporated the whole Christian message. All knowledge, including moral knowledge, was now informed by faith in the new revelation—in Christ and his Gospel. Indeed, the whole of the Christian’s life and reality was colored by his faith. His conscience, then, was “very much more than a simple subjective judgment about one’s actions. It implied the whole inner religious attitude of man.”³⁰ Thus, the Christian’s disposition of faith became the basis for how he viewed the world and how he interacted with it.

²⁷ Williams, “Conscience: In Theology,” 199-200. See also: Friedrich (ed), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. by Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 914.

²⁸ “[Gentiles] show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them” (Rom 2:15 RSV).

²⁹ Brown, Fitzmyer, and Murphy, *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 896.

³⁰ Williams, “Conscience: In Theology,” 200.

We see examples of this elevated sense of conscience in St. Paul's writings. One of the strongest examples is found in his letter to the Romans, when he states that "whatever does not proceed from faith is sin" (Rom 14:23 RSV). What he means here by "faith" can be interpreted in a number of ways,³¹ including "something like 'a good conscience'"³² and "the confidence that one's Christian faith permits one to do a particular thing, an inward liberty with reference to it."³³ The idea is that when one has faith, his acts flow from it; the acts of the believer are performed for the glory of God, which makes those acts good. Aquinas notes that "a Gloss says, 'The entire life of unbelievers is sin,' just as the entire life of believers is meritorious, inasmuch as it is directed to the glory of God."³⁴ Thus, all the acts of a Christian are wrapped up in and informed by his faith; they are directed toward glorifying him.

St. Thomas Aquinas comments further on this collaboration of conscience with faith found in the New Testament. The role of conscience, for him, is the application of the attitude of faith to everyday life. He says, "What we hold by faith universally, ...conscience applies to a deed performed or to be performed."³⁵ It is the Christian living *as a Christian*, acting in ways worthy of his dignity and vocation as an adopted son of God. Considered thus, faith and conscience are almost indistinguishable and are certainly inseparable. The Christian who has a living faith conducts himself in a certain way, consistent with this faith.

³¹ See J. A. Emerton and C. E. B. Cranfield (eds), *The International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments*, vol. 11, Romans (Edinburgh: T.T. Clark Ltd., 1979), 728.

³² Emerton and Cranfield (eds), *The International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments*, vol. 11, Romans, 728.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Romans*, 1140, at Aquinas Study Bible, <https://sites.google.com/site/aquinasstudybible/home>.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

In the first Letter of St. John, we find another reference to conscience. While the author does not use the term *conscience*, he is describing a Christian perspective of conscience. He writes:

Little children, let us not love in word or speech but in deed and in truth. By this we shall know that we are of the truth, and reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God; and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him” (1 Jn 3:18-22 RSV).

This idea brings us back to the ancient Hebrew sense of conscience that hinges upon one’s relationship with God. However closely one walks with God and follows his commandments determines the state of one’s conscience. The confidence one has while “hearts do not condemn us” “is not a subjective opinion but is grounded in God’s judgment, with which one’s own concurs.”³⁶ It is because the heart, or conscience, “confirms that he has walked in holiness and integrity” that one enjoys such peace. Just as was noted regarding the Old Testament sense of conscience, the New Testament strongly values the objective moral order of God, emphasizing it as the rule according to which we must live. This is likewise consistent with the correlation of faith and conscience discussed just above. When we live in fidelity to our Christian faith, we somewhat “accidentally” live with good conscience. That is because living as a Christian necessarily entails walking closely with God, loving him and our neighbor as Christ loved us,³⁷

³⁶ Friedrich (ed), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. by Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 916.

³⁷ This “Commandment of Love” and other biblical themes will be discussed further in the section on Divine Law in Chapter 3.

and thereby performing only those actions which are consistent with God's commandments and confirm us in good conscience.

In addition to the correlation of conscience with faith, we find the term "conscience" employed in several other contexts. In Romans, conscience bears witness to the natural law which is written on the Gentiles' hearts (Rom 2:14-15).³⁸ In Hebrews, the author associates a clear conscience with good intention and honorable behavior (Heb 13:18 *RSV*). In 1 Corinthians 8:1-13, St. Paul instructs us to take care, not only of our own consciences, but of the consciences of our brothers and sisters as well. In St. Paul's scenario, if our brother believes wrongly that something is a sin, then he ought not to do it. This matter of an erring conscience will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2.

Postmodern Shift in Conscience

New philosophies began to reshape how people understood themselves and their realities in entirely new and unprecedented ways—ways that were incompatible with the ancient and traditional ways of thinking. Unavoidably, this impacted the way conscience was understood, for "the principles of personal freedom and private judgment were being introduced as the guiding principles of moral living,"³⁹ For the Jewish people of the Old Testament, conscience was responsible for keeping oneself faithful to the alliance with God. Jews revered God and his law as superior to their personal judgments and feelings. Motivated by love for God and the desire to maintain their covenant with Him, they strove to obey the law as their greatest guide for action.

³⁸ In Chapter 3, we will discuss more on the meaning of natural law and how it relates to conscience.

³⁹ Williams, "Conscience: In Theology," 201.

Likewise, after the fullness of revelation took place in the person of Jesus, the early Christians, followers of the New Law, sought a perfection that was well beyond themselves. The standard of morality was objective, exterior, and divinely administered. They were summoned by God himself to come, “be perfect...” (Mt 5:48) and to receive the grace to do so. Early Christians, and Christians up until the Modern Era, were keenly aware that this perfection was achieved not on their own terms but on God’s. They therefore sought to align their lives and actions with the faith they professed, identifying their conscience with their faith.

Having studied the Jewish and Christian mentalities regarding conscience, it is obvious the contrast between the traditional view and that of the Modern Era, one of increasingly emphasized values of freedom and individualism. A transition took place, as more value was placed on the subjective, personal judgments rather than on the objective or divine order to which we submit ourselves. According to this new perspective, external law becomes the oppressor, and only that which originates from myself expresses true liberation. “The ultimate rule of morality became something completely subjective.”⁴⁰

We should emphasize here the value of sincerity in action. It is not the case that sincerity does not matter; it is actually a necessary factor in moral decision-making. Subjective, personal judgment was always a key aspect of conscience, in proper proportion to the objective, external order. Sincerity must be distinguished from truth; the former concerns the acting person’s subjective belief, while the latter concerns the objective reality.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

It has always been important that man have a sincere conscience, meaning that he does what he truly believes to be the “right thing to do.” Only relatively recently, however, the subjective criterion has become the *only* one that mattered. No longer did the actual end of the action bear significance for the moral value of the act. If I see it as right, then it is right (for me). Ideally, both subjective and objective aspects are right, so that the person’s subjective experience aligns with objective reality. In such a case, a person’s “sincerely held convictions”⁴¹ are also correct and true.

Let us illustrate these distinctions with an example. When I’m invited to dinner at a friend’s house, I may bring a bottle of wine because I believe she likes wine. This is a sincere gesture. However, if she in fact is struggling to overcome an addiction to alcohol, bringing wine would actually be harmful to her and introduce temptation. Bringing the wine in this case would not be good, objectively, but erroneous. If I am unaware of my friend’s struggle with alcoholism, then my gift would be sincere, since I sincerely believe she will enjoy the gift. However, if I know that she will struggle, then the gift is insincere because it does not follow the knowledge I have concerning the harm that wine would cause. In this case, the action of bringing wine would be both insincere and erroneous. Thus, in this illustration, we see how an action can be true or erroneous objectively and sincere or insincere subjectively.⁴²

⁴¹ Charles E. Curran, “Conscience in the Light of the Catholic Moral Tradition,” in *Readings in Moral Theology: Conscience*, ed. Charles E. Curran (New York: Paulist, 2004), 4.

⁴² In the case of a sincere but erroneous conscience, we distinguish further between vincible and invincible ignorance. When the error is through no fault of the agent, then he is invincibly ignorant. However, if there is fault in his ignorance, such as through neglect, then he is vincibly ignorant and this increases the culpability of his error. In this example of me visiting my friend, if she had included in the invitation a special request that I not bring alcohol, then there is failure on my part to read the invitation in full and use all the information given to decide on what to bring. I did not read it all, so I do not have all of the information; yet, I should have. My error is sincere, but it is still my fault.

Thinking about our own experience, the best we can do is act on a sincere conscience and continue to seek to inform ourselves so that we avoid vincible error. Catholic tradition actually places an emphasis upon the subjective aspect of the act over the objective. As long as we are sincere in our conviction that an action is correct, not only are we permitted to do it (as Aquinas teaches), but such an action is even considered meritorious—even when it is (*invincibly*) *erroneous* (as St. Alphonsus Liguori teaches).⁴³ “Conscience frequently errs from invincible ignorance without losing its dignity. The same cannot be said for a man who cares but little for truth and goodness.”⁴⁴ It cannot be overemphasized, though, that while the subjective aspect of conscience is given primacy, this is not at the exclusion of the objective aspect. It does matter whether the act is objectively right or wrong.

There are three criteria that factor into the moral quality of an action, according to St. Thomas Aquinas: the object, then intention, and the circumstances.⁴⁵ Just because I believe my action is good, or that I intend good by doing it, does not *make* it good. To return to our prior example of dinner with my friend, my good intention attached to my gift of wine does not preclude her subsequent interior struggle upon receiving it. The object of giving alcohol to an alcoholic remains negative and evil, regardless of how I feel about giving it or how innocent I am in my good intention. Moreover, various circumstances can either worsen or ameliorate the problem. For instance, if I bring a white wine, and she only enjoys red, then the evil is a bit lessened; on the other hand, if I happen to bring her very favorite kind—the one she misses

⁴³ Curran, “Conscience in the Light of the Catholic Moral Tradition,” 5.

⁴⁴ Paul VI, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes* (7 December 1965), §16.

⁴⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd. ed., §1750, accessed May 23, 2017, http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM. Brady adds a fourth: whether the act is consistent with the person’s character. See Brady, *Be Good & Do Good*, 121-122.

drinking to most—then the evil is exacerbated. Circumstances “contribute to increasing or diminishing the moral goodness or evil of human acts...[yet] of themselves cannot change the moral quality of acts themselves.”⁴⁶

All of this is meant to argue for the relevance of the object of our acts, even though the subjective aspect is given primacy. With the overemphasis of the subjective aspect, the holistic understanding of conscience was replaced by the following new conviction:

The all-important condition for good moral action was...the subjective good faith or good intention of the individual, whether his moral judgment was objectively right or wrong, true or false. Provided the intention is good, whether the judgment is right or wrong, it is equally the voice of God for the person acting. This is the direct antithesis of traditional moral teaching in the Western Church.⁴⁷

Conclusion

From the time of St. Paul’s writings until those of St. Thomas, conscience was considered the meeting place of man and his world, his reaction to his reality, all flowing from his undercurrent of faith. The more closely man walks with God, the more sincerely and faithfully will he fulfill God’s commands; thus, the better state his conscience will be in. Traditionally, faith informed man’s entire outlook and provided a permanent source for his moral compass, whether his actions required extensive deliberation or were more spontaneous. His faith and his conscience were aided by the continued formation given first through his relationship with God

⁴⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §1754.

⁴⁷ Williams, “Conscience: In Theology,” 201.

and others, through the Sacred Scriptures, and through God's law.⁴⁸ While man must act according to his genuine, subjective convictions, he must strive unceasingly to discover the objective truth and divine order that surround his actions. Through the virtue of prudence, conscience reaches its full integrity.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ The purpose for and means by which man forms his conscience will be discussed in Chapters 2 and 3.

⁴⁹ Williams, "Conscience: In Theology," 202. Prudence will be discussed further in Chapter 2.

Chapter 2: Understanding the Meaning of Conscience, Its Manifestations, and Man's Responsibility to Form It

Introduction

Having traced the meaning of conscience back to ancient literature as well as to both Old and New Testaments, we are better equipped to answer the question, *What is conscience?* From both Greek and Latin roots, we understand conscience to carry both positive and negative as well as antecedent and consequent influences. The Old Testament notion of conscience and morality, we noted, is inseparable from God's alliance with man and his commandments. For the Christian, we learned that conscience can and should be identified with an overarching attitude of faith and the disposition of Christian discipleship.

In this chapter, we will continue our conversation on conscience, moving from our focus on historical background to a discussion on what conscience *is*. We will do this by examining three common manifestations of conscience: conscience as an inner voice, as a practical judgment, and as a lifelong process. All of these notions of conscience are compatible with one another, and they all simultaneously contribute to our overall understanding of the Christian conscience. These three notions will draw from several themes discussed in the historical section and treat them in greater depth. Before concluding this chapter, we will touch briefly on some alternative views of conscience which are not compatible with the traditional Christian understanding. Additionally, we will end with a discussion on our twofold responsibility to both form and follow our consciences.

Manifestations of Conscience

1. Conscience: the Voice that Speaks to our Depths

Perhaps this is the most common, albeit vague, sense of conscience. We are all familiar with the concept of having an inner voice telling us what to do, but what do we mean when we assert this? It is more than an intuition about what is right and true; it has commanding force. Our inner voice, our gut, our instinct—these all refer in a way to conscience. It is something deep inside of us, telling us the right thing to do, perhaps demanding we take a particular path. When we “follow our conscience,” we have peace, but when we betray it, we betray ourselves, and one could say our hearts are full of unrest until the wrongs are righted.

A characteristic of this sense of conscience is that it is somewhat impulsive. Little, if any, deliberation takes place before the action is carried out, but it is still done in an intentional and moral way. The person acting is not acting “passively,” on some sort of autopilot, but is following what they determine is the right thing to do, according to their interior “voice.” Yet whose voice is making the commands—our own or another’s? A poetic passage from *Gaudium et Spes* sheds some light:

In the depths of his conscience, man detects a law which he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him to obedience. Always summoning him to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience when necessary speaks to his heart: do this, shun that. For man has in his heart a law written by God; to obey it is the very dignity of man;

according to it he will be judged. Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, Whose voice echoes in his depths.⁵⁰

The above passage is pregnant with allusions to the various manifestations of conscience. As a voice, conscience *summons* and *speaks to the heart*. Reading this, one can almost hear the whisper of conscience within, “*Do this; shun that.*” At the end of this passage, however, God is cited as the source of this interior voice of man. The voice of conscience that speaks, summons, and echoes in the depths is *God’s voice*. Man does not impose that law which he discovers within, but it is imposed upon him by another—by *God*. What a marvel this is.

Of course, a certain amount of qualification is needed to understand this rightly. It is not the case that I can do what I please and claim that God told me to do it. Nor is it true that my subjective sense that I ought to do something, my genuinely observed impulse toward an object of desire, means that such an impulse was placed there by God. Another way of saying this is that my subjective sincerity does not cause or necessarily imply the truth of the object, as mentioned before. We must be careful to guard against elevating the subjective aspect of conscience at the expense of the objective aspect.

How, then, can we attribute the voice within me to God himself, yet at the same time have conditions for following it? The answer to this is that we are subjective—and prone to error—in our observing this voice. While it may be God who is speaking to our depths, we fallen creatures are the ones who are listening and interpreting the message, muddled and mixed in with the rest of our impulses, desires, virtues, vices, and sins. We cannot fault God’s voice for our

⁵⁰ *Gaudium et Spes*, §16.

misguidedness, but we must recognize we are fallible in following his prompts, even those he makes from within our very hearts.

What is the best way to discern the accuracy of our interpretation, since we are fallible in our interpreting his voice? The passage from *Gaudium et Spes* gives us the answer to this question. To couple with his voice in our hearts, God gives us his law, which takes many forms: natural law, divine law, and good civil law. This is not to say that every act we do ought to fall under a law. What it does say is that these laws direct us to him and are a means of holding our interpretations in check. These laws are also universal, so that what is true for me is likewise true for you. Objective truth holds for everyone, and God's voice inside each person will never contradict those laws which order and direct each one of us to him.

Conscience as a voice or impulse can also be understood practically, motivating those mini- or sub-decisions that we make, which are the results of previous, perhaps more complex decisions.⁵¹ When we set goals, for instance, we may have deliberated extensively over whether or how to make such a goal work. However, having set that goal, each little act advances us toward that goal. As a mother, countless examples abound regarding my effort to keep my children safe. When my toddler runs in the yard toward the street, for example, my impulse is to run after her to stop her. I did not have to think about whether this action is best; it was spontaneous. However, while it was somewhat impulsive, it was also intentional and fully my own act. It resulted almost naturally and necessarily from my desire for and commitment to my child's wellbeing and safety.

⁵¹ See Brady, *Be Good & Do Good*, 152-153.

Another example could be made of my interest in having a garden. When I water the garden in the evening, I do not have to think about it each time. Because I made the previous decision to have a garden and sustain it so as to yield flowers and vegetables, it follows that watering it regularly is the right thing to do. I am therefore urged to do so from my conscience. The voice within me may insist that I water the plants and may even motivate me by presenting to my imagination hypothetical images of my flowers wilting, causing me to consider in an instant the hypothetical result of my negligence. Thus, without deliberating, I know the best option would be to remain faithful in my duty to watering the garden.

Actions of routine are often motivated by this manifestation of conscience as a voice or impulse. Much of what we do is governed by our goals: We want to keep our jobs; therefore, we get out of bed on time. We want to avoid speeding tickets; therefore, we obey the speed limit. I don't want my children to say bad words; therefore, I watch my language. We don't need to think very hard—if at all—about whether we ought to do these things. We simply know what is right, perhaps in our “gut,” and we do it.

2. *Conscience: an Act*

Both Thomas Aquinas and John Paul II define conscience as the application of universal knowledge to particular cases.⁵² For Aquinas, this very application of knowledge to particulars is an act, so in this sense, conscience is technically an act. To be clear, when conscience judges a

⁵² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 79, a. 13, in *The Summa Theologiae of St. Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Online Edition, 2016), <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/index.html>. See also: *Veritatis Splendor*, §59.

certain act to be good, and the person does that act, conscience *is* the former act of judging, not the latter act; rather, conscience dominates that latter act.

Thomas cites the technical term “synderesis,” which would be helpful for us to examine. He says that the term conscience is sometimes applied to what is actually synderesis, which is “the habitual knowledge of the universal practical principles of moral action.”⁵³ It is the knowledge of those self-evident principles in the moral realm. These principles include: that evil should be avoided and good should be done, treat others as you would like to be treated, that innocent life should be protected, and that we should act justly. These principles are called self-evident and universal, which means all human beings know them, no matter their culture or when they lived. They are intuited by all, as opposed to that knowledge which is from learning or experience. Conscience is the application of synderesis to concrete situations.⁵⁴

Conscience takes on syllogistic form when considered this way. Here is a simple example:

1. Cheating is wrong and should not be done.
2. *This* test is difficult, and I can easily read my neighbor’s answers.
3. Since cheating is wrong, I should not look at my neighbor’s answers.

The first principle is discovered through synderesis, and it is applied to my particular situation: *this* test. Conscience is the act of applying the principle that cheating is wrong to the concrete

⁵³ T. Slater, “Synderesis,” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia, An International Work of Reference on the Constitution, Doctrine, Discipline, and History of the Catholic Church*, vol. 14, ed. Charles George Herbermann (New York: The Encyclopedia Press, 1913), 384.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 384-385.

experience of struggling through a test and feeling tempted to cheat. The conclusion is a judgement made by conscience; in this case, to avoid cheating, which is universally known to be wrong.

With such obvious principles of *synderesis* mentally at our disposal, acts of conscience may seem simple. However, not all principles used or required by the conscience are implicitly known through *synderesis*. We naturally know that good is to be done and evil avoided, but we do not always know what the more specific “good” is. For example, I know through *synderesis* that children should be cared for and protected; however, research is required to figure out *how* to care for a child. More specifically, I do not inherently know that honey can be fatal for infants, so unless I discover this principle through external means, my conscience cannot make proper judgments about it. As a broader example, Bioethics deals with several controversial topics because the “good” is not black and white; knowledge of the truth is still unfolding and research is required in order to discover scientific truths.

The realm of faith is also one in which “the good” is not always obvious. We do not know everything on our own, which is the reason for revelation. God revealed his law to us precisely because we needed it to be revealed in order to know and use it in our practical judgments. Prior to this revelation, it may not have been known that the exclusive love for the one God was “the good;” at least, it was not known as a necessary tenant for salvation.

Furthermore, sometimes first principles appear to compete with one another, which complicates the work of conscience. Which principle wins out and ultimately directs the act? For example, I may give up sweets for Lent, and this resolution is a good principle to remain faithful

to. However, if Grandma visits and brings her famous coffee cake, it would be good to eat it with her out of gratitude and charity. Which principle is more important than the other, fidelity to my fasting (which is for God and for my own penance), or charity toward my grandma (which is for the sake of charity for God)?⁵⁵

Conscience in the sense of an act of judgment governs individual decisions. Even though they are singular decisions, we would not call them isolated. Some do hold the view that each of our actions is entirely independent of the others, an isolated act free from the influence of prior acts.⁵⁶ From experience, however, we know this is not the case. We are constantly drawing from our memory and experience. My decision to sit down and write a thesis is aided by my past acts of writing long papers. Anything related to practice supports this. The pianist is more prone to practice (and practicing well) by the influence of past acts of practicing (well). I am also more prone to practice piano or write a thesis if I have made a prior action or decision of becoming a professional pianist or a graduate student. Our acts are interrelated and exhibit continuity; past acts influence future acts.⁵⁷

3. The Christian Conscience: a Lifelong Process of Faith

Previously we discussed the identification of conscience with faith, and in this context, the idea of conscience as a process arose. When we understand faith as the Christian's revelation-inspired outlook on his reality and conscience as his means of reacting to this reality,

⁵⁵ In St. Bonaventure's *The Life of St. Francis*, we read that St. Francis once excused himself and another friar from a fast in the name of charity, compassion, prudence, and digression. (Bonaventure, *The Life of St. Francis* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 49-50.)

⁵⁶ This will be discussed below in the section on Freedom of Indifference found in Chapter 3.

⁵⁷ Servais Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1995), 375.

it follows that both his faith and his conscience are continuously developing within him. The sacrament of baptism initiates the Christian into the faith, and he has his entire life to work toward the perfection of this faith. Likewise, the Christian conscience, which flows from and is inseparable from his faith, continuously matures throughout his life. Here we will discuss the concept of conscience as a process. As noted earlier, this idea differs from the understanding of conscience as a mere application of principles to concrete actions. While it does not exclude this, it is much broader than that. To understand conscience as a process, we will examine Aquinas' teaching on the virtue of prudence and the concept of fundamental option, ultimately arriving at the stance that conscience does indeed develop and it requires formation from higher, external sources to remain true to the faith upon which it hinges.

St. Thomas Aquinas, following Aristotle, defines prudence as “right reason applied to action”⁵⁸ and belongs to practical reason, since it concerns action (as opposed to speculative reason, which remains in the intellect). Prudence, he says, is specifically concerned with regulating the means to our end. It is the virtuous application of “universal principles to the particular conclusions of practical matters”,⁵⁹ in the same syllogistic manner discussed earlier.

As noted above, the most fundamental, universal principles are inherently known to man.⁶⁰ The “singular matters of action” are what complicate the process for us. For these, “secondary universal principles... are not inherited from nature, but are acquired by discovery through experience, or through teaching.”⁶¹ Moreover, these “secondary and more

⁵⁸ *ST*, II-II, q. 47, a. 2, s. c., trans. English Dominican Province.

⁵⁹ *ST*, II-II, q. 47, a. 6, co., trans. English Dominican Province.

⁶⁰ *ST*, II-II, q. 47, a. 15, co., trans. English Dominican Province.

⁶¹ *ST*, II-II, q. 47, a. 6, co., trans. English Dominican Province.

detailed precepts, which are, as it were, conclusions following closely from first principles”,⁶² are “not equally known to all”⁶³ and can be “blotted out from men’s hearts,” causing error in the practical reason by concupiscence, passions, evil persuasions, “by vicious customs and corrupt habits”.⁶⁴ Thus, with such complications, it is necessary that we remain vigilant in our pursuit of purity of heart and our endeavor to achieve the knowledge proper to our practical reason.

To maintain right practical reason (i.e., prudence), St. Thomas teaches, three “acts” are required. “The first is ‘to take counsel,’ which belongs to discovery, for counsel is an act of inquiry”.⁶⁵ This step toward prudence is one of education. It involves research, acquiring knowledge and seeking advice of experts. It “demands finding the relevant rules, values, and goods involved in the particular situation.”⁶⁶ We seek counsel not only from these external sources, but from those of our own “memory of the past, a keen understanding of the present, and thoughtful perception of future possibilities.”⁶⁷ When we seek council, we try to inform our decision in every way that seems appropriate. As we read from Aquinas, not all secondary principles are known to all, so it is therefore incumbent upon each person to seek out the knowledge proper to their decisions to ensure that they exercise wisdom and prudence.

Let us consider a practical example. Many doctors prescribe the birth control pill for a number of reasons: to regulate women’s menstrual cycles, to help women avoid pregnancy, to

⁶² *ST*, I-II, q. 94, a. 6, co., trans. English Dominican Province.

⁶³ *ST*, I-II, q. 94, a. 4, co., trans. English Dominican Province.

⁶⁴ *ST*, I-II, q. 94, a. 6, co., trans. English Dominican Province.

⁶⁵ *ST*, II-II, q. 47, a. 8, co., trans. English Dominican Province.

⁶⁶ Brady, *Be Good & Do Good*, 154.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

alleviate menstrual migraines, to help skin problems, or to help polycystic ovarian syndrome.⁶⁸ While any of these may be a desired outcome, the doctor would do well to research the negative outcomes of this medication, as they may outweigh the positives.⁶⁹ In seeking council on the matter, the doctor may read scholarly journals, consult with medical experts, and take up the question of how the pill achieves its desired goals. In so doing, the doctor may discover that on the one hand, the pill can be used to treat acne, anemia, and ovarian cancer;⁷⁰ yet on the other hand, she may also find that the pill increases risk of certain cancers,⁷¹ may have a causal relationship with depression,⁷² and may even cause abortion.⁷³ It is this stage of inquiry that one works to eliminate vincible error, which was discussed earlier. The more the doctor knows about *any* medication she prescribes, the more knowledge she has to conduct her practical reason and the more prudent she is in prescribing it (or in ceasing to prescribe it). The doctor ought to engage in painstakingly thorough research and inquiry in order to avoid imprudent actions in her prescriptions, which could amount to malpractice and the detriment of her patients.⁷⁴

⁶⁸ Jennifer Rainey Marquez, “Other Benefits of Birth Control Pills,” *WebMD*, last modified 2015, accessed April 2, 2018, <http://www.webmd.com/sex/birth-control/features/other-reasons-to-take-the-pill#2>.

⁶⁹ Of course, such research is required for *any* medication that the doctor may prescribe.

⁷⁰ “What Are the Benefits of the Birth Control Pill?” *Planned Parenthood*, accessed April 2, 2018, <https://www.plannedparenthood.org/learn/birth-control/birth-control-pill/what-are-the-benefits-of-the-birth-control-pill>.

⁷¹ “Oral Contraceptives and Cancer Risk,” *National Cancer Institute*, last reviewed February 22, 2018, accessed April 2, 2018, <https://www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/causes-prevention/risk/hormones/oral-contraceptives-fact-sheet>.

⁷² “Does the Contraceptive Pill Cause Depression?” *BBC News*, last modified October 4, 2016, accessed April 2, 2018, <http://www.bbc.com/news/health-37551855>.

⁷³ “How Birth Control Methods Prevent Pregnancy – Topic Overview,” *WebMD*, accessed April 2, 2018, <https://www.webmd.com/sex/birth-control/tc/how-birth-control-methods-prevent-pregnancy-topic-overview>.

⁷⁴ See Curran’s example of “a doctor who does not know the symptoms of AIDS [and] is derelict in her duty as a doctor and vincibly erroneous” (Curran, “Conscience in the Light of the Catholic Moral Tradition,” 5.).

The next stage of prudence in Aquinas' teaching is "to judge of what one has discovered,' and this is an act of the speculative reason."⁷⁵ Upon retrieving further knowledge concerning the matter in question, the person is prepared to make an informed decision. What Thomas means by an act of "speculative reason" is that the decision or judgment is an act of the intellect; it does not result in action until the final step of practical reason. To better illustrate this stage, which may seem obvious or implicit, we continue with our example of the doctor.

With all of the new knowledge she has acquired from her research and inquiry, the doctor can now compare positive aspects of the pill with the negative. Her objective here is to mentally determine whether the positive aspects sufficiently outweigh the negative (and that no intrinsically evil—and therefore absolutely unjustifiable—side effects exist) so that she can prudently and in good, sincere conscience, prescribe it. She may have discovered during her inquiry, for instance, that one possible side effect of the pill is that it can "render the uterine wall inhospitable to any accidental zygote that may have formed,"⁷⁶ in the unlikely—yet possible—case of conception. She may also hold that a zygote is a human life—a person endowed with the same rights enjoyed by all persons living outside the womb. In such a case, her speculative reason would most likely direct her to the conclusion that prescribing the pill is incompatible with her overarching attitude of faith that implies charity toward God and neighbor, necessitating the protection of this "zygote," to whom she believes the unconditional right to life is due.

For greater clarity, we will now match the doctor example with Aquinas' reference to primary, known principles and secondary, unknown principles. For Aquinas, universal principles

⁷⁵ *ST*, II-II, q. 47, a. 8, co., trans. English Dominican Province.

⁷⁶ Karen Swallow Prior, "The Pill: Contraceptive or Abortifacient?" *The Atlantic*, last modified December 31, 2012, accessed April 2, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/sexes/archive/2012/12/the-pill-contraceptive-or-abortifacient/266725/>.

are known to all. In this case the general principle would be along these lines: All innocent human life ought to be protected. Virtually no one would argue against this; if we took a survey of random people on the street, they would likely all support this claim. This is not because everyone was taught this concept at a young age. It is implicit and universal. For primary principles, the “truth or rectitude is the same for all, and is equally known by all,”⁷⁷ without having to be taught or explained.

The second principle, that the birth control pill can endanger innocent human life, is much less intuitive. Here we have a secondary principle, “certain matters of detail, which are conclusions, as it were, of those general principles,”⁷⁸ the concluding of which is the result not only of the general principle, but of “discovery through experience, or through teaching.”⁷⁹ The more knowledge we gain and considerations we make in the first stage of attaining prudence, that is, in seeking council, the better equipped we are to arrive at a true conclusion in our second stage of judgment.

During this stage, it is also worth mentioning that in addition to employing knowledge gained from the first stage, we also engage in prayer, seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit to help us to act according to the faith that governs our outlook on reality. Especially in matters that are controversial and do not have an obvious right answer, it can be helpful to also employ St. Ignatius of Loyola’s tools of discernment. In Ignatian Spirituality, we acknowledge our feelings of either consolation or desolation; the former “leads you to feel encouraged, confident, and calm

⁷⁷ *ST*, I-II, q. 94, a. 4, co., trans. English Dominican Province.

⁷⁸ *ST*, I-II, q. 94, a. 4, co., trans. English Dominican Province.

⁷⁹ *ST*, II-II, q. 47, a. 15, co., trans. English Dominican Province.

in your decision,”⁸⁰ and the latter “leads you toward hopelessness [and makes you] agitated or restless or, as Ignatius says, ‘listless, tepid, and unhappy.’”⁸¹ Paying attention to these feelings can help us to determine what the right decision is. Having done the due diligence of a thorough and sincere inquiry in the first act of prudence, a useful criterion in attempting a judgment consistent with my general attitude of faith and search for truth is a deep sense of “peace and joy.”⁸²

We now approach the third, final, and chief act of practical reason, and that is “‘to command,’ which act consists in applying to action the things counselled and judged.”⁸³ Put simply, it is to command an action after research and deliberation. This is the stage in which conscience really shines. Having been well informed, the acting person is able to carefully determine the best path through reason; conscience then commands the person to take this or that path, thereby fulfilling the acts of prudence.

Considering these three acts of prudence, “captured in the phrase, ‘Look, Judge, and Act,’”⁸⁴ conscience is shown to be a process. While the previous section demonstrated the way in which conscience can be considered a voice or impulse, practically devoid of deliberation, here we see that conscience is also a process that involves extensive inquiry and deliberation before taking the form of a thoughtful command.

⁸⁰ James Martin, *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything: A Spirituality for Real Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 316.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² Curran, “Conscience in the Light of the Catholic Moral Tradition,” 18-19. While my “peace and joy” is not sufficient for a true conscience, it is a natural consequence of it. For full assurance that my conscience is true, see the section below on formation of conscience, as well as on the relationship of conscience with the law. The law holds the subjective aspect of conscience in check with objective reality.

⁸³ *ST*, II-II, q. 47, a. 8, co., trans. English Dominican Province.

⁸⁴ Brady, *Be Good & Do Good*, 154.

Fundamental Option

Conscience takes the form of a process when one strives for the virtue of prudence, but in a more fundamental way, conscience as a process can encompass one's whole life. This lifelong process of conscience is closer in meaning to the Christian identification of conscience with faith. As John Paul II states in *Veritatis Splendor*, "freedom is not only the choice for one or another particular action; it is also, within that choice, 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."⁸⁵ We determine ourselves as ultimately for God or against God, just as in our act of faith, we assent to God and his revealed truths.

However, just as in the assent of faith entails "the obedience of faith,"⁸⁶ so does the ultimate decision for God contain several implications for how we ought to conduct ourselves. We are responsible for behaving in a way consistent with our overarching principle; our fundamental option becomes the undercurrent to our concrete actions. It is not enough claim to be a disciple; the true Christian *lives* his discipleship in the small, daily acts that make up his life. John Paul states:

By his fundamental choice, man is capable of giving his life direction and of progressing, with the help of grace, toward his end, following God's call. But this capacity is actually exercised in the particular choices of specific actions, through which man deliberately conforms himself to God's will, wisdom and law.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ *Veritatis Splendor*, §65.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, §66.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, §67.

Along these lines, John Paul warns against the separation of fundamental option and concrete actions. He insists that our behavior needs moral integrity, meaning that our actions are consistent with our general orientation. Fundamental choice directs me, but it does not constitute my morality; the full integrity of it, including all my particular choices and acts, make up my moral state.

The importance of the unity of fundamental choice with concrete acts is especially important in Christianity. This is because when we violate our fundamental choice by engaging in “conscious decisions to the contrary, with regard to morally grave matter,”⁸⁸ the fundamental option is revoked. This means my general attitude of faith, no matter how convicted, heartfelt, or enthusiastic, does not compensate entirely for my relationship with God. Through my concrete acts, I have the power to (unavoidably) express and strengthen my fundamental relationship with God, or to violate, weaken, or even sever it. This is why being a so-called “good person” is not enough to qualify us for the state of grace. A single mortal sin is a direct offense against God, and even the longest tally of good deeds cannot outweigh such a sin.

John Paul is explicit about this point in order to argue against the claim that only “an explicit and formal rejection of God and neighbor”⁸⁹ can change our fundamental option. He argues instead that love for God, obedience of faith, and the response of discipleship as a fundamental option entail acts and decisions in conformity with this option. On the other hand, it would follow that, in acting in ways that violate the choice for God and discipleship through consciously and gravely disordered actions, we reveal within ourselves a state of “contempt for the divine law, a rejection of God’s love for humanity and the whole of creation... [turning] away

⁸⁸ Ibid., §67.

⁸⁹ Ibid., §70.

from God and [losing] charity.”⁹⁰ Therefore, John Paul concludes that our fundamental option for God is not only lost by a formal rejection of God, but even our small, concrete acts can radically change our fundamental orientation.⁹¹

To bring this theory down to earth, let us consider marriage as an example. In marriage, spouses need to trust each other in order for the marriage to thrive. In the vows, “I promise to be true to you in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health. I will love you and honor you all the days of my life,” each spouse publicly declares their fundamental option to love, honor, and be true to their spouse.

Now, consider the scenario wherein the husband has a secret gambling addiction, and he is technically stealing money (and time) from his family. In so doing, he is violating his relationship with his wife in grave and conscious ways. He knows this is wrong, yet he does it again and again. We would say that he is violating his fundamental option to love, honor, and be true to his wife, even though he does not directly come out and declare expressions contradicting his vows. Even after remorsefully coming forward and confessing all he has done to his wife and obtaining her forgiveness, he must amend his life and cease the concrete actions of gambling and lying. Even after having confessed, each subsequent, concrete act of excessive gambling and lying about it violates his fundamental choice *again* in a grave manner. Likewise, when we act in ways that gravely violate our fundamental choice of faith and discipleship, we must repent, seek forgiveness, and amend our lives in order to fundamentally reorient ourselves to God.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

To bring this back to our point about conscience being a process, the fundamental option gives us a guiding principle and an ideal for our concrete actions. In the Christian context, conscience is identified with faith as a fundamental option, and conscience directs man to act according to this faith. Thus, in completing each small act in accordance with our fundamental option, we advance on our pilgrimage of faith and toward the perfection to which God calls us. The Christian spends his entire life “deliberately [conforming] himself to God’s will, wisdom and law.”⁹²

What Conscience is Not

As discussed in the first chapter, the modern era saw a shift in the understanding of conscience. The weight of personal judgment and freedom increased to the point of overshadowing the value of objective truth and order.⁹³ John Paul states in *Veritatis Splendor*:

Certain currents of modern thought have gone so far as to *exalt freedom to such an extent that it becomes an absolute, which would then be the source of values ...* The individual conscience is accorded the status of a supreme tribunal of moral judgment which hands down categorical and infallible decisions about good and evil. To the affirmation that one has a duty to follow one's conscience is unduly added the affirmation that one's moral judgment is true merely by the fact that it has its origin in the conscience. But in this way the inescapable claims of truth disappear, yielding their place to a criterion of sincerity,

⁹² *Ibid.*, §67.

⁹³ What John Paul II calls “exaltation of freedom” (*Veritatis Splendor*, §33.) will be discussed further in Chapter 3, in the section on Pinckaers’s “Freedom of Indifference”.

authenticity and "being at peace with oneself", so much so that some have come to adopt a radically subjectivistic conception of moral judgment.⁹⁴

Along the same lines as Pope John Paul II, Cardinal Pell distinguishes between this subjectivistic view, which he dubs "Primacy of Conscience," and the Church's view, "Primacy of Truth." The former values the conscience as a kind of personal oracle, to which truth is subject. In this view, conscience is the boss, and its integrity results from how "true" the subject is to himself, rather than to the truth.⁹⁵ The latter values an objective law, a truth, to which the conscience is subject. According to this view, the conscience gains integrity as it aligns with what is objectively, morally right. It is dangerous indeed to fall into the former belief, as it leads to the abandonment of God's law altogether. Why would we need to refer to an external law when each person is his own law-giver? God's law is meant to guide us to our fulfillment, and when we seek our immediate preferences in exchange for his law, we forfeit the promise of happiness and the ultimate fulfillment that only God can give.

Simply put, conscience must not be reduced to mere emotion.⁹⁶ It is not a personal moral "sense" that can change as the wind blows or even as a person's perspective matures. Conscience itself is not the trump card. Conscience is a messenger of truth to the subject, not the determiner

⁹⁴ *Veritatis Splendor*, §32.

⁹⁵ As discussed earlier, sincerity is an important factor in conscience. Indeed, one must follow sincerely-held convictions in order to act "in good conscience." The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states "A human being must always obey the certain judgment of his conscience. If he were deliberately to act against it, he would condemn himself" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §1790.). It also states, however, that we "must always seriously seek what is right and good and discern the will of God expressed in divine law" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §1787.). To put it another way, both subjective, genuine understanding *and* objective, moral truth and order matter. It is the responsibility of every person as the agent his own activity to form his conscience so that subjective understanding matches up with objective truth. Then, he can genuinely act according to a "right" conscience.

⁹⁶ This is not to say that emotions are not involved in conscience or discernment. As noted above, particularly in Ignatian Spirituality, feelings and emotions can be quite useful in discerning God's will. Attention to peace and joy versus anxiety can indicate the difference between right and wrong.

of truth. “Conscience does not constitute an autonomous and exclusive authority for deciding the truth of a doctrine.”⁹⁷ It is the agent’s ability to apply what is objectively true to his particular situation, and to freely act according to this truth, here and now.

Responsibilities to Conscience

Whether we view conscience as a voice, an act of judgment, or a lifelong process, we have the responsibility to both follow and form it. We discussed the binding force of conscience to a certain extent. Here, we will examine this further, exploring the erring conscience in greater detail. It will become evident that since we must follow our conscience in every case, we have the grave duty of forming it, so that it directs us well and so that our resulting actions are good and consistent with the truth. Here we will look to the methods of formation for our consciences, as well as the pastoral implications this has within the greater community.

Responsibility to Follow our Conscience

When conscience concerns future acts to be done or not done, it “assumes the nature of a command or moral imperative. Its ‘mandatory power’ is not arbitrary but springs from a ‘conviction of the truthfulness of the good’.”⁹⁸ We all know the feeling or sense that we “should” or “should not” do something, along with the pressure placed on us by this imperative character of conscience. It not only helps us figure out what the best choice is, but it commands us to

⁹⁷ Joseph Ratzinger, Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian *Donum Veritatis* (14 August 2015), §28.

⁹⁸ Richard A. Spinello, *The Encyclicals of John Paul II: An Introduction and Commentary* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012), 162.

follow through. It bothers us and even torments us.⁹⁹ This prompting force is the binding power of conscience; we *must* follow it.

John Paul cites St. Bonaventure, who “teaches that ‘conscience is like God’s herald and messenger; it does not command things on its own authority, but commands them as coming from God’s authority, like a herald when he proclaims the edict of the king. This is why conscience has binding force’.”¹⁰⁰ There is a weight of authority, higher than my own, and the stakes are high. St. Thomas teaches that conscience “binds not because it proclaims an obligation arising from itself, but rather one which comes from the eternal law of God. It is an obligation imposed definitively by God, who is the end and true good of the human person.”¹⁰¹

When a higher and trusted authority commands me to do something, I am compelled to obey, both out of respect for the authority and in order to remain in good standing with that authority; this is all the more powerful when I understand the motives behind the order, or when I am a beneficiary, although these factors are not necessary. To use a light-hearted example, if an expert in cake-making tells me to bring the butter to room temperature before beating it into frosting, I feel the pressure that I ought to do it; otherwise, I know the quality of my frosting is at stake. Likewise, and much more serious, God, the author of all creation, upon Whose mercy we rely for our salvation, reveals certain commandments that are necessary for eternal life (Lk 18:18-20). I know that it is in my best interest to heed these terms since I hope to receive eternal life from Him.

⁹⁹ *ST*, I, q. 79, a. 13, co., trans. English Dominican Province.

¹⁰⁰ *Veritatis Splendor*, §58.

¹⁰¹ Brian V. Johnstone, “Conscience and Error,” in *Readings in Moral Theology: Conscience*, ed. Charles E. Curran (New York: Paulist, 2004), 163.

Erring Conscience

Is conscience binding even when it errs? Brian Johnstone poses this question well. “How can it be that conscience, in the case where it does not mediate the eternal law, that is where conscience is in error, still communicates the obligatory power of that law?”¹⁰² Catholic tradition teaches that we must always act in accord with our sincere conscience. We established above that the subjective aspect of conscience—the acting person’s sincere belief that an act is good—holds primacy over the objective—whether the act is truly good, while both are necessary for the act to be good. When the person sincerely believes that an act is good, even if the belief is *invincibly* erroneous, he must follow through according to this judgment.

For Aquinas, the person who acts in sincere yet involuntarily erroneous conscience is excused from sinning, but sincerity and involuntariness of error does not render the act a good act. For example, if I try to put out a grease fire by pouring water on it, never having learned that water exacerbates grease fires, then the moral character of my act is good, while the objective quality is evil. My ignorance and good intention do not render a positive result when I pour water on a grease fire. So long as my ignorance in this situation is innocent and “involuntary,” meaning it is not due to “negligence, by reason of a man not wishing to know what he ought to know,”¹⁰³ then I am not “wrong” for doing it or morally culpable for the evil that ensues.

St. Alphonsus Liguori takes this a step further and teaches that “one who acts with an invincibly erroneous conscience not only does not sin, but probably acquires merit.”¹⁰⁴ St. Alphonsus acknowledges the objective evil, while emphasizing the moral good of the agent.

¹⁰² Ibid., 164.

¹⁰³ *ST*, I-II, q. 19, a. 6, co., trans. English Dominican Province.

¹⁰⁴ Johnstone, “Conscience and Error,” 165.

Because the agent acts with prudence, the virtue that directs a good conscience, “he or she earns merit, on account of the good end for which he or she acts, namely the glory of God and the good of the neighbor.”¹⁰⁵

So, to answer the question posed by Johnstone, conscience binds by the power of the eternal law, even when it does not accurately mediate this law, because the person genuinely *thinks* he is mediating this law and his error is through no fault of his own. By choosing an evil under the genuine conviction that it is good, the person chooses it for goodness’ sake, moved by the *goodness* he perceives and actively *wills good*. The person moves in his heart and conscience toward God, even though the object is not actually true, good, or of God.

On the other hand, if a person does good, under the impression that he is sinning, he is likewise held accountable according to how faithful he is to his conscience. If his conscience judges something as wrong, and he does it anyway, he is wrong in doing it, even if he was mistaken and it was actually good.¹⁰⁶ This is due to the same principle, that moral quality of his action is determined by his sincere judgment; if conscience errs in the conclusion that he should do or avoid something, and he acts contrarily (and does something that is objectively good and harmless), he is still at fault. For example, if someone applies the principle that people should fast from meat on Good Friday, and he mistakes today for Good Friday (but it is actually Holy Thursday), and deliberately and obstinately eats meat anyway, he does something objectively and religiously harmless; however, since he genuinely believes that what he is doing is wrong, he

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ “It is possible that the evil done as the result of invincible ignorance or a non-culpable error of judgment may not be imputable to the agent; but even in this case it does not cease to be an evil, a disorder in relation to the truth about the good. Furthermore, a good act which is not recognized as such does not contribute to the moral growth of the person who performs it; it does not perfect him and it does not help to dispose him for the supreme good” (*Veritatis Splendor*, §63.).

acts against the judgment of his conscience and the command of prudence. Therefore, he is wrong and his act is morally evil; thus, his will becomes evil.¹⁰⁷

Responsibility to Form our Conscience

Since we are bound to obey our conscience, it is incumbent upon us to ensure that we equip our consciences with all the information it needs to direct us rightly. Relying on God who draws us to himself via our consciences and our natural inclination to the good, and striving to grow in the virtue of prudence, which rightly directs conscience, we aim to remain oriented toward God and goodness in every act and in our fundamental direction. “The education of conscience is indispensable for human beings who are subjected to negative influences and tempted by sin to prefer their own judgment and to reject authoritative teachings.”¹⁰⁸ We are fallible and fallen creatures, prone to error, selfishness, and sin. Therefore, considering our fallen state, alongside the binding force of our conscience, it becomes clear that we must seek formation so that our conscience does not fall into error and misguide us.

Since man is not the one to determine what is good or evil, but must freely align himself with the transcendent truth, he needs to know what that truth is in order to weigh his actions against it. Cardinal Pell put it best when he said, “The formation of a Christian conscience is thus a dignifying and liberating experience; it does not mean a resentful submission to God’s law but a free choosing of that law as our life’s ideal.”¹⁰⁹ We recognize that God’s law is our greatest

¹⁰⁷ Having reasoned that an object is evil, “if then the will moves toward that object, the will becomes evil” (Johnstone, “Conscience and Error,” 164.). St. Thomas teaches that evil intention actually causes the will to be evil. “The mere malice of the intention suffices to make the will evil: and therefore too, the will is as evil as the intention is evil. But the same reasoning does not apply to goodness” (*ST*, I-II, q. 19, a. 8, ad. 3, trans. English Dominican Province.).

¹⁰⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §1783.

¹⁰⁹ George Pell, “The Inconvenient Conscience,” *First Things* 153 (May 2005), at <http://www.firstthings.com/>.

promise of happiness, and we therefore dedicate ourselves to a lifetime of formation according to it. Our conscience is more dignified the more informed it is, and it gains value not by merely asserting itself according to its own convictions, but by referring to the truth whence it finds its answers.

We are not isolated individuals, left to reinvent the wheel in our moral discernments. Richard Gula explains that the social nature of conscience is found in the etymology of the term, which, again, means “know together with.” He says, “While the judgment of conscience is always made *for* oneself (what I must do), it is never formed *by* oneself.”¹¹⁰ His point is that we are all influenced by our communities, our experiences, our habits, and our sins, to the point that we cannot single-handedly maneuver our way through the moral life and find what is true or best on our own. Whether we realize it or not, we do and we must “consult the established sources of wisdom.”¹¹¹ The worthier the source, the more effectively it will orient us to our true end of ultimate happiness and communion with God.

John Paul emphasizes the theme of conversion in the process of forming our consciences; by so doing, we make conscience “the object of a continuous conversion to what is true and to what is good.”¹¹² John Paul emphasizes conversion in *Veritatis Splendor*, arguing that “It is the ‘heart’ converted to the Lord and to the love of what is good which is really the source of *true* judgments of conscience.”¹¹³ Knowing the truth is not enough, it is the identification of *the good as my good*.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁰ Richard M. Gula, “The Moral Conscience,” in *Readings in Moral Theology: Conscience*, ed. Charles E. Curran (New York: Paulist, 2004), 58.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹¹² *Veritatis Splendor*, §64.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Major sources for formation of the Christian conscience (qua Christian) are family life and faith life; these sources draw from and orient the conscience toward an identification with their faith. Specifically, the Magisterium of the Catholic Church is “a great help for the formation of conscience,”¹¹⁵ since the Church was entrusted by God with the task and the authority to teach and guide us in matters of faith and morals.

It is the family who first and most fundamentally forms the person. During the most formative years of a child’s life, the parents are responsible for forming the consciences of their children both through their example of faith, prudence, and charity and through explicit teaching. This is a sacred duty and must not be neglected or taken lightly.¹¹⁶

Religious communities, such as parishes, youth groups or men’s and women’s groups, continued catechesis, catholic schools and universities, and charity work are all formative to the conscience. These all ought to provide a kind of continued education, strengthening the Christian’s perspective of faith that governs all he does. In both the broad and the practical senses, the Christian conscience should be supported and strengthened in these communities.

In a formal way, the Church herself is moral formator of the Christian conscience. Pope Paul VI states in *Dignitatis Humanae*:

In the formation of their consciences, the Christian faithful ought carefully to attend to the sacred and certain doctrine of the Church. For the Church is, by the will of Christ, the teacher of the truth. It is her duty to give utterance to, and authoritatively to teach, that

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation on the Role of Christian Family in the Modern World *Familiaris Consortio* (22 November 1981), §36.

truth which is Christ Himself, and also to declare and confirm by her authority those principles of the moral order which have their origins in human nature itself.¹¹⁷

We encounter in the Magisterium of the Church a reliable source of truth, instituted and protected by God so that we may follow it without hesitation. Doing so is not blind or robotic, since we are free to research and discover for ourselves the reasons behind the Church's teachings. Additionally, we have good reason to trust and follow the Magisterium as our unflinching guide, and we therefore give our assent using our full human agency, consciousness, and intentionality, as opposed to a kind of blind or subconscious passivity. We are wise to turn to the Magisterium to form our consciences, for in the Magisterium,

The Church puts herself always and only at the *service of conscience*, helping it to avoid being tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine proposed by human deceit (cf. *Eph 4:14*), and helping it not to swerve from the truth about the good of man, but rather, especially in more difficult questions, to attain the truth with certainty and to abide in it.¹¹⁸

Conclusion

In this section, we explored several manifestations of conscience as it is commonly understood; these included conscience as an interior voice, as an act of practical judgment, and as a lifelong process. According to all of these understandings, conscience directs our choices and links our subjective freedom with objective truth.¹¹⁹ We discovered that the fullest, Christian

¹¹⁷ Paul VI, Declaration on Religious Freedom *Dignitatis Humanae* (7 December 1965), §14.

¹¹⁸ *Veritatis Splendor*, §64.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, §61.

understanding of the term identifies conscience with faith, insisting that through conscience, man orients both his whole life and his individual acts to God, Who is his ultimate end.

We also clarified that conscience is not a mere feeling or subjective, personal sense of right and wrong. This is a prominently erroneous conception of conscience found in contemporary culture.

Finally, we discussed the responsibilities that we all have of following our consciences, even when they err. The reason for this is that they carry the authority of God, even while we misinterpret his voice and mis-apply his truth to our experience. It is because we are so prone to error that we are also responsible for forming our consciences according to the truth to prevent such errors. In the following chapter, we will discover several sources by which we ought to form our consciences.

Chapter 3: The Components of Conscience: Subjective Freedom and Objective Truth

Introduction

In Chapter 1, we discussed the history of the notion of conscience, considering several aspects of conscience that are still in play today; these include antecedent and consequent conscience, good and evil conscience, and the identification of conscience with God’s voice and with our Christian faith. In Chapter 2, we looked at the meaning of conscience today, specifically understood as an interior voice, a practical judgment, and a lifelong process, along with our obligation to both follow and form our consciences. Here in Chapter 3, we shall examine the working components of a healthy conscience; this consists of a balanced interplay of our subjective freedom with objective truth. As stated in the introduction, it is the aim of this paper to establish that genuine human freedom is founded upon truth. We will begin this chapter with an examination of the truth as it is known and safeguarded by various forms of law. After a discussion on law, we will take up human freedom, aiming to establish that man is most free when he acts in accord with his nature and with his supernatural end of communion with God.

Of the three manifestations of conscience from Chapter 2, conscience as a practical judgment affords us the clearest context for a discussion of the meeting place of law and freedom. The law, being exterior, is often considered a hindrance to our freedom, which is more internal. In his conscience—his *heart*—man decides how to interact with his world. Here the Christian decides how to react to his reality in a way that is “worthy of his dignity and vocation as an adopted son of God.”¹²⁰

¹²⁰ See Chapter 1.

As noted above, Aquinas incorporates both subjective and objective realities of conscience, defining it as “knowledge applied to an individual case”.¹²¹ Man’s experience is the subjective reality. He experiences his world, his surroundings, his options, and his own freedom. The objective aspect of conscience is the truth which man observes, by which he strives to shape his actions. It consists of the *known* good, which includes “all the knowledge of goodness that we can gain through study, education, reflection, perception, and above all, personal experience.”¹²²

Conscience has also been termed “man’s free adoption of God’s law”¹²³ by Cardinal Pell as well as John Paul II, and this definition also incorporates both subjective and objective aspects of conscience. *Man’s free adoption* is the subjective aspect, and *God’s law* is the objective. We first turn to a discussion on the objective aspect: truth found in and protected by law.

Law

The Catholic understanding of conscience presupposes an order that transcends man. It is not an invention of, but an apprehension of and assent to, something above and outside of itself.¹²⁴ We discover truth and adhere to it. The term “law” for our purposes, refers to that objective moral order that results from God’s design. We will discuss law under the categories of “divine law” and “natural law,” but no matter the qualifier, “law” always points to the objective order. It is the law—natural or divine—that grants us access to the truth and safeguards that same truth. It bids us to adhere to it so that we may act according to the truth which transcends us.

¹²¹ *ST*, I, q. 79, a. 13, co., trans. English Dominican Province.

¹²² Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, 419.

¹²³ Pell, “The Inconvenient Conscience,” at <http://www.firstthings.com/>.

¹²⁴ “Revelation teaches that *the power to decide what is good and what is evil does not belong to man, but to God alone*” (*Veritatis Splendor*, §35.).

We can only know the laws of God's order insofar as he reveals them to us, which he has done publicly throughout salvation history. In a certain way, he also does this privately in the heart of every man. Here we distinguish between natural law and revealed law, both of which are contained within "God's law." As Newman explains, "[God] implanted this Law, which is Himself, in the intelligence of all His rational creatures."¹²⁵ Newman also cites St. Thomas Aquinas in reference to natural law, which Thomas describes as, "participation of the eternal law in the rational creature."¹²⁶ It is objective and absolute, and our cooperation with it is what determines the moral value of our actions. We are responsible for using our conscience to apprehend this law and act in according to it.

Natural Law

Within our very makeup as humans is "natural law," which grants us access to the very law of God—God's own divine and eternal law. Natural law is written on the human heart.¹²⁷ It is this truth of our being, of our human nature, that is attested to by natural law, that "light of understanding infused in us by God, whereby we understand what must be done and what must be avoided."¹²⁸ These moral norms are set in place by the order by which we were made. Acts that affirm our nature and advance us toward our natural perfection are good, while acts against our nature are self-destructive and evil.

¹²⁵ John Henry Newman, "Conscience," *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk*, accessed 6 August 2015, <http://newmanreader.org/works/anglicans/volume2/gladstone/section5.html>.

¹²⁶ *ST*, II-I, q. 91, a. 2, co., trans. English Dominican Province.

¹²⁷ "The law which is written in men's hearts is the natural law" (*ST*, II-I, q. 94, a. 6, s. c., trans. English Dominican Province.).

¹²⁸ *Veritatis Splendor*, §40.

Flowing from our human nature and the objective order of creation, natural law is universally applicable to all. John Paul II states, “Inasmuch as the natural law expresses the dignity of the human person and lays the foundation for his fundamental rights and duties, it is universal in its precepts and its authority extends to all mankind.”¹²⁹ Moreover, “the universality and the immutability of the moral norm make manifest and at the same time serve to protect the personal dignity and inviolability of man, on whose face is reflected the splendour of God.”¹³⁰ It is evident, then, that our very nature as humans carries a law that is meant to uphold and protect the nature and dignity of all human persons. Moreover, natural law is additionally universally accessible to all, because it is “inscribed in the rational nature of the person”¹³¹ and “written and engraved in the heart of each and every man,”¹³² Thus, all human persons, capable of accessing natural law, are therefore able to “discern good from evil, which is the function of the natural law”.¹³³

Of the myriad precepts discovered through natural law, here are a few mentioned by St. Thomas Aquinas:

- “preserving human life, and of warding off its obstacles”
- “sexual intercourse, education of offspring”
- “inclination to know the truth about God, and to live in society”
- “[inclination] to shun ignorance, to avoid offending those among whom one has to live”¹³⁴

Divine Law

¹²⁹ Ibid., §51.

¹³⁰ Ibid., §90.

¹³¹ Ibid., §12.

¹³² Ibid., §44.

¹³³ Ibid., §42.

¹³⁴ All four of these quotes are from *ST*, II-I, q. 94, a. 2, co., trans. English Dominican Province.

While natural law gives us a share in God’s divine law, there is more to his law and wisdom that cannot be apprehended through nature or human power alone. Rather, we must rely on divine revelation to know the Divine Law of God. While knowledge of natural law is required for the attainment of man’s natural good, divine law is required for the attainment of eternal life. Cardinal Newman describes the “Divine Law” as “The rule of ethical truth, the standard of right and wrong, a sovereign, irreversible, absolute authority in the presence of men and Angels.”¹³⁵ It is absolute, and it reigns regardless of how many people respect its authority. Ultimately, these laws educate us as to their respective objective realities, indicating how we ought to act in order to attain to the perfection with respect to both natural and supernatural realities

In several ways throughout salvation history, God has revealed his law to us, giving us an increasing share in his wisdom. Here we will examine the ways God has revealed his law to us through the Old and New Testaments, as well as in the teaching office of the Church, known as the Magisterium.¹³⁶

Old Testament

In the Old Testament, God shared with his chosen people the Mosaic Law, in which the Hebrew people found the ways of life that would lead them to their greatest prosperity. The Law informed every aspect of their lives. It formed their consciences, as their actions were considered either good or evil according to how well they aligned with the Law. They were technically free

¹³⁵ Newman, “Conscience,” <http://newmanreader.org/works/anglicans/volume2/gladstone/index.html>.

¹³⁶ While we will not elaborate on the topic here, it must be mentioned that divine law comes from both Sacred Scripture and Apostolic Tradition. Both are “equally sources of revelation” and “to be accepted with ‘an equal affection of piety’” (Christian D. Washburn, “The Council of Trent and Vatican I” in *The Oxford Handbook of Catholic Theology*, Oxford University Press, <http://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199566273.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199566273-e-46>).

to act as they willed, as God did not hinder their autonomy simply by revealing his Law to them. However, by violating the Law, they sinned and broke their covenant with God, and this led to their demise. Because of this, and because of the communion with God and prosperity promised for their obedience to the Law, the Hebrew people were motivated to obey the Law, and they did so by freely aligning their actions with the Law.

In giving the Hebrew people the Mosaic Law, God made a covenant with them; if they heeded his commands, he would in turn be their God. Repeatedly throughout the Old Testament, we see God reminding the people that their actions in accord with the Law will bring them prosperity, but their rejection of the Law will result in death and despair. In Exodus, God told the people, “If you listen closely to the voice of the LORD, your God, and do what is right in his eyes: if you heed his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will not afflict you with any of the diseases with which I afflicted the Egyptians; for I, the LORD, am your healer” (Ex 15:26 *NABRE*). God reveals to the people that he is the judge of right and wrong. In order to flourish, they must obey his commands and pay close attention to his voice. Already, living a good moral life is associated with and necessary for a relationship with God.

Likewise, in Deuteronomy, God warns against disobedience, “But if you will not obey the voice of the LORD your God or be careful to do all his commandments and his statutes which I command you this day, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you” (Deut 28:15 *RSV*). Following this is an extensive list of curses, touching virtually every aspect of their lives. God threatens to smite them in every heart-wrenching way imaginable, from taking away their children (Deut 28:32 *RSV*), to destroying their sustainability (Deut 28:22-24 *RSV*), and causing sickness of mind and body (Deut 28:27-28 *RSV*). The condition is simple: If you want to thrive and be happy, do as God commands.

Even before God made the Covenant through Moses, the same principle applied to the very first man, Adam. “The LORD God gave the man this order: You are free to eat from any of the trees of the garden except the tree of knowledge of good and evil. From that tree you shall not eat; when you eat from it you shall die” (Gen 2:16-17 *NABRE*). Here God warns Adam against disobeying his orders. The penalty for disobedience is death. Therefore, Adam is to act in a way that pleases God, if he desires to keep his life. Beginning with the first human in biblical history, we have divine law. Doing as God commands preserves life, and disobeying him results in death. As in the previous example, this is just one of the instances of its kind. Indeed, their obedience did lead them to flourish, and by their disobedience, they brought destruction upon themselves, for God is faithful to his word. Throughout the Old Testament, we find several other instances of God promising human flourishing in exchange for their loyalty to him and his commands, as well as God punishing the people due to their disobedience or rejection.

God’s Call to Conversion Proves the People’s Free Will

The fact that God gave the people commandments of the covenant and reminded the following generations repeatedly of the promise, and the cost of their neglecting their end of the deal, tells strongly of the freedom of the people. If they were not free, God would not be so adamant with them. He would simply command, and they would obey. Clearly, this is not so. Too many occurrences throughout the Old Testament tell of God punishing the people for their lack of obedience. In Amos, God tells them “I will not take it back; because they...did not remember the covenant of brotherhood” (Amos 1:9 *NABRE*);¹³⁷ also, “I will not take it back; because they spurned the instruction of the LORD, and did not keep his statutes” (Amos

¹³⁷ “It” being their punishment.

2:4 NABRE). If God had removed their freedom, he would not repeatedly call the people to conversion; he would not beg of the people to remember the covenant and obey.

In Isaiah, God says to the people, “Come now, let us set things right, says the LORD: Though your sins be like scarlet, they may become white as snow... If you are willing, and obey, you shall eat the good things of the land; But if you refuse and resist, you shall be eaten by the sword” (Is 1:18-20 NABRE). This passage could not illustrate the moral system more clearly. First, God summons the people, and indicates that there is an objective right and wrong, and that his way is right. Then he offers them a clean slate on the condition that they come, repent, and obey his commands. He promises prosperity in return for their obedience, and death if they reject his commands. It is up to them to decide which consequence they prefer, and to use reason to inform the manner in which they act. They are free to obey or disobey, but they cannot determine whether obedience or disobedience will warrant them life or death—they cannot change the objective moral order. They must accept that their free actions have consequences that are out of their control, as there is a Law and an order higher than themselves, and in which their actions are a mere participation.¹³⁸ They cannot determine the laws of morality,¹³⁹ but they can and must learn them. They must form their consciences according to the truth that God revealed; he did so for their own sake, so that they can do good and bring good upon themselves. If they educate themselves and their children on how

¹³⁸ In *Veritatis Splendor*, John Paul identifies this cooperation with God’s will as “participated theonomy.” We are indeed free agents, yet we acknowledge that we participate in a greater moral order. “Others speak, and rightly so, of *theonomy*, or *participated theonomy*, since man’s free obedience to God’s law effectively implies that human reason and human will participate in God’s wisdom and providence... Law must therefore be considered an expression of divine wisdom: by submitting to the law, freedom submits to the truth of creation” (*Veritatis Splendor*, §41.).

¹³⁹ Again, we are speaking of those laws revealed by God that indicate the objective moral order. Man does establish laws of the state, “determining” them, adding, subtracting, and changing them. However, these laws instituted by man can only represent (at best) the laws instituted by God. “*The power to decide what is good and what is evil does not belong to man, but to God alone*” (*Veritatis Splendor*, §35.).

to live a moral life—that is, what God requires of them—then they can act from formed consciences, and bring upon themselves the prosperity that God promises and desires for them.

The Decalogue

Perhaps the most familiar set of moral principles from the Bible are the Ten Commandments.¹⁴⁰ In them we find “precepts bearing on the fundamental obligations of religion and morality and embodying the revealed expression of the Creator's will in relation to man's whole duty to God and to his fellow-creatures.”¹⁴¹ The first three pertain to the love and respect we owe God, and the final seven direct us in our love and respect for our neighbor.

After Moses received and relayed the Ten Commandments to Israel, he warned them, “You shall walk in all the way which the LORD your God has commanded you, that you may live, and that it may go well with you, and that you may live long in the land which you shall possess” (Deut 5:33 RSV). Here, again, we see the theme of obedience to God’s commands resulting in life and prosperity.

As we will see later in our discussion of God’s law in the New Testament, Jesus elevates the moral code through his preaching of the Beatitudes and through his commandment of love.¹⁴² However, he still upholds these as basic commandments which ought to be observed. When asked what must be done to inherit eternal life, Jesus cited these commandments, saying, “You know the commandments: ‘Do not commit adultery, Do not

¹⁴⁰ Ex 20:1-20; Deut 5:6-21.

¹⁴¹ John Stapleton, "The Ten Commandments," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 4, ed. Kevin Knight (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1908), accessed 18 August 2017, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/04153a.htm>.

¹⁴² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §1968, §1970.

kill, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother’” (Lk 18:20 RSV). Even Jesus acknowledges these commandments as conditions for eternal life.¹⁴³ While these commandments are fulfilled in the “Law of the Gospel”,¹⁴⁴ they remain an effective “light offered to the conscience of every man to make God's call and ways known to him and to protect him against evil.”¹⁴⁵ They are our aids, guiding us to the promised reward of eternal life.

Prophets

In addition to explicit laws, God spoke through prophets, calling his people back to himself. He emphasized the importance of a contrite heart over merely robotic obedience. While we would not call this observation a “law” in the concrete sense, we do notice that it implies a sense of directing or commanding of our subjective disposition. There is an objective principle that God is instructing us to consider and use as we form our consciences and execute acts according to his law.

God desires much more than a robotic, going-through-the-motions obedience to his commandments. The whole reason he reveals his divine law to us is so that we can have a relationship with him. This means that what he desired from the people of the Old Testament—as well as from all of us today—is the conversion of our hearts. When we follow his commands,

¹⁴³ “Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them. For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Whoever then relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but he who does them and teaches them shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5:17-20 RSV).

¹⁴⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §1968.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, §1962.

and choose to live and act as he wills us to, not only our actions, but even our hearts, must be directed toward him, fully investing ourselves in this relationship.

From the prophet Jeremiah, for instance, we read:

“Return, O faithless sons,
I will heal your faithlessness.”

“Behold, we come to thee;
for thou art the LORD our God.”¹⁴⁶

Here we see God calling Israel to conversion after they have betrayed the covenant. He beckons them to return so he can heal them. In this passage, there is an invitation and a response: Israel responds and returns to the Lord. There is something personal about their response, “Behold, we come to thee,” something more than mere obedience to dry commands. It is as if we can read through the lines and see their hearts, turning so tenderly, so vividly. There is a sense of love here, a humble acceptance and receptivity on the part of Israel. Israel reciprocates God’s re-initiation to the covenant and once again affirms their allegiance to God.

We find this theme of conversion of the heart even more explicitly stated in Joel:

“Yet even now,” says the LORD,
“return to me with all your heart,
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
and rend your hearts and not your garments.”¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁶ Jer 3:22 *RSV*.

¹⁴⁷ Joel 2:12-13 *RSV*.

Notice that God is not telling his people to obey his commands here, but to return with all their hearts. Surely, this implies a re-ordering of their lives to God and aligning their actions with the commandments of the covenant. However, God emphasizes the heart and does not leave it out of his purview. While yes, he requires obedience to his commands, he does not want acts alone, but our heart, our intention, our desire, as well.

New Testament

In the New Testament, we encounter a new law that fulfills the old. “The New Law or the Law of the Gospel is the perfection here on earth of the divine law, natural and revealed.”¹⁴⁸ This New Law is manifest primarily through the Sermon on the Mount and through “the ‘*new commandment*’ of Jesus, to love one another as he has loved us.”¹⁴⁹

We will first look to the Sermon on the Mount, during which Christ preached tenants of the New Law. John Paul notes in *Veritatis Splendor* that the rich young man in the Gospel has kept the Commandments but is left dissatisfied. He yearns for yet a greater perfection than is achieved through keeping the basic Commandments of the Old Law. “Conscious of *the young man's yearning for something greater, which would transcend a legalistic interpretation of the commandments*, the Good Teacher invites him to enter upon the path of perfection.”¹⁵⁰ This interaction of the young man with Jesus reveals that there is a path of perfection that goes beyond the commandments. This, again, is the conversion of the heart, which draws man into deeper interior perfection than meeting external commandments would.

¹⁴⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §1965.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, §1970.

¹⁵⁰ *Veritatis Splendor*, §16.

In the Sermon on the Mount, “Jesus presents God’s demand not by dispensing with the Law but by asking for a deeper observance that gets to the reason why its demands were formulated, i.e., to be ‘perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect’”.¹⁵¹ The New Law elevates the Old Law;¹⁵² by observing the New Law, we implicitly fulfill and even surpass the Old Law. We obey the precepts of the Commandments with all our hearts. We even attain to “the perfection of the heavenly Father”.¹⁵³

In St. Augustine’s commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, he distinguishes between the outward and inward observation of God’s commands. Regarding the Commandment against killing, he says, “we preserve our innocence both outwardly when we do not kill, and in heart when we are not angry.”¹⁵⁴ Thus, the New Law calls us to align ourselves with God’s law both inwardly and outwardly. It is not enough to go through the motions of obedience while our hearts are not directed toward the Kingdom of Heaven. Perfection consists in full conversion and full conformity with the heart of God.

Let us take up some examples from Scripture. In the example concerning adultery, Jesus said, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that every one who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Mt 5:27-28 RSV). Jesus acknowledges the Commandment forbidding adultery, and he follows it up with a further command. Not only must we avoid explicit, adulterous acts, but we must even

¹⁵¹ Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New Haven: Yale University, 2010), 179.

¹⁵² “The Lord’s Sermon on the Mount, far from abolishing or devaluing the moral prescriptions of the Old Law, releases their hidden potential and has new demands arise from them: it reveals their entire divine and human truth. It does not add new external precepts, but proceeds to reform the heart, the root of human acts, where man chooses between the pure and the impure” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §1968.).

¹⁵³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §1968.

¹⁵⁴ Augustine, *On the Sermon on the Mount*, Chapter 9, at New Advent, www.newadvent.org.

avoid those acts that lead to adultery. To be perfect, we must be outwardly pure, avoiding adulterous acts, and inwardly pure of heart, protecting our eyes and the movements of our hearts from the attitude of infidelity. We must keep vigilant against lust in general, and look upon others only with love and respect.

In the Gospel, we also encounter what we might call the “Commandment of Love.” Jesus tells his disciples, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn 13:34 *RSV*).¹⁵⁵ Here is a new, over-arching commandment, including within itself all of the divine law. As we found in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus does not fulfill the Old Law as if to render it null. Rather, he calls us to abide by the commandments in a fuller way.¹⁵⁶ We must act according to the truth contained in the divine law, and we must also be conformed to this law from within.

Raymond Brown makes a helpful clarification:

This is ‘new’ not because the OT was lacking in love but because there are now two peculiarly Christian modifications: The love is to be empowered and modeled on the way Jesus manifested love for his disciples by dying and rising for them...and it is a love to be extended to one’s fellow Christian disciples.¹⁵⁷

Only after Jesus endured his Passion and Death is the full meaning of his love revealed. There is an objective standard to love—one that entails the high price of one’s own life. The new

¹⁵⁵ See also: Jn 15:12.

¹⁵⁶ Later, he says, “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love” (Jn 15:10 *RSV*), reaffirming the validity of the commandments and their place as prerequisite to his love.

¹⁵⁷ Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 352.

“Commandment of Love” is far from shallow or sentimental. Through this commandment, Jesus demands that we imitate him in making full gifts of ourselves in love to our brothers and sisters.

This is the New Law, which contains “the entire Law of the Gospel”.¹⁵⁸ While it is briefly stated, the “Commandment of Love” encompasses the entire divine law by which Christians must form their consciences to be worthy of inheriting eternal life. This is the commandment that leads us to the perfection for which God made us and to which he calls us through the Law of the Gospel.

Let us take two more examples from the Gospels, placing them side-by-side, in order to demonstrate Jesus’ point in the Law of the Gospel. In Matthew 5, Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven” (Mt 5:43-45 RSV). We pair this with a passage from Luke 23:

And when they came to the place which is called The Skull, there they crucified him...

And Jesus said, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do”... And the people stood by, watching; but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, “He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!” The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him vinegar, and saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” (Lk 23:33-37 RSV)

In the first passage, Jesus teaches that Christian love applies not only to those who do good to us, but even to our enemies. In the second passage, he demonstrates this very love. In the midst of his own Passion and death, he offers a prayer of intercession on behalf of those who

¹⁵⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §1970.

were crucifying and mocking him. He taught in Matthew, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Mt 5:44 *RSV*), and in Luke, we see him doing exactly that. Here Christ illustrates through his own actions that perfection to which he calls us. We must love and pray for both neighbor and enemy, even at the cost of our own lives.

Jesus gave several directives concerning *how* we are to love our neighbor. He tells us to forgive one another generously (Mt 5:39, 6:14-15; Lk 17:4), to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for the sick, and visit the imprisoned (Mt 25:31-46). He tells us to give generously (Mk 12:41-44), to carry our personal crosses (Mt 5:42, 16:24), and to humbly suffer persecutions for his sake (Jn 15:20). He asks us to go the extra mile, both literally (Mt 5:41) and concerning the commandments.¹⁵⁹ We must love¹⁶⁰ our neighbor both exteriorly through our acts and even interiorly from our heart.

We see the theme of the new Commandment to love our neighbor as fulfilling all other commandments in the epistles of Paul and John. In Galatians 5, Paul writes, “For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Gal 5:14 *RSV*), and in Romans 13, he writes:

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery, You shall not kill,

¹⁵⁹ As we examined with adultery, for instance, more is required of us than merely *not committing* adultery; we must even guard against interior sins of lust.

¹⁶⁰ Karol Wojtyla writes in *Love and Responsibility* that “Man’s capacity for love depends on his willingness consciously to seek a good together with others, and to subordinate himself to that good for the sake of others, or to others for the sake of that good” (Karol Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981), 29.). There are countless opportunities to apply this principle practically, of seeking the good with another, of subordinating ourselves to this good and to the good of the other. He contrasts *love* with *use*, stating their incompatibility; love “is the only clear alternative to using a person as the means to an end, or the instrument of one’s own action” (Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, 28.). Persons are always and only that other with whom we subject ourselves for a common good and for whose good we subject ourselves.

You shall not steal, You shall not covet,” and any other commandment, are summed up in this sentence, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law. (Rom 13:8-10 RSV)

Paul, therefore, sees the law to love our neighbor as a sufficient fulfillment of all the commandments as well as the entirety of Divine Law. “When he says, therefore, that all the commandments are brought to their completing sum total in love of neighbor, he means that – *post Christum* – love has *taken the place of the commandments*, being itself the comprehensive and indelible guard against violation of neighbor.”¹⁶¹

We must recognize an important detail when discussing Divine Law, and that is that we cannot carry it out by our own power alone.¹⁶² John Paul II states, “To imitate and live out the love of Christ is not possible for man by his own strength alone. He becomes *capable of this love only by virtue of a gift received... Christ's gift is his Spirit*, whose first “fruit” (cf. *Gal 5:22*) is charity”.¹⁶³ We find basis for this in 1 John, which reads:

And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. All who keep his commandments

¹⁶¹ James Louis Martyn, *The Anchor Bible: Galatians* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 522.

¹⁶² “...all men, having lost innocence through the sin of Adam... ‘became unclean’ ...So completely were they the slaves of sin [*cf. Rom 6:20*] and under the power of the devil and of death that not only the Gentiles by means of the power of nature [*can. 1*] but even the Jews by means of the letter of the law of Moses were unable to liberate themselves and to rise from that state, even though their free will, weakened and distorted as it was, was in no way extinct” (Peter Hünemann, Helmut Hoping, Robert L. Fastiggi, Anne Englund Nash, and Heinrich Denzinger, eds., *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals*, 43rd edition (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), §1521.). Also: “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” (*DH*, §1551.).

¹⁶³ *Veritatis Splendor*, §22.

abide in him, and he in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit which he has given us. (1 Jn 3:23-24 RSV)

Not only do we receive the revelation of Divine Law from God, but also the power to live by it as well. Through the gift of God's Spirit, we are equipped to love as God loves, and to keep the commandment to love (and therefore all God's commandments contained therein).

It is worth reemphasizing the objectivity of these laws, contained in the "Commandment of Love." Jesus did not tell us to do our personal best. His instructions were not vague or loose. Through his example of love, Jesus gave us the objective standard according to which we must conform our acts and our hearts. As recipients of the Gospel, Christians must admit that we do not create moral standards; rather, we observe and receive the truth that Christian morality is founded upon and rooted in the genuine imitation of Christ. It is fulfilling the Commandments of the Old Law, yes, but it is much more than that. It is conforming my heart to the heart of God. By embracing the divine law both exteriorly and interiorly, I orient myself wholly to God, achieving in a way, the fundamental option both in principle and in all of my particular acts that abide by the "Commandment of Love."

Magisterium

In addition to Sacred Scripture, Catholic Christians also rely upon the teaching office of the Church in order to know God's law.¹⁶⁴ We are privileged to have a living, dynamic

¹⁶⁴ As noted above, we must acknowledge that Sacred Scripture and Apostolic Tradition are equally sources of revelation and therefore of divine law.

“participation in [God’s] own infallibility.”¹⁶⁵ As “‘the servant’ of the word of God,”¹⁶⁶ the Magisterium is “the sole authentic interpreter of the Word of God, written or handed down, by virtue of the authority which it exercises in the name of Christ.”¹⁶⁷ The people of the Old Testament had the Law to inform their practical judgments; the people of the New Testament—today’s pilgrim Church—have the Magisterium. Made up of the Holy Father and all bishops in communion with him, the Magisterium bears the authenticity and authority of the apostles and the protection from error that Christ promised the Church.¹⁶⁸ With confidence, Catholics can rely on the Magisterium for guiding their moral lives along the straight and narrow path, and “interpreting and applying the moral truth found in revelation and natural law to contemporary issues.”¹⁶⁹ *Donum Veritatis* puts it concisely:

“The Magisterium, therefore, has the task of discerning, by means of judgments normative for the consciences of believers, those acts which in themselves conform to the demands of faith and foster their expression in life and those which, on the contrary, because intrinsically evil, are incompatible with such demands.”¹⁷⁰

It is worth emphasizing the role of service that the Magisterium enjoys. *Dei Verbum* states:

¹⁶⁵ *Donum Veritatis*, §13.

¹⁶⁶ Christian D. Washburn, “The Catholic Use of the Scriptures in Ecumenical Dialogue,” in *Verbum Domini and the Complementarity of Exegesis and Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 2014), 78.

¹⁶⁷ *Donum Veritatis*, §13. See also: Paul VI, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum* (18 November 1965), §10.

¹⁶⁸ Paul VI, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* (21 November 1964), §20.

¹⁶⁹ Gula, “The Moral Conscience,” 55.

¹⁷⁰ *Donum Veritatis*, §16.

“This teaching office is not above the word of God, but serves it, teaching only what has been handed on, listening to it devoutly, guarding it scrupulously and explaining it faithfully in accord with a divine commission and with the help of the Holy Spirit, it draws from this one deposit of faith everything which it presents for belief as divinely revealed.”¹⁷¹

The teaching office of the Church does not author or create new Divine Revelation. Whether by positively offering an “authentic meaning of a particular text”¹⁷² or by negatively “[prohibiting] an erroneous interpretation, i.e., the teaching of what a particular biblical text does not mean,”¹⁷³ the Magisterium serves, protects, and interprets existing Divine Revelation.

The Magisterium provides guidance for our consciences and answers to contemporary moral problems. Whether we consult it and heed its position is our choice. Each person is free to assent or dissent, although the consequences of either option are unavoidable. Just as the people of the Old Testament were free to obey or reject God’s Law, they were not free from the reward of life or the punishment of death that would result from their free choices.

By heeding the Magisterium, we do not shackle our freedom or numb our faculty of reason, resigning ourselves to a robotic obedience. On the contrary, in entrusting ourselves to the Magisterium as our primary source of moral formation, we recognize that God has granted us the key to the best life imaginable. We receive its instruction as God’s gift, his personal

¹⁷¹ *Dei Verbum*, §10.

¹⁷² Washburn, “The Catholic Use of the Scriptures in Ecumenical Dialogue,” 79.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*

and direct guide for morality, which he “spontaneously offered to men and women to attain eternal life, total intimacy with him.”¹⁷⁴ We participate in a moral order which we have not designed, nor whose laws we can change. Viewing the Magisterium as a bleak conglomeration of rules is very negative and sounds limiting. In truth, however, when the Magisterium says “no” to something, the reason is because that act is not good, and we are better off avoiding it. It is certainly an act of humility to resist such a course of action, especially an appealing one, and more especially when we do not fully understand the reason the Magisterium condemns it. But there is great freedom and peace in the assurance that assent to God’s way is best for us and everyone, however mysterious the circumstances. When we struggle to assent to something that the Church commands, it is an opportunity for growth in holiness and virtue. In humility, we assume fault in our understanding, and make it our project to prayerfully seek better understanding. “A troubled conscience is the *beginning*—the beginning of an encounter with the teaching that will require patience, humility, time, self-scrutiny, conversion.”¹⁷⁵

These examples of divine law demonstrate that God desires a relationship with his people and that he provides morality as a means for entering into this relationship. In *The Bible and Morality – Biblical Roots of Christian Conduct*, the authors state that “Morality is not primarily the human response but a revelation of...God’s purpose and of the divine gift.”¹⁷⁶ The Law is God’s gift, as it provides his people with a lifestyle compatible with communion with him. “The God of the Bible reveals not primarily a code of conduct but

¹⁷⁴ Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Bible and Morality: Biblical Roots of Christian Conduct* (11 May 2008), §5.

¹⁷⁵ Pell, “The Inconvenient Conscience,” at <http://www.firstthings.com/>.

¹⁷⁶ *The Bible and Morality*, §4.

‘Himself’ in his mystery and ‘the mystery of his will.’”¹⁷⁷ God does not give us a compilation of arbitrary or meaningless rules to follow. He grants us access to the fullest life possible; the Law is much more than a stark code of conduct: it is a kind of cheat-sheet to attain eternal life. It is dynamic, because it facilitates a relationship with God who invites us, sustains us, and dwells in us. Entering into this relationship is our response to his invitation; it is our ongoing effort to continuously form our consciences by seeking the truth in order to live according to it more perfectly and faithfully.

Freedom

Having established the primary sources by which the Catholic conscience is formed—divine law as manifest in natural law, the Commandments of the Old Testament, the New Law of the Gospel, and the teachings of the Magisterium—the question remains: What room is there for personal freedom? In forming his conscience, does man retain his freedom? Does genuine freedom imply absolute autonomy? We will now discuss the role of freedom in the activity of conscience. After clarifying what we mean by “freedom” and making a few distinctions, we will come to discover that “freedom of conscience is never freedom ‘from’ the truth but always and only freedom ‘in’ the truth”.¹⁷⁸

Understanding Freedom

Cardinal Pell explains that “conscience is the free acceptance of the objective moral law as the basis of all our choices.”¹⁷⁹ Crucial to the Catholic understanding of conscience is our freedom. Man cannot be held accountable for his actions if he does not have the freedom to do

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ *Veritatis Splendor*, §64.

¹⁷⁹ Pell, “The Inconvenient Conscience,” at <http://www.firstthings.com/>.

them or not do them. Man is a free agent. His actions stem from his reason, and whether he does an action or not is entirely up to him. Even in the case of coercion, such as a Christian who experiences persecution and the pressure to deny his faith at the cost of death, he still retains the autonomous choice to either apostatize or die a martyr's death.¹⁸⁰ The options available may be limited, but that choice belongs to him. Only in the cases when one is physically forced to do something or is mentally ill is one not free; however, when one is forced, the action would not be predicated of that person. If one acts as the subject, one's actions are free, whatever amount of pressure is on that person's will to move in one direction or another.

Acknowledging that God's law is the objective rule against which man's actions gain or lose their moral value, it becomes clear that as a free agent, man is endowed by God both with the revelation to know his law, and with the power to embrace or resist that law. The trouble today's society has with such a concept revolves around the word "freedom." Merriam Webster Dictionary assigns the following definitions to "freedom":

1. The absence of necessity, coercion, or constraint in choice or action
2. Liberation from slavery or restraint or from the power of another: INDEPENDENCE

¹⁸⁰ Granted, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states that "Imputability and responsibility for an action can be diminished or even nullified by ignorance, inadvertence, duress, fear, habit, inordinate attachments, and other psychological or social factors" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §1735.), but that "Every act directly willed is imputable to its author" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §1736.). Our purpose here is to distinguish between external and internal freedom. Thanks to our interior, spiritual freedom, human persons can choose what kind of person they want to be. The heart, "beyond the grasp of...others, is the place of truth, where we choose life or death" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §2563.). It is this sense of freedom which drives our "fundamental option," that ultimate choice for God or against him, and our lifelong pilgrimage of faith. This deepest sense of freedom is experienced by all persons, regardless of their circumstances in life. Brady's example of Victor Frankl highlights that even under the worst forces of repression, Frankl recognized that his fundamental freedom of the heart remained. He laid claim to that "'last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way'" (Brady, *Be Good & Do Good*, 49.).

3. The quality or state of being exempt or released usually from something onerous¹⁸¹

These definitions describe freedom as a kind of autonomy. One is only free, in this sense, if there are no external pressures or forces. It is the absence of restriction, the capacity and right to do whatever I want, whenever I want.

We can talk about freedom in both external terms, as emphasized in this modern-day definition, and in terms of internal manifestations, such as freedom to orient one's life toward God or against God. However, in order to demonstrate the dependence freedom has upon truth, we turn to the Thomistic understanding of freedom as "rooted in the two spiritual faculties of intellect and will".¹⁸² It is this structure that signifies what it means for man to be made in the image of God.¹⁸³

We begin by acknowledging happiness as man's final end. Aquinas taught that happiness as "the final end could not be the object of choice, for it was the primordial energy of the will which caused and directed all choices."¹⁸⁴ This means that all our choices and actions result from and direct us towards our final end of happiness. We do not have the option to *not* want happiness;¹⁸⁵ the desire for it is part of our makeup as human persons.

Moreover, Aquinas taught that with this natural ordering of the human person toward happiness come the natural inclinations of the intellect toward the truth and of the will toward the good. Again, we cannot help but desire these, for they are natural and instinctual, internal

¹⁸¹ "Freedom," Merriam-Webster, accessed August 18, 2017, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/freedom>.

¹⁸² Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, 223.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 387.

¹⁸⁵ "In itself the final end [of happiness] could not be the object of choice, for it was the primordial energy of the will which caused and directed all choices" (Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, 387.).

movements. “The spiritual hunger that impels us toward truth, love, and goodness...is the fundamental desire, the spiritual instinct...that underlies all choices.”¹⁸⁶ We are “free” to act this way or that, but we are not “free” to pursue evil for evil’s sake. We will always choose what we choose—good or evil—for the sake of a good, whether that good is real or merely perceived.

Now we encounter a potentially confusing use of terms. For Aquinas, “freedom” and “liberty” are rooted in our inclinations to truth and goodness.

It is precisely because we cannot help aspiring to goodness and truth that we possess limitless freedom, at least potentially, opening onto infinite truth and goodness...the capacity for truth and goodness...is the essence of our freedom.¹⁸⁷

This means that the better our apprehension of truth and goodness in our object (meaning, the closer our apprehension resembles objective reality and truth), the better our moving toward them—choosing and willing them—moves us toward our ultimate goal of happiness in God. Here, we see the compatibility and inseparability of the subjective and objective realities of conscience at work. The more my subjectivity aligns with the objective truth, the better my choices are and the freer I become through my good acts.

If Aquinas uses “freedom” to describe “the orientation to the highest”,¹⁸⁸ then what would he make of the scenario wherein someone uses “freedom” in the modern sense to move toward something lower? Aquinas says that we use our freedom rightly when we use it to advance toward our end of happiness and God. On the other hand, “it comes of the defect of liberty for [free will] to choose anything by turning away from the order of the end; and this is

¹⁸⁶ Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, 385.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 387.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 389.

to sin.”¹⁸⁹ So freedom for Aquinas does not equal the capacity to choose any option available. Rather, freedom is higher and more real when it is used to advance toward one’s end; it is lower and defective when it is used to turn away and impede one’s end.

Not only is one more free when one chooses good over evil, but St. Thomas even goes so far as to say that the *inability* to sin is a greater form of freedom than the ability to sin. He states, “there is greater liberty of will in the angels, who cannot sin, than there is in ourselves, who can sin.”¹⁹⁰ Based on the same principle that one is most free when one chooses that which accords with one’s end, angels can be considered more free than man *because* they are limited to only doing good and acting according to their end.

This way of using the term “freedom” is, admittedly, very different from the popular notion of freedom. It does, however, make sense of the principle that genuine freedom hinges on truth. Because we are naturally oriented toward truth and goodness, ultimately striving for happiness and God, our inherent desire and ability to achieve these ends is the basis for our freedom. We become less free to be who we were made to be when we choose evil; such a defect of our freedom violates our nature and ruins our end.

Freedom of Indifference and Freedom for Excellence

Servais Pinckaers distinguishes between two types of freedom: Freedom of Indifference and Freedom for Excellence. The former coincides with the popular notion of freedom today. According to Freedom of Indifference, man is free when he has the uninhibited “power to choose between contraries.”¹⁹¹ It is a person’s will functioning without any external coercion, even from

¹⁸⁹ *ST*, I, q. 62, a. 8, ad. 3, trans. English Dominican Province.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁹¹ Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, 375.

that same person's reason. This view excludes the role of natural inclinations to truth and goodness in acts of freedom, as these infringe upon the indifferent quality or stance of the will toward the object. Virtually *anything* that influences the will inhibits freedom—even past acts and habits. Certainly law “appears as an external restraint and a limitation of freedom”.¹⁹² One is most free, according to Freedom of Indifference, when each act stands alone. Even if one has the habit or routine of going to bed at 9:00pm, for instance, my choice to do so tonight must be considered an isolated act, free from the influence of my habit. I must be just as “free” to go to bed at another time, in order to make the choice “indifferently”.

Freedom for Excellence, on the other hand, incorporates the Thomistic principles explained above. While Freedom of Indifference is founded upon the indifferent choice between contraries, the will functioning independently of reason, Freedom for Excellence hinges upon the harmonious cooperation of reason and will. Man is most free when he uses this power to advance toward the perfection of his being—his own *excellence*. Rather than acting independently or exclusive of inclinations, Freedom for Excellence relies on and fully incorporates the natural inclinations. Man is spontaneously propelled toward those good things that are in accord with his nature, and in pursuing them, he achieves his own excellence. Acts are integrated and share a continuity, collectively advancing man toward or away from his end.

Virtue and vice belong to this view, as man's repeated good or evil acts either advance man in goodness or evil. Additionally, law is a welcomed source for educating oneself according to the truth.¹⁹³ Knowing what is good for my nature liberates me to act accordingly. Moreover,

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Pinckaers notes that law is “progressively interiorized through the virtues of justice and charity” (Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, 375). This calls to mind the ancient Hebrew sense of *leb* from Chapter 1, in which we noted that the external law of God was internalized in the heart of man.

having formed habits of affirming my personal dignity in such good acts, I interiorize the law through repeated and continuous acts of virtue.¹⁹⁴ Opposite the theory that freedom is manifest in isolated choices between contraries, my freedom is rather manifest in “moral progress in virtue...a clearer knowledge and a clearer taste for the good.”¹⁹⁵ The more good I do, the easier it becomes to discern and do good next time. There is a further, very beautiful result of this process:

Thus there is formed within us what St. Thomas calls a “connaturality” for the good, a special capacity conferred by each virtue in its own setting, which allows us to discern and esteem the good with swift, sure, judgment, often more penetrating than the reasonings of the learned.¹⁹⁶

This is far from legalism or casuistry, whereby morality focuses on the barebone application of rules to actions. This is about allowing oneself to be gradually conformed to the good. We determine ourselves in the good¹⁹⁷ by choosing it and aligning ourselves with it. It is about *becoming good*. The continuity of our good acts grounds us in the good, and enhances our freedom to act for the good.¹⁹⁸ We are therefore most free when we form ourselves according to good laws—natural and divine—and allow our spontaneous inclinations to guide us toward the good, ultimately to our personal perfection and happiness.

¹⁹⁴ Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, 375.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 418.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁷ Virtuous acts render both the objective outcome of the act and the acting subject good. (Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, 368.). See also: Spinello, *The Encyclicals of John Paul II: An Introduction and Commentary*, 30, 33.

¹⁹⁸ This idea of forming and practicing virtue coincides with our previous discussion on prudence, “the mold and ‘mother’ of all the other cardinal virtues” (Josef Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), 3.), whereby we educate ourselves, discern our specific good, and act accordingly. The more we do this, the sense of connaturality is enhanced within us, and the less we have to deliberate next time because truth and goodness are further interiorized in us.

While noting the positive effects of repeated good acts: strengthening of virtue, connaturality with the good, and overall progression toward the ultimate goal of happiness, we ought to recognize the other side of the coin: that of the consequences of evil acts. In the Thomistic view, acts are not isolated but deeply integrated and interrelated. This means positive consequences for our good acts and negative consequences for our evil acts. Repeated choices for good results in connaturality with the good, which “repeated acts of injustice deform the judgment even as they corrupt the will.”¹⁹⁹ Not only do we create obstacles for ourselves in the way of our ultimate end, but we disable ourselves, truly limiting ourselves, in our ability to return to the good after abandoning it. We need our judgment to be sound and our will to be free in order to pursue the good, so by repeatedly choosing evil, *we lose our freedom*, since we are no longer even capable (i.e., “free”) of judging and choosing well.

As discussed above, in order to ensure that we are apprehending the truth and acting well is through the “checks and balances” of the law. We discussed several sources of law above. Natural law is our internal share in God’s wisdom. It demands that we affirm and respect our nature and dignity as human persons. Divine law is revealed to us in several forms, including the Commandments of the Old Testament and the New Law of love found in the Gospel. Additionally, we access the divine law through the living Magisterium of the Church.

In our moral judgments, we seek “the reality and truth of the good presented...The law intervenes here to enlighten the reason as to the nature and character of things.”²⁰⁰ Again, we do not author truth; we seek and discern it. We are fallible and require the external corrective of the law. We benefit from the opportunity to ask ourselves, “Is this in keeping with the

¹⁹⁹ Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, 419.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 420.

Commandments, the love of Christ, and the teachings of the Church?” and “Does this affirm the dignity of the human person?” The more we answer in the affirmative to these questions, the freer our acts are; thus, the more we determine ourselves in the good, and the more “spontaneously” good we become.

Alleged Conflict Between Freedom and Law

Again, the purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate that human freedom is compatible with God’s law; in fact, “*Human freedom and God's law meet and are called to intersect*”.²⁰¹ Both are given to man so that he may attain his ultimate fulfillment—happiness in God.²⁰² By forming his conscience according to God’s law as his objective standard, man does not inhibit his freedom, but attains to true freedom—freedom in the truth.²⁰³

John Paul writes with great clarity in *Veritatis Splendor* that:

... man is certainly free, inasmuch as he can understand and accept God's commands. And he possesses an extremely far-reaching freedom, since he can eat "of every tree of the garden". But his freedom is not unlimited: it must halt before the "tree of the knowledge of good and evil", for it is called to accept the moral law given by God. In fact, human freedom finds its authentic and complete fulfilment precisely in the acceptance of that law. God, who alone is good, knows perfectly what is good for man, and by virtue of his very love proposes this good to man in the commandments.²⁰⁴

²⁰¹ *Veritatis Splendor*, §41.

²⁰² Aquinas distinguishes between man’s last end as the thing itself which we desire, ultimately God, and the attainment and enjoyment of that end (God), which results in happiness. (*ST*, I-II, q. 3, a. 1, co., trans. English Dominican Province.)

²⁰³ *Veritatis Splendor*, §64.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, §35.

Therefore, when we say that man is free, we do not mean that he can or should do whatever he wants, whenever he wants, as Freedom of Indifference would recommend. Instead, man's freedom is both far-reaching and limited. There are things man *should not* use his freedom to do.²⁰⁵

The final sentence from John Paul's passage above highlights the reason that law does not infringe upon man's freedom but enables it. This is because God knows what is best for man. God's law is consistent with man's greatest good, with man's excellence. This is the foundation of Freedom for Excellence. We could put it this way: that by limiting his freedom to do whatever he wants whenever he wants, man is made more free to become excellent by pursuing only those ends which advance him toward perfection.

Conclusion

In this chapter, our aim was to arrive at an understanding of both law and freedom, in order to demonstrate the dependence of genuine freedom upon objective truth. We discussed the sources of this truth in both natural and divine laws, noting the various means we have to access divine law in particular. Throughout the Old Testament, God revealed his commandments to the Hebrew people as an invitation for a personal relationship between Himself and man. In the New Testament, the commandment to love was emphasized, elevating all commandments to the new standard of loving God and neighbor as Christ loved us. After Christ founded the Church, her

²⁰⁵ Cormac Burke distinguishes between freedom as a right and freedom as a power. "Freedom is not the freedom to do what one likes; it is the freedom to do good... [Man] has the power, but not the right, to use his freedom to do wrong. He is able, but not entitled, to do wrong... No one has the right to do wrong. Further, no one has the right to go wrong - even if it is just internally or unconsciously. He has the power to go wrong, but not the right" (Cormac Burke, *Authority and Freedom in the Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988), 47). While we may have the power to do something, we may not have the right to do it. Yet because we use "freedom" to refer to both power and right, it is important to emphasize that the two concepts of "power" and "right" are not actually equivalent.

teaching office, the Magisterium, has served us as a constant and living source of God's directive authority and divine law concerning the myriad moral issues we face in our contemporary settings.

After our discussion on law as the guardian and source of objective truth, we turned to freedom as our subjective contact with his truth. We are "free" to live according to the truth, but in a more genuine sense, John Paul teaches that we are "free" insofar as we move towards real goods. Freedom concerns more than simply outward hindrances to our autonomy. True freedom entails inward freedom—freedom to act in ways that advance me in my personal good, which is always toward God. Genuine freedom is freedom *from* sin and freedom *for* that excellence for which I was created.

Having discussed the notion of true freedom, it becomes clear that it cannot exist without access to objective truth. If I am only free insofar as I can choose to advance toward God, then I need to know *how* to move in this way. I need clarity as to which choices are consistent with God's commandment of love especially. Even beyond knowledge, I need to *desire* to move in this way. Thus, continuous conversion of heart toward God is required, over and above the commitment to follow God's commands.

Chapter 4: Reconciling the Experienced Manifestations of Conscience with Thomistic Tradition

Introduction

St. Thomas' teachings on freedom and Pinckaers' philosophy of Freedom for Excellence give context for all three of our concepts of conscience discussed in Chapter 2. In this final chapter, we will revisit conscience under the titles of "voice," "judgment," and "process," and apply the principles of law and freedom found in Chapter 3 to these manifestations of conscience, thereby arriving at a more comprehensive understanding of conscience in light of Thomistic tradition.

Natural Inclinations and the Voice of Conscience

We noted earlier the experience we all have of an interior sense that we ought to do something. It may not be accompanied by a thought process, and it can be rather impulsive and unexplained. Here, I argue that this inner voice of conscience coincides with the internal workings of our natural inclinations.²⁰⁶

Our natural inclinations to truth and goodness are those impulsive and spontaneous undercurrents of our will, driving us to desire certain things—the "right" thing. They influence us involuntarily, causing a certain instinct for moral action. This is the same way that we talk

²⁰⁶ We may also examine this notion of "conscience as inner voice" alongside St. Thomas's "interioris instinctus." This latter term can be found in his *Summa Theologiae* referring to something inside man that spurs him to act. (*ST*, I-II, q. 9, a. 5, ad. 2, trans. English Dominican Province.) Perhaps this inner voice can be likened or even credited to God speaking to us from within. Aquinas states, "the lowest degree of prophecy is when a man, by an inward instinct ("interior instinctu"), is moved to perform some outward action." (*ST*, II-II, q. 174, a. 3, co. trans. English Dominican Province. Latin added.) Aquinas's teaching seems highly compatible with the description in *Gaudium et Spes* of conscience as God's voice echoing in the depths of man (*Gaudium et Spes*, §16.).

about the inner voice of conscience. I “feel” like I “should” do (or not do) something, and I may not be able to explain it. It is impulsive, implicit, and relentless! There is something absolute and determinative about it. It carries authority and threatens that I am bad or wrong if I disobey. This authority is not my own but from another,²⁰⁷ and it threatens because it is my very nature—the nature from which both natural law and my inclinations to abide by this law spring—that I will violate if I disobey. If I persist in actions against this voice, I will destroy my nature and preclude the possibility of attaining ultimate happiness.

Natural inclinations, as well as our conscience as an inner voice, can lead us into error. While we are inclined toward truth and goodness, we also have limitations and the influence of passions, and these can cause us to mistake a false or evil object as true or good. “The gap between the known good and the real good is at the root of sin and can be expressed by the distinction between the ‘real’ and ‘apparent’ good.”²⁰⁸ Whether the apprehended good is the real good or not, we are inclined to it, as it appears subjectively to benefit us. “The entire force of temptation lies precisely in the appearance of good with which it captivates the mind and heart.”²⁰⁹ It *looks* good, and therefore it is desirable.

Let us take up an example used in the section in Chapter 2 on *Conscience: the voice that speaks to our depths*. Staying employed is a good thing, yet at the moment when the alarm clock rings, the passion of sloth may kick in, and there is another good—the good of sleep—that beckons us to pursue it. While we know that we should get out of bed, we are tempted to stay in

²⁰⁷ “Saint Bonaventure teaches that ‘conscience is like God's herald and messenger; it does not command things on its own authority, but commands them as coming from God's authority, like a herald when he proclaims the edict of the king. This is why conscience has binding force’” (*Veritatis Splendor*, §58.).

²⁰⁸ Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, 419.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 419.

bed due to “the appearance of good”²¹⁰ posed by our sloth. Without extensive, if any, deliberation, we have conflicting “impulses,” and conscience has the challenge of distinguishing between them and choosing the greater good, if not the only good, available.

The point here is that according to the Thomistic understanding of freedom, having a habit of promptly turning off our alarm clocks and getting out of bed would be the image of true freedom. The free man would not cave to those lesser goods that get in the way of the greater goods. He would not limit his true potential for fulfillment (keeping his job, his income, his career path, financial security, etc.) for the sake of shorter-term, “apparent goods,” (satisfying the immediate desire for a little more sleep). Even in small and somewhat trivial dilemmas, we can see that there is an objective reality according to which we must submit ourselves. There is an order of goods, and the good of staying employed aligns me with my personal excellence, while a few extra minutes of sleep does not. For this very reason, conquering my temptation to take those few extra minutes of sleep, i.e., self-mastery, is so praiseworthy. By disciplining myself, I advance in maturity and selflessness; I develop my authentic freedom and my “ability to perform actions of real excellence.”²¹¹

Conscience as Practical Judgment

St. Thomas Aquinas defines conscience as “knowledge applied to an individual case.”²¹² It is the act of applying natural or divine law to a particular situation.²¹³ The interplay of freedom and law may be obvious here, but we will lay it out clearly nonetheless. In the Thomistic sense,

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Ibid., 360.

²¹² *ST*, I, q. 79, a. 13, co., trans. English Dominican Province.

²¹³ *Veritatis Splendor*, §59.

man is not free unless he is moving toward his ultimate end, and therefore making choices for the real good. He needs to apprehend truth and goodness rightly, therefore, in order to apply objective truth to his subjective reality. Our reason can err, and to avoid going astray, law is there to guide us, to inform us of the truth, and to correct us when we do err. We are most free when we perform correct acts of conscience.²¹⁴

Here it would serve us well to turn to an extensive passage from John Paul's *Veritatis Splendor*:

Human freedom and God's law meet and are called to intersect, in the sense of man's free obedience to God and of God's completely gratuitous benevolence towards man. Hence obedience to God is not, as some would believe, a *heteronomy*, as if the moral life were subject to the will of something all-powerful, absolute, extraneous to man and intolerant of his freedom... Others speak, and rightly so, of *theonomy*, or *participated theonomy*, since man's free obedience to God's law effectively implies that human reason and human will participate in God's wisdom and providence. By forbidding man to "eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil", God makes it clear that man does not originally possess such "knowledge" as something properly his own, but only participates in it by the light of natural reason and of Divine Revelation, which manifest to him the requirements and the promptings of eternal wisdom. Law must therefore be considered an expression of divine wisdom: by submitting to the law, freedom submits to the truth of creation.²¹⁵

²¹⁴ Both subjectively sincere and objectively true, as discussed in Chapter 1.

²¹⁵ *Veritatis Splendor*, §41.

In order to perform the act of conscience, applying knowledge of objective truth to our specific scenario, we must access objective truth and be sure of its objectivity. As noted above, there are principles that are inherent in us, first principles of synderesis. However, there is extensive knowledge to which we do not have natural access and for which we therefore need an external source of wisdom or law to inform us. This is especially the case for that revelation needed in order to know, love, and be one with God; hence the several instances of divine law explained above. Additionally, in the process of reasoning, both speculatively and practically, man can err and apply false or defective knowledge to his situation; following through, he therefore performs a bad or imperfect act. Such a mistake, or especially a consciously evil act, impedes man from his ultimate end of happiness, and therefore inhibits his freedom to become the perfect version of himself through excellence.

Genuine freedom is found neither through heteronomy, whereby we adhere to God's commands while repressing our personal autonomy,²¹⁶ nor through absolute autonomy, by which we disregard all external sources of truth that may influence our will. Genuine freedom engages our autonomy and is reached when one fulfills the moral obligation "to seek the truth and to adhere to it once it is known."²¹⁷

Law, Freedom, and Conscience as a Lifelong Process

Lastly, we take up the notion of conscience as a lifelong process and its relation to both law and freedom. Perhaps the discussions of virtue and connaturality most aptly describe this relationship.

²¹⁶ "Hence man's dignity demands that he act according to a knowing and free choice that is personally motivated and prompted from within, not under blind internal impulse nor by mere external pressure" (*Gaudium et Spes*, §17.).

²¹⁷ *Veritatis Splendor*, §34.

Pinckaers defines virtue as “a personal capacity for action, the fruit of a series of fine actions, a power for progress and perfection... virtue develops the person and his actions... through the power of virtue, and man achieves works bearing the stamp of his unique quality as a moral person.”²¹⁸ Virtue implies an ongoing process, chronologically, yes, during which man performs acts congruous with the end of perfection. It is both the fruit of and power for moral goodness. He achieves moral identity through the virtues he accomplishes, and each subsequent act bears his increasingly-defined moral signature.

Pinckaers notes the connection of virtue with fidelity—fidelity to truth and goodness. “Fidelity is necessary for virtue’s growth, and shares its power of renewal. In sum, it is freedom’s fidelity to itself, to its qualitative source, the natural sense of truth and goodness.”²¹⁹ Freedom can only be true to what it is in the cooperative structure of reason and will as they apprehend and choose objective truth and goodness. Moreover, Pinckaers notes the spiritual character of fidelity, meanwhile upholding spiritual fidelity’s dependence upon material fidelities: “Since we are body and soul we need both, as a support and as concrete material for the exercise of various virtues and progress in them. Moral fidelity will therefore incorporate the more material fidelities and integrate them.”²²⁰

What does all of this mean for conscience as a lifelong process? Conscience is about virtuous acting, and virtue is about fidelity to truth and goodness. While we have moral fidelity in a spiritual, intangible way, this is only established through our concrete acts of fidelity to truth

²¹⁸ Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, 364.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Ibid.

and goodness. These tangible acts solidify the quality of fidelity in us, and thereby establish virtue in us, and these empower us to perform further acts of virtue and fidelity.

All of this is a process, one that never ceases. It works for better or for ill, for virtue or for vice. Again, we are only genuinely free when we choose the real good, that good which advances us toward our perfection of happiness and communion with God. While we have access to the real good through natural law, further research is often needed depending upon the situation. Natural law only reveals limited amounts of wisdom, however, falling short of the divine wisdom required for us to know truths of salvation. To access these, divine law as revealed by God in Scripture, Tradition, and the universal Magisterium of the Church is required. Attaining knowledge found therein, and applying it faithfully time after time without ceasing in fidelity to truth and goodness, is a lifelong process.

John Paul highlights the importance of conversion in pursuing truth and goodness. Knowledge alone is not enough, he says; “what is essential is a sort of ‘*connaturality*’ *between man and the true good*. Such a connaturality is rooted in and develops through the virtuous attitudes of the individual himself.”²²¹ Through the process of virtue-building, specifically the theological virtues and the cardinal virtues, man acts according to the good and thereby becomes good. Connaturality develops between man and the good, which further employs man to do good and to find his freedom in good acts perfective of his nature—hence, “freedom ‘in’ the truth”.²²² Virtue-building, attaining connaturality with the good, and being converted to the good from within, are all processes of formation and deep-seated maturation for conscience.

²²¹ *Veritatis Splendor*, §64.

²²² *Ibid.*

Becoming good is long, sometimes grueling. Especially in cases when our subjective understanding is at odds with objective laws of revelation, fidelity to objective truth is difficult and requires humility. Cardinal Pell prepares us for the process of conversion and humble submission required of the serious Catholic:

[I]f we disagree with the Church’s message so seriously that we cannot follow its terms, we cannot reinvent that message to make it easier or more palatable. Rather, we enter into a period of prayer, study, and enquiry to try to understand the message and to understand why we find ourselves opposed to it. And if the matter that puzzles us is one of a binding Church teaching or a central moral teaching, then this may prove a lifetime’s work.²²³

We never cease to create ourselves morally. So long as we live, we are acting persons, using our consciences and therefore determining ourselves for good or evil.

Conclusion

We end this paper by revisiting the three manifestations of conscience that we discussed in chapter 2—“voice,” “judgment,” and “process”—in order to ground them in the context of St. Thomas Aquinas’ teachings on freedom. We found that each of these ways of understanding conscience is consistent with Thomism and with the teachings of the Catholic Church. Conscience as a voice or impulse within us is much like those natural inclinations in us that urge us to do good and to avoid evil. Whether they are identical entities or distinct yet intimately functioning internal drives, both the voice of conscience and the natural inclinations help us to do the “right thing” and even offer a sort of subconscious discernment between goods.

²²³ Pell, “The Inconvenient Conscience,” at <http://www.firstthings.com/>.

The dependent relationship of freedom upon law is perhaps most obvious when considering conscience as a practical judgment. As we perform acts of conscience, we apply objective knowledge as found in divine and natural laws to our subjective, personal experiences. Our genuine freedom rests upon how closely we follow the commands of God, the greatest of which is the commandment to love.

Lastly, conscience as a lifelong process is illuminated by the Thomistic teachings on virtue and connaturality. As we do good, we become good; we become *connatural* with the good and thus inclined to do *more* good. This relationship of connaturality is gradually formed and fostered. Likewise, my growth in virtue is a lifelong process, forming my conscience and enabling it to continue down this path of goodness. The more virtuous acts I perform, the more virtuous I become, and thus the more able I am to perform virtuous acts in the future. It is a cycle of interrelated goodness that feeds itself. Throughout the process of life, we freely seek the good (the truth of which is known and safeguarded by law), and in choosing it, we are grounded more firmly in the good, strengthening our ability to recognize and choose good in the future. This is the lifelong process of conscience and of growing in virtue and connaturality with the good.

Conclusion

Introduction

The endeavor of this paper is to understand the meaning of conscience, and in so doing to argue that genuine freedom is based on truth. Below are brief summaries of each chapter, with a concluding statement in which we demonstrate that the goal of the paper is achieved.

Chapter 1: The Historical Development of the Concept of Conscience

In the first chapter, we seek an appreciation for the developing meaning of conscience from the earliest records of its mention found in ancient Greek and Latin writings. Here, conscience refers to both antecedent and consequent scenarios, both positive and negative acts, and is even identified with the voice of God.

Next, as we explore the notion of conscience in Old Testament texts, we discover that the Hebrew term *leb* or “heart” translates most closely with *conscience*. By *leb*, they mean man’s inner core, the source of his actions and the locus of his personal orientation to God. All of ancient Hebrew morality, we learn, revolves around God’s commandments; the quality of their conscience relies upon their loyalty to God both in their hearts and in their actions.

After the Old Testament, we undertake the notion of conscience as found in the New Testament. Here, *conscience* takes on greater meaning, as it is rooted in the context of Christian faith. Faith entails an entire world view and religious attitude for the Christian, and his actions must follow suit. Thus, conscience becomes inseparable from faith. The integrity of one demands the integrity of the other; living the Christian faith entails walking faithfully with God.

In the Postmodern era, the common understanding of *conscience* shifted. Up to that point, objective standards were valued as the norm for subjective understanding. With this new emphasis on subjectivity and individualism, however, conscience became more associated with personal experience and opinion while objective rules and standards became associated with oppression of freedom and autonomy. While sincerity and rectitude are both important, the value of sincerity became disproportionately emphasized to the point of eclipsing the value of objective rectitude.

We end this chapter with a discussion on sincere conscience and vincible error. We conclude that sincerity is essential to a good conscience; however, we must not stop here. We must always strive to educate ourselves according to the truth so as to avoid error.

Chapter 2: Understanding the Meaning of Conscience, Its Manifestations, and Man's Responsibility to Form It

When we refer to conscience, we commonly think of it under the manifestations of an interior voice, a practical judgment or act, and of a lifelong journey. Each of these notions give us insight into what conscience *is*, and in this chapter, we examine each of these categories in detail.

Conscience as a voice, we find, is spontaneous, personal, and carries an imperative character to either pursue or avoid a particular action. This category is mysterious, because it can nudge us without our conscious deliberation, although its purpose is to aid us in doing what is right and good. Conscience as an act or a practical judgment, as St. Thomas defines it, is the act of applying universal knowledge or *synderesis* to a particular situation. It is where objective truth and subjective experience meet. Conscience as a lifelong process of faith involves growth in

virtue, especially prudence. It involves the stages “Look, Judge, and Act”,²²⁴ and it is in this process that we realize we are never finished growing in our knowledge of truth or in our perfection in pursuing the good. Throughout our lives, we must continuously seek conversion of heart and mind, reorienting ourselves, choosing what we know to be good with every choice we make. By this process, our consciences take shape, and we determine ourselves for good or for evil.

We add “of faith” at the end of “lifelong process” because as Christians, our actions are always informed by our faith and the truths found therein. Conscience is inseparable from our life of faith, and we are therefore on a lifelong process of perfecting our internal disposition and outward actions so that they align with the faith we proclaim.

Additionally, within the section on conscience as a process, we take up the topic of fundamental option, supporting the claims that John Paul II makes in *Veritatis Splendor*. While we make a fundamental option for or against God, our actions must be consistent with this overarching “option.” Our actions give concrete shape to our fundamental choice, and through our acts our fundamental orientation to God is either confirmed or lost.

Next, we make some useful clarifications regarding mistaken views of conscience. Since subjectivism is so prevalent today, it is helpful to call to mind that conscience is not merely a feeling or a personal sense about something. People often defend their actions with the justification that they felt it was right in their conscience. However, conscience is not a feeling; it is a judgment made according to the knowledge one has at the time. While we did discuss conscience as an inner voice carrying imperative character, we were also sure to note that we are

²²⁴ Brady, *Be Good & Do Good*, 154.

prone to err in our perceptions of what we ought to do in a given instant. It is not enough to have a personal sense that something is right. The “tribunal”²²⁵ of truth is objective and lies in God’s wisdom, not in our own.

We end this chapter discussing our responsibility to both follow and form our consciences; the former responsibility implying the latter. Conscience commands as from God’s own authority;²²⁶ we are all familiar with its binding force. However, since we are prone to err, and since we are required to follow our sincere conscience even when it does err, the need for formation is obvious. Thus, we see that our subjective experience requires objective truth as discovered in and safeguarded by laws, which are then taken up in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3: The Components of Conscience: Subjective Freedom and Objective Truth

In the third chapter, we explore the role of conscience with respect to both freedom and the law. The purpose of this chapter is to establish the dependence of freedom upon truth, which is found in and safeguarded by natural and divine laws. Natural law, which advances us in our nature, can be found within the heart of man, while we depend upon divine revelation to learn divine law, which is required for salvation.

In the Old Testament, we find several cases in which God calls the Hebrew people to himself. He bids them to obey his commandments so that the covenant between them may thrive. Their obedience to his commands is the condition upon which their relationship is based. Because of this, the morality of the Hebrew people revolves around these commandments, as we saw also in Chapter 1. Not only is outward obedience required, but so is the inward disposition

²²⁵ *Veritatis Splendor*, §32.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, §58.

of the heart. God does not want robotic obedience, but the whole person. This is the message time and again of the prophets, who called for conversion of the heart.

In the New Testament, we discover the major theme of the New Law, which is God's commandment to love as Christ loved. This commandment both transcends and includes all of the commandments of God, and it is now extended not only to God but to our neighbors as well. We must strive for an inward disposition of love toward God and to our neighbor, loving them through our actions and in our hearts, to the boundless and unconditional degree that Christ loved us.

The final source of divine law we discuss in this chapter is the Magisterium of the Catholic Church, which is a living and universal witness of God's teaching authority. Through the Magisterium, God invites us to live and act in ways consistent with a relationship with him. Our primary aim in life ought to be advancing in this relationship and becoming more perfect and holy—more like God. The Magisterium is God's gift to us; it is his authentic and enduring voice speaking reliable guidance for difficult and morally ambiguous, contemporary issues.

After discussing the law, we turned to freedom, distinguishing between external and internal freedoms as well as Pinckaers' "Freedom of Indifference" and "Freedom for Excellence." Following St. Thomas Aquinas and St. John Paul II, our definition of freedom is not just man's ability to choose between contraries, as Freedom of Indifference suggests; rather, genuine freedom rests in man's ability to advance in goodness and to choose to follow God's commands, especially the commandment of love. We use our freedom properly when we choose the good, since only in these acts do we become more excellently who we are. This is the meaning of Freedom for Excellence, and it is this understanding of freedom that is consistent with and promotes the growth of freedom.

This chapter ends with a clarification that freedom and law are not opposed to one another, as Freedom of Indifference and modern values would propose. We do not accept that genuine freedom consists in doing as we please when we please, while we do accept that there are things we ought not to use our freedom to do—things that would ultimately enslave us and inhibit our growth in goodness and excellence. It is upon these foundational understandings of freedom and truth that our claim that the two are in harmony with one another and that the former requires the latter for proper functioning and thriving rests. Only by limiting ourselves to those acts that are good for us are we authentically free.

Chapter 4: Reconciling the Experienced Manifestations of Conscience with Thomistic Tradition

We end this paper with Chapter 4, in which we draw connections between those manifestations by which conscience is best known, discussed in Chapter 2 with themes found in Thomistic notions of freedom and law, discussed in Chapter 3. Conscience as a voice can be closely related with the Thomist teaching on natural inclinations. Both the voice within us and these natural inclinations direct us with authority towards the greatest perceived good. In both cases, however, we can err, and this is why law is still required to preserve the integrity of our actions. The voice of our conscience directs us to do the “right thing,” and our natural inclinations direct us to seek that which we judge as good. In our freedom, we move towards that which is good, affirming the relationship between our freedom to choose and the law which guarantees the truth and informs our choices.

Second, we take up conscience as a practical judgment, noting that the role of conscience, according to St. Thomas, is that of freely applying knowledge of objective truth to our personal experience. Knowledge of the truth is prerequisite, again, to preserve the integrity of our freedom. John Paul uses the phrase “participated theonomy” to describe the ideal functioning of

our free acts. We are not meant to suppress our autonomy and follow God's commands blindly and rigidly like robots. Nor, however, ought we elevate our autonomy so highly that we eclipse God's commands with our own decisions and subjective judgments. Rather, participated theonomy engages our reason and will, inviting us to embrace God's wisdom and to participate in it. We submit to God's law with the understanding and appreciation for its providential direction, trusting that it guides us rightly. We are often even able to inquire as to the reason behind the commandment, yet even in cases that we do not see the reasons, we are invited not to repress ourselves but to trust and submit ourselves to what we know is loving wisdom and providence. Thus our genuine freedom to follow God and pursue truth and goodness is founded upon objective truth and upon the means by which he reveals this truth.

Lastly, we discuss conscience as a lifelong process, and we liken this theme to St. Thomas' teaching on virtue and connaturality, which are also processes. As we grow in virtue, we thereby open ourselves up to further virtue. As we make good choices, we advance ourselves in the good, enabling ourselves to perceive truth and goodness and to choose them again and again. As a sort of by-product of this good behavior, a relationship of connaturality develops between us and goodness. It becomes more natural to choose the good; it is more "like" us or "befitting" that we choose the good. All of this forms our conscience in the good, strengthening it and perfecting us in our lifelong journey towards perfection.

Conclusion

After traversing the history of the notion of *conscience* and exploring several common understandings of conscience that coincide with Church teaching, we arrive at the conclusion that conscience is indeed the meeting place of our subjective freedom with the objective truth. Only when both subjective and objective aspects of conscience are employed in a balanced

manner is man genuinely free and able to advance in authentic goodness. Informed by both natural and divine law, man's conscience is given the direction it needs to attain to his greatest happiness and perfection in God.

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