

TOWARD A RECOVERY OF THE MORAL SENSE

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In 2008, Pope John Paul II's *Veritatis Splendor* marked its fifteenth anniversary. A critical task for philosophers and theologians alike in the light of *Veritatis Splendor* is the recovery of the moral sense, given its decline and obscuring in a culture that has also lost its religious sense.¹ The position a person takes toward the greatest of mysteries, that is, the mystery of God, is at the heart of every culture. Different cultures also involve different ways of pondering the mystery of the world, of the human person, and of giving expression to the transcendent dimension of human life. Present-day culture all too often has a very narrow sense of human life, because it emphasizes the physical and the psychic, not the divine. But in the midst of such a culture, at times characterized by a closed skepticism, there are also human beings marked by a restless incredulity and with these it is necessary to dialogue. Among them certainly there are those driven by the natural desire to know the truth, the kind of persons who, not having found God yet, possibly spend their time seeking Him because they do seek truth. An example of this restless incredulity can be found in the celebrated semiotician Umberto Eco. A recent translation of Eco's correspondence with Carlo Maria Cardinal Martini entitled *Belief or Unbelief?* recounts a discussion on various questions, including the ethical question. Eco frames his answer to Martini in terms of an ethics "born in the presence of the other."² Eco believes in a natural ethics that can match the principles of an ethics grounded on faith in transcendence. The purpose of this chapter is to show how an agnostic's understanding of ethics can be better understood as the intellect's desire for the truth and as "the work of the Law written in the hearts" of men. This will lead to a discussion of the moral sense as a capacity which all human beings have for recognizing the true good, a

¹ Pope John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor* (Boston: St. Paul Editions, 1993), no. 98, p. 120.

² Umberto Eco and Cardinal Martini, *Belief or Unbelief?*, translated by Minna Proctor (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2000), p. 89.

sense rooted in the religious sense, in man's relatedness to the other who is God. This capacity for recognition is in particular need of help in our culture, and as Christian academics I think that we can provide much needed help, through both word and deed.

Let me begin with a number of claims made by Eco; a universal semantics, that is, elementary notions common to everyone in the human race, provide for Eco the basis for an ethical system. The acceptance of this semantics enables us, for example, to respect others, including their needs and rights as physical and also thinking beings. He maintains that we can only understand and interpret ourselves through others; in fact, he speaks of "the other that is in us."³ Consciousness of the other's importance provides for Eco a strong foundation for ethical behavior, much as the existence of the totally other, that is God, would provide for the believer an unshakeable foundation for morality. What Eco terms a "secular ethics" is, according to him, a natural ethics, one that not even a believer would deny, and which does have sufficient impetus for virtue. The nonbeliever, like the believer, will know that he has done wrong and that he stands in need of correction and more importantly, of forgiveness. As Eco graphically puts it:

...a nonbeliever might think the evil he is doing in secret goes unseen. But keep in mind, if the nonbeliever thinks that no one is watching him from on high, he thereby knows--for this very reason--that no one will forgive him. Knowing he's done evil, his solitude will be infinite, his death desperate. This person is more likely than the believer to attempt to purify himself through public confession; he will ask forgiveness from others. He knows his predicament from the core of his being, and so he also knows in advance that he must forgive others. Otherwise how does one explain that nonbelievers are also capable of feeling remorse?⁴

It is interesting to find a prominent agnostic intellectual such as Eco speaking in this way; he considers his ethics to be animated by a deep religiosity, albeit a secular religiosity, which is based on "a sense of the

³ Ibid., p. 94. See also pp. 91-94.

⁴ Ibid., pp. 98-99.

sacred, of the finite, of investigation and expectation, of a communion with something greater—even in the absence of faith in a personal and provident divinity.”⁵ The principles of this natural ethics cannot be in disharmony with the principles of a supernatural ethics, which according to Eco, recognizes that “natural principles were carved into our hearts in anticipation of salvation.”⁶ Granted that men who hold to a natural ethics will not always act justly, Eco considers that even an ethics grounded on an absolute foundation does not keep believers from sinning, because the temptation to evil is found even in those who have a revealed notion of the good.

That a natural ethics can be the basis for a supernatural ethics should not be disputed, for grace builds on nature. Thomas Aquinas tells us that because the proper form of man is his rational soul, there is in every man a natural inclination to act according to reason, and this is to act according to virtue. Thus, our reason naturally directs us to act virtuously.⁷ But nature wounded by sin does not do all the good that it would have done in the state of original justice. Sin not only disorders our faculties, it also diminishes the natural tendency to virtue.⁸ The good of nature, however, is threefold, according to Aquinas, and the first good of nature, which consists in the principles out of which nature is constituted, was neither destroyed nor diminished by sin.⁹ Consequently, Aquinas says “virtue is natural to man according to a kind of beginning.”¹⁰ In human reason “are to be found instilled by nature certain naturally known principles of both knowledge and action, which are the nurseries of intellectual and moral virtues,” and in the will there is “a natural aptitude for good in accordance with reason.”¹¹ Because of these natural principles, which are the “seeds of the virtues” and are found in every man’s reason, we can understand

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

⁷ *ST I-II* 94.3c.

⁸ *ST I-II* 85.2c-3c.

⁹ *ST I-II* 85.1c.

¹⁰ *ST I-II* 63.1c.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

how someone like Oscar Wilde in his depraved period might see Martin of Tours cutting his cloak in half for a beggar as a noble or beautiful gesture, but a foolish one nonetheless.¹² The intelligibility and attractiveness of virtue is recognized and appreciated not only by the good man. As Aquinas says, “. . . although not all men have virtues in the complete habit, yet they have them according to certain seminal principles in the reason, in force of which principles the man who is not virtuous loves the virtuous man, as being in conformity with his own natural reason.”¹³

Aquinas’s argument enables us to understand Eco’s description of what happens in the person who commits evil, feels remorse and seeks to purify himself through the forgiveness of others. Just as a human being can project himself into the future and recognize the inappropriateness of a possible action through the use of his intellect, so he can also look back on the act and recognize its dishonorable character, consequently experiencing remorse, guilt, or shame. The experience of shame is found in the reasoning faculty. Shame shrinks from what is dishonorable itself, that is, from the morally bad act, which is not in consonance with human dignity, and not simply from its consequences.¹⁴ The remorse or shame experienced is evidence that the evil performed is not in harmony with reason. There is thus a rupture or disharmony that is produced within the human person as a result of a bad choice, and also a rupture in his ties to others. For this reason, Eco says that the man who does evil “knows his predicament from the core of his being.” It is in the nature of human spirit to see and know itself and its acts, to look toward the other and back upon itself—matter is incapable of this.¹⁵ The person is relational or dialogical in his very being. And so, when Eco says that ethics is “born in the presence of the other,” and that the experience of evil is known “from the core of his being,” the other cannot simply be other human persons such as himself, even if Eco says that “the ethical dimension

¹² I am indebted to my colleague Marie George for this example.

¹³ ST I-II 27.3 ad 4.

¹⁴ Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1384a24, 1384a14-16.

¹⁵ Joseph Ratzinger, “Concerning the Notion of Person in Theology,” *Communio* 17 (Fall, 1990): 451.

comes into play when the other arrives on the scene.”¹⁶ Rather, “in the core of his being” man is inherently moral and made for communion with that totally other, the ultimate true good who is God. While recognizing that the inner man needs purification and forgiveness from others for the evil committed, that he needs, as it were, to be known with approval, Eco’s reasoning does not go far enough.

In order better to understand the desperate and solitary situation of Eco’s nonbeliever, which may be characteristic of many people in our culture, we will refer to Aquinas’s distinction between synderesis and conscience found in his treatment of man’s intellectual powers in the *Summa Theologiae*. While our rational powers admit of opposite things, synderesis inclines us to the good only, and therefore Aquinas calls it a habit rather than a power, although he notes that some consider it to be a power higher than reason, while others say that it is reason itself, not as reason, but as nature.¹⁷ Just as speculative reason proceeds from speculative principles that are bestowed on us by nature, so practical reason proceeds from certain practical principles. Aquinas speaks of the first practical principles as belonging to synderesis, a special natural habit, which inclines us to the good and draws us away from evil. Synderesis provides us with a universal and unerring principle, in reference to which all human works are examined.¹⁸ Because of the permanent and unchangeable character of this practical principle, human knowledge participates to some extent in the same knowledge that exists in higher substances. The intellectual simplicity from which our reason moves due to the habit of first principles is similar to angelic knowing, which is said to be godlike since angels receive knowledge of truth without any movement or reasoning.¹⁹ Aquinas puts it more emphatically when he says: “... that something is known with certainty is due to the light of reason divinely implanted with us, by which God speaks within us.”²⁰

¹⁶ Eco and Martini, *Belief or Unbelief?*, pp. 93-94.

¹⁷ ST I 79.12c.

¹⁸ See DV 16.2c.

¹⁹ See DV 15.1c.

²⁰ DV 11.1 ad 13.

The important question is: How should this be understood in relation to synderesis? Aquinas says that synderesis is a habitual light which cannot be extinguished from the human soul, just as it is impossible to deprive the soul of the light of the agent intellect, through which the first principles in both speculative and practical matters are made known to us. This light belongs to the nature of the soul and by it the soul is intellectual. It is precisely the intellectual soul, the mind, or the understanding²¹ which is said to be formed by the first truth itself, as a copy is formed to the likeness of the exemplar;²² the intellectual soul or mind is thus said to be made in the image of God. Aquinas quotes Augustine in this regard who says, "The image of God exists in the mind, not because it has remembrance of itself, loves itself, and understands itself; but because it can also remember, love, and understand God by Whom it was made."²³ The remembrance of God, of which man's mind as image of God is capable, can help us better to understand the notion of synderesis, for it is possible to interpret the latter by means of the Platonic concept of *anamnesis* (that is, remembrance or recollection).²⁴

This concept is also in accordance with a certain Biblical anthropology; in his Epistle to the Romans, St. Paul says, "In truth, when the Gentiles, guided by natural reason, who have no law do what the Law prescribes, these having no law are a law unto themselves. They show the work of the Law written in their hearts. Their conscience bears witness to them."²⁵ A similar idea can be read in the monastic rules of St. Basil who says, "The love of God is not based on some discipline imposed on us from without, but rather is constitutively infused in our reason as a capacity and a necessity."²⁶ St. Basil even says that a "spark of divine love is lodged within us."²⁷ And

²¹ DV 15.1sc 5.

²² DV 18.1 ad 7.

²³ ST I 93.8sc.

²⁴ See Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Verdad, Valores, Poder*, translated and introduced by José Luis del Barco (Madrid: Rialp, 2000), pp. 64-74.

²⁵ Rom. 2:14-15.

²⁶ *Regulae fusius tractatae* Res 2, 1: PG 31, 908, quoted in Ratzinger, p. 66.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

since love of God is manifested in doing His will, in fulfilling His law, then the “spark of divine love” means that we have received in our mind—and not as something imposed from without—the capacity and disposition to do what the law prescribes. We can say with certainty that one thing is better than another because there is engraved in us, as it were, a fundamental understanding of the good.²⁸ There is thus inserted in us a primordial remembrance of the true and the good, of the true good, and in this remembrance there is a natural tendency of beings created in the image of God to do what is fitting to God. Man’s very being from its origin is in harmony with certain things and in contradiction with others.²⁹

This *anamnesis* of the origin, resulting from the very constitution of our being, which is made for God, is not a conceptually articulated knowledge but rather a certain inner sense, a capacity for recognizing the true good, which beckons the human person who is not interiorly divided to recognize its echo deep within himself. Such a person sees that this good befits his nature (because it is that for which his nature is made) and he thus wants to direct himself to that befitting good.³⁰ We might also say that the true good which is recognized by this capacity or inner sense is a participation in the ultimate true good, that is, God, and thus this inner sense, or moral sense, is rooted in the religious sense, in man’s relatedness to God.³¹ We can now understand what the Apostle Paul means when he says that the Gentiles are a law unto themselves: this is not to be taken in the sense of the autonomous subject who creates, as it were, his own law, but rather that one’s own self, one’s interiority, is the site of self-transcendence, since it is there where we are touched by the One from whom we originate and to whom we are destined.³²

So when the sense of the good is not heeded, it is not surprising that the mind should pronounce itself against this evil, against what is

²⁸ St. Augustine, *De Trinitate* VIII, 3, 4; PL 42, 949, quoted in Ratzinger, p. 67.

²⁹ Ratzinger, *Verdad, Valores, Poder*, p. 67.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ See Pope John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, nos. 98 and 106, pp. 120 and 128.

³² Ratzinger, *Verdad, Valores, Poder*, p. 68.

unfitting and disproportionate to it. Aquinas calls conscience “a certain pronouncement of the mind,” which bears us witness.³³ Insofar as something has already been done which is evil, conscience is said to accuse or to cause remorse, because what has been done “is found to be out of harmony with the knowledge according to which it is examined.”³⁴ In such a case, Aquinas tells us, we have a defiled conscience because we are conscious within ourselves of the act’s wrongness or inappropriateness, and thus conscious of some disorder within our very selves.³⁵ We may say that the remorse experienced by conscience is the mind’s recognition that what was done was not in keeping with its nature. The object of the act was not a truly human good, and thus not in consonance with what Aquinas calls “the law of understanding,” which is the habit of *synderesis* or natural reason.³⁶ We can now better reinterpret Eco’s concept of the feeling of remorse, which is not simply a feeling, but rather the mind’s pronouncement against evil, and the need for purification and forgiveness, given the defilement of conscience and of self mentioned by Aquinas. The case of Eco’s non-believer clearly shows the working of *synderesis*, the law of understanding present in the mind of the Gentiles, according to Aquinas. And so the non-believer’s conscience experiences remorse for evil-doing, since conscience examines the act against this law or principle.

Knowledge of the first principles contained in *synderesis* is the same for all human beings and cannot be blotted out from their hearts. But, as Aquinas tells us, it can be neglected in the case of particular actions, in so far as reason is hindered from applying the general principle to a particular act on account of some passion.³⁷ Something that is not good can appear as good to reason in a particular instance because of a passion, or disorder in the will itself. Provided the judgment of reason retains its freedom, it is in the power of the will not to will, or not to

³³ *ST I* 79.13 ad 1.

³⁴ *DV* 17.1c.

³⁵ *DV* 17.1 ad 2 (1st series).

³⁶ *DV* 17.2 ad 3.

³⁷ *ST I-II* 94.6c.

consent to the passion.³⁸ Human beings thus retain dominion over the passions. If a man's will is rectified, that is if he has a good will, which is not interiorly divided, then he will be rightly disposed in regard to the principles of practical reason. He will then love the true good rather than what simply appears good. So, knowledge of the good must also be accompanied by love of the true good. In the case of Eco's non-believer, in whom knowledge of the first principles is at work given the remorse of conscience, it would seem that rectitude of the will is lacking. This might also account for his lack of belief, since as Augustine puts it: "no man believes, unless he will."³⁹ Our will, our loves, need to be ordered by virtue and in the final analysis, by grace.

To return then to the *anamnesis* of man's origin—the remembrance of God, of the true good—to which we have related *synderesis*, we can also interpret this as the foundation for what Pope John Paul II in *Veritatis Splendor* calls the "new evangelization."⁴⁰ This *anamnesis* lodged within the core of man's being needs help from the outside in order to be actualized. After having had the truth of the Gospel proclaimed to them, the Gentiles recognized this truth as that for which they had been interiorly longing, since it was the development of that seed of truth already present in and constitutive of their being. The light of faith thus perfects and elevates the natural light of *synderesis*. Robert Hugh Benson, in perhaps his most celebrated book, recounts an anecdote which is illustrative of how the truth already lives in the human heart and how it can be fully recognized: "An old Hindu, it is related, after hearing one sermon on the life of Christ, begged for baptism. 'But how can you ask for it so soon?' inquired the preacher. 'Have you ever heard the name of Jesus before today?' 'No,' said the old man, 'but I have known him and have been seeking him all my life.'"⁴¹

The truths of faith need not only to be proclaimed, they also need to be lived. *Veritatis Splendor* reminds us that faith becomes a witness before God and before men precisely through the moral life. Eco

³⁸ ST I-II 10.3c.

³⁹ ST I-II 56.3c.

⁴⁰ See Pope John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, no. 107, p. 128.

⁴¹ Robert H. Benson, *The Friendship of Christ* (New York: Scepter, 1991), pp. 51-52.

himself recognizes this to be the case, and so after lamenting the sins of colleagues at a Catholic university, he says, "The power of an ethical system is judged by the behavior of the saints."⁴² Certainly, it is the saints whose lives reflect the splendor of truth. Just as the beauty of nature has led in the past to the knowledge of God, now the beauty of a life consistent with the faith can lead people to wonder at the cause of such a life and can thus become for many a new access to God. While contemporary culture is to a great extent very secularized, de-Christianized as the Pope puts it, it is nevertheless also sensitive to the presence of signs in its midst. The believer committed to moral truth can therefore become a sign and a compelling force that will lead persons to faith. In speaking of the consistent ethical life commitment to which faith calls us, Pope John Paul II puts before us the example of numerous saints: "By their eloquent and attractive example of a life completely transfigured by the splendor of moral truth, the martyrs and, in general, all the Church's Saints, light up every period of history by *reawakening its moral sense*. By witnessing fully to the good, they are a living reproof to those who transgress the law. . . ."⁴³ There is no doubt that many in our world have forgotten about God and also the distinction between good and evil. They have converted human life into something without meaning, drowned in nihilism.⁴⁴ The moral sense needs to be reawakened in these persons, and we as Christians are challenged by Pope John Paul II to give witness to the absoluteness of moral truth, and to the Truth itself who is Christ. As the Pope puts it: "This is a daunting task if we consider our human weakness, which so often renders us opaque and full of shadows. But it is a task which we can accomplish if we turn to the light of Christ and open ourselves to the grace which makes us a new creation."⁴⁵

We cannot expect to renew and transform our culture unless there is an interior renewal of persons. We should therefore remember the

⁴² Eco and Martini, *Belief or Unbelief?*, p. 97.

⁴³ Pope John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, no. 93, p. 115; author's emphasis.

⁴⁴ Leszek Kolakowski, "La Filosofía de la Modernidad," *Nuestro Tiempo* (October, 1985): 112.

⁴⁵ Pope John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (Boston: St. Paul Editions, 2001), no. 54, pp. 70-71.

words of Léon Bloy, which made such an impression on the young Raïssa and Jacques Maritain: *Il n'y a qu'une tristesse, c'est de n'être pas des saints* ("There is only one sadness, not to be a saint").⁴⁶ Through their quest for and love of the truth which interiorly transformed them, the Maritains were able to bring about a spiritual renewal in their midst. Only through a life so lived, aided by the grace that makes all things new, can we hope not only to reawaken the moral sense in so many around us, but also to dialogue with those who recognize a natural ethics but have not yet come to the full discovery of truth.

⁴⁶ Raïssa Maritain, *We Have Been Friends Together*, translated by Julie Kernan (New York: Doubleday, 1961), p. 88.