

tions.¹⁷ The groups and associations as common agents and the institutions as common operative habits, taken together as common means, make the common good *possible*. But their very exercise and use as common social activity is the common good *actually* realized.¹⁸ And one may add as corollary that when it is realized, it is not only *for* the members; it is already *in* them. As in them it is their personal good, and every man can say of it, "This is *my* good." As their personal and common good, it is "*perfectio naturae humanae socialiter possessa*."¹⁹ And thus in a wholly natural sense, he who loses himself for this good shall find himself.

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Problem (b): *Ethics and Subjectivity*

There is a series of questions about moral knowledge which has been regulative of philosophical thought from the very beginnings. Does nature contain the secret as to how we are to act or are moral codes purely conventional? If nature is regulative here, is knowledge of its rule tantamount to abiding by it? Is knowledge of what we ought to do possessed equally well by good and bad men? Out of the discussion of these questions there emerged a view of the gradation of moral knowledge. At one extreme, there is knowledge of what nature presents as the ends of human action, natural law; at the other extreme, is the judgment of the virtuous man as to what he ought to do here and now. Somewhere between these two extremes lies the moral discourse called ethics.

We are not made uneasy by the description of prudence as a knowledge dependent upon subjectivity since the truth of its judgment consists in its conformity with rectified appetite. Only the appetitive power which has a correct intention of the end will be able to choose with facility and pleasure the means presented to it by prudence. Because it must presuppose a proper disposition of appetite with respect to the end, prudence, although an intellectual virtue, saves the definition of virtue more perfectly than do art, science, wisdom and understanding.¹ *Qualis unusquisque*

¹⁷ *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 61, a. 5, corpus—social justice as an acquired virtue must be carefully distinguished from the infused virtues of the proficient and perfect Christian.

¹⁸ Leo W. Shields, *The History and Meaning of the Term Social Justice* (Notre Dame, Indiana, 1941), pp. 24, 25 and 33.

¹⁹ Joseph Donat, S.J. (in *Ethica Generalis*: Oeniponti, 1920, p. 52) employs this expression as a description of culture. Taken in a habitual sense, this is certainly to be admitted since culture is the total pattern of institutions in society, but taking "perfectio" as meaning activity, the expression describes the extrinsic common good.

¹ *Q.D. de virt. in com.*, a. 7, c.

*est, talis finis videtur ei.*² If the prudent man's assessment of a concrete situation is dependent in a special way on his subjective appetitive disposition, the norm in terms of which he judges his situation is not so dependent and constitutes a kind of knowledge which, in fact or in principle, can be had by the virtuous and non-virtuous. This is clearly the case with those common precepts which make up natural law. What dependence, if any, on subjectivity is had on the part of ethics?

Unqualified assertions about the objectivity of the moral order do not prepare us for the somewhat startling remarks St. Thomas makes about the status of ethical discourse. Even quite general norms, he says, are variable and uncertain.³ To go beyond generalities in the direction of the concrete is to enter the realm of the ineffable, of sheer multiplicity: man's moral task is pursued in an arena where there is no necessity, where all is contingent and variable. Ethics offers little for the mind to delight in, so much so that to undertake its study for the perfection of one's intellect will lead inevitably to frustration—or worse, to the claim that certitude has been found where no certitude is. The truth at which ethics, and moral knowledge generally, aims is not the truth of knowledge, which makes a man good only in a certain respect, but the truth of action whereby a man becomes good absolutely speaking.⁴ If the end of ethics were knowledge alone, its poverty of truth would argue against our spending time on it.⁵ Since its end is *extra genus notitiae*,⁶ the study of ethics is justified only insofar as it provides us with some remote help in knowing what we ought to do.

As an exercise in practical reasoning, ethics will have operation for its end. Practical reason is the use of our mind not to know what's what, but rather to know what is to be done and to know what is to be done in such a way that we see how it is to be done. Ethics has an operable object, something we can do, namely our own free acts as directed to an end. Its proper mode will not be analytic; the definitions of happiness, of virtue, of the voluntary and involuntary, are all ordered to a procedure more proper to ethics, a procedure called compositive which strives to state the causes which will effect the end. In short, ethics saves two of the criteria of practical knowledge; when the third criterion, the here and now engagement of appetite, is present we no longer have to do with moral science but rather with prudence.⁷ Unlike prudence, ethics is said not to involve any

² *Q.D. de virt. card.*, a. 2, c.

³ *In II Ethic.*, lect. 2, nn. 255-9.

⁴ *Ia*, q. 5, a. 1, ad 1.

⁵ *Ia-IIae*, q. 14, a. 3, c: "Cognitio autem veritatis in talibus non habet aliquid magnum, ut per se sit appetibilis, sicut cognitio universalium et necessariorum: sed appetitur secundum quod est utilis ad operationem, quia actiones sunt circa contingentia singularia."

⁶ *Q.D. de ver.*, q. 3, a. 3, ad 8.

⁷ "Est autem considerandum, quod sicut supra dictum est, prudentia non est in ratione solum, sed habet aliquid in appetitu. Omnia ergo de quibus hic fit mentio, in tantum sunt species prudentiae, inquantum non in ratione sola consistunt, sed habent aliquid in appetitu. Inquantum enim sunt in sola ratione, dicuntur quaedam scientiae practicae, scilicet ethica, oeconomica et politica."—*In VI Ethic.*, lect. 7, n. 1200.

direct engagement of appetite. It is this denial which leads us to ask if ethics is equally accessible to the well and ill-disposed man. First, however, we must examine the relation between the principles of ethics, none of which is certain, and the common principles of the moral order which are certain, absolute, indispensable.

The common precepts of natural law are spoken of on an analogy with the common principles of the speculative order. It is natural for us to move from more common to less common considerations, but this transition is different in the speculative and practical orders. A sign of this difference is had in the fact that, in the speculative order, proper as well as common principles are certain: each speculative science has appropriate certain principles. This is true even in the case of the speculative science which is concerned with the mobile and contingent.⁸ The moral order is contingent and ethics is concerned with the contingent as contingent; thus, while the common principles embody certitude, as soon as we move away from them, the most that can be achieved is probability.⁹

The principles of natural law must be distinguished into the most common and less common: the latter are said to be known with a minimum of consideration, the former immediately. The first principle of practical reason is the apprehension of the good: "bonum est primum quod cadit in apprehensione practicae rationis, quae ordinatur ad opus: omne enim agens agit propter finem, qui habet rationem boni."¹⁰ The first precept of practical reason is that good is to be pursued, evil avoided. The ends to which we are naturally inclined give rise to precepts having to do with the preservation of life, marriage and the family, the political life. The most common precepts are known by everyone immediately; others, slightly less common, come to be known with a little thought. "For there are some things concerning human acts so explicit that with a modicum of consideration they can be approved or disapproved right off by reference to those first common principles."¹¹ These less common principles are still certain and do not come within the range of the remark that all moral discourse is uncertain.¹² Ethics is described in the following passage. "There are others judgment of which requires much consideration of diverse circumstances; such a diligent consideration falls not to anyone, but to the wise, just as the consideration of the particular conclusions of the sciences belongs not to everyone but only to philosophers."¹³

Why is it that the most common and common principles of natural law are certain whereas proper principles, what St. Thomas often calls proper conclusions from them, are never certain? We mentioned above the dif-

⁸ In *Boeth. de trin.*, q. 5, a. 2.

⁹ Ia-IIae, q. 94, a. 4, c.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, a. 2, c.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, q. 100, a. 1, c.

¹² Cf. *ibid.*, a. 3, c: the precepts of the decalogue are said to be knowable *statim cum modica consideratione* from the common principles and in a. 8 they are shown to be indispensable.

¹³ Ia-IIae, q. 100, a. 1, c.

ference between the speculative science which is concerned with the mobile and contingent and ethics: the former is concerned with necessities in contingent things. In the practical order, only common principles express the necessary. "Notice that the definitions of mutable things are immutable; thus whatever is natural to us as pertaining to the very definition of man can in no way be changed, for example, that man be animal. Things which follow on nature such as dispositions, actions and motions are changed now and again. So too what belongs to the very notion of justice cannot be changed, for example, that one should not steal, for this is to do something unjust. What is consequent on the definition of justice is sometimes mutable."¹⁴ Common principles contain the end and are thereby immutable: they are specified by the final end and derive their necessity from that, for they express that without which the end cannot be had. One cannot violate justice and act according to right reason. Presumably what are called proper conclusions from natural law do not involve this relation to the end which is, so to speak, analytic; consequently, they are not certain.

We can approach the proper principles, those with which ethics is concerned, by examining the reasoning process of counsel. The inquiry of counsel presupposes the end and concerns itself with means of attaining the end.¹⁵ "The principle of the inquiry of counsel is the end which is first in intention, last in realization. Because of this, counsel's inquiry must be resolute and begin with what is intended until it comes to what must be done immediately."¹⁶ Counsel concludes with a statement containing the means of achieving the end; so too the proper principles will express not the end itself but the means of attaining it. And, since such means are variable and contingent, the proper principles cannot be certain and invariable. "There is not the same truth or rectitude for all men where the proper conclusions of practical reason are concerned and even when such principles apply to many men they are not equally known by all. It is right and true for all men that they should act according to reason. From this principle it follows as a quasi-proper conclusion that the goods of another should be returned. However, this is true only for the most part since in some cases to do so would be dangerous and irrational, as when someone asks for what is his that he might use it against the fatherland. This principle will grow ever more deficient as one descends towards particulars, as for example if one should state that the goods of another are to be returned but with such and such exceptions, in such and such a way: the more conditions added, the more ways the principle will be deficient."¹⁷

¹⁴ *In V Ethic.*, lect. 13, n. 1029.

¹⁵ *Ia-IIae*, q. 14, a. 2.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, a. 5, c. See S. Edmund Dolan, F.S.C., "Resolution and Composition in Speculative and Practical Discourse," *Laval theologique et philosophique*, VI, 1 (1950), pp. 9-62.

¹⁷ *Ia-IIae*, q. 94, a. 4, c.

We can see now why St. Thomas says that moral discourse, even when confined to generalities (e.g. the goods of another ought to be returned), is defective and uncertain. Unlike common principles which express the end or what is so connected with the end that failure to abide by them is *eo ipso* to forfeit the end, proper principles express means of achieving the end and partake of the variability and contingency in which human acts take place. Common principles cannot be dispensed. "If precepts are found which contain the conservation of the common good or the very order of justice and virtue, they contain the intention itself of the law-giver and cannot be dispensed."¹⁸ Proper principles express ways in which, in variable circumstances, the common good and the order of justice and virtue can be attained and they participate in the variability of the contingent circumstances they are trying in some measure to surmount.

We have tried to assign the reason for distinguishing ethical discourse from the common principles of natural law: the latter express the end or that without which the end cannot be had, the former express means which usually lead to the acquisition of the end. We must now examine the relation of ethics to the other pole of moral knowledge, the *scientia particularis* of the prudent man. We have already reminded ourselves that ethics and prudence have two things in common, an operable object, the *agibilia*, and a mode of procedure, composition, the statement of the causes which will effect the end. They are said to differ in this that the appetite of the knower is regulative of the truth of the prudential judgment. Reason's dependence on the inclination of appetite to the good leads to calling the judgment of prudence one made through inclination or connaturality. Such a judgment is opposed to that made *per modum rationis*, the judgment of moral science which is concerned with enunciating general precepts to cover likely situations. It is this opposition which poses a problem.

Prudence is a virtue of the practical intellect which depends for its very being on the possession of moral virtues. Moral science, on the other hand, is not so dependent. Is it the case, then, that any man, whatever his moral dispositions, could arrive at knowledge of moral science or ethics? Notice that we are not asking whether any man, regardless of his moral state, knows the common precepts of morality. Our question bears on those proper conclusions, true only for the most part, which we have been concerned to distinguish from the common principles of natural law and which we have assigned to ethics. We recall that proper principles are enuntiated on the basis of experience; the experience in question is of course moral experience and ethics thus appears to be a generalization from moral experience, that is, from the efforts of men to achieve the good, to acquire virtue. This suggests that there is no purely cognitive entree into ethics; ethics cannot be regarded as a neutral calculus of human action discoverable with equal ease by the good and the bad. Now this may seem a shocking suggestion, not least because of the flattering light it casts on professors of ethics. A number of qualifications must be made before the

¹⁸ Ia-IIae, q. 100, a. 8.

position becomes tenable; let us approach the matter obliquely by considering the familiar description of the fitting student of ethics.

To qualify as a student in any discipline, one must have certain moral dispositions. He must be docile and not given to inordinate curiosity if he is to profit from the direction of the teacher. Much more than these general qualifications are required of the student of moral science. First, he must have a fairly extensive experience of human action: the young man will find that easy dogmatism which is the concomitant of inexperience getting in the way of his acceptance of the teacher's remarks. Unacquainted with the way virtuous men operate in such and such circumstances, he will find the suspension of disbelief difficult when he is told how the liberal man acts or would act and consequently how he should act if he wants to acquire this virtue. This opaqueness is compatible with the best of intentions with respect to the ultimate end of the science, right action, and if a young man has been lucky in his parents and the wider culture of city and country, time may remove the impediment of inexperience and he will arrive at the point where he can profit from the study of ethics.

A more serious impediment than inexperience is a history of bad actions, experience of the wrong kind. One who has been unlucky in the early training he received, one whom discipline has not disposed to the good, or worse, one who has strangled what might have been a good beginning and carried over into later life the worse aspects of youth—such will scarcely profit from the study of ethics. Of the *sectator passionum* St. Thomas will say that perhaps he can grasp the end of moral science which is knowledge, but this will be of no use to him since he is indisposed with regard to the end of that knowledge. "Just as one young in age falls short of the end of this science which is knowledge so one young in habits falls short of the end which is action; the latter's defect is not due to time but to his living according to his passions, for he pursues whatever passion proposes. Knowledge of this science is useless to him as well as to the incontinent man who does not abide by the moral knowledge he has."¹⁹ The defective knowledge of moral science, as we saw earlier, makes it an unworthy object of concern if our goal is knowledge alone and not the end of the knowledge, action. Ethics is of precious little help in the acquisition of virtue, but it is only because it is of some help that we are justified in pursuing it. The morally indisposed man, apart from his unwillingness to listen to the moralist, is sometimes said to be unable even to understand the moralist.²⁰

¹⁹*In I Ethic.*, lect. 3, n. 40.

²⁰"Dictum autem supra, quod sermo et doctrina non habet efficaciam in omnibus: sed oportet ad hoc, quod habeat efficaciam in aliquo, quod auditoris anima ex multis bonis consuetudinibus sit praeparata ad gaudendum de bonis et ad odiendum mala; sicut oportet etiam terram esse bene cultam ad hoc quod nutriat bene semen. Sic enim se habet sermo auditus in anima, sicut semen in terra. Ille enim qui vivit secundum passiones, non libenter audiet sermonem monentis, *neque etiam intelliget*, ita quod iudicet illud esse bonum ad quod inducitur. Unde non potest ab aliquo persuaderi."—*In X Ethic.*, lect. 14, n. 2146. Cf. *In Iob*, cap. 2, lect. 1: "Sed Satan calumniam inferebat, quasi Job actibus virtuosus intenderet propter temporalia bona, sicut et mali homines, quorum Satan princeps est, *experimento sui* iudicunt de intentionibus justorum."

The experience required for the acceptance of the proper precepts of moral science must be aided by a training which has inclined one to the good. Otherwise moral facts cannot be recognized as such. "It is necessary in moral matters to accept as a principle that something is so (*quia ita est*), and this acceptance is a result of experience and custom, for example, that concupiscence is allayed by abstinence."²¹ The rule that fasting is useful in the acquisition of temperance is most readily accepted by one whose training has shown that fasting does indeed quell concupiscence. In the absence of such experiential knowledge of the moral fact, one can accept it on the word of another. He who can neither apply to his own training nor accept such facts on another's word is beyond the meager help that ethics can give.

These few remarks indicate that ethics presupposes on the part of the learner subjective dispositions of a rather special kind. He who has been the recipient of a good upbringing will profit most from ethics; its precepts will find an anchor in his own experience and he will be disposed to use moral science in his own life. One who is well enough disposed to apply moral science to achieve ends to which he has not been habituated by discipline and training can accept the fact on faith and come to verify it in his own efforts to acquire virtue. This indicates that there is a good deal of the *gustate et videte* in ethics. Conceived as an exercise in pure reason or in practical reason which would deduce proper principles from common in terms of moral neutrality, ethics will be missed or dismissed.

Does the discussion of the fitting student of ethics indicate something about its fitting formulator? Can it be maintained that the teacher of ethics must possess subjective dispositions of a special kind, in short, be a virtuous man? Or can one be a successful moralist *malgre lui*?

Let us remind ourselves of the purpose of ethics. When Aristotle writes the *Nicomachean Ethics* he is endeavoring to show others how virtue can be acquired. We have already found it necessary to emphasize that the ultimate end of moral science is action in accordance with right reason. Now if someone is to lead us to virtue by way of useful precepts, he must have knowledge of the goal. Furthermore, we have seen that the passage from common to proper principles is by way of experience. Ethics can arise only against the background of an effort to achieve in the fluctuating circumstances of daily life the end of virtuous action. Without such efforts, without the histories of human subjects striving for virtue, there would be no way of getting at the proper precepts which constitute ethics. In short, ethics is dependent upon subjective efforts and cannot be had in abstraction from these efforts, say by way of calculation and deduction from common principles. It is just this that seems to explain the reiterated remark that in human action the good man is the measure.

If ethics is dependent for the enunciation of proper principles on the experience of good men, we must still distinguish the judgment of the prudent man, the judgment by way of inclination or connaturality, from the

²¹ *In I Ethic.*, lect. 1, n. 53.

judgments of moral science. The latter are dependent upon the former, to be sure, but one can be instructed in moral science and make judgments about acts of virtue even when he does not possess that virtue.²² For that matter, even when one possesses a virtue, his judgments about singular acts according to that virtue and his judgments as moral scientist will differ in kind, since the latter will be general. The moral scientist who is also virtuous is not restricted to his own experience in enunciating proper principles; just as one taking counsel applies to others, so too the moral scientist. This seems to indicate that a moral scientist who did not possess virtue could enunciate proper principles by observation of what good men do. In any case, there is no way of avoiding the dependence of ethics on the experience of men trying in variable and contingent circumstances to act according to reason. Without appeal to that experience, ethics cannot come up with precepts which will be of help to me when I try to do what is right. If we consider St. Thomas' example of a moral fact, fasting allays concupiscence, and ask ourselves how this can be stated to be generally true apart from the efforts of some men to achieve temperance, the nature of the dependence in question becomes clear.

Just as in the practical syllogism of the prudent man there is a common norm playing the role of major premiss, so too ethics will strive to resolve into common principles the generalities, true for the most part, which have been culled from the experience of good men. It is this attempt which makes ethics more persuasive than the simple suggestions one man gives another. At the same time, this attempted resolution opens the way to the mistaken impression that ethics is simply a system, even an analytic one, whose main appeal is to theoretical reason. It then becomes easy to forget the source in moral experience of the proper precepts of moral science, to forget that its compositive mode is the reflection at the level of generality of the thought process of the virtuous man as he strives to do the right thing in shifting and evanescent circumstances. Worse, it becomes too easy to forget that ethics, while it addresses itself to our reason, addresses itself to our practical reason and that the knowledge it gives is meant to have a valuable if small influence in the direction of our lives. We must always insist on the objective basis of moral knowledge; at the same time, however, we must warn against ignoring the dependence of moral science on human experience. Moral science is an attempt to mediate, for the well-disposed listener, between the absolutely true but incorrigibly common precepts of natural law and the fleeting circumstances of life where we must do the right thing for the right reason and in the right way. Ethics is an appeal to practical reason and thus would pave the way for those judgments which carry us *extra genus notitiae*, judgments whose rectitude consists in conformity with an efficacious intention of the good.

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²² Ia, q. 1, a. 6, ad 3.