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# A Creaturely Ethic: *Veritatis Splendor* and Human Nature

By

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## I.

Sometimes it helps to begin with the critics, if we are to understand what a document is about. We can learn something of the main preoccupations of *Veritatis Splendor* by looking at the position of two of its feminist critics. While in some respects their criticism is not well made, it serves nonetheless as a kind of exhibit, displaying the habits of the heart which contemporary society assumes in reflecting on such issues. What is particularly striking is what they *overlook*, revealing a widespread and perhaps systematic blindness in face of certain aspects of traditional ethical teaching. The authors consider the case of an Italian woman (Gianna Beretta Molla) who had a cancerous condition, which, if fully operated, would have ended the life of her unborn child. She chose to have only a minor operation, putting her life at risk to ensure that her child at least would live. And this is more or less what happened, the child being carried to term and the mother dying a few days after the birth. She was beatified by John Paul II in 1994.<sup>1</sup>

The criticism of the authors follows a predictable course. Presumably the strongest argument they could make is that such cases can be used to justify unhealthy suffering.<sup>2</sup> What they actually say goes much further. They are against theologies that regard suffering as "a value in itself"; they insist that voluntary suffering is justified only if it leads to "a greater good which involves the alleviation of the suffering"; and they reject suffering

that is "coerced onto a group or individual."<sup>3</sup> After giving a short account of the woman's life, the two critics make this comment:

This account shows quite clearly the patriarchal thinking that assigns undue suffering to women in the name of strict adherence to a moral precept - a precept which no woman had any voice in articulating ... Their (i.e. women's) suffering is literally spiritualized through beatification and is held up as a model of Christian faithfulness.<sup>4</sup>

There are some detailed comments which could be made about these criticisms. For one thing, they seem to misrepresent the traditional Catholic position on such cases. But the overall thrust of the critique is clear enough, and encompasses two main points. The first touches suffering and its place in human life, whether it can ever play a positive role or have a significance in itself. Because they object to the social consequences of any positive value of suffering - i.e., that we should see those who suffered as having benefited from their suffering, at least in some cases - the authors are unhappy that Gianna Molla should have been beatified. Raising such a person to sainthood sends the wrong signals to other women. The second point is political, that one group should not be telling another what to do, that at very least, a group needs representation among those who are formulating such principles. Behind this, we sense the guiding principle of the critique: the principle of autonomy. What is particularly is what the criticisms overlook. There is not the slightest sense that Mrs. Molla's action might have been a great human action for all that, displaying the human at its truest and best - even if it is admitted that it is not an action which others are obliged or even encouraged to imitate. Yet surely this is the way most people would judge Mrs. Molla's action, at least those whose minds are not contaminated by philosophy, theology, or politics.

The authors of the article allow that voluntary suffering is permissible in some cases. But it must ultimately be aimed at "the alleviation of the suffering." There is only one clear category of actions which satisfies this criterion - that of the worker for justice, who suffers in order that others may not have to suffer.<sup>5</sup> Mrs. Molla's action falls far short of this, being focused only on a small part of the world, one with which she has immediate material connections, the life of the child growing within her. It lacks any direct political aim. Far from being directed towards alleviating suffering, it seems to undergo it simply. Defenders of Mrs. Molla might suggest that her context of action is in fact larger than the authors of the article think - that it articulates something of the lasting human condition, showing forth (with all qualifications) what a human life at its best always

is and should be. But such an idea of the human condition is precisely what the authors of the article want to move away from. It would “present victimization as the normal experience of living.”<sup>6</sup> Their ideal human life looks quite different, being freed from the oppressive heteronomy of the past, and looking to what they call the promotion of “full humanity.”<sup>7</sup> With this we come to the second theme, that of autonomy.

The authors’ argument against the case of Gianna Molla from the standpoint of human autonomy is not particularly well made. The authors suggest that the saint was the victim of oppressive rules devised by others, that she lacked “choices and options”, and may well have had private thoughts about her suffering which were quite different from those of the official account.<sup>8</sup> This is deeply unfair to Mrs. Molla, who knew full well what she was doing, and that she could have done otherwise. She had qualified in 1949 as a doctor, after all. Her advisors did not put pressure on her to do what she did – if anything, they tried to dissuade her. Her real offense is not a lack of autonomy, but that her autonomous action took a direction of which the critics do not approve. If she had made a medical breakthrough, or had been the first woman in a particular field, showing other women that they could follow, it would be different. But to gain any credit in this frame of reference, she would have to advance the freedom of herself or of a larger group, opening up choices which were not there before. Presumably defenders of autonomy could in some cases praise people who gave their lives for others – revolutionary leaders might be an example. The problem with Gianna Molla’s action is that it just does not look like this sort of autonomy, fitting too well into traditional understandings of the relation of mother to child, ever to be portrayed as an emancipatory advance. If anything, it reflects a deep sense of obedience.

These themes of suffering and autonomy are closely connected. The suggestion that it might be good, at least in some circumstances, for human beings to submit to a larger order, rather than simply to forge the future they want, is immediately suspect to those whose primary framework is political and emancipatory. This probably explains the hostility of the critics to any hint that people should embrace suffering willingly, at least in some cases, as part of the human vocation. Suffering is rather to be regarded negatively – the only thing to be said about it is that it should be alleviated. The suggestion that it might enoble in any way inevitably gives the wrong impression, leading people into an unhealthy passivity. The authors condemn the authoritative belief system which could produce a life like that of Gianna Berreta Molla. This is strangely ironic – a different point of view might see such a life precisely as a reason to *respect* the

system of belief which produced it. *Veritatis Splendor* can be read as an attempt to recall us to such a point of view.

## II.

Many of the critics of *Veritatis Splendor* seem to miss the wood for the trees because they do not realize how much its outlook differs from that of contemporary Western society, and therefore from their own.<sup>9</sup> Often enough, the current Western moral vocabulary has only one question: is the vocabulary *ours*, a product of autonomy and not of heteronomy? But as the encyclical implies, we are born into a sort of heteronomy, our consciousness being part of a larger life which we did not ourselves make,<sup>10</sup> and which prescribes virtues we have to develop if we are to live a human life at all. The "human" is there waiting for us, before we think about it, so that there is something to which our vocabularies should correspond even as they bring it to articulation (an articulation which is itself part of the "human"). But as the encyclical also insists, it is wrong to call this "heteronomy".<sup>11</sup> It is rather the foundation of our limited human autonomy, the only sort we were made for. To consent to the human is to consent to a life we did not make, of which we are in a sense the stewards. This is the strong teaching on human nature which the encyclical wants to promote.

The encyclical believes that there is a "truth about man as a creature" (VS n.31) and that freedom must take account of this. It sums up its main thesis near the beginning of the final chapter: "Freedom is rooted in the truth about man" (VS n.86). A statement that freedom depends on truth can arouse very different responses. On the one hand, the dependence can seem obvious. I cannot even walk through a door without first ascertaining where it is, and whether it is open. A freedom which tried to operate without attending to the prior state of the world would be a bad joke. But the thesis can also look like a contradiction. "Truth" refers to something which is there before we even consider it, while "freedom" is open and fluid. So an attempt to submit freedom to truth can seem a denial of what freedom really is, reducing it to the functions of a calculus. Telling someone to come to a free decision on some matter and then telling them that the outcome will of course be *this*, is a denial of freedom. The twentieth century contains a large literature on this, maintaining that we often deliberately do away with our freedom by submitting to various "truths." Freedom is frightening, so we tame it by bringing it under something else – prohibitions of nature, the Ten Commandments, the categorical imperative – the paraphernalia of bad faith.<sup>12</sup> And it can look as if any insistence that freedom depends on truth must come down to this.

A common resolution of the problem distinguishes between material things and human subjects, attributing a predetermined nature only to the former. Doors are always the sorts of things that if they are open, you can walk through them. But there is nothing much that human subjects always are, before they have *decided* to become something. A definition of the human as such is precisely a definition of something which has no essence in the conventional sense, as Sarte famously argues.<sup>13</sup> Sarte's position has lately been trumped by the more radical view which thinks that not only are human beings without a nature, but everything else is without one too.<sup>14</sup> The encyclical wants to argue in the opposite direction to both of these, that (with some qualifications) human beings have a nature as other things do, and that this makes them part of the material creation and provides a natural basis for ethics. Freedom is part of a larger structured life, which it is intended to serve. "(I)ts absolute and unconditional origin is not in itself, but in the life within which it is situated..." (VS n.86)

The difficulty of uniting the concept of freedom with that of nature should not be underestimated. It can seem a contradiction to a consciousness formed in "modern" categories, leading inevitably to an unhealthy dependence on mere biology. As the encyclical notes, the Church's position on sexual morality is sometimes understood in this way, leading to accusations of "physicalism" or "naturalism". "Contraception" and "artificial insemination" are among the acts whose prohibition supposedly goes back to this mode of thinking. The encyclical strongly denies that it means anything like this (VS n.47). The same kind of reduction can be applied in a slightly different context (that of animal behavior) to yield different results. We can try to found an ethics on what most people do most of the time. Surveys of behavior tell us what is "normal" and this is the nearest we get to a specification of what people should do (VS n.46). But as the encyclical points out, we cannot deduce a normative morality from the behavioral sciences (VS n.111). In any case, the things most people do most of the time do not reflect human nature at its best, as we live in a *fallen* world. The world reflected in statistical surveys is not the world as it was originally meant to be (VS n.112).

To a "modern" consciousness, these seem to be the only possibilities for understanding a freedom which is obedient to nature. Since such possibilities cannot found an ethics, the major premise tends to be abandoned in favor of a nature which is obedient to human freedom (or can be rendered so). This leads to ethical approaches which try to "overcome" nature, or which at best use it as a base for the cultural constructions of freedom (VS n.46). Both of these need to take account of the way nature is. But any deeper idea of obedience to nature is foreign to them. Their approach is ultimately calculative, seeing nature as something to be

handled and managed, rather than part of what the subject itself is, to which we owe a kind of obedience.

These approaches raise questions as to the identity of the self who makes such ethical decisions. The encyclical makes the significant comment during its discussion of these approaches that the "modern" understanding leaves the human being without a nature at all (VS n.436). The self can be identified only with *freedom*. This does not mean it is entirely without moral orientation – freedom itself may impose certain demands, as Kant believed. But it lacks any original commitment to a particular sort of bodily life, a belief that the bodily human being was originally made to do some things and not others.

### III.

The encyclical believes that the goods which the human being was made to achieve are not just the goods of a rational decision-maker, but of a bodily creature. There is a way human beings are meant to live, before they even give thought to the matter – a certain sort of life they are made for. One way of looking at moral action is to see it as an assent to what God made us. In order to think this, the encyclical insists on the unity of the bodily and spiritual sides of human life, refusing "any division between freedom and nature" (VS n.50). It refers to the Catholic Church's endorsement of the Aristotelean teaching of the unity of the human person, "whose rational soul is *per se et essentialiter* the form of his body" (VS n.48). The finalities of bodily functions are not merely "physical" or "pre-moral". The body offers "reference points for moral decisions." We do not just take account of material realities, but *are* in the first place a natural, material reality. So we discover in the body, "the anticipatory signs, the expression and the promise of the gift of self, in conformity with the wise plan of the Creator" (VS n.48). In other words, the body contains indications of the moral form which a life is to take. Freedom has larger obligations, beginning "not in itself, but in the life within which it is situated" (VS n.86). This means that it is possible for free actions to contradict the meaning of the life which they should express. The encyclical refers to "manipulations of corporeity which alter its human meaning" (VS n.50).

Those who think instinctively in "modern" categories can feel lost as to what the encyclical is proposing here, how we can speak of bodily relations as the bearers of moral significance without falling into a "naturalist" interpretation. This is a very old problem. W.K.C. Guthrie traces the various types of sophism in fifth century Greece back to the separation of *physis* from *nomos*.<sup>15</sup> This distinction, often translated as the

distinction between nature and culture, is an ancestor of contemporary distinctions between nature and history, or nature and freedom. Plato shows that once *physis* and *nomos* are separated like this, our rationality loses any deeper basis it might have had. Either it seems to support mere physical interests, as in Thrasymachus' view that justice is really the interests of the powerful, or it seems to construct whatever it wants on the basis of the physical, as in Callicles' view that justice is really a fiction constructed by the weak to defend themselves against the strong.<sup>16</sup>

As it clearly indicates, the encyclical is philosophically Aristotelean here. Aristotle saw that human reason does not simply promote the "animal" goods of a wider human life, as if reason had a mere instrumental relation to them. It also transforms such a life, so that the "passionate" elements *serve* the "rational".<sup>17</sup> But such a transformation is not a fiction created by reason, which does violence to our animal nature. The human "passionate" elements were *meant* to be informed by the rational,<sup>18</sup> which brings the physical life of humans to the perfection it was made for. That we should discuss political goods with others, and build a common order in which they can be achieved, is not a complicated way of imposing power, or disguising our lack of it. Rather such talk is itself one of the goods of the animal we are. In a certain sense, our talk is not a product of nature – if it were, we would all talk the same language. But that we should talk is natural, for all that, one of the peculiarities of our nature being that it should complete itself through what is not merely "natural".

It might help to take a particular example here, one which the encyclical mentions in passing, the command to "honor one's parents" (VS n.52). The peculiarity of this injunction can escape us, it is such a familiar part of our ethical inheritance. Why exactly should I incur ethical obligations towards people simply because of a physical accident – that they happen to be the ones through whom I came into the world? One can attempt to reduce freedom to nature here, saying that humans care for their young simply out of felt instinct. Or one can move in the opposite direction, trying to establish the injunction on the basis of a freedom or rationality which is independent of any contingent material relations. For example, I could say that I "owe my parents a debt of gratitude" for their having supported me through my childhood and youth. But this may not be true – my parents may not have performed their duties particularly well. Anyway, the basics for a contract are lacking. I never gave my consent to it. Or we could argue from the direction of the general good, that society is better off when the younger generation respects the older. This again submits the injunction to a higher set of principles, which apply



universally, and reduces obligations to parents to a more general obligation towards the good of society as a whole.

But the encyclical wants to maintain the injunction as a primary moral command which follows on my being born to these parents. Sheer biology has a part to play in the structure of moral obligation. Or it might be better to say that biology is never simply "sheer" biology, where human beings are concerned. Bodily existence itself, by establishing us at a particular point in the material creation, founds our first moral obligations. One of the effects of this approach is to limit the obligations we incur. Catholic moral teaching based on natural law is sometimes reproached for laying burdens on human shoulders. But in a sense, it does just the opposite, *limiting* the responsibilities of human beings. We are not in the first place spiritual subjects who face the whole of the material creation, with responsibilities for all of it (perhaps leaving us with the feeling that we do not know where to start), but bodily subjects who grow up with obligations towards some people which we do not have towards others.

The position has an important consequence for contemporary discussions in Catholic moral theology. While every ethics admits that calculations of consequences play some part in moral decisions, the encyclical's position implies that such calculations are not the primary form of moral reflection. The converse of the example described above is a further useful illustration. Thomas Aquinas sees the duty of parents to look after their children as part of the natural law, following on the fact that the children owe their existence to their parents.<sup>19</sup> We could well imagine a parent making many decisions in fulfillment of this duty which involved weighing of goods against other goods, and balancing good effects of decisions against the inevitable negative effects (Which school should my children attend? Should they learn music?, etc.). But the parent does not regard the original duty of being a good parent as subject to such a calculus. It is not as if the children are to be looked after only if this proves the best thing for me to do after this has been weighed against other possible courses of action. If it comes down to a choice between looking after my children or taking up an important political office (and I cannot do both), there should be no choice, even if it seems I could do more for my country than anyone else could. My detailed activity of weighing goods and evils takes place within a context of bodily relations which is already given to me, a context which is not itself to be submitted to such a calculus. This context arises out of my material existence, as one who has parented these particular children.

This position holds that the ends of a human life are given in advance and that its free actions should aim to achieve such ends. Above all, it leads to an ethics suitable for *creatures*, who also share in God's

providence (VS n. 43). One of the implications of this way of thinking is that it is also possible to act in ways which disregard the life a human being was made for, and are therefore inhuman. Certain negative precepts safeguard the minimum required for the human to be present at all. For example, the encyclical describes precepts against lying or directly killing the innocent as “universally binding” and “unchanging” (VS n.52). Assuming one of these actions is in question, the precept obliges “regardless of cost” (VS n.51). In such cases people should consider the matter closed, and should not even begin to calculate the consequences. Might the direct killing of the innocent sometimes be justified – in wartime for example? The encyclical’s response: do not ask, do not even begin to calculate. There is no space between avoiding evil and avoiding certain actions. Avoiding the latter is a constitutive part of the former, for a human being. As the encyclical puts it (somewhat opaquely), the prohibition of such actions does not “inhibit” a good intention, but is its “basic expression” (VS n.82). Once again, this limits the responsibility of humans. We should not see ourselves as responsible for the physical evils which may follow a refusal to act in an inhuman way. This position reflects a trust in Providence, and a sense of a limited human role in the scheme of things, as befits an ethic of creatures. When tempted by actions which should never be done, humans should simply act rightly; the outcome of the refusal to do evil is the affair of God, who made the larger order in which such a situation could arise, and Who will bring it to its perfection in His own way.

Such a concept of human nature also provides a standard to assess the actions of those who go beyond the minimum required for an action to count as human. There is no “higher limit” to the love of God and neighbor (VS n.52), so that there is infinite room for actions which show the nature of the human being writ large. One of the reasons why the case of the Italian woman already quoted is so striking is that her action surely expresses something of what being a parent *always* is, the gift of oneself over many years, which children are never really able to repay, and which they can at best pass on to others when they become parents in their turn. Certain actions sum up what humans always are, even if they show it writ large, and in a form that others are not obliged directly to imitate. Such actions are desperately important for us, keeping alive as they do our sense of what it is to be human. And if they fundamentally challenge contemporary vocabularies for which autonomy is the highest value, and “human nature” has no meaning, then so much the worse for the vocabularies.

To see examples like that of Mrs. Molla as fundamental, providing an original measure for human vocabularies by indicating what it is they are

trying to bring to expression, is to grasp the encyclical's teaching on human nature. "(T)here is something in man which transcends...cultures. This 'something' is precisely human nature: this nature is itself the measure of culture..." (VS n.53). To admit this is to acquire eyes once again for the beautiful actions which humans turn up from time to time (perhaps surprising even themselves), discovering and bringing to perfection a self whose laws they did not construct, and which are always stranger than they thought. Such examples remind us of what we already knew but had forgotten in the pressures of everyday – what it is to be one of God's human creatures. This is the truth which precedes our freedom, the one of which the encyclical wants to remind us.

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### References

1. *The Tablet*, 30 April (1994): 536.
2. A second case quoted by the authors, that of Elisabetta Canori Mora, beatified on the same day as Gianna Molla, offers a stronger argument for this position, given that she stayed with an abusive husband. *Ibid.*
3. (p. 306) Talvacchia, Kathleen and Mary Elizabeth Walsh, "*The Splendor of Truth: A Feminist Critique*," in *Veritatis Splendor - American Responses*, eds. Michael E. Allsopp and John J. O'Keefe (Kansa: Sheed and Ward, 1995) 296-310.
4. *Op cit.*, p. 307.
5. The authors say this explicitly: "(A) feminist/womanist perspective understands suffering as a reality that cannot be avoided in the work of justice. Suffering is not a value in itself, but is only a value in the work of solidarity." *Op cit.* P. 306
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Op cit.* P. 307.
9. "Given their professional and technical concerns, theologians were likely to miss the forest for the trees. Their own particular interests and professional training would blind them to other and more significant features of the letter." (p. 217) James P. Hanigan, "Veritatis Splendor and Sexual Ethics," in Allsopp & O'Keefe (1995), 208-223. The thought that the encyclical might be fundamentally critical of contemporary Western thought seems to have eluded some commentators. For

example, (on John Finnis' critique of post-enlightenment approaches to revelation) "I would simply say to John Finnis that we are living in a post enlightenment period and cannot return to the Middle Ages." (p. 5) Alan Smithson, "The Nature of Moral Authority," in *Veritatis Splendor- A Response*, ed. Charles Yeats (Norwich: Canterbury Press 1994) 1-7. "(The pope) is consciously excluding the majority's form of moral rationality." (p. 270) John C. Haughey, "Veritatis Splendor and Our Cover Stories," in Allsop and O'Keefe (1995) 269-277.

10. *Veritatis Splendor* n.86. Henceforth referred to in the text as "VS" with number.

11. "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 this freedom" (VS n.41).

12. "No rule of general morality can show you what you ought to do; no signs are vouchsafed in this world." Sartre, Jean-Paul, *Existentialism and Humanism* (London: Methuen, 1948), p. 38.

13. Although for Sartre there is a human condition, "it is impossible to find in each and every man a universal essence that can be called human nature." Op. cit. P. 45.

14. "(Sartre) should have confined himself to saying 'Human beings no more have an essence than anything else does'." Rorty, Richard, *Essays on Heidegger and Others* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), P. 132. Cf. also p. 160.

15. Guthrie, W.K.C., *A History of Greek Philosophy*, Volume III (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969) pp. 55-134.

16. *Republic* (338c). *Gorgias* (483a-484c).

17. *Politics* (1254b1-10).

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Summa Theologiae* 2a-2ae, 189, 6.