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CONSCIENCE IN CRISIS

The need for a better understanding of conscience

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Introduction

Conscience is the key to moral life. In the depths of the heart, we discover the voice calling us to love good and avoid evil. Because of that function conscience has in the moral life, many are ready today to say “do what your conscience tells you to do”, or “I will follow my conscience”, as an excuse to do anything without a real understanding of the meaning of the conscience or its role in moral life. In their decision-making, they are invoking their right to conscientious objection. But conscience is not an independent judge that makes the right decisions easily. On the contrary, all moral traditions and even modern psychology are telling us that conscience can err, influenced by inordinate inclinations, ignorance, one’s prejudice, etc. According to the Catholic moral tradition, acting morally means obeying the voice of conscience, which is well-formed and informed. Proper understanding of conscience is important, especially today. We live in an informatic age where we are overwhelmed by information and data from different sources and social networks and, consequently, often confused by conspiracy theories and fake news. Therefore, in this thesis, I want to argue that conscience is not an indifferent judge on which we can blindly rely, but has to be informed of what the good is. Furthermore, since conscience reflects subjective and normative character, I argue that conscience has to be formed with objective moral standards, the Word of God, and the Church’s teaching. Conscience has a double meaning; it has something to do with knowledge *science* and it is a shared knowledge among human beings *con-science*. Precisely because it can err the conscience has to be well-formed and guided to be able to make good decisions for one’s moral life.

In the first chapter, I argue for the need for conscience in the Christian moral life. This argument I want to support is based on the dangers of moral relativism and wrong use of the term freedom, and on the other hand, blind obedience. When there are no objective moral standards this leads to the collapse of society that we are witnessing today. Anyone can claim

his or her right to act as they please without a sense of responsibility. On the other hand, we have to be aware of the dangers of mere obedience “just follow the law;” this can make us insensible or irresponsible to others.

Further on, I want to continue my argumentation on a need for conscience from a more anthropologic perspective presenting a biblical, theological and philosophical view of the human person. In his first interview, when asked who he is, Pope Francis responds that he is a sinner. I think that this notion is important especially when confronting moral relativism, individualism, or subjectivism, which leads us to a better understanding of the other when facing the weaknesses of our brothers and sisters. When we realize that we are not without errors and that we can err in our judgments, we can recognize our vulnerability which again leads us to recognition of others and to act, to be able to confront injustices in our society, to confront conformity or just to act from mere obedience without being able to see other in need.

In the second chapter, the notion of conscience is considered first from a historical perspective, how the concept of conscience has been developed through history. To know how to “act according to conscience” we have to know what it is. In developing this argument, I will draw mainly on thinkers from Catholic moral tradition, including St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Alphonsus Liguori, and Benedict XVI. I will argue that conscience is the “most secret core and sanctuary of a man” where we can hear the voice of God, raising awareness that conscience is not infallible. For this reason, we need a proper education or formation of conscience, the role of community and society in the formation of conscience, and an understanding of the role the virtues play in one’s life.

To the argument about the notion and the role of conscience in Christian life, I want to add also recent debates about the role of conscience between so-called “proportionalists”, “consequentialists” and those on a more traditionalist side in the light of *Veritatis Splendor*. I

think that this debate is interesting because it gives us a broader perspective on how the Church is facing contemporary challenges, and how certain groups and magisterium are responding.

After considering the need for conscience and what the conscience is, in the third chapter I will argue for the promotion of virtue ethics in the formation of conscience. Without a sense of our fragility and vulnerability, we cannot hear God's voice. The formation of conscience should include objective moral norms, community, and good examples. Virtues are not just strong dispositions to certain kinds of actions and emotions, they help people, and they guide and incline agents to certain acts through prudential reasoning. Here I will suggest in the line with Daniel J. Daly who in his book *The Structures of virtue and vice* argues that virtue ethics should be at the service of moral discernment, to guide the agent in the discernment of what is good, right, and virtuous, and less incline to tell people what to do.

On this line is Pope Francis who in his encyclical *Amoris Laetitia* calls for critical dialogue and confrontation with others like priests, or educated laypersons in helping people to become more aware of their situation before God, to discover the paths of spiritual and moral growth, and how to respond as best as possible to God's will and moral demands. Thus, in this chapter, I argue for accompaniment and discernment of people in dubious conscience with the accent on humility, discretion, and the love for the Church and her teaching in a sincere search for God's will. This is also in the line with Ignatian discernment.

As we live in a complex world that presents us with many challenges on which it is not easy to discern what is God's will, I argue that in Ignatian spiritual tradition we can find a good guide in cases when our conscience faces challenges finding the right decision.

Chapter I: Place for conscience

To understand the conscience in today's contemporary culture, in my opinion, we have to first understand the concept of freedom which is the cornerstone of our society, culture, politics, and its counterpart, obedience. We can hear from many groups of people their appeal to freedom as an excuse to do whatever they think is the right thing to do, as freedom become the fundamental right for every individual. This became especially obvious in many appeals to consciences objection to receiving a covid-19 vaccine. There are numerous reasons for this like politicization of measures set against the pandemic, distrust in pharmaceutical companies that produce those vaccines, surrounding conspiracy theories, etc. Freedom certainly is and should be our fundamental right, but my question is can we understand freedom in these modern terms as an absolute right, or freedom must have some limits.

1.1. Freedom vs. Obedience

Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor expressed in his book *The Ethics of Authenticity* his worries about modern society and its decline, which started in the seventeenth century that deeply affects the modern concept of freedom. The first source is individualism as the finest achievement of modern civilization. "We live in a world where people have a right to choose for themselves their own pattern of life, to decide in conscience what convictions to espouse, to determine the shape of their lives in a whole host of ways that their ancestors couldn't control."¹ This modern freedom, argues Taylor, was won by our breaking loose from older moral horizons, where people saw themselves as a part of larger order. This moral order was hierarchical and provided people with meaning and their proper place in the universe. And since people lost their sense of a higher purpose, they become more focused on their individual lives. "In other words, the dark side of individualism is a centering on the self, which both

¹ Charles Taylor. *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992. 2.

flattens and narrows our lives, makes them poorer in meaning, and less concerned with others or society.”² This has become, according to Taylor, a specific form of contemporary culture.

The second reason for worry is what he calls “instrumental reason”, a kind of rationality that calculates the most economical application of means to a given end. Thus, the maximum efficiency becomes the measure of success. This happened, argues Taylor, because our social arrangement and modes of action are no longer grounded around the will of God and the moral order. “The fear is that things that ought to be determined by other criteria will be decided in terms of efficiency or ‘cost-benefit’ analysis, that the independent ends that ought to be guiding our lives will be eclipsed by the demand to maximize output.”³ Once the old order (authority) disappeared, we created the grounds for a new and maybe not any better and potentially worse authority in the process of “rebellion”. Demands of economic growth are used to justify very unequal distributions of wealth and income would be an example of this cost-benefit analysis. We start to treat human beings and the environment in which we live instrumentally. Thus, technology becomes an authority that we cannot control anymore, it becomes a self-moving entity. But on the other hand, argues Taylor: “Our degrees of freedom are not zero. There is a point to deliberating what ought to be our ends, and whether instrumental reason ought to have a lesser role in our lives than it does.”⁴ And this freedom can be expressed through political engagement.

That becomes the third reason for worry where our industrial-technological society and its institutions and structures severely influence our choices. This means that we face restrictions, opportunities, and incentives generated by those structures that shape our choices in our everyday life, providing us with a sense of powerlessness in the face of these created structures.

² Charles Taylor. 3.

³ Charles Taylor. 5.

⁴ Charles Taylor. 8.

Taylor calls this authority of created structures and institutions “soft despotism.” Those structures and institutions according to Taylor gathered an “immense tutelary power” over which people have little control. This immense tutelary power signifies growth in government, types of an economy that dictates our behavior. “A society in which people end up as the kind of individuals who are ‘enclosed in their hearts’ is one where few will want to participate actively in self-government. They will prefer to stay at home and enjoy the satisfactions of private life, as long as the government of the day produces the means to these satisfactions and distributes them widely.”⁵ He also includes here the authority of experts which pervades government as well as the corporate spheres. The bureaucrat is the expert, the manager, and more and more we are in danger of losing political control over our destiny to the system itself. We have the sense that “they”, whoever they are have more control over us. Artificial intelligence, for example, becomes the ultimate expression of that.

The first worry that Taylor expresses, individualism, led to moral relativism where everyone has a right to develop their own form of life. It is the culture of self-fulfillment or a search for authentic human existence, but since there are no more any higher moral ideals, which was characteristic of medieval time, culture falls into moral subjectivism. “By this, I mean the view that moral positions are not in any way grounded in reason or nature of things but are ultimately just adopted by each of us because we find ourselves drawn to them. On this view, reason can’t adjudicate moral disputes.”⁶ Taylor calls this position emotivism, which means that our morals are a matter of our emotions or inner preferences which have no grounding. What that means is that every individual is now focused more on his interiority to choose whatever he considers right, to the detriment of any relation with or demand from the outside. But choice cannot be the goal argues Taylor, self-choice as an ideal makes sense only

⁵ Charles Taylor. 9.

⁶ Charles Taylor. 18.

because some issues are more significant than others. We have always given justification why we choose this over that because we cannot act without some sense of what is significant, or without meaning. Significance, argues Talyor, is determined by relationship with others. “Things have significance not of themselves but because people deem them to have it.”⁷

He builds the notion of meaning or significance from the definition of human nature as social creature. In his view, we can’t achieve authenticity in this artificial state as isolated free individuals because we are social creatures. We are social creatures that have a language to communicate with each other, which is socially acquired. “The general feature of human life that I want to evoke is its fundamentally dialogical character. We become full human agents, capable of understanding ourselves, and hence of defining identity, through our acquisition of rich human languages of expression.”⁸ Each human being can discover for him or herself their own particular being only in the web of social relations. Thus, my freedom is conditioned by my relation to others, I can’t define myself, as moral relativism proposes, just as it pleases me. Because the very nature of human beings is that I need others to be in dialog with, to be able to discover who I am. And that I can’t accomplish without a langue that is given to me, or passed forward to me by a community that I am in. “Only if I exist in a world in which history, or the demands of nature, or the needs of my fellow human beings, or the duties of citizenship, or the call of God, or something else of this order matters crucially, can I define an identity for myself that is not trivial. Authenticity is not the enemy of demands that emanate from beyond the self; it supposes such demands.”⁹ Thus, for us Christians, our concept of freedom depends deeply on our idea of God and our relationship with him and the community of believers or the Church.

⁷ Charles Taylor. 36.

⁸ Charles Taylor. 32-33.

⁹ Charles Taylor. 40.

A similar description of the “malaise of modernity” as Taylor calls it, we find in Servais Pinckaers in his book *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, where he distinguishes two different concepts of freedom. It is the *freedom of indifference* started with nominalism and *freedom for excellence* characteristic of Greek philosophy and the Fathers of the Church. He argues that moral tradition from Aristotle to St. Thomas Aquinas explained that freedom is a faculty proceeding from reason and will, which unite to make the act of choice. “This act of choice is thus formed by practical judgment and will. For him, free will was not a prime or originating faculty; it presupposed intelligence and will. It was rooted, therefore, in the inclinations to truth and goodness that constituted these faculties.”¹⁰ On the contrary, William of Ockham, a 14th-century Franciscan theologian, maintained that free will preceded reason and will in such a way as to move them to their acts. “For him, free will was the prime faculty, anterior to intelligence and will as well as to their acts.”¹¹ In this way freedom could be described, argues Pinckaers, as laid entirely in the power of the will to choose between contraries, regarding the reason or not. “Thus understood, freedom was practically identified with the will, as the origin of willing and acting, as a power of self-determination. In this way, it came to constitute, in some way, by itself alone, the very being of the person, at the source of all action.”¹² Unlike the traditional model where freedom was defined as an attraction toward the good, it became a radical indifference, argues Pinckaers, where a pure will is a commanding force.

Aquinas saw freedom as oriented by natural inclinations toward some perceived good, meaning, perfection, or natural human disposition toward beatitude. For Ockham, maintains Pinckaers, all human dispositions or inclinations are subject to the free and contingent choice of human freedom. “This meant that I could freely choose or refuse happiness, either in

¹⁰ Servais Pinckaers. *The Sources of Christian Ethics*. Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1995. 331.

¹¹ *Idem*. 331.

¹² *Idem*. 332.

particular matters presented to me or in general, in the very desire which attracted me to it, owing to the radical indifference of my freedom.”¹³ This displacement or subjection of inclinations to will alone contributed to a modification of their nature. Thus, argues Pinckaers, they became to be regarded as impulses of a lower order, on the psychosomatic plane. The total concept of nature was being transformed. “The harmony between humanity and nature was destroyed by the freedom that claimed to be ‘indifferent’ to nature and defined itself as *non-nature*.”¹⁴ This is the reason why later in the development of the fundamental moral theology, especially in the manualist tradition, questions on human happiness were often omitted. While from antiquity to the late medieval time happiness was considered the first desire of human nature as well as its perfection. The same was with passions of the soul seen as an obstacle to freedom, whereas for Aquinas passions could be good and acquire positive moral value. Virtues that developed the natural inclinations and brought them to perfection, became just a traditional, convenient category for listing moral obligations. “This is what the textbooks of moral theory did when they suppressed the treatise on virtues in fundamental moral theology and divided the subject matter of specialized moral theology according to the commandments rather than the virtues.”¹⁵

Human acts were considered wholly as a choice between contraries determined by our will alone. Isolated from the study of virtues, argues Pinckaers, each action was studied in itself, according to a particular circumstance. “In the seventeenth century, this would be called the study of cases of conscience, whence the name casuistry.”¹⁶ The reason behind this move from a more traditional notion of freedom lies in a primitive passion of the human will to self-affirmation, or a radical difference between itself and all else, seen also in Taylor as a self-

¹³ *Idem*. 333.

¹⁴ *Idem*. 333.

¹⁵ *Idem*. 336.

¹⁶ *Idem*. 338.

authenticity. This autonomy writes Pinckaers, includes the rejection of all dependence whatsoever, and of any norm or law not made by itself. The power was most clearly evidenced in negation, in all its forms: refusal, criticism, contradiction, and confrontation.¹⁷

The final break as Pinckaers sees it is between freedom or free will and reason. Whereas for Aquinas freedom and will are united to make a free choice, with Ockham freedom consisted of the ability to choose between contraries before and even against reasons proposed. “Because of the ruptures mentioned above, the reason no longer had a direct hold on freedom; it could not penetrate the will.”¹⁸ According to Pinckaers, this divorce between reason and will gave birth to two different forces, voluntarism and rationalism. Because each faculty of will, and reason, acted independently from each other. The main force of this freedom of indifference lies precisely in the capacity of the will to say no to reason. “Since morality is the proper domain of freedom, its main elements would be taken over by the will and would be ordered according to their relationships of power over various desires.”¹⁹ What that brought to moral understanding, according to Pinckaers, is that now the law, commandments, obedience, and all that determined moral action, was defined by the will alone. It was not any more important the question of why is this particular action, or goal good for me, or does it bring perfection to my act, but obedience to authority. The sheer will of authority becomes central.

The divorce between reason and will changed also our relation to God who as the Creator possessed the absolute freedom joined with his omnipotence. “Reflection on him would focus henceforth on his free and sovereign will far more than on his wisdom, truth, and goodness.”²⁰ From now on moral law was an expression of God’s will who remained perfectly free in respect to his law and precepts. Law and God’s precepts according to St. Thomas Aquinas were

¹⁷ *Idem.* 339.

¹⁸ *Idem.* 340.

¹⁹ *Idem.* 341.

²⁰ *Idem.* 342.

considered as an expression of his divine wisdom and they concerned what was good for the human person and oriented to his end and perfection. For Ockham on the other hand, argues Pinckaers, all legislative work proceeded from the will, and first from the will of God, the author of law and source of moral obligation. This concept of freedom, argues further Pinckaers, created absolute separation between God and the world, who created the world but remained alien to it. In that way, a man was in no position to reach God and to know his will in a natural way. “Only possible bond between God and the creation was its radical dependence of his being to God. Human freedom was total, granted; but the condition of creaturehood subjected it to the omnipotence of the divine will. God’s sovereign power over man created the moral bond. This bond had no other source than God’s will, manifested with the force of obligation.”²¹

From now on moral theology was concerned mainly with this concept of law. Since moral law has no other foundation than God’s will moral theology was interested in obligations, commandments, Decalogue. “Since morality drew its origin from the divine will alone, human actions, considered in isolation as we have seen, would be evaluated morally only and precisely as they related to law. In themselves, they could be called indifferent, like the freedom that formed them.”²² Morality thus studied actions from the outside, and since it was no more focused on inclinations or virtues, or interiority, morality reduced itself to what was minimum necessary. “It often led to the reduction of obligations to a minimum so as not to overburden consciences; but it also happened at times that demands were pushed to the limit, insisting on formal as well as material conformity of actions to the law.”²³

²¹ *Idem.* 343.

²² *Idem.* 343.

²³ *Idem.* 344.

This duty-driven moral theory replaced the previous teaching from Aristotle, Church fathers, and Aquinas – where charity, virtuous acts, and conformity to ends of human person and perfections in accordance to human nature and the law played a significant role – with legal obedience to the law. This Ockham theory of the law contributed to the rise in moral relativism in later development in the history of philosophy, as we saw in Taylor’s critique of modernity. Since the only thing that stood between man and his freedom was God and his will expressed in his law and precepts, with the rise of skepticism introduced by René Descartes in the 16th century and his methodical doubt the very notion of God and his existence came in doubt. And if God doesn’t exist then also his laws don’t apply. “Relativism would be the besetting temptation of every moral system based on freedom of indifference. There was only one fixed point, only one absolute: conformity to the divine will or to sheer obligation.”²⁴

The only way of knowing God’s will according to nominalism was through scripture where God revealed his law and precepts and surprisingly through reason. The divine law contained in the scripture was taken and understood in a predominantly juridical sense consonant with the morality of obligation. The role of reason was to deduce them from the scripture and make them explicit as universal and relatively abstract principles. The Discovery of God’s will by reason was the foundation of morality argues Pinckaers. “Right reason or conscience is a privileged place, the nearest and most natural where the moral law is revealed to us. Ockham, too, saw in reason the foundation of natural law. For him, a first principle of moral theory would be the duty of acting in conformity with the dictates of reason, even should reason occasionally err.”²⁵ Since this way of thinking attributed to God’s will alone as the foundation of morality, argues Pinckaers, soon in the name of reason, human will would come in place of

²⁴ *Idem.* 345.

²⁵ *Idem.* 348.

God as the source of law. “Or the will of the individual and of conscience, the will of society, of authority, of the state, or of the people.”²⁶

Since now morality came to be understood as conformity of the reason to God’s will, obedience became the highest virtue. But morality founded on sheer obedience to the will of authority easily slides to ideology. The devastating consequences of this slide became reality in the ideologies of Nazism and Communism of the 20th century. Prudence Marry Allen in her article *Where Is Our Conscience?* says that this happens when conscience is located in the will, and objective truth is jettisoned, human acts than have transitive and intransitive consequences.²⁷ After World War II many philosophers, theologians, and thinkers wanted to understand how was it possible that otherwise normal people were able to easily kill millions of innocent people in concentration camps like Auschwitz, Dachau, or Siberian gulags.

In the early 1960’s Stanely Milgram, an American social psychologist conducted an experiment on obedience. In the name of science, he asked ordinary Americans to inflict a series of strong electric shocks on an innocent individual, where he discovered that a large majority were willing to do so. “Milgram argued that most people ‘blindly’ obey authority because they find themselves in a situation where obedience is expected of them – and not because of their personal convictions about the correctness of the commands.”²⁸ Johannes Lang in his article *Against Obedience* brings Hannah Arendt’s social-psychological explanation of mass atrocity suggesting that morality is a collection of socially accepted habits, customs, and rules, and as such morality is fragile in the face of political forces seeking to undermine it. Political forces after World War I and mass unemployment took advantage of people who were

²⁶ *Idem.* 349.

²⁷ Prudence Allen. “Where Is Our Conscience?” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 44, no. 3 (2004): 367.

²⁸ Johannes Lang. “Against Obedience: Hannah Arendt’s Overlooked Challenge to Social-Psychological Explanations of Mass Atrocity.” *Theory & Psychology* 24, no. 5 (2014): 650.

left with a profound sense of being superfluous, feeling insecurity and longed for safety. Lang writes:

The destruction of the individual's private, or internalized, morality began with the destruction of the public sphere. Nazi rule, in Arendt's view, thrived on an impaired intersubjectivity, that is, on the absence of critical discourse. What would others say? Under totalitarian rule, according to Arendt, the others say nothing, for they dare not. In this atmosphere of weakened public opinion, people may easily lose their "common sense," as Arendt put it, making it possible for the coercive logic of totalitarian ideology to prevail, according to which mass murder can become a moral duty.²⁹

This analysis is in line with Allen's argument saying that when conscience is located in the will, and objective truth is jettisoned, we tend to transfer our moral responsibility to others or institutions. Lang then compares Milgram's findings with Arendt's analysis of the social-psychological explanation of mass atrocity saying that Nazi authorities had reduced the individual to an instrument of power, that is someone mostly concerned with the approval of his superiors. "The perpetrators feel no responsibility for their acts because they have ceased to see themselves as the source of their own behavior. They are no longer accountable to themselves."³⁰

These findings of Milgram and Arendt can serve us in understanding how easily we can be instrumentalized as individuals or as a society for someone others' purposes and goals. Charles Taylor called this temptation "instrumental reason", as we saw earlier. Like Taylor, Arendt also believed that our "degrees of freedom are not zero" and that we have ability to deliberate whether "instrumental reason" ought to have a lesser role in our lives. "Arendt believed that people possess an ability to imagine alternative social and political arrangements and that this capacity enables individuals to transcend existing norms and to question them. Indeed, her view

²⁹ *Idem.* 653.

³⁰ *Idem.* 654.

asserted that people have the moral responsibility to interrogate the principles behind the laws that affect them.”³¹ Arendt, argues Lang was especially critical of the social sciences who tended to portray individual subjectivity as simply a reflection or result of social forces. “The result, according to Arendt, was to deprive the human being of its dignity: its status as a free, unique, and unpredictable actor.”³²

By examining Charles Taylor’s worries about modern society and his critique of the modern concept of freedom we saw that freedom can easily fall under influence of “instrumental reason” of social structures that give us a fake notion of freedom where we act according to incentives of market economy, and under political and societal changes. True freedom according to Taylor can be understood only in respect of human social nature, and dialog with others in finding solutions. Servais Pinckaers showed us how giving the power of freedom to will alone can lead us to moral relativism or how obedience to the will of God can easily be changed to the will of society or authority of the state, or of the people. The atrocity of WWII is the prime example of how individual conscience can be impaired in virtue of obedience to the authority, and transfer responsibility to others.

Thus, we see that freedom and obedience are related to each other and must be conditioned for a true moral human act. Conscientious human act, therefore, presupposes the freedom to act in obedience to what is good and true. This principle is understood by the Catholic moral reflection as fundamental requirements necessary to preserve the dignity of the human person, values, and the well-being of society. It is, therefore, necessary to understand human nature found in the Bible and handed down by the tradition of the Catholic Church. We cannot understand the right place and function of the conscience in human life if we don’t have a proper understanding of the human condition.

³¹ *Idem.* 656.

³² *Idem.* 656.

1.2. Understanding Human Nature

The key concept about human person Christianity finds in the first three chapters of the book of Genesis. There we find that human beings are creatures brought to life out of the sheer goodness and love of God. In the book about biblical roots of Christian conduct presented by the Pontifical Biblical Commission is said that everything that is created, “heaven and earth” is due to God’s decision and is a free gift of the Creator God. “For Israel, the acknowledgment of God as the Creator of all is not the beginning of the knowledge of God, it is the fruit of her experience with him and of the history of her faith.”³³ In this experience with God humanity discovered that the biggest gift consists in the fact that God created human beings in his own image. “Let us make humankind in our image, according our likeness.” (Gen 1, 26)

Paul J. Wadell in his book *Happiness and the Christian Moral Life* notices that the book of Genesis presents God as an amazingly prodigious artist bringing beautiful things to life, delighting in them, and declaring all of them good. “The stories of creation attest to the undeniable goodness of creation, but they also make it clear that God alone creates, that God alone can do this. Everything else that exists, including human beings, are not creators but creatures, not the authors of life but receivers of life.”³⁴ This experience of life received as a gift tells us that we are not self-constituting, autonomous beings, rather we are radically dependent, creatures whose lives originate in God and at every moment are sustained by God. Wendel writes further that Christian anthropology claims we live not from our own power but always from the endlessly creative love of God. And this is the fundamental reason why anything exists at all.

³³ “The Bible and Morality - Biblical Roots of Christian Conduct, Pontifical Biblical Commission, 11 March 2008,” accessed January 25, 2022, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/pcb_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20080511_bibbia-e-morale_en.html.

³⁴ Paul J. Wadell. *Happiness and the Christian Moral Life: An Introduction to Christian Ethics*. 2nd ed. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2012. 119.

Our identity and dignity as persons come from the fact that we are made in God's image and likeness and out of the free will of God. "Every person is a once-in-a-lifetime, never-to-be-repeated expression of God's glory. The doctrine of the *imago Dei* means that, if we have 'eyes to see,' we can find God in everyone we meet."³⁵ This means that every human person deserves respect and is worthy, and our dignity and identity are not measured in terms of intelligence, talent, physical ability, wealth, or even goodness. The dignity is given, not earned or merited.

This fundamental claim of Christianity explains why Charles Taylor is right in his worry about the modern concept of freedom, individuality, and self-sufficiency because to be a creature is to be dependent, needy, finite. When we are born, we need our parents to help us grow into responsible adults, we need society to learn the language, culture, education, etc. Just as in God there are three persons who are united perfectly in one nature and distinct by their relations as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, humans do not lose their individuality by being united to others. On the contrary, as John Rziha notes in his book *The Christian moral life* humans rather discover their true identity through their loving relationships. "As the three persons are made distinct through a complete giving and reception of the fullness of the divinity, humans also discover their true self by completely giving and receiving others in loving relationships."³⁶ Same affirmation we find in the pastoral constitution on the Church in the modern world *Gaudium et spes*: "Man's social nature makes it evident that the progress of the human person and the advance of society itself hinge on one another. For the beginning, the subject and the goal of all social institutions is and must be the human person which for its part and by its very nature stands completely in need of social life." (GS 25)

³⁵ *Idem.* 122.

³⁶ John Rziha. *The Christian Moral Life: Directions for the Journey to Happiness*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017. 14.

The *Imago Dei* doctrine makes a further claim about human beings. Created in the image and likeness of God, humans have a unique place in the created world because all other plants and animals are endowed with being, life, senses, and emotions, but humans possess intellect, reason, and free will. “Thus, the way that humans are distinctively in the image of God is through their ability to know and love God and others.”³⁷ We are called to personal union with God and others. “For having been created in the image of God, who ‘from one man has created the whole human race and made them live all over the face of the earth’ (Acts 17:26), all men are called to one and the same goal, namely God Himself.” (GS 24)

By our ability to know and to freely choose we can decide for God as our end or goal, or decide not to choose God as our final end. Here lies our freedom, but it can only be true freedom if it is governed in accord with God’s plan for us, and that plan is personal union with him. Those actions are called by Aquinas “human acts” because they are the product of will and reason. “The voluntary is an act consisting in a rational operation. Now such are human acts. Therefore, there is something voluntary in human acts.” But human actions are not some random activities, they are never without some end. “Now the end is the principle in human operations, as the Philosopher states (Phys. ii, 9). Therefore, it belongs to man to do everything for an end.” (ST Ia-IIae, q.6. a.1.) This ability also means that we are moral creatures, by our freely deliberate acts – intention, chosen means, and object of desire – we can judge the acts as morally good or bad. James Keenan brings an explanation of Aquinas’ description of human action: “Aquinas specified all moral activity according to the object willed. The object willed is not external action but an internal one, that is, all moral action derives its moral estimation from the intention, the object in the will. [...] The intention or the object willed is measured by reason because reason makes specified human behavior good.”³⁸ And in this act of reason, we

³⁷ *Idem.* 15.

³⁸ James F. Keenan. “The Problem with Aquinas, Thomas Concept of Sin.” *Heythrop Journal* 35, no. 4 (1994): 405.

find the place for conscience, according to Aquinas. “Properly speaking, conscience is not a power, but an act. This is evident both from the very name and from those things which in the common way of speaking are attributed to conscience. For conscience, according to the very nature of the word, implies the relation of knowledge to something: for conscience may be resolved into ‘cum alio scientia,’ i.e., knowledge applied to an individual case.” (ST 1, q.79, a.13) To understand this more closely we need a deeper investigation of human nature.

Namely all living beings are created as a composite of the body and the soul. According to ancient Greek philosophy, and especially Aristotle, the body-soul union was explained using the philosophical terms “form” and “matter.” For Aristotle matter referred to material that the thing was made of. The form referred to the way that material was organized into a particular shape. Form determines the nature of the thing. Thus, a form of a squirrel determines the shape and types of actions and ends of a squirrel. For example, a squirrel is a furry animal that gathers acorns to survive winter. The same is with the soul and body, where the soul gives form to the body. A particular human soul always gives form to the particular human body. And unlike squirrels and other animals who have sentient souls, the human soul has the ability of both, sense knowledge and intellectual knowledge. John Rziha explains: “The capacities within the soul to cause actions are called ‘powers.’ Although there are numerous powers within the soul, the three most pertinent to human actions are the intellect, the will, and the emotions.”³⁹ The intellect provides us with the ability to know the truth, the will gives us the ability to love and choose things once the intellect knows something as good, and emotions provides us with the ability to desire bodily good in accord with reason, for example to stay alive and to ensure the propagation of the human race.

³⁹ John Rziha. *The Christian Moral Life*. 18.

Rziha argues that a good way to further explain the different powers of the soul is by looking at their natural inclinations. “A natural inclination is an interior drive that a being has to perform its proper action. Because God made everything for a purpose, all things have a natural propensity to do certain things. For example, spiders have a natural inclination to spin webs. Humans are made by God to attain unity with God and others based on knowledge and love.” But because of sin, caused by the disobedience of the first couple, Adam and Eve, our natural inclinations to know the truth has been weakened but not destroyed, and our intellect became subjected to ignorance. Furthermore, our emotions are not anymore in harmony with reason and they affect our free will not to choose always the true good.

Because the body plays an essential role in all human actions, and because the human soul is the form of the human body its union and proper functioning are essential in understanding moral life. “Ultimately, both the body and the soul are causes of human actions, and both must be taken into consideration in determining what actions humans are created to perform. When acting, the soul is the primary (or first) cause of all actions, and the body is the instrumental (or secondary) cause of all actions.”⁴⁰ For example, for the human person to form an abstract concept of a squirrel – to have a general knowledge about this particular animal species – human intellect which is part of the soul, works through the body and brain functions and functions of sight in the formation of knowledge from a particular instance of a squirrel in the nature. In another word, humans must associate a sensible sign with a particular concept. Rziha notes the further reason for the fundamental unity of the body and soul in the will. The reason lies in the fact that just as the intellect requires the body to think, the will requires the body to love. Since the knowledge comes in through the body, the love goes out through the body. “Since the divine image in humans inclines them to enter into loving relationships through acts of knowing and loving that require the body, the body also shares in the image of God. In fact,

⁴⁰ *Idem.* 21.

the body is the physical element of the sincere gift of self through which humans discover their true self.”⁴¹

This short analysis of human nature and dignity, in no way complete, brings to light the importance of all parts of human nature for Christian ethics. Created as a free gift out of God’s love, called for personal union with God and others which is accomplished through free acts of reason and the will. And although our capacity for this union with God and others is severely impaired by sin, nevertheless we are called to this end by our natural powers and also with the supernatural powers given us by the saving power of Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit.

To help us orient toward that end God gave humankind the Ten Commandments to establish the right relationship with him and with each other in society. But as we saw in the first part of this chapter obeying the law is the minimum, and it is not enough for personal union where God asks of us an interior response of our reason, free will, and our emotions. This means that we have to return to the traditional concept of morality that focused more on happiness, acquired and infused virtues, and the guiding of the Holy Spirit. Already in the book of Deuteronomy God reveals his desire for more than just obeying the law. “You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength.” Rziha notes that already in the Old Testament along with the deontological system, a system concerned with the interior development of the person is beginning to develop in the Old Testament. “In this type of moral system, actions are determined to be good or bad based on whether or not they lead to true happiness. However, [...], this internal transformation still requires that humans perform good external actions, only now these actions are ordered toward the happiness of loving union with God rather than toward an external material reward.⁴² To perform good acts the virtues are those stable internal dispositions in the human soul that

⁴¹ *Idem.* 23.

⁴² *Idem.* 58.

dispose us to virtuous acts. Of this, we will talk about more in the third chapter where I will argue for the promotion of virtue ethics in the formation of conscience.

Before we move on to the discussion about conscience, I would like to present another reason why we often fail to hear our conscience and to respond to others in need. James Keenan explains that people do not fail having responded, rather, they fail beforehand, they fail to bother to respond in the first place.

1.3. Importance of recognizing our vulnerability

In his paper *Vulnerability, Recognition and Conscience*, James Keenan expressed his worry about teaching conscience formation. The reason is, Keenan argues, that it is not enough just to provide students with the needed number of instructions about conscience. “I say this because I see some students who are responsive to the need for moral assistance, others not. If all have consciences, why do some respond and others do not?”⁴³ Failing to respond, continues Keenan, lies in the fact that people fail to respond *in the first place*. We fail to bother, or we pretend that we don’t see what is going on. His argument goes well with Milgram’s social experiment on obedience and Arendt’s social-psychological explanation of mass atrocity where people are able to do horrible things to others and then continue their lives as usual. Because they don’t bother to see, or they transfer the responsibility to the authority as Prudence Marry Allen argued. To these reasons why we often fail *to bother* Keenan responds that the problem is that we think the beginning of moral action is conscience, but that is not the case. If we want to act in conscience, argues Keenan, we need first to be vulnerably disposed to the other and then subsequently recognize the other. “In other words, I think there are two steps before acting in conscience: being vulnerably disposed and then actually recognizing. These are the pre-

⁴³ James Keenan. Building Blocks for Moral Education: Vulnerability, Recognition and Conscience, David DeCosse, ed. *Conscience and Catholic Education* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2022). xx.

conditions to the conscience act.”⁴⁴ Recognizing the other from the experience of our own vulnerability is something that our modern or postmodern society needs, especially in light of Taylor’s analysis of the modern malaises in self-sufficiency and instrumental reason. A radical consequence of this modern obsession with the *self* we can find in the writings of Jean-Paul Sartre who saw the other as an obstacle, *the other is hell* he wrought at the end of his play *No Exit*. The other writes Sartre, exposes me, makes me weak and fragile, turns me into an object. “The Other is the hidden death of my possibilities, insofar as I live this death as hidden in the midst of the world. [...] Thus, in the sudden jolt that shakes me when I grasp the Other’s look, there is this: that suddenly I see a subtle alienation of all my possibilities, which are arranged far away from me, in the midst of the world, alongside the world’s objects.”⁴⁵ In Sartre’s point of view the look of the other makes me an object, it defines who I am, and for this reason, I cannot be whatever I want and that is for Sartre the hell.

Although Sartre is right in the sense that we should not make others an object of our interest or manipulation, but he is wrong in seeing others as a threat. As we saw earlier in the discussion about human dignity and nature, we are social creatures and as such we discover our true identity through our loving relationship with others. Progress of the human person and the advance of society hinges on these relations as mentioned already in *GS*. Keenan rightly notices that being able to act in conscience we need first recognize our vulnerability but not in the sense Sartre sees it as an obstacle or a threat. He borrows his view on vulnerability from Judith Buttler saying that vulnerability is the human condition that allows me to hear, encounter, receive, or respond to the other even to the point of being injured. Being human is being vulnerable.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ *Idem*. Xx.

⁴⁵ Jean Paul Sartre. *Being and Nothingness; an Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*. New York: Washington Square Press/Atria Paperback ed., 2021. 413.

⁴⁶ James Keenan. *Building Blocks for Moral Education*. xx.

Irish theologian Enda McDonagh in his book *Vulnerable to the Holy* recognizes the Other not as a threat but as a window to mystery, to God himself.

Human otherness and that of the rest of the natural world demands a recognition and respect which ultimately rest in its rootedness in God and God's continuing creative activity, the divine letting be in which humans are invited and empowered to partake. This human letting be, in its accepting and enabling senses, renders each human vulnerable to the holy, to the immediate sacredness of every human being, including the self as other, and to the sacred character of the universe itself as created by, reflecting and even participating in the holiness of God.⁴⁷

Our vulnerability is significant precisely because God himself is also vulnerable in his creative act, in his letting be God also makes risk. "God is not only letting be, but also letting go. This is the risk of creation for God, introducing into being other reality distinct from Godself."⁴⁸ The culmination of God's vulnerable *letting be* and *letting go* of risk finds in Jesus Christ's redemptive act. "The lessons of history suggest a God of surprises. The greatest surprise of all was God's initiative in Jesus. At the heart of that surprise lies Calvary. The risks God undertook in creation and redemption are finally revealed here."⁴⁹

The vulnerability ethics thus is grounded in God's act of creation/redemption and human dignity in the *imago Dei* tradition. In his essay *Linking Human Dignity, Vulnerability and Virtue Ethics*, Keenan argues that ethics of vulnerability that develops of an *imago Dei*/human dignity presupposition, can provide a foundation for virtue ethics, and help us in the face of contemporary challenges. He sees a special contribution to the contemporary discussion on vulnerability in Emmanuel Levinas for his appreciation of the human condition of recognizing the other. "Levinas's challenge is that our encounter with the other person precedes

⁴⁷ Enda McDonagh. *Vulnerable to the Holy: in Faith, Morality and Art*. Blackrock, Co. Dublin: Columba Press, 2004. 15-16.

⁴⁸ *Idem*. 19.

⁴⁹ *Idem*. 33.

consciousness: because of this it also precedes the meaning we make of the encounter, the meaning we make of ourselves, and the rational activity of making decisions regarding the nature of our response to this other person.”⁵⁰ Daniel J. Fleming in his article *Primordial Moral Awareness* explains this saying that for Levinas before consciousness is able to speak about the face, the face speaks. “What we have now is not a case of an encounter with another object, but rather a presence that addresses consciousness prior to any objectification and understanding being able to occur. Given that the face speaks to consciousness prior to consciousness speaking of the face, Levinas argues that such communication is best understood in the imperative mood. The face calls to consciousness.”⁵¹ Contrary to Sartre’s notion of *the ego concerned only for itself*, Levinas refers to *the created-ness* of the ethical subject, argues Fleming, we are created as our brother’s keeper before we ourselves could have any idea, longing, or intention to want to be such keeper. Thus, our nature is relatedness to the other as a fundamental condition, or call to responsibility before any act of consciousness.

As the encounter with the other for Levinas is before consciousness, for Keenan is the vulnerability that defines and establishes us as creatures before God and as ethical among one another.⁵² “Vulnerability allows oneself to be at risk in response to others; but we should not think that vulnerability is always precarious. My openness to you is not always a fragile one, though I allow myself to be exposed to the other. In instances of responding to the other, I might still take risks, though even those risks themselves are not necessarily precarious.”⁵³

Good examples of vulnerability are found in the Gospels. One example is the Prodigal Son parable from the Luke Gospel, where the vulnerability of the father is the center of the parable.

⁵⁰ James F. Keenan. “Linking Human Dignity, Vulnerability and Virtue Ethics”, *Interdisciplinary Journal for Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society* 6, 1 (2020): 60.

⁵¹ Daniel J. Fleming. “Primordial Moral Awareness: Levinas, Conscience, and The Unavoidable Call to Responsibility”, *The Heythrop Journal*, 56 (2015), 607.

⁵² James F. Keenan. “Linking Human Dignity, Vulnerability and Virtue Ethics.” 60.

⁵³ *Idem*. 62.

The father allows his younger son to leave his household with one-third of his inheritance and when he wasted all in some foreign country decides to return to his father. “But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger!’” (Lk 15, 17) In his desperate situation, he finally recognizes the goodness of his father. In this story, we recognize the vulnerability of the father in his freedom to let go of his son knowing that he might never come back or that he could waste all his inheritance. Despite the transgression of his son the father embraces him back to his household and because of that, experiences resentment of his older son because of his merciful act toward the younger son. “The centrality of the story is the enduringly vigilant, attentive, and responsive father, who is so because he is vulnerable and is capable of not only embracing them but in entering one’s precarity or the other’s dominance.”⁵⁴

In the Good Samaritan parable, the vulnerable one is not a wounded man who lies on the road but the Good Samaritan who recognizes the man in need, no matter who he might be, or what is his history, the Good Samaritan restores his dignity by helping him, unlike the priest or Levite who passes him by. Keenan reminds us that since the early fathers of the Church, from Origen, Ambrose, and Augustine, this parable is considered as the Gospel in miniature, where the Good Samaritan is Christ and the wounded man on the road is Adam. It is a parable of our redemption, where Christ allows himself to be wounded for us and pay for our redemption on the Cross. “In him we recognize the image out of which we are made, the vulnerable one. Our dignity rooted in the *imago Dei* is rooted in vulnerability.”⁵⁵ From the examples of these parables, we can see how vulnerability becomes the precondition for acting in conscience, just like for Levinas the encounter with the other calls for responsibility before any act of consciousness.

⁵⁴ *Idem.* 62.

⁵⁵ *Idem.* 63.

To help us foster and engage our vulnerability Keenan proposes four virtues that build on one another and to promote human dignity and rights. First is the virtue of humility, then the virtue of willing vigilance that enables us to recognize others' dignity, the third virtue is mercy that moves us toward justice for all, and the fourth is the virtue of hospitality.

The virtue of humility is of fundamental importance for vulnerability because a humble person is in touch with reality and recognizes its proper place among the others and before God. Keenan argues that humble conscience helps us to see our inter-relatedness, where we are all interdependent. "A humble conscience keeps us alert to our environment, our neighbor in need, our own responsibilities, and the need to take account of the future and its challenges. Here we realize that the humble conscience engages – and sometimes interrupts – our agenda for our lives, which can so easily proceed automatically."⁵⁶ Humility enables us to hear what other people are trying to say and to re-examine our own opinions and thinking. Renowned Canadian psychologist Jordan Peterson, suggests that we should always assume that the person we are listening to might know something we don't. "So, listen, to yourself and to those with whom you are speaking. Your wisdom then consists not of the knowledge you already have, but the continual search for knowledge, which is the highest form of wisdom."⁵⁷

Humility then makes room for the next virtue of a willing vigilance that disposes us to recognize the needs of another. "This recognition is an illuminating discovery of something or someone that matters enough for us to stop and encounter."⁵⁸ This virtue of vigilance makes us ready and prompt to act and not to be too preoccupied with ourselves.

With humility that puts us in the right place and relationship with others, and with the virtue of vigilance by which we recognize the need of another, Keenan argues we are willing to enter

⁵⁶ *Idem.* 65.

⁵⁷ Jordan B. Peterson. *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote for Chaos.* London: Allen Lane, 2018. 270.

⁵⁸ James F. Keenan. "Linking Human Dignity, Vulnerability and Virtue Ethics." 66.

into the chaos of another. “Humility and vigilance allow us to be merciful.”⁵⁹ Mercy for Keenan is a political virtue that moves us toward justice. Fostering those virtues can help us against indifference toward another’s precarious situation, to move us to try to change the structures of injustice, and not to stay, as Taylor recognizes, a society in which people end up as the kind of individuals who are ‘enclosed in their hearts.’ In his discussion on mercy, he borrows from the work of Spanish Jesuit Jon Sobrino who based the notion of mercy on the experience of recognizing another as precarious. “Sobrino makes his case for the radical comprehensiveness of mercy through four themes: the principle of mercy, the mercy of God, the mercy of Jesus, and finally, the mercy of the Church. The principle of mercy stands at the origin and basis of all moral activity.”⁶⁰ Keenan concludes from Sobrino that the most important thing for the Church is to start to ‘think itself’ from without, to de-center itself to resemble more to Jesus who encounters people in need on the road.

The fourth virtue of hospitality is a result of the previous three virtues, which in the virtue of hospitality they receive the concrete form in the act of conscience. All four virtues are not separate principals coming one after another but are more inner conditions or movements of vulnerability. Keenan finds a biblical foundation for the virtue of hospitality in Lucas Chan’s exposition of the book of Ruth. There Boaz, a noble and righteous Jew, first welcomes Ruth a widow and a foreigner from Moab and bestows on her special privilege that exceeds the requirement of the Law, and then decides to marry Ruth nevertheless it was unconventional and risky, for it contradicted post-Babylonian exile insistence on racial purity, the period when the book was written. The notion of hospitality in the Bible is unique in the sense that God becomes Israel’s host, and solidarity becomes a frequently repeated message, to the point that lack of solidarity with the strangers is an offense to God. (Judges 8:4-17) The key importance

⁵⁹ *Idem.* 67.

⁶⁰ *Idem.* 67.

of hospitality, argues Chan is that it requires generous sharing of personal possession, against consumer culture that reinforces individualism and self-centeredness. “It is thus important for us to discourage and resist the corrosive forces of such isolating individualism, and instead cultivate a culture of generosity.”⁶¹ Keenan concludes that those virtues of humility, vigilance, mercy and hospitality bring forth the human vulnerability so rooted in the *imago Dei* to our act of conscience.

To conclude this chapter, we can say that to act according to conscience we need a wider horizon than our own view of interests and needs. As Taylor showed us, we discover our true identity from the demands that emanate from beyond the self. Since our nature is social, we need each other. Created in God’s image out of love every human person possesses inalienable dignity and value. Thus, our free acts should always respect the dignity of another human dignity, and also, as we saw in the explanation of Paul J. Wandell and John Rziha our acts should be directed toward our true end, the union with God. If we lose this horizon, we could easily fall into pursuing self-interest, self-fulfillment, become enclosed in our hearts, which eventually leads to the negation of others’ dignity. As atomized individuals, we can easily be manipulated by others, by structures, by authorities, in pursuing their goals and ends. Our freedom is conditioned, never absolute and we should be aware of those conditions. Thus, the act of conscience must emanate from our condition as vulnerable for others, just as God is vulnerable for us.

⁶¹ Lucas Chan. The Hebrew Bible and the Discourse on Migration: A Reflection on the virtue of hospitality in the book of Ruth. In *A Lucas Chan Reader: Pioneering Essays on Biblical and Asian Theological Ethics*. George Griener and James F. Keenan ed. Bengaluru: Dharmaram Publications, 2017. 109.

Chapter II: What is Conscience?

2.1. Historical development of the notion of conscience

Already mentioned Jordan Peterson pointed out the importance of listening not just to ourselves but the others as well because wisdom consists in the continual search for knowledge. Contemporary and future knowledge always rests on previous quests for knowledge throughout history. In his book *Beyond Order*, he writes: “We must support and value the past, and we need to do that with an attitude of gratitude and respect. At the same time, however, we must keep our eyes open – we, the visionary living – and repair the ancient mechanisms that stabilize and support us when they falter.”⁶² I believe this attitude of gratitude and respect fits well in our discussion of the notion of the conscience, what is it, where can it be found, and is there still a place for conscience in moral life.

Since the conscience stands in strong relation to moral life many people think that the early foundations for conscience lie in the religious context. But the truth is that the first discussions on conscience started in the pagan cultures of Greece and Rome. In his book *Conscience a Biography*, Martin Van Creveld suggest that many commentators have noted that the Homeric poems – which, along with the Bible, have acted as the real fountainhead of all subsequent Western culture for thousands of years – have nothing to say about the subject. “The poems do indeed distinguish between good, *agathos*, and bad, *kakos*. But those terms had nothing to do with protecting the weak against the depredations of the strong. [...] ‘Good’ were the qualities that the ruling warrior-aristocrats claimed for themselves; [...] ‘Bad’ was what the same men associated with the lowly and the servile; and, ultimately, with those who were pitiable because they were disgusting, and disgusting because pitiable.”⁶³ Van Creveld further notes that the

⁶² Jordan Peterson. *Beyond Order*. New York: Penguin Publishing Group, Kindle Edition, 2021. 47.

⁶³ Martin Van Creveld. *Conscience: A Biography*. London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2015. 24.

ruling class, the aristocrats created those concepts for themselves. Virtues of that time were courage, the desire to rule, heroism, power to conquer and rule over others. On these sources, Friedrich Nietzsche found his inspiration for his “Übermensch” and consequently later, National-socialism. Here we can also see how some ideas of the past can have devastating consequences if we take them for granted. “To use Nietzsche’s famous phrase, what we see here is a world beyond, others would no doubt say beneath, good and evil. It is one into which conscience has not yet been introduced.”⁶⁴

In the time when Homer writes his works *Iliad* or *Odyssey*, argues Van Creveld, we find concept *aidos* which is close to our concept of conscience. *Aidos* is the Greek term for the feeling of shame, modesty, respect, humility, and honor. Thus, if a man or a woman would not listen to this feeling of *aidos*, they would be considered as shameless, or cowards, especially men if they would refuse a duel in a battle, even one that they cannot win. For us, a retreat would seem a reasonable choice, but not for Greeks. “The Homeric poems, the *Iliad* in particular, see things differently. Their central message is that against a background of an inexorable fate none of us is able to avoid, *aidos* is what distinguishes heroes from the common herd and makes for a life worthy of being lived.”⁶⁵ The use of the concept *aidos* as something closer to our idea of ‘conscience’ is found in Sophocles’ King Oedipus. When Oedipus finds out that he by mistake killed his father and committed incest with his mother, Oedipus experiences guilt and remorse. “What is at work here is the ancient conflict between a man, the world’s opinion of him, and his own inability to look that opinion in the face.”⁶⁶

Another concept close to our notion of conscience begins to appear in the Greek playwrightings of the fifth century B.C. In those writings, we find expression *suneidesis* which

⁶⁴ *Idem.* 25.

⁶⁵ *Idem.* 27.

⁶⁶ *Idem.* 29.

translated, literally means *knowledge with oneself*. Famous British historian of ancient Western philosophy, Sir Richard Sorabji in his book *Moral Conscience through the Ages* explains that *suneidesis* in those texts served as a metaphor of one sharing knowledge with oneself as if one were split into two. “The shared knowledge is of a defect, and usually, except in Plato, of a moral defect. The metaphor was expressed by a particular form of the verb for knowing, *suneidenai*, to share (*sun-*) knowledge (*eidennai*), coupled with the reflexive pronoun in the dative (e.g., *heautōi* [oneself]).”⁶⁷ This split into two creates tension in the human person where one of the two knows of the crime committed but is keeping it a secret, the other shares this secret and is a possible witness against the other, who can make him ashamed.

On the other hand, early Greek culture is not just a culture of shame as often had been said. Sorabji, argues that shame cannot be separated off from guilt so easily in all the examples given by the later dramatists. “I agree with a further claim in this account that, although the Greeks do not distinguish guilt from shame, the situations which provoke shame in the Greek portrayals in some cases provoke also the attitudes which we distinguish as guilt, even though the Greeks and Romans did not make the distinction.”⁶⁸

According to Plato, his mentor Socrates (469 – 399 B.C.) often refers to his ‘inner voice’ or a *daemon*, who would frequently warn him not to do things he intends or would approve his intentions. “In Plato’s *Timaeus* he identifies Socrates’ *daemon* with the most authoritative type of soul which is placed in the head and is intellectual (*katanooun*) – in other words, his intellect. If Socrates’ *daemon* is his intellect, this does not initially seem to fit with the dialectical claim that the *daemon* is a god or child of a god.”⁶⁹ Plato situates *suneidesis* to the intellectual part of the soul, it is not just a feeling or emotion of shame or guilt. William Lyons in his essay

⁶⁷ Richard Sorabji. *Moral Conscience through the Ages Fifth Century BCE to the Present*. Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2014. 12.

⁶⁸ *Idem*. 17.

⁶⁹ *Idem*. 21.

Conscience - An Essay in Moral Psychology says that the Socratic conscience is close to the classical Christian conscience. “For the Socratic conscience is a pre-factum warning, not a post-factum visceral reaction. In being a warning, it is associated with a voice and so with a message. Moreover, in being a prophetic voice, it is invested with special divine or divinely inspired authority.”⁷⁰

Further development of the notion of conscience we find in Epicureans who, argues Sorabji, introduced a view of conscience as fear of detection and punishment. “The epicurean Lucretius in the first century BC uses the standard Latin term for conscience when he says that the mind which shares knowledge with itself of bad deeds torments itself with fears about the Furies and punishment after death in Tartarus, even though punishment cannot come from supernatural sources, nor after death when our atoms will have dispersed.”⁷¹ Sorabji finds in Cicero, a famous orator and Roman statesman, his comments on epicureans who held the idea that they are watched by the gods, and consequently being troubled in conscience. This was not the only function; conscience was also averting one from wrongdoing and directing toward doing right.

Van Creveld argues that Greeks of the classical period never really liberated themselves from their early association with honor, justice, punishment, but shortly after 300 BC the shift in the understanding of conscience begin to change with the emergence of Stoic philosophy. He sees two developments coming to happen, one religious and the other political. The first was that people stopped believing in anthropomorphic gods, and the second was the rise of powerful monarchies governed by despots. The Stoic school with some others as well developed here in a response to these changes in society. That led to a strong emphasis on individualism. Because of these changes, the Stoics put a strong emphasis on reason. “They

⁷⁰ William Lyons. “Conscience – An Essay in Moral Psychology.” *Philosophy (London)* 84, no. 4 (2009): 479.

⁷¹ Richard Sorabji. *Moral Conscience through the Ages Fifth Century BCE to the Present*. 23.

have the potential for exercising reason; in other words, the ability to distinguish between virtue and its opposite or, to use the Stoics' language, between that which was according to nature and that which was not."⁷² For Stoics, morality consisted of acting following the laws of nature. Stoics believed that the world was designed according to an eternal reason or *Logos*, thus the human faculty of right decision making or *suneidesis* should be in accord with the divine reason or *Logos*. This natural law on the other hand can be discerned only by the person who possesses the virtue of prudence or practical wisdom.⁷³ In the writings of Epictetus, we discover that virtuous life consists of discovering the law which is also the task of philosophy. Van Creveld argues that this was by no means an easy task regarding man's subjectivity and proneness to error.

Apart from the Greek term for conscience *suneidesis* we find a similar term in the Latin for conscience, *conscientia*, which literal meaning is 'knowledge with' oneself. Cicero agrees with the Stoics that men must live according to nature, but unlike the Stoics, he follows Plato arguing that conceptions of good and evil are innate ideas. "He describes us as having formed from the very first shadowy understandings (*adumbratae intelligentiae*) that we get from the God-given divine element within us."⁷⁴ The Greek and Roman understanding of *suneidesis* and *conscientia* found their synthesis in the early Christian thought on the matter of conscience, together with the reference to the scripture.

Although in the Old Testament there is no word for 'conscience' but there is a sense of knowledge between good and evil placed in the human heart. For Old Testament anthropology, the heart is the center of the person and the seat of many different emotions. The true heart is led by the divine law given by God. In the prophet Jeremiah for example we read: "I the Lord

⁷² Martin Van Creveld. *Conscience: A Biography*. 25.

⁷³ Dirk Baltzly. "Stoicism," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, 2019.

⁷⁴ Richard Sorabji. *Moral Conscience through the Ages Fifth Century BCE to the Present*. 30.

search the heart and examine the mind, to reward each person according to their conduct, according to what their deeds deserve.” (Jer. 17, 10); or in Proverbs: “A person may think their own ways are right, but the Lord weighs the heart.” (Prov. 21:2) In their heart people experience guilt and fear from breaking God’s commandments: “But after David had taken the census, his conscience began to hurt, and he said to the Lord, “I have committed a terrible sin in doing this! Please forgive me. I have acted foolishly.” (2 Sam. 24, 10)

Saint Paul in his writings was the first one who introduced *suneidesis* in the Christian tradition. In his epistles he discussed whether Christians should eat meat previously offered to pagan gods, concluding that Christians should use their conscience as a moral guide, and be attentive not to scandalize the weaker ones. “For if someone with a weak conscience sees you, with all your knowledge, eating in an idol’s temple, won’t that person be emboldened to eat what is sacrificed to idols? So, this weak brother or sister, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. When you sin against them in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ.” Another result that comes from Paul’s reasoning is that conscience is not infallible, since their eating of sacrificed meat can corrupt the conscience of those weaker ones. “The message is that a clear conscience is not a sure guide, and this is reaffirmed in the same letter when Paul says that his own clear conscience (*ouden emautôi sunoida*) does not acquit him since God is the judge.”⁷⁵ (1Cor 8, 10-12) *Suneidesis* is a universal experience found in every human person. In the letter to Romans Apostol Paul writes: “Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them.” (Rom. 2, 14-15) Sorabji notes that the written law in men’s hearts is already present in the Hebrew scriptures, but what is new is a close

⁷⁵ *Idem.* 32.

connection to conscience. “As with the original Greek concept, conscience in Paul is not the ultimate source of our knowledge of right and wrong. For him, the law in our hearts is the source. But conscience reveals our possession of that law. This makes the relationship between conscience and the inner law close, but not identity.”⁷⁶

While for the Greeks and Romans Divine judgment was nothing new, and central emphasis in the ethics of philosophy was on virtue or good character, saint Paul introduces his doctrine of salvation by the grace of God alone. John Anthony McGuckin, a British orthodox theologian, argues that this Pauline doctrine stood in marked contrast with most Hellenistic moral thought and a large amount of Jewish reflection too. “It was thus the sign of wisdom and an authentic connection to salvation to be ever uneasy in one’s (human) conscience as one assessed one’s manner of life and attitudes against the standard of Christ’s Gospel.”⁷⁷

Later Christian writers and theologians relied heavily and further developed what saint Paul only briefly sketched in his letters on conscience, as well on Stoic and Jewish concepts. “The Latin Christian writers generally follow the lead of the Greek tradition in terms of the semantics of conscience. The word’s first use (*conscientia*) is again to signify a state of ‘common awareness’ (*con-scientia*), knowing something along with others, a standard form of social belief.”⁷⁸ Already in the third century, we have discussions about freedom of conscience and freedom from coercion. The Christian convert Tertullian, addressed the rulers of the Roman empire arguing that it would be irreligious to take away the freedom of religion and that it is a matter of human justice and natural liberty that each should worship as he thinks. “His argument, that religion is that which quintessentially demands full freedom of choice in order to be practiced sincerely, [...] came to have a more dominant resonance in later times

⁷⁶ *Idem.* 31.

⁷⁷ John A. McGuckin. Conscience in Early Christian Thought. In J. Hammond & H. Alvare (Eds.), *Christianity and the Laws of Conscience: An Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. 61.

⁷⁸ *Idem.* 65.

and served for subsequent Christian generations [...] as the foundational Christian tradition that claimed freedom of worship in society as an axiomatic right of humankind.”⁷⁹ Those arguments and of many others like Origen, Lactantius, Augustine, anticipated many seventeenth-century arguments for freedom of conscience.

A crucial event for Christian appropriation of conscience happened in Jerome’s choice of the Latin word *conscientia* in his translation of the Bible from Greek to Latin. Many commentators on Jerome points out his interpretation of Ezekiel’s vision of four living creatures coming out of a cloud in a shape like a man but each had four different faces, of a human, a lion, an ox, and an eagle. The first three parts refer to Plato’s three parts of the soul, reason, emotions, and appetite. An eagle as the fourth part of a soul Jerome interpreted it as the “spark of conscience” by which we recognize that we are sinning, called by the Greeks *synteresis*. Douglas C. Langston, points out that Jerome’s comment influenced later medieval discussions of conscience from Peter Lombard, Thomas Aquinas, William Ockham, and others. “Jerome’s comment that *synteresis* (alternatively, *synderesis*) is never extinguished in human beings and his remarks elsewhere to the effect that wicked people cease to have any conscience led Lombard and subsequent thinkers to distinguish *synderesis* from conscience. It is unclear that Jerome meant to distinguish the two, but the distinction plays a major role in late medieval discussions of conscience.”⁸⁰ Thus, this led theologians of later times to believe that there were two different things, conscience and the spark of conscience.

Further discussions on the conscience were made by Saint Augustine, who will have a strong influence on Luter’s view on conscience. In his famous work, *Confessions* Augustine understands conscience as an inner part of himself, accusing him and showing disgust for

⁷⁹ *Idem*. 66.

⁸⁰ Douglas C. Langston. *Conscience and Other Virtues: from Bonaventure to MacIntyre*. University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001. 9.

himself. “What accusations against myself did I not bring? With what verbal rods did I not scourge my soul so that it would follow me in my attempt to go after you! But my soul hung back. It refused, and had no excuse to offer.”⁸¹ McGuckin points out that Augustine held a very skeptical view of the power of the human conscience in finding the genuine good. “What that means, in short, is that he taught that the human individual conscience was so deeply corrupted by the race’s fall into sin from its early origins, that pride and selfishness are ingrained in everything that a human does.”⁸² For that reason human person needs the Grace of God to discern the right thing to do, without God’s grace human will cannot choose the good. “Conscience for Augustine has value as a compass, but the primary energy in a moral life comes rather from the grace of divine love, as it is confirmed through the twin formative influences of scriptural teaching (about right and wrong) and the call to serve the neighbor selflessly (another form of love).”⁸³

In the thirteenth century, Saint Bonaventure takes the twofold distinction made by Jerome between *synderesis* as a “spark of conscience” and conscience. He places the first part of the conscience within the rational part of the soul and the second part *synderesis* in the affective part of the human person. This twofold distinction of the conscience served Bonaventure as a good explanation for why human beings choose evil when it is the case that all man naturally will and desire good. Sorabji notes that the role of *synderesis* was motivational, placed in the power of the will. “It directs feeling concerning what should be wanted. It is on the side of the capacity for feeling rather than for cognition.”⁸⁴ The connection of conscience with the feelings notes further Sorabji will find its further development in the eighteenth century. The function of *synderesis* is the application of the first principles provided by the conscience (do not kill,

⁸¹ Augustine. *Confessions* VIII. 7.18. trans. Henry Chadwick. *Confessions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998. 146.

⁸² John A. McGuckin. *Conscience in Early Christian Thought*. 68.

⁸³ *Idem*. 69.

⁸⁴ Richard Sorabji. *Moral Conscience through the Ages Fifth Century BCE to the Present*. 63.

obey your parents, etc.) to the concrete action, it moves one to choose the good or apparent good. For this reason, Langston calls the first part of the conscience ‘the potential conscience’ and the second part ‘the applied conscience.’ This distinction explains why human beings although naturally inclined toward good, perform evil. “Their evil actions are a result of ignorance or a misapplication of the applied conscience.”⁸⁵ Langston notes that according to Bonaventure we should always follow our conscience even if it is erroneous because it is ‘the internal representative of God’, but we are also obliged to educate ourselves properly so to know God’s law.

Saint Thomas Aquinas on the other hand, contrary to Bonaventure’s voluntaristic view of *synderesis*, places *synderesis* in the rational part of the human soul arguing that *synderesis* is a disposition within the power of reason. Langston points out that Aquinas builds on the Aristotelian principles. “Once the basic principles are apprehended and become part of *synderesis*, conscience, also in the rational part, applies these first principles to particular situations.”⁸⁶ Thus for Aquinas *synderesis* is infallible in itself, and conscience can make mistakes in the interpretation of *synderesis* to the concrete cases. Langston argues that in the *Summa Theologiae* Aquinas connects the virtue of prudence with the conscience since prudence is the right reasoning about what is to be done. “Not only is prudence connected with carrying out the dictates of conscience, but prudence is also connected with the knowledge that is applied to activities.”⁸⁷ Conscience and *synderesis* stands also in close connection with other virtues and the weakness of will, where for example the virtue of temperance can help one to follow his conscience not to drink much alcohol.

⁸⁵ Douglas C. Langston. *Conscience and Other Virtues: from Bonaventure to MacIntyre*. University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001. 27.

⁸⁶ *Idem*. 40.

⁸⁷ *Idem*. 43.

In the sixteenth century, Martin Luter refuted the scholastic view of conscience. Lutter was influenced by Augustinian theology arguing that human conscience cannot operate in isolation from God's grace. Authorities other than Scripture are misleading. "The only source of knowledge about God and his actions is Scripture. In particular, one must embrace the teachings of Christ and the message of his sacrifice: God has forgiven humankind, and acceptance of this forgiveness is crucial for salvation."⁸⁸ The primary function of conscience in Luter's view argues Langston is a judgment whether the person is justified by faith or damned. Paul Strohm in his book *Conscience, A Very Short Introduction*, points out that his appeal of conscience in 1521 at Worms refusing to set aside his idea that a personal conscience based solely on the scripture marked a new shift in further understanding of conscience. "Luther was announcing a new understanding of conscience, a shift from the institutionally bound conscience of Catholicism to what may indeed be considered a 'Reformation' conscience, bound only by its direct communication with God as revealed in scripture."⁸⁹ Later in the seventeenth century with the rise of the Enlightenment conscience became more and more secularized, especially regarding the freedom of religion after the century of religious wars, in the philosophical and political thought of John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, and others.

The culmination of these tendencies toward the freedom of conscience from religion, morality, or tradition is found in the thought of Nietzsche, especially in his work *On the Genealogy of Morality*. He differentiates between 'good' and 'bad conscience'. The good conscience is found in 'the sovereign individual', and bad in the one who is not yet free. "The proud knowledge of the extraordinary privilege of responsibility, the consciousness of this rare freedom and power over himself and his destiny, [...]: - what will he call his dominant instinct, assuming that he needs a word for it? No doubt about the answer: this sovereign human being

⁸⁸ *Idem*. 72.

⁸⁹ Paul Strohm. *Conscience a Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. 24.

calls it his conscience...”⁹⁰ Thus for Nietzsche, the good conscience is the one that makes its own values.

What we could learn from this brief presentation of the history of the development of conscience is that conscience is a part of human experience. Early Greeks understood it as *aidos*, feeling of shame, and guilt. It is part of us but also accuses us of the wrong we did, so we feel like we are split into two. Socrates understood it as a part of our intellectual soul, a voice that guides him. Thus, it is not just an emotion or a feeling, but it is related to knowledge, and reasoning. In that way, Stoics understood that if the conscience is to lead us to the right action it has to be in accordance with something objective, which is the *Logos* that governs all reality with divine wisdom.

Christianity recognized that that guiding voice comes from our interiority, is the voice of God calling us to realize our human dignity through our cooperation with his plan. On the other hand, conscience is not the absolute norm of our judgment and action, it is not infallible. Saint Paul and Augustine saw the need for God’s grace in helping us to choose the right good, and Bonaventure and Aquinas saw how difficult it is for conscience to apply the fundamental moral principles and norms to concrete human situations. In Luther and later in Nietzsche we saw the desire of human conscience to liberate itself of ‘the exterior authority’ seen as a limit to our freedom or progress.

All these historical notions of conscience are also part of the modern understanding of Conscience in the Catholic Church which we will now try to explain.

⁹⁰ Friedrich W. Nietzsche. *On the Genealogy of Morality*. Cambridge University Press. 2006. 37.

2.2. Theological understanding of Conscience

Saint Thomas Aquinas states in the *Summa Theologiae* that a good life consists of good deeds. (ST I. II. 57, 5) Doing the right thing is not always an easy task to do, especially in situations with many possibilities, particular contexts, and different consequences. Thus, the role of conscience is to point us toward the right action and to the choice of the right means. To be able to do the good deeds that lead toward a good life we need to hear the voice of conscience that is part of our interiority. In the Vatican II document, *Gaudium et Spes* conscience is understood as the voice of God echoing in our heart to love good and avoid evil.

“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. In a wonderful manner conscience reveals that law which is fulfilled by love of God and neighbor. In fidelity to conscience, Christians are joined with the rest of men in the search for truth, and for the genuine solution to the numerous problems which arise in the life of individuals from social relationships.” (GS 16)

The document echoes a long tradition of thought on conscience that we covered in the previous section. In conscience we discover the law written in our hearts, meaning that the conscience does not speak on its own it is not the source of speech, but the echo of God. Obeying the conscience is the very dignity of a human being because we are made in God’s image and doing what is right has to correspond to that image and God’s plan for creation. As Anthony Lusvardi argues, it is in virtue of our ability to freely and justly relate to God that we possess as our exalted dignity. “The Council is saying that conscience has an interior and profoundly personal dimension, which gives rise to civil rights”⁹¹

⁹¹ Anthony Lusvardi. “The Law of Conscience.” *Logos* (Saint Paul, Minn.) 15, no. 2 (2012): 25.

A further point that the document express is the social character of conscience as a shared experience with the rest of humanity. James Keenan notes that following the conscience is not a private matter. Created by God we are constitutively related to God, ourselves, and the neighbor. “We are inescapably social, so much so that whatever our conscience guides us to do will be brought to light. Whatever we try to do in private will inevitably enter into the very nature of ourselves. Since we cannot escape our consciences, we cannot escape our own relational responsibilities.”⁹² Thus by the voice of conscience we are called as individuals and as a society in a search for the truth and the good. Here *syneidesis* or “the knowledge with” becomes obligation not just for oneself but for the whole society. “Indeed, the Council describes conscience as always making reference to that which is outside itself, to the objective moral law.”⁹³ *Gaudium et Spes* conclude the brief but influential paragraph 16 on conscience recognizing its tendency to error, but nonetheless, if the error comes from invincible ignorance conscience doesn’t lose its dignity. For this reason, conscience has to be guided and formed. Tom O’Shea in his article *Modern Moral Conscience* argues that since conscience has the social and normative foundations it has to undergo an ethical education to become morally responsive. “The moral responsiveness of people’s consciences is further strengthened when they can continue to draw upon the ethical resources of a community that sustains a tradition of ethical enquiry. For instance, these traditions can provide common reference points and vocabularies to focus moral self-reflection and to communicate its results.”⁹⁴ For this reason, it is no coincidence that the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* places discussion of conscience right before the discussion of the virtues. Following Thomas Aquinas, since conscience is closely tied to the virtue of prudence as a part of the practical intellect, it has to grow through

⁹² James Keenan. *Moral Wisdom Lessons and Texts from the Catholic Tradition*. 2nd ed. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010. 37.

⁹³ Anthony Lusvardi. “The Law of Conscience.” 26.

⁹⁴ Tom O’Shea. “Modern Moral Conscience.” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies: IJPS* 26, no. 4 (2018): 594.

education and experience. The virtues are dispositions that help us pursue the good end, but more on that in the third chapter.

According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the nature of moral conscience is defined in scholastic fashion as a judgment of reason whereby the human person recognizes the moral quality of a concrete act. The act of conscience has a threefold dimension according to the *Catechism*. In paragraph 1778 *Catechism* distinguishes 1/the judgment of conscience before performing the act, 2/during the process of performing the act, and 3/after the act has already been completed. Thus, the emphasis is on judging actions. “In all he says and does, man is obliged to follow faithfully what he knows to be just and right. It is by the judgment of his conscience that man perceives and recognizes the prescriptions of the divine law.”⁹⁵ Moreover, the *Catechism* emphasizes the importance of interiority and self-examination against distractions of life that can confuse the voice of conscience with our inordinate desires.

For conscience to make the judgment of a moral situation it has to include three moments: 1/the moment of determining moral principles (*synderesis*), 2/their application to a particular act, and 3/the judgment about concrete acts yet to be performed or already performed. “The truth about the moral good, stated in the law of reason, is recognized practically and concretely by the prudent judgment of conscience. We call that man prudent who chooses in conformity with this judgment.”⁹⁶ The *Catechism* derives those three moments from Bonaventure’s and Aquinas’s description of conscience, with a difference that conscience absorbs the role of *synteresis* in determining the general principles of morality.

The first moment of conscience is what *Gaudium et Spes* recognizes as the law written by God in our heart, a law accessible to all people of goodwill and right reason. Anthony Fisher

⁹⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. 2nd ed. rev. in accordance with the official Latin text promulgated by Pope John Paul II. Vatican City: Washington, D.C.: Libreria Editrice Vaticana; 2019. Paragraph 1778.

⁹⁶ CCC. Paragraph 1780.

in his book *Catholic Bioethics for New Millennium* argues that principles provided by the first moment or conscience-1 as he calls it gives us a foundation for self-criticism, social criticism, and defends us against social pressure. “Conscience-1 is an antidote to the subjectivism of those who call ‘doing my own thing’ conscience or the relativism of those who think it means doing what the group does.”⁹⁷ On the other hand, concludes Fisher, Conscience-1 is not the Global Positioning System that can guide us wherever we want to go and tell us which roads we should avoid. As Prudence Allen argues in her article *Where is Our Conscience?* if a person thinks only in general about acts without a particular act in mind, then the inner light of conscience does not turn on. “Conscience is not a simply univocal judgment applied externally, but it is a dynamic analogical judgment made by an internal act.”⁹⁸ Because we are not machines, ethical situations demand of us to engage a whole person. We would say not just the mind but the heart also. Thus, moment 1 or Conscience-1 can only give us general direction for the voyage, but the directions for the particular directions are provided by the second moment or Conscience-2.

The second moment of conscience or Conscience-2 as understood by Fisher requires the virtue of prudence in the application of the general moral principles to the particular situations. Fisher notes here that some modern readers of tradition suggest that this is the only or primary meaning of the word ‘conscience’, equating it with the virtue of prudence. But prudence is a quality of the virtuous mind and especially of virtuous doing, while conscience is the practical reasoning toward good action. “Morality is not just a mind game. Its purpose, the ancients insisted, is action: the choice of some real action by a real person in real circumstances.”⁹⁹ One of the reasons for associating conscience with the virtue of prudence lies in manualist tradition,

⁹⁷ Anthony Fisher. *Catholic Bioethics for a New Millennium*. Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012. 48.

⁹⁸ Prudence Allen. “Where Is Our Conscience?” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 44, no. 3 (2004): 339.

⁹⁹ Anthony Fisher. *Catholic Bioethics for a New Millennium*. 49.

which understood conscience as a judge passive to the law. As Servais Pinckaers notes the treaties on conscience were a creation of casuist morality, which introduced it into fundamental moral theology, but conscience was no longer a virtue like prudence, formed and perfected through practice. “Properly speaking, conscience was a judge. In regard to the law, it was passive and could not presume to form or change it. It simply received the law, communicated it to freedom, and applied it to freedom’s actions.”¹⁰⁰

For this reason, argues Fisher, it is at the moment 2 that conflicts of conscience often occur between the teaching of the Church and individual moral reasoning, since the real circumstances are often confusing and complex. “To reason well at this level requires qualities such as foresight, sensitivity, seriousness, commitment, self-criticism, humility, and discernment. So, conscience must not only be *well informed* but also *well formed*.”¹⁰¹ Daniel J. Fleming in his article *the Threshold of Conscience* argues that this second moment emerging after we recognized the call to do good and avoid evil one must discern what constitutes good in a particular action. Since in its conclusions and judgments it is not universal, and certainly not infallible, we need moral wisdom. “Conscience/2 does not naturally possess such wisdom – it is a developmental aspect of our personhood that changes over time and is the focus of the discipline of moral education. Conscience/2 must therefore be formed, and in being formed it engages with sources of moral wisdom.”¹⁰² And this wisdom can be found in the Scripture and Tradition, reason and the natural law, and also in the human experience. Thus, an act of conscience after considering the moral principles, and by the practical discernment of reasons and goods in the given situation, can give final judgment about the concrete act. This judgment we recognize as the third moment or Conscience 3.

¹⁰⁰ Servais Pinckaers. *The Source of Christian Ethics*. 272.

¹⁰¹ Anthony Fisher. 49.

¹⁰² Daniel J. Fleming. “The Threshold of Conscience: A Radical Challenge for Education in Theological Ethics ... and Beyond.” *Journal of Adult Theological Education* 13, no. 2 (2016): 105.

The third moment of conscience then makes a final and best judgment of what action to follow or refrain from in given circumstances and at particular moments. Fleming argues that this moment following a first and second moment of conscience calls us for commitment to action or disposition. It is a moment in which, following the *Catechism*, conscience enables us to assume responsibility for the acts performed. “If a man commits evil, the judgment of conscience can remain with him as the witness to the universal truth of the good, at the same time as the evil of his particular choice.” Thus, at this moment conscience ‘bites’ or warns us against the act about to be committed or approves those that are good. Or it can give us cause for remorse after we have already committed the act.

Understanding how conscience works at least to a certain degree, we can pose a question why is it then that so many of us fail in hearing its voice, or ignore its ‘itching’s’ and ‘biting’s’. How come that many people never reach the third moment of conscience, they either remain at the first moment (awareness of the universal moral call to do good), or the second moment (search for concrete moral truth), or they are not even aware of the first moment. One of the reasons we already covered in the first chapter, recognizing that if we want to act in conscience we need to be first vulnerably disposed to the other and then subsequently recognize the other. In another word, we have to first recognize our own broken humanness in need, its dignity and goodness conferred by God as the foundation to all our acts.

Joseph Ratzinger in his address to the National Catholic Bioethics Center in 1991 recognizes the similar need for our genuine moral acts. He argues that if we identify our conscience with the self-consciousness of the “I” and its subjective certainty about itself we fall prey to the social surroundings and the opinions in circulation, as a result of a lack of self-criticism, deficiency in listening to the depths of one’s soul. He sees this diagnosis confirmed by what has come to light since the fall of Marxist systems in Eastern Europe. He mentions the Moscow patriarch who speaks of blunting of the moral sense. “The power of perception of

people who lived in a system of deception was darkened. Society lost the capacity for mercy, and human feelings were forsaken. A whole generation was lost for the good, lost for humane deeds. ‘We must lead society back to the eternal moral values,’ that is to say, open ears almost gone deaf, so that once again the promptings of God might be heard in human hearts.”¹⁰³ Ratzinger thus warns against degrading conscience to a pseudo-rational certainty that leads to self-righteousness, conformity, and lethargy. Conscience should represent the transparency of the subject for the divine, and thus constitute the very dignity and greatness of the human. Only in this way does conscience enable one to assume responsibility for the acts performed.

This understanding of the conditions before our act in conscience leads us to what Daniel J. Fleming calls a *primordial call* to moral goodness. This corresponds to the understanding of conscience in *Gaudium et Spes* as always summoning the human person to ‘love good and avoid evil.’ Fleming derives his argument from Emmanuel Levinas’ understanding of the call to responsibility. “Levinas’ big idea is that ethical responsibility is not something that proceeds from our understanding of what it means to be human but rather that it precedes this as the very structure out of which the possibility for such understanding arises.”¹⁰⁴ This primordial call is something akin to a pebble in one’s shoe, whose pinching on our foot reminds us of its presence. Following Levinas, this pebble’s pinching in our shoe is not something first understood in concepts or reached through reasoning, or freely chosen after deliberation. “Rather, one is affected by meaning, one is commanded by proximity, held hostage by an experience, not after representation but before it, in presence, presentation, vulnerability, embodiment, in affectivity as its own kind of intentionality, its own access to meaning.”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Benedict XVI, Pope. *On Conscience: Two Essays*. Philadelphia: San Francisco: National Catholic Bioethics Center; Ignatius Press, 2007. 21.

¹⁰⁴ Daniel J. Fleming. “Primordial Moral Awareness: Levinas, Conscience, and The Unavoidable Call to Responsibility”, *The Heythrop Journal*, 56 (2015), 606.

¹⁰⁵ *Idem*. 608.

This pebble in our shoe, or primordial awareness, is a call to attend to it and take it out, or we can ignore it, just as we can continue walking with the pebble in the shoe ignoring it but nevertheless feeling its presence. “Furthermore, conscience/1 is experienced as a call to moral responsibility which is prior to choice, meaning that we do not choose its call to do good and avoid evil, but rather respond to it, and this remains true aside from considerations of the specific form of our response.”¹⁰⁶ Fleming finds the reason why people hear this voice but don’t respond to it arguing that this primordial call to responsibility is a voice that calls but does not legislate or coerce. Thus, one can either respond to it, ignore it, or even reject it. “This latter is typical of the position that consciousness finds itself in once the call is recognized – a state of ‘bad conscience’, already guilty of not responding in an ethical way. *GS* provides three possible reasons for this: invincible ignorance, lack of care for truth or goodness, or habitual sin.”¹⁰⁷ The call to responsibility calls us to respond and to engage in a search for the truth, to take actions in the world around us to discover what constitutes a good response to this call.

The responsibility to engage in a search for the truth in particular, as we already argued, is part of the second moment of conscience. Since conscience-2 deals with particulars, and its conclusions are not universal, it is not infallible. As German philosopher Robert Spaemann notes, there is no guarantee that living one’s life in conformity to conscience would be a good life since nothing that contradicts conscience is good, but on the other side neither is good everything that conscience requires or permits. “If one said, ‘whatever my conscience approves is good,’ one would have missed the true voice of conscience altogether since as the voice of practical reason conscience strives for a total perspective rather than simply standing its

¹⁰⁶ *Idem.* 610.

¹⁰⁷ *Idem.* 611.

ground. It intends truth, and therefore can be mistaken.”¹⁰⁸ The *how* of moral response is a fragile reality. Thus, in search of moral goodness conscience needs formation and guidance.

Joseph Ratzinger borrowing from Spaemann, argues that conscience is an organ because it is something that is given to us that belongs to our essence, it is not something that has been made outside of us. He takes the analogy of speech, arguing that we have learned how to speak from our parents, relatives, and in school. And although it is formed from the outside, the ability to speak in the language corresponds to our own nature, that we can express ourselves in language. For example, you cannot learn a dog to speak. “Man is as such a speaking essence, but he becomes so only insofar as he learns speech from others. In this way, we encounter the fundamental notion of what it means to be a man: Man is a being who needs the help of others to become what he is in himself.”¹⁰⁹ We already possess a pebble in our shoe as Fleming would say, a primordial moral awareness, an organ of internal knowledge about good and evil, but we need the help of others for it to become what it is.

James Keenan in his book *Moral Wisdom* distinguishes conscience from the “super-ego” as the voice of our psychic apparatus. The super-ego is a term discovered by Freud and his psychoanalysis, who argued that super-ego developed during a long period of childhood from the id (basic instincts present at birth) and the ego (part of the id modified by the external world, awareness). “The long period of childhood, during which the growing human being lives in dependence on his parents, leaves behind it as a precipitate the formation in his ego of a special agency in which this parental influence is prolonged. It has received the name of the super-ego. In so far as this super-ego is differentiated from the ego or is opposed to it, it constitutes a third

¹⁰⁸ Robert Spaemann. *Persons: the Difference Between 'someone' and 'something.'* Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006. 174.

¹⁰⁹ Benedict XVI, Pope. *On Conscience: Two Essays.* 51.

power which the ego must take into account.”¹¹⁰ Thus super-ego is an internalized authority developed under the influence of one’s parents, tradition, social demands, teachers, examples of others etc. Super-ego can be modified during a lifetime. Keenan argues however that super-ego is not a moral guide, but more like a sense of restraint or a pang of guilt. On the other side, conscience is a call to grow. “Certainly, this is not to say that whenever we ‘feel guilty,’ the super-ego and not the conscience is working. When we say things like ‘I feel so guilty,’ we should ask ourselves, ‘Did I do anything wrong?’ If the answer is yes, then the conscience is probably judging us, but when the answer is no, the superego is probably intimidating us.”¹¹¹ Keenan notes that the “super-ego” is not bad, since it helps us not to run in front of a car or to put a hand into an electrical outlet. But where super-ego is experienced as a certain form of social conformism, conscience on the other hand is suspicious of conformity, particularly when injustice is at stake. “Moral progress, therefore, always occurs when people heed their consciences, take steps of their own, and move forward, even at the risk of isolation and loss.”¹¹² He points out that we should never forget that the language of conscience is the forceful language of being called, of being commanded.

This call implies the call for freedom of conscience, but not the freedom to do whatever we want. For this reason, we understand the need for the formation of conscience. But not as many people think, learning a few laws like the Ten Commandments, although important and helpful. For the development of conscience, we need to learn how to play fairly with others, to tell the truth, to care for others, not to steal, to respect others and their opinions, to not eat too much, etc. “I think the formation of the conscience is really a development of our relatedness in virtue: mentored practices of justice, temperance, fortitude, fidelity, and self-care through

¹¹⁰ *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. Volume XXIII (1937-1939): Moses and Monotheism, An Outline of Psycho-Analysis and Other Works*, 1964. 146.

¹¹¹ James Keenan. *Moral Wisdom Lessons and Texts from the Catholic Tradition*. 34.

¹¹² *Idem*. 34.

the ministration of conscience's own prudence allow us to learn more and more about how we are to respond to God, neighbor, and ourselves in love. Virtuous practices become the exercises for the formation of conscience."¹¹³ In the same line is the *Catechism* pointing out that the education of conscience is a lifelong task. "Prudent education teaches virtue; it prevents or cures fear, selfishness and pride, resentment arising from guilt, and feelings of complacency, born of human weakness and faults. The education of the conscience guarantees freedom and engenders peace of heart."¹¹⁴ In the formation of conscience, crucial importance plays the Word of God, prayer, faith, and practice, examination of conscience, the working of the Holy Spirit, witnessing of others, and the teaching of the Church. All this should play the role in the formation of conscience.

Notwithstanding the possibility of a failure, the *Catechism* teaches that we should act in conscience and in freedom so as personally to make moral decisions. The *Catechism* repeats *Dignitatis humane* that men and women should not be forced to act contrary to their conscience. Traditional morality always understood the difference between vincible ignorance and invincible ignorance. A person acting from vincible ignorance is guilty of evil committed because it is in her responsibility to find out what is a true and good action but didn't take the trouble to find out. For example, when a hunter mistakenly shoots down another person thinking it was a deer, without first checking at what he is aiming at. On the contrary, if a person acts according to invincible ignorance, she is not guilty of evil committed, because in that case, she couldn't know.

This teaching follows the argument of Thomas Aquinas who in the *Summa Theologiae* makes the question of whether a person who acts out of ignorance is guilty. Aquinas argues that the answer depends on whether an action was voluntary or involuntary. And since

¹¹³ *Idem*. 36.

¹¹⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Paragraph 1784.

ignorance causes an act to be involuntary, the question then is, was the ignorance due to our negligence, or was it out of our power to know. He gives an example: “For instance, if erring reason tells a man that he should go to another man’s wife, the will that abides by that erring reason is evil; since this error arises from ignorance of the Divine Law, which he is bound to know. But if a man’s reason, errs in mistaking another for his wife, and if he wishes to give her right when she asks for it, his will is excused from being evil: because this error arises from ignorance of a circumstance, which ignorance excuses, and causes the act to be involuntary.”¹¹⁵

James Keenan in his article *Can a Wrong action be Good?* raises the question of whether we can call as good those persons who follow conscience that result in wrong behavior. Taking into consideration a long tradition of debates on this very question from St. Bernard, Abelard, Aquinas, rigorists, laxists, and probabilism, he concludes that some may feel inclined to accept Thomas’s description of the person as “excused” when acting from ignorance. But today “excused” is used to describe a person who is victimized by some external cause that diminishes the ability to will, or a person that is mentally ill, drugged, or under threat would be excused from blame. “But the analogy fails because, unlike being coerced or drugged, a person who errs in good faith is a person who has struggled to find the right, has searched heart and mind, and in firm good faith and free will acted with conviction. This person is good and what differentiates this person from another who strives in the same way but whose action is recognized as right is precisely the evaluation of the action as wrong.”¹¹⁶

This notion of conscience finds its source in Alfonso Liguori who argued that to call some action good, it is sufficient that action is guided by the directive of reason and prudence. “Not merely does the person who acts with an invincibly erroneous conscience not sin, but

¹¹⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Suma Theologiae*. I. II. Q.19. a.6.

¹¹⁶ James Keenan. “Can a Wrong Action Be Good? The Development of Theological Opinion on Erroneous Conscience,” *Église et Théologie* 24, (1993), 216.

more probably even gains merit.”¹¹⁷ This doesn’t mean that people like Hitler or Stalin are excused of their guilt precisely because they were certainly not striving as much as possible to find the right thing, especially in the world that has for centuries taught injustice is wrong. For this reason, *GS 16* holds that conscience doesn’t lose its dignity from invincible ignorance, but the same is not applied for a man who cares but little for the truth and goodness, “or for a conscience which by degrees grows practically sightless as a result of habitual sin.” Borrowing from Anthony Fisher, I argue that we should always: 1/do our best to cultivate a well-formed and informed conscience; 2/take responsibility for our actions; 3/seek to resolve doubt rather than act upon it; 4/follow the last best judgment of our conscience even if in the invincible ignorance; 5/being humble, aware of our possible errors; and 6/avoid coercing people.¹¹⁸ Following these sixth rules will provide us with enough assurance that we acted upon the correct conscience. For this reason, the *Catechism* concludes its treaties on conscience arguing that the more a correct conscience prevails, the more do persons and groups turn aside from blind choice, always trying to be guided by objective standards and moral conduct.

After analyzing historical development and theological understanding of conscience we can see that conscience consists of three basic dimensions: personal, communal, and religious. Thus, to have a correct conscience we have to integrate all three parts in our moral acting. Their relationship, and which dimension has more importance was and still is today subject of controversy and debates.

2.3. Understanding of conscience around and after Vatican II

Before the Vatican II Council, matters regarding conscience were mainly studied in the manuals of moral theology. They developed from the confessional practice in the fifteenth to

¹¹⁷ Alphonsus Liguori. *Conscience: Writings from Moral Theology*. Liguori Publications, 2019. 12.

¹¹⁸ Anthony Fisher. *Catholic Bioethics for a New Millennium*. 52.

the sixteenth century to provide help for the priest in the confessional. One example is Thomas Slater, an early twentieth-century manualist. He notes that the manuals are the product of centuries of labor by able and holy men on the practical problems of Christian ethics, but they are technical as textbooks of the lawyer and the doctor, and not intended for edification, or Christian perfection. “They are not intended for edification, nor do they hold up a high ideal of Christian perfection for the imitation of the faithful. They deal with what is of an obligation under the pain of sin, they are books of moral pathology.”¹¹⁹ Thus main concern for moral theology was how to define right and wrong actions, and how to help Christians to put them in the practice. In that sense, conscience was understood as a dictate of the practical reason discerning whether a particular action is right or wrong. The role of the priest was to help a penitent to make a good judgment when in doubt.

James Keenan notes that the manuals guided priests in the confessional, where the matters of conscience were assessed, resolved, and absolved. In his article *Vatican II and the theological ethics*, he distinguishes five developments that contributed to further development of the manuals in the 20th century. First is the promulgation of the Code of Canon Law in 1917. “Vatican congregations and offices issued definitions on moral matters more and more frequently and more and more specifically throughout the century.”¹²⁰ For this reason, moral theologians were more concerned with interpreting the Law than in reflecting on the questions facing the contemporary world, characteristic of the tradition in the casuist and moral manuals from the 16th to 19th century. This led to the second development of the 20th century where manualists became interpreters of the teaching. “As the century unfolded, manualists were more and more concerned not with facing the challenges of the world but rather with

¹¹⁹ Thomas Slater. *A Manual of Moral Theology for English-Speaking Countries*. 5th and rev. ed. London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1925. 6.

¹²⁰ James Keenan. “Vatican II and Theological Ethics.” *Theological Studies (Baltimore)* 74, no. 1 (2013): 165.

conforming to the rigors of the church.”¹²¹ The third development is a result of the research into human psychology in which the perception of the penitent as wounded and uncertain become more and more evident. “This is an evolution over the decades preceding the council: the average layperson is, in the eyes of the moralists and confessors, progressively less able to discern and execute morally right conduct.”¹²² Forth development. Since the Canon Law was the main reference, the moral manualist became more opposed to innovations. Fifth, all this contributed to the inadequacy of the moral theologians to address the real critical issues of the day.

Following Belgian moralist Odon Lottin, Keenan notes that since moral theology was overtaken by the canon law it lost its moorings in dogmatic theology and the biblical and patristic sources. “By the manualists’ insistence on avoiding wrong external acts, not only had they abandoned the purpose of morality, that is, to pursue the Christian vocation, but they lost morality’s deep connection to ascetical and mystical theology.”¹²³ Lottin, argues Keenan, calls for a return to conscience as the foundation to the moral life, and to the formation of conscience, and the virtues life, where prudence is the chief virtue. “By turning to prudence, Lottin liberates the Christian conscience from its singular docility to the confessor priest. He instructs church members to become mature self-governing Christians, insisting that they have a lifelong task, a progressive one, as he calls it, toward growing in virtue.”¹²⁴ Together with Lottin, Fritz Tillmann, and Bernard Haring, started a shift in moral theology from the manuals toward theology concerned more with the Christian vocation following Christ than with moral pathology. Their views on conscience were deeply influenced by the atrocities of World War II. “Haring sees the manualists as being responsible for this conforming, obediential moral

¹²¹ *Idem.* 165.

¹²² *Idem.* 166.

¹²³ *Idem.* 168.

¹²⁴ *Idem.* 168.

theology, one that is worried solely about following church rules; instead, he summons conscientious Christians to a responsive and responsible life of discipleship.”¹²⁵ For Haring central theme now is the freedom to follow Christ. “Personal freedom is the foundation for doing good and for doing moral theology. Through freedom, we hear the voice of God that we must obey in freedom.”¹²⁶ Keenan argues that Haring’s work anticipated and inspired some of the most important words from Council regarding conscience.

After Vatican II many theologians following Lottin, Tillmann, Haring, and Council documents like *Gaudium et Spes*, started to develop a more personalistic view of conscience. “For this reason, we can say that they put forward the idea that we need to always heed and form and follow our conscience. Moreover, while very much connected to the natural law’s principle to avoid evil and to do good, the revisionists’ notion of conscience is, in the pursuit of the good, animated by its call to love God, self, and neighbor.”¹²⁷ The so-called ‘revisionists’ like Joseph Fuchs, Charles Curran, Linda Hogan, Paul Valadier, and others understood conscience in a very relational way, oriented not as much on the agent making a judgment but more as a disciple who hears and responds to the voice of conscience.

They came under criticism, especially regarding their disagreements with the encyclical *Humane vitae* and its view on contraception. Joseph Fuchs for example considered that the married couple should have the competency of a moral decision in these matters rather than general teaching of Rome. The goal, notes Keenan, is to enable the people to assume responsibility and not just to follow the law. In 1993 St. John Paul II issued an encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* expressing his concern regarding the separation of human freedom and the

¹²⁵ James Keenan. “Vatican II and Theological Ethics.” 170.

¹²⁶ Keenan James F. “Catholic Conscience Awakening: The Evolution of Our Contemporary Dependence on Conscience”. Stephan Goertz, Rudolf B. Hein, Katharina Klöcker (Eds.). in *Fluchtpunkt Fundamentalismus. Gegenwartsdiagnosen katholischer Moral.* (Freiburg: Herder, 2013) 314.

¹²⁷ *Idem.* 314.

essence of truth. Encyclical confirms the “ability to know the truth” on the part of every human being, but on the other hand, warns against the dangers of relativism, skepticism, and “an illusory freedom”, as a consequence of original sin. The text warns of some authors who emphasize the “creative” character of conscience, which diminishes the cognitive function of the moral good to be done. Keenan argues on the other hand that in fact there are no dramatic differences between the ‘revisionists’ and the pope. “Thus, while the revisionists argued that we need to heed, form, and follow our conscience, the magisterium was more interested in the question of what it means to form the conscience and here focuses on the need to see and uphold the intrinsic connection between freedom and truth and therefore between conscience and truth.”¹²⁸ Conscience therefore can be understood as personal freedom to hear the voice of conscience, and to follow the law of Christ. Anthony Lusvardy notes that conscience is incapable of becoming a voice of moral transformation if it remains its own source. “In a sense, then, the conscience can be thought of as the means by which individuals translate the demands of the moral law into the practical judgments and choices of everyday life.”¹²⁹

The examples of the manuals show us that there is no true moral life without the involvement of the whole person, and commitment to heed the voice of conscience to do the good, to grow, to seek the truth. When only a minimum is required and formal obedience to the law is demanded, we are less equipped to recognize dangerous ideologies and oppressive social structures. On the other hand, a freedom that has no basis in objective truth can easily turn to the tyranny of the strong over the weak. The danger of modern emphasis on “autonomy” leads to a more individualistic lifestyle, unconcern for the others in need, or compassion. Conscience reduced to subjective certainty does not liberate but makes us dependent on personal taste or prevailing opinion. For this reason, many theologians together with Vatican

¹²⁸ *Idem*. 317.

¹²⁹ Anthony R. Lusvardi. “The Law of Conscience.” *Logos (Saint Paul, Minn.)* 15, no. 2 (2012): 38.

II documents and *Veritatis Splendor*, invite us to promote the formation of conscience, to foster virtues, human dignity, values, and social justice. This will be then the task for the next chapter, where I will argue that in the Church tradition, theology, and spirituality we have powerful means to face contemporary challenges through formed conscience.

Chapter III: Conscience in practice

To live a morally good life in today's world is not an easy task to do. As we already saw in previous chapters, moral dilemmas in concrete and particular circumstances are not always "black" or "white" so we could easily discern what is good action and what is bad action to pursue. In our moral decisions and actions, we can easily make mistakes without even realizing that our decision is a morally wrong action, and can cause pain to some distant others of whose existence we are not aware. Although ignorance doesn't make us less responsible if we could have made effort to learn what we should know but failed to bother. It is easy for example to recognize that killing an innocent person is morally wrong, or that stealing an iPad that I so desire from the store is morally wrong. But when it comes to morally complex situations, like discerning whether to prolong or not someone's life by using artificial life support when that person is in a coma, or for example buying cheap clothes that are made in a factory that underpays its workers and provides an unsafe working environment, or whether or not to receive a vaccine that used fetal cell lines in development or production, our moral decisions may not come painlessly.

Another problem with our moral reasoning presents social structures in a form of laws, institutions, or economical mechanisms, that can negatively influence or constrain our moral reasoning and decisions. There is a mutually influencing dialectic between persons and structures that can engage persons and groups to develop virtuous acts or vicious acts. Pope Francis writes in *Evangelium vitae* that we can become distracted by the limitless possibilities for consumption offered by contemporary society. "This leads to a kind of alienation at every level, for a society becomes alienated when its forms of social organization, production, and consumption make it more difficult to offer the gift of self and to establish solidarity between

people.”¹³⁰ For example, I may be driven by my desire for having new and in-vogue clothes while at the same time denying the truth about the unjust and exploitative working conditions of the workers producing inexpensive clothes, because it is something far away from my world.

Benedict XVI recognized how certain impersonal instruments and structures created by individuals can be a negative force and present social sin. “Economy and finance, as instruments, can be used badly when those at the helm are motivated by purely selfish ends. Instruments that are good in themselves can thereby be transformed into harmful ones. But it is man’s darkened reason that produces these consequences, not the instruments per se. Therefore, it is not the instrument that must be called to account, but individuals, their moral conscience and their personal and social responsibility.”¹³¹ Following Benedict XVI we can conclude that to be able to change unjust structures we first have to become aware of our responsibility and be personally touched by the injustice done to our neighbor.

In the last few years and especially during the COVID-19 pandemic we could witness the rise of all kinds of populism, disinformation’s in media and social networks, different kinds of divisions between those who wear masks and are vaccinated and those that do not wear and are opposed to vaccines, a variety of conspiracy theories, and even divisions between scientist and different interpretations of the pandemic. For this reason, we have now “fact-checking” organizations devoted to promoting the veracity and correctness of reporting. But recent studies showed that even they can be either biased or too flawed to be of value to people seeking the truth. A study by Morgan Marietta, David Barker, and Todd Bowser showed a substantial difference in the questions asked and the answers offered. “Fact-checkers exercise a large amount of subjectivity not only in which disputed realities to evaluate but also in which kind of positive or negative assertions to check or ignore. In sum, the three major fact-checkers

¹³⁰ *Evangelium vitae*. 196.

¹³¹ *Caritas in Veritate*. 36.

display substantial differences in the disputed facts that they address.”¹³² All this can create confusion in a person who honestly wants to follow his conscience and do the right thing. Therefore, to be capable of facing contemporary challenges there is a need now more than ever to insist on the formation of conscience and a moral character to help us face the complex reality of life.

I argue in this chapter that the virtue theory provides the best account. First, I will present the virtue theory and the role the virtues play in the conscious moral life. Next in the second part, I will show how the need for moral education and formation using Dan Daly’s personalist approach using practice, norms, and exemplars for virtue formation. In the third part I will argue for Ignatian spirituality as a good help to a Christian who wants to reform his or her life and inform his or her conscience under the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the search for God’s will.

3.1. The importance and connection among the cardinal and the theological virtues

In his book, *The Structures of Virtue and Vice* Daniel J. Daly argues that virtue theory is successful because it provides an insightful explanation of moral reality, how one acts, and how one drives or interacts with a person suffering from homelessness. “The point here is that a virtue approach to the moral life resonates with and helps explain the moral experience.”¹³³ According to Daly, the virtue approach offers a full picture of the moral life. It integrates and organizes all moral realities, and is not focused only on acts and rules, obligation and moral minimum. Virtue theory incorporates and contextualizes human action and normative action guides. This approach points toward moral excellence, to what is more loving, merciful and

¹³² Marietta Morgan, David C. Barker, and Todd Bowser. “Fact-Checking Polarized Politics: Does The Fact-Check Industry Provide Consistent Guidance on Disputed Realities?” *The Forum: a Journal of Applied Research in Contemporary Politics* 13, no. 4 (2015): 593.

¹³³ Daniel J. Daly. *The Structures of Virtue and Vice*. Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2021. 124.

just action to do. Further, argues Daly, it is capable of providing moral guidance and action assessment. “Action assessment through a virtue lens is retrospective, inviting the agent to ask, for example, Who am I becoming, or who have I become, now that I have repeatedly lied to my friend?”¹³⁴ Thus virtue theory is not only interested in what is forbidden or allowed, or about good or evil acts but also in the question of who I am when doing this particular act, under this kind of circumstances. “Virtue captures the moral reality of the person because it recognizes that there is a whole in the moral life, the person. When human acts are abstracted from the acting person, neither is sufficiently understood. The human person is in relation to family, friends, and God, not a person’s actions.”¹³⁵

This approach is similar to what Livio Melina calls the “ethics of the first person” in contrast to the “ethics of the third person” situated in the perspective of the observer (a judge or confessor), who evaluates the external act according to its conformity to the rule. “What is designated here as the ethics of the first person is rooted within the perspective of the subject, who in his acting is called upon to realize acts that are excellent, that direct him to his own fulfillment. In this perspective, the intrinsic finality of the act of the person is a privileged dimension, and virtues enter as decisive factors and essential principle of the good act precisely because they bear directly on the teleological or finalistic dimension of acting.”¹³⁶ Following Daly and Melina we can see how virtue plays a significant role in shaping the quality not just of the moral act, but of the person as well. Virtues dispose the person toward the right understanding of the end of the action. It also helps the person to develop morally, which blind conformity to the law could not accomplish. Stuart Chalmers argues that virtues are central to the underlying nature of a person’s motivation and development in choosing the good. “In

¹³⁴ *Idem.* 125.

¹³⁵ *Idem.* 126.

¹³⁶ Livio Melina. *Sharing in Christ's Virtues: for a Renewal of Moral Theology in Light of Veritatis Splendor.* Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2001. 39.

effect, virtue is not simply about choosing the good in individual cases, but about putting into practice a real ‘strategy’ for doing good. This has obvious implications for the moral conscience, in that virtue provides the environment for both the functioning and the refinement of our moral capacity for reflection and judgment.”¹³⁷ The virtues provide context for understanding conscience. We cannot understand conscience in isolation without reference to all parts of someone’s life.

But what are the virtues? In antiquity, philosophers were interested in gaining “practical wisdom”. They emphasized the years of learning and practice necessary to produce excellent moral character. This character was a durable and unchangeable tendency to always act in a certain way called *hexis* or *habitus*. Bonnie Kent notes that habits are not emotional reactions but “durable characteristics of the agent inclining to certain kinds of actions and emotional reactions, not the actions and reactions themselves. Acquired over time, habits grow to be *second nature* for the individual.”¹³⁸ Since we are not born with those habits necessary for an independent life we have to form and learn those habits by practice and the help of others, usually our parents, relatives, and teachers. Activities like focusing our sight on one point, or talking, walking, and other activities, require a long period to develop. Habits follow our human nature. For example, humans can walk in a way animals can’t, or use their hands and manipulate objects of many different shapes other primates can’t.

Since we are different from other animals by our intellectual nature, we have to develop habits of knowledge about the world, awareness of ourselves and others, and how to interact with them. We need to distinguish here the difference between “habit” as a subconscious or involuntary routine activity, like leg shaking, biting nails, or smoking, from a “habit” in a

¹³⁷ Stuart P. Chalmers. *Conscience in Context: Historical and Existential Perspectives*. Bern: Peter Lang, 2014.

¹³⁸ Bonnie Kent. “Habits and Virtues.” In Stephen J. Pope and James Keenan. *The Ethics of Aquinas*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2002. 116.

qualitative sense that perfects human natural abilities. Stephen J. Pope notes, following Thomas Aquinas, that habits are quality in the soul that order human conduct in a way that contributes to human development of the person.¹³⁹ For this reason, a habit is called a virtue if it is good and if corresponds to human nature and its natural inclinations to proper actions. “Therefore, human virtue which is an operative habit, is a good habit, productive of good works.”¹⁴⁰ Thus virtue is a good habit that not only renders a good action but also makes its possessor, a human person good. Virtue has an attractive force that enables us to see not just the good we pursue by certain actions but also the goodness of the action itself. For example, every soccer player wants to win a game, yet to win it they have to follow many rules internal to the game, like undergoing rigorous training, knowing the strategy well, and respecting the team play. Developing all those habits necessary for developing a good skill will give them the possibility not just to win a game but also to enjoy every moment of it, even if they lose.

Romanus Cessario argues that a Christian concept of habit presupposes the human person as open to development and modification from both natural and divine causes. Thus, we distinguish acquired (prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude) from infused virtues (faith, hope, and charity). “Furthermore, habitus points up the difference between what derives from authentically personal activity and what remains rooted in the biological givens of temperament or personality type.”¹⁴¹ As already explored in the first chapter about the nature of the human person according to the doctrine of *Imago Dei*, we showed that humans are unique because they possess intellect, reason, and will as a distinctive power of the soul. Because of these powers of the soul, we are capable of performing a wide variety of good actions, but also bad actions too. As Rziha notes, habits enable humans to perform a particular type of action,

¹³⁹ Stephen J. Pope. “Overview of the Ethics of Thomas Aquinas” In Stephen J. Pope and James Keenan. *The Ethics of Aquinas*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2002. 34.

¹⁴⁰ Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologiae*. Ia IIae. q. 55, a. 3.

¹⁴¹ Romanus Cessario. *The Moral Virtues and Theological Ethics*. 2nd ed. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009. 36.

disposing them to always perform good actions. “Since the intellect, will, and emotions are all involved in human actions, all three powers must be perfected by habits. By means of virtues, these powers of the soul can be perfected to perform good actions, leading to happiness.”¹⁴²

According to Thomas Aquinas, we can distinguish between intellectual habits and moral habits. “First, in so far as by the habit a man acquires an aptness to a good act; for instance, by the habit of grammar man has the aptness to speak correctly. [...] Secondly, a habit may confer not only aptness to act, but also the right use of that aptness: for instance, justice not only gives man the prompt will to do just actions, but also makes him act justly.”¹⁴³ Thomas argues that since virtue is that which makes its possessor and his action good, habit is called virtue only in the second sense. For example, a good mathematician is said to be a person who is successful in resolving complex mathematical problems. But that doesn’t mean that a good mathematician is also a good person. He is good only in a relative sense. A mathematician is good and virtuous in what he does but he is virtuous and a good person because he uses his knowledge for some good, for example giving free instruction to poor children. According to Aquinas, a habit is called a virtue only by the will or some power in so far it is moved by the will. “Therefore, the virtue which makes a man to do well actually, and not merely to have the aptness to do well, must be either in the will itself; or in some power, as moved by the will.”¹⁴⁴ Because by the power of the will we are free to choose between good acts and bad acts. Thus, intellectual virtues give humans the ability to discover the truth, to better understand the essence of things, judge well, and be consistent in their thinking. Those virtues are called *understanding*, *science*, and *wisdom*. “Since humans require habits to be good at thinking, the virtues of *understanding*,

¹⁴² John Rziha. *The Christian Moral Life: Directions for the Journey to Happiness*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017. 117.

¹⁴³ Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologiae*. Ia IIae. q. 56, a. 3.

¹⁴⁴ *Idem*.

knowledge, and *wisdom* are essential for perfecting the speculative intellect's natural inclinations to know the truth."¹⁴⁵

As we saw earlier in Aquinas' argument, even a person without good moral character may possess intellectual habits so they are considered virtues only in a relative way. Thus, since the intellectual virtues incline a person to know the truth, Aquinas asserts that we need another kind of virtue that affect our will to make a true judgment about things to be done. For Aquinas, argues Gregory Reichberg, the will is the faculty responsible for safeguarding the overall good of the person because all our actions spring from the will as a unitary force. "Since the other faculties aim at more limited goods (the concupiscible power is ordered to experience of sensory pleasure, sight to vision, and the intellect to the apprehension of truth), the will, whose defining referent is goodness as such, enfolds each of these particular human goods with its inclination to a total, all-encompassing goodness."¹⁴⁶

The faculty of the will depends on the knowledge of the truth and good so to incline a person to take the action. "Moreover, the will's inclination to particular goods is indeterminate; rational desire becomes effective only as the result of a choice between competing options."¹⁴⁷ Thus the will needs direction toward the desired end which is provided by the intellect and the virtue of prudence is the virtue concerned with the promoting of the end. The habit of prudence is the key virtue that connects intellectual habits with moral habits because prudence is concerned with practical knowledge applying universal moral principles to concrete particular situations. "The virtue of practical understanding perfects the intellect's ability to determine laws and goals (the end of the action), and the virtue of prudence perfects the intellect's ability

¹⁴⁵ John Rziha. *The Christian Moral Life: Directions for the Journey to Happiness*. 122.

¹⁴⁶ Gregory M. Reichberg. "The Intellectual Virtues." In Stephen J. Pope and James Keenan. *The Ethics of Aquinas*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2002. 139.

¹⁴⁷ *Idem*. 139.

to apply these ends to the particular situation.”¹⁴⁸ Thus our actions are morally good when they are appropriately directed (by the will) to their due end. And since intellectual virtues are no guarantee that a person will use his knowledge for the good, or to act at all – a physician may use his knowledge to help his patient or he can refuse to help him because he can’t pay him – we need moral virtues which rectify the will. Those virtues are *prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude*, traditionally called the cardinal virtues because they are the key virtues for the moral life.

We already noted that prudence is a key virtue that connects intellectual habits with moral habits, which perfects the acts of the practical intellect, recognizes the ends to which a person is naturally inclined, and ensures the rightness of necessary means for obtaining the desired end. James Keenan argues that “the ability to develop a well-ordered personality depends not only upon the intended exercise of well-ordered actions but also on the prudential determination of those intended exercises.”¹⁴⁹ Because the virtue of prudence is concerned with the right measure and the mean for a person’s respected end, the lack of prudence would result in a deficiency of things to be done.¹⁵⁰ For example, an excellent scientist may have great knowledge and goodwill in search of scientific discovery in his field, but if he is imprudent with that desire he may neglect the needs of his family.

The virtue of prudence is also the key virtue of conscience. Since through conscience we hear the call to do good and avoid evil, the virtue of prudence helps us to determine the best way how to execute the good action in a particular situation according to the objective moral standards. Paul Wadell argues that the virtue of prudence provides us with the skill necessary for a good conscience as not just sensitive to the good but also wise in doing the good.

¹⁴⁸ John Rziha. *The Christian Moral Life: Directions for the Journey to Happiness*. 123.

¹⁴⁹ James Keenan. “The Virtue of Prudence.” In Stephen J. Pope and James Keenan. *The Ethics of Aquinas*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2002. 259.

¹⁵⁰ Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologiae*. Ia. IIae. q. 65. a.1.

“Conscience is completed in prudent action, in seeing how the moral call is best responded to in the situation before us. Prudence is integral to conscience because prudence gives insight and ingenuity to our desire to do good.”¹⁵¹

If the virtue of prudence is the key between intellectual and moral virtues, the virtue of justice according to Aquinas is the chief of all moral virtues because of its closeness to reason as the root of human good.¹⁵² It relies on reason and prudence to give each person what each person deserves. The virtue of justice is a virtue of the will since the will is a rational appetite to desire whatever the intellect judges to be good, unlike passions who respond to the good and bad through senses.¹⁵³ Rziha notes that the virtue of justice is a habit that perfects our ability to love since the primary act of the will is to love. “In humans, the natural inclination to love oneself is generally powerful enough that humans do not need an acquired virtue to perfect it. However, they do need a virtue to perfect their natural inclination to love God and the others.”¹⁵⁴ Thus justice is fundamental virtue because it regulates how we deal with each other. Chalmers recognizes the virtue of justice as an “outward-looking” perspective, “oriented directly toward the good of others, and the good of the community as a whole, and not toward the good of the individual.”¹⁵⁵ He points out the reciprocal relationship that exists between conscience and justice, although it applies to all the virtues concerning conscience. “Thus, rather than simply being a moral or legal standard that is wholly detached from the individual, justice as the disposition of a love of right action and right relation forms part of the dynamic, virtuous environment in which conscience both develops and makes its judgments.”¹⁵⁶

¹⁵¹ Paul J. Wadell. *Happiness and the Christian Moral Life: an Introduction to Christian Ethics*. 2nd ed. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2012. 182.

¹⁵² *Summa Theologiae*. Ia. IIae. q. 66. a.4.

¹⁵³ *Idem*. Ia. IIae. q.8. a.1.

¹⁵⁴ John Rziha. *The Christian Moral Life: Directions for the Journey to Happiness*. 124.

¹⁵⁵ Stuart P. Chalmers. *Conscience in Context: Historical and Existential Perspectives*. 321.

¹⁵⁶ *Idem*. 323.

The first two of moral virtues are concerned more with actions, while the other two moral virtues, *temperance*, and *fortitude* are concerned with personal discipline, since they regulate appetitive powers of the soul, namely emotions and passions. Although passions and emotions are good in themselves, they can be detrimental to a person due to human fallen nature, and inclination to sin. Temperance is the virtue that perfects the desire for bodily pleasures and needs. Thus, a person with the proper virtue of temperance will know how much alcohol and in what situation is reasonable enough to drink. Fortitude on the other hand is the virtue that perfects our emotions like fear, despair, and anger. It disposes us to persevere in pursuit of the good despite hardships and dangers. “They operate in the will with the purpose of removing the obstacles that hold the will back from following reason, and thus aim at harmony of desire, decision, and operation.”¹⁵⁷ Both virtues of temperance and fortitude depend on prudence and justice. For example, to be fearless in battle may not be a sign of virtue but of rashness. A husband cannot decide to be celibate in the marriage if his wife is against it. The reciprocal relation exists also with a conscience which prompts us to acquire the virtue of temperance and fortitude, and on the other hand, those virtues give us the strength to heed our conscience. “Assisted by prudence, one’s conscience may judge the particular circumstances to be unjust. The choice then presented to us is whether to speak up or keep silent. Fortitude gives us the strength of character that is able to stand up for what is right and to protect others when they are in danger. Fortitude enables us to make ourselves vulnerable for the sake of the truth, for the sake of the good, for the sake of others’ good.”¹⁵⁸

From this short exposition on the intellectual and moral virtues, we can understand the significance they play in our moral life whether we are aware of them or not. They open a broader horizon to our actions and intentions, explaining not just why some actions are good

¹⁵⁷ *Idem.* 327.

¹⁵⁸ *Idem.* 331.

or evil, but also why they are good or evil for the person and society. As we said, virtues possess an attractive power because most of us desire to be righteous, brave in the face of a threat, or wise in making decisions and understanding. We also desire to be able of controlling our emotions and passions, so to realize our full human potential. Therefore, fostering of virtues can help a human person to see that doing good and avoiding evil is not the act of obedience to some external lawgiver but that in that act exists intrinsic power of good that corresponds to the nature of an acting person and as well as to the end of that action. For example, a husband that chooses to be faithful to his wife in the face of temptation is not just following the law of “You shall not commit adultery.” Because his choice makes him not just obedient, but also righteous, prudent, temperate, and brave. He sees the beauty in his act of faithfulness because of his love for wife and family. We could say there is something noble in it.

As Christians, we know that our actions do not have only temporal consequences and that our moral norms receive their objectivity not just only from social agreements and traditions. Our actions and deeds have consequences far beyond this life. Moral norms receive their objectivity from God who is our creator and who placed in us the desire to long for communion with him. All our inclinations, intellectual and sensitive, emotions and passions are inclining us to find the source of our being. And since nothing created can ever fully satisfy us, because our hearts are restless until they rest in God, God gave us the grace of supernatural virtues which perfect our natural faculties of intellect and will in discovering the source of our being. Those virtues are called the theological virtues that are infused, *faith, hope, and charity*.

The virtue of faith is the fundamental act of Christian existence,¹⁵⁹ enabling us to understand divinely revealed truths. Faith, therefore, informs reason to recognize the fuller truth of reality. Aquinas argues that faith is “an act of the intellect assenting to the divine truth

¹⁵⁹ Benedict XVI, Pope. *Christianity and the Crisis of Cultures*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006. 77.

at the command of the will moved by the grace of God.”¹⁶⁰ Faith is not just an act of blind obedience, or wishful thinking, but corresponds to the longing of human nature for knowledge and understanding. God’s grace helps the faithful to understand and accept the mysteries of faith found in the Bible, revelation, and the teaching of the Church. The experience of faith produces the response of choosing to live a life according to our ultimate goal.

To persevere in that choice God gives the grace of hope to stay on the path of faith. In the letter to the Hebrews saint Paul defines faith as “the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” (Heb 11. 1) Thus, hope has its ground in the faith which presents God as the source of eternal happiness and trust in his divine providence because we cannot attain this goal with our own power. The virtue of hope perfects our will since the natural inclination of the will is to desire the good, and to love. Catechism notes that the virtue of hope responds to human desire which God has placed in the heart of every man. “It takes up the hopes that inspire man’s activities and purifies them so as to order them to the Kingdom of heaven; it keeps man from discouragement; it sustains him during times of abandonment; it opens his heart in expectation of eternal beatitude.”¹⁶¹ The virtue of hope, therefore, gives importance not only to our eschatological destiny but also to our everyday living. Dominic Doyle recognizes unity between principal hope, union with God, and secondary hope, the hope of earthly happiness. Our everyday struggles of improving this world receive their importance from principal hope as the context of eternal destiny. “It thus gives them importance they would not otherwise have possessed. The theological virtue of hope, therefore, adds dignity to the temporal project of constructing the human good *in via*.”¹⁶² We can reach our eternal happiness only through our acts in this world if they correspond to that end. “When someone genuinely hopes for truth or

¹⁶⁰ Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologiae*. IIa. IIae q. 2. a. 9.

¹⁶¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Paragraph 1818.

¹⁶² Dominic F. Doyle. *The Promise of Christian Humanism: Thomas Aquinas on Hope*. New York: Crossroad Pub. 2011. 131.

goodness – that is, when someone seriously intends to achieve something true and good through some concrete means of action – that person reveals what he truly values, as distinct from what he says he values.”¹⁶³ The most perfect value is love, and therefore the most perfect virtue should be charity.

The virtue of charity comprises and informs all other virtues, it is the root, the form, and the goal of the virtue’s life. Livio Melina points out that the virtue of charity is the apex of Christian moral life because by charity we participate in “godlike” generosity.¹⁶⁴ Charity perfects the natural inclination to love God and others. There is a chain reaction between infused virtues, because faith causes hope, and hope causes charity that leads us to union with God. Thus, love is not blind, it is based on knowledge (faith) and trust (hope). Love can only be realized in freedom, so “love means an act of the will.”¹⁶⁵ Therefore the virtue of charity perfects our will, by motivating us to desire what is good. We can distinguish between our ultimate fulfilling good which is God and particular proximate good. If those particular proximate goods like health, wellbeing, friendship, or possessions, are oriented toward ultimate good, then they are in no contradiction to God, they are truly good in themselves. But if some of them become our prime goal or end then they become an obstacle to union with God and neighbor. For example, a man who puts his career, status, and money in the first place, then he is in a danger not only to fail to love God but also his family and friends. And this is true not only for individuals but for society, politics, and the economy as well. The virtue of charity is the summit of Christian moral life because it informs all other virtues (acquired and infused), inclinations, and acts with proper motivation not to act for selfish ends but out of love for God and others. For this reason, Pope Francis speaks of “organic unity” existing among the virtues, so no one of them can be excluded from the Christian ideal. He says to us that Christian

¹⁶³ *Idem*. 133.

¹⁶⁴ Livio Melina. *Sharing in Christ's Virtues: for a Renewal of Moral Theology in Light of Veritatis Splendor*. 131.

¹⁶⁵ Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologiae*. IIa. IIae q. 23. a. 2.

morality is a response to God of love who saves us to see God in others and to go forth from ourselves to seek the good of others. “All of the virtues are at the service of this response of love.”¹⁶⁶

In the end, this exposition of virtue theory is certainly not an exhaustive one, and we could add even more virtues like generosity, hospitality, empathy, etc., but those presented are traditionally considered fundamental for moral life. They offer us an explanation not just of our actions, of what kind they are, but also who we are who make them, and how we stand in relation to God and neighbor. The virtues themselves are not ready-made solutions to the challenges we face in life. On this account, Chalmers argues that the path of virtue is one of growth, including failures, and partial successes. “Therefore, the way of virtue, the way to perfection, necessarily includes imperfection. If this were not the case, we would have no way of reaching perfection.”¹⁶⁷ Catechism of the Catholic Church recognizes moral imbalance in human nature caused by sin and therefore points out to God’s grace he offers us to persevere in the pursuit of the virtues. “Everyone should always ask for this grace of light and strength, frequent the sacraments, cooperate with the Holy Spirit, and follow his calls to love what is good and shun evil.”¹⁶⁸ This *call to love what is good and shun evil* is heard in conscience, which reveals the interrelatedness between conscience and the virtues. The virtues help the conscience to make better judgments in accord with a particular situation. And in return, conscience always directs toward the good.

Pope John Paul II affirms the reciprocal relationship between conscience and the virtues in his encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* emphasizing the importance of continuous conversion to what is true and good.

¹⁶⁶ Pope Francis. *Evangelii Gaudium*. 39.

¹⁶⁷ Stuart P. Chalmers. *Conscience in Context: Historical and Existential Perspectives*. 300.

¹⁶⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Paragraph 1811.

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. Indeed, in order to “prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom 12:2), knowledge of God’s law in general is certainly necessary, but it is not sufficient: 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: prudence and the other cardinal virtues, and even before these the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity.¹⁶⁹

Thus, there exist the true human good, recognized in the promptings of conscience, and developed through virtuous attitudes. For this reason, we need to form our conscience and the habits of virtue. Since the virtues shape our moral character to pursue good action, they also enable the conscience to respond to the good perceived. Therefore, as we grow in virtue we grow in conscience. But how do we grow in virtue, and what are the means for this kind of education?

3.2. The need for growth and education of the virtues through practice, norms and exemplars

Human nature is deeply social – as already argued in the first chapter – because we depend on our relations with others, our parents, siblings, friends, society, etc., our growth, therefore, rests on those relations. As Jordan Peterson notes that mental sanity means not an individual put well together in his own mind, but how he or she can remain acceptable in behavior to others. “If people can tolerate having you around, in other words, they will constantly remind you not to misbehave, and just as constantly call you to be at your best. All that is left for you to do is watch, listen, and respond appropriately to the cues.”¹⁷⁰ In the example of the psychopath who is immaturely egocentric, incapable of showing any sense of personal

¹⁶⁹“Veritatis Splendor (6 August 1993) | John Paul II,” accessed March 21, 2022, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_06081993_veritatis-splendor.html. Paragraph 64.

¹⁷⁰ Jordan Peterson. *Beyond Order*. Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition. 6.

responsibility, without guilt or remorse, William Lyons argues that we can develop a good conscience in a way that psychopath has failed to develop. “Thus, we will only develop a conscience if we succeed in overcoming the egocentricity of childhood and begin seriously to take other people into consideration when pursuing our goals. And conscience can only arise if and when we are capable of sufficient empathy with others to be distressed when our actions are harmful to them and in consequence show guilt, shame and remorse.”¹⁷¹

Daniel Daly offers a personalist approach to virtue, where the whole person with her or his actions, intentions, emotions, and reasoning is considered. He argues that all these powers must relate well to the others for a single virtue to develop. “A virtue’s relation with other traits enables or constrains the virtue’s growth. Justice develops only if other virtues, such as temperance, develop as well.”¹⁷² Daly following contemporary consensus on virtue formation points out four primary ways in which character is formed: “Through moral practices, the following of norms, the emulation of exemplars, and by reflecting on virtues themselves. They are all equally fundamental and morally formative in their own right.”¹⁷³

- Practice

Deriving from Alasdair MacIntyre, Daly notes that moral practice, as well as other types of practices, is a complex human activity socially established, and pursued for its own sake. For example, volunteering in a soup kitchen because of the compassion for the homeless people. This compassion grows over time. Volunteering in a soup kitchen may start as a requirement of a school, parish, or parents. But with time and through contact with the homeless people and interaction with them, hearing their stories of why they become homeless, a young person may start to love volunteering and discover joy in serving others. “Because

¹⁷¹ William Lyons. “Conscience – An Essay in Moral Psychology.” *Philosophy* (London) 84, no. 4 (2009): 490.

¹⁷² Daniel J. Daly. *The Structures of Virtue and Vice*. 142.

¹⁷³ *Idem*. 145.

virtue is an embodied reality, the bodily practice of feeding the hungry can be the beginning of the cultivation of the moral virtue of mercy, much in the same way that a child learns chess through candy bribes. If she comes to practice for the sake of the suffering, then the works of mercy can cultivate a merciful disposition in the practitioner.”¹⁷⁴

- A dialectical relationship between norms and virtues

To guide our actions in the performance of the good we need norms. “The student in the moral life requires the concrete guidance in the good that is primarily communicated in norms.”¹⁷⁵ Daly notes that since norms are more effective in guiding persons away from vice than they are in teaching virtue, they lack the full explanatory power of the goodness of the person. For example, one can refrain from stealing someone’s phone only because it is forbidden by the law and not because of respect for another person’s property. On the other hand, following the norms is not always applicable to every situation. For example, someone can steal another’s phone in order to call an emergency when there is no other possibility. Thus, there exists a dialectical relationship between norms and virtues. “Norms cannot consistently deliver good and right actions unless accompanied by good character traits. Thus, the virtues serve as the hermeneutical context for moral norms. Because no norm is self-interpreting, all interpretation of norms occurs within the context of the virtues.”¹⁷⁶ Therefore taking someone’s phone in case of an emergency would be a prudent act, not stealing. The norms are important because they carry the values and insights of how to relate to God, neighbor, and self. With time those values become internally possessed by the virtuous person.

Servais Pinckaers argues that the process of internalization of values carried by norms goes through three basic stages of human life. He calls this process freedom for excellence, which

¹⁷⁴ *Idem.* 147.

¹⁷⁵ *Idem.* 149.

¹⁷⁶ *Idem.* 151.

requires the slow, patient work of moral education. The first stage is childhood which corresponds to the stage of discipline. The second stage is adolescence or the stage of progress. And the third stage is adulthood or the stage of maturity. “Moral education begins with the acceptance of what may be called the discipline of life, based on rules, which are the moral laws.”¹⁷⁷ Pinckaers sees moral education, not as one imposing the moral laws on a disciple as the work of an alien will. Moral education leads a student to understand that discipline, laws, and rules are not meant to restrict his freedom, on the contrary, they enable a student to fully realize his potential by putting in harmony laws and freedom. Every great piano player had to start with basic rules and theory of music. To this stage corresponds the Decalogue, the moral theory of obligation, but we should not stay on this basic level of moral life.

The second stage of moral formation is characterized by progress in virtue. Pinckaers notes that in this stage little by little, a person starts to put aside his or her desire for sensible pleasure, and a fear of punishment as leading motives for acting. Now the acts of love of virtue for its own sake, love for others as friendship starts to develop. “Virtue is not a habitual way of acting, formed by the repetition of material acts and engendering in us a psychological mechanism. It is a personal capacity for action, the fruit of a series of fine actions, a power for progress and perfection.”¹⁷⁸ Similar to Daly, Pinckaers also sees the importance of a personal approach to virtue theory where all parts of a moral act are involved. The Sermon on the Mount is a text suited to this stage according to Pinckaers because the Sermon’s precepts go beyond external actions toward the “heart” where our sentiment and actions are rooted.

This brings us to the third stage of moral education called maturity characterized by self-mastery and the development of a profound interiority. This mastery has twofold dimensions,

¹⁷⁷ Servais Pinckaers. *The Sources of Christian Ethics*. Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1995. 360.

¹⁷⁸ *Idem*. 364.

personal character, and openness to others. “Our freedom reaches maturity precisely with our capacity to balance the twofold dimension of personality and openness to others, interiority and outreach, living ‘for self’ and ‘for others.’”¹⁷⁹ Pinckaers repeats the Aristotelian definition of virtue which renders good not only the act and a person who performs it but also those around a virtuous person who may profit from it. The work of a morally mature person is similar to the fruit of a tree, offered to another as a model to inspire, an attractive example to imitate. This stage corresponds to a person led by the grace of the Holy Spirit working within through faith and charity. Daly points out that norms cannot predict the right actions for all the complex circumstances of human life, so they recede in importance upon the acquisition of virtues. “Because the meaning of the norm has been internalized in the person of virtue, she knows what values the norm protects and promotes. This agent understands the primacy of the spirit of the norm and not the letter.”¹⁸⁰

Norms and virtues mutually depend on each other because virtues provide the right context and measure for norms to apply, and norms on the other hand provide the right direction towards the good of a human person. Of course, this progress is not straightforward, and not everyone reaches the third or second stage. Some people remain childish all their life, conducting out of fear of punishment or trying to satisfy all their imbalanced inclinations. Most of us remain in the second stage of virtuous life where we have control over our passions and imbalanced inclinations, where we do justice, and always try to do good, but never want to go deeper in the understanding of moral life and the role of the Holy Spirit in our moral discernment. And therefore, we often fail in recognizing the real good, and the will of God. Progress in virtue asks personal commitment, time, and sacrifice, it is not something automatically reached and it asks time of trial, failures, and experience.

¹⁷⁹ *Idem.* 367.

¹⁸⁰ Daniel J. Daly. *The Structures of Virtue and Vice.* 151.

- Exemplars

For this reason, we need exemplars because, notes Daly, they embody the best moral teaching. “Identifying exemplars can fix the reference of the term “good person” without the use of descriptive concepts.”¹⁸¹ Since no society or community is perfect or ideal, we need to promote virtues that help us to build a better society. We need to point out the examples that embody those virtues in their lives. It is no wonder that the most popular characters in modern popular culture are superheroes. Because there is something in our nature that craves for something great. We are captivated by the examples of lives not just from popular superhero movies, but also from the literature, sports, and lives of saints. Jordan Peterson argues that this is true because the human being is a creature that is part nature and part culture. “These stories call to capacities that lie deep within our nature but might still never develop without that call. [...] Such a story presents us in the most compelling manner with the ultimate adventure, the divine romance, and the eternal battle between good and evil. All this helps us clarify our understanding of moral and immoral attitude and action, personal and social.”¹⁸²

Consider the example of Franz Jägerstätter, an Austrian farmer who because of conscientious objection refused to serve in the Nazi army and was executed in 1943. His example embodies the virtue of justice and fortitude in opposing unjust structures and the love for the good. Pointing to his life we don't have to explain what is a virtue of justice or fortitude, and what it means to defend the good in the world gone wrong. Aware of this universal call found in every human individual to become a better version of him or herself, a call to perfection or sanctity, we need to offer the ways to that end to the people and especially to the young people.

¹⁸¹ *Idem.* 152.

¹⁸² Jordan Peterson. *Beyond Order.* 57-58.

The call to do good and avoid evil as we already said is never found in abstract but in the complexity of particular situations. Theories and norms are necessary but insufficient for providing ready answers to every circumstance of life. Therefore, argues Daly, ethical theories are at the service of moral discernment, and the same can be said for the virtue theory in moral decision-making. “Virtuous action is discovered through reflection on the virtues in light of concrete circumstances. And though practices and norms play a heuristic role in the acquisition of the virtues, they are not capable of guiding the acquisition of virtue in every ethical situation.”¹⁸³ Virtue ethics, notes Daly, is a method of discernment where the virtues are the tools with which the agent morally discerns and discovers the virtuous action in a given particular situation. In a particular circumstance we take counsel from the virtues, making questions about whether this action would be just, or merciful, or what would a merciful person do in this situation? What kind of person would I be if I refuse to be just or merciful?

A good example would be a simple question of going to visit a friend who is in a hospital or refusing to visit him because of the mask mandate in all health care facilities during the COVID-19 pandemic. I may be reluctant to wear it because of my personal opinion on the seriousness of that disease, but if I want to act as a virtuous person I may need to ask if my attitude toward a mask mandate and a new virus is a result of my expertise and knowledge or because of my pride? Do I show with my act respect for another person’s life or my false righteousness? What kind of a person would I be to refuse to visit a friend? Thus, a virtuous or prudent thing to do would be to learn more about this disease, to review the data research on how contagious it is, and the effectiveness of wearing a face mask during the pandemic. This research can give me enough information to learn that masks help stop spreading the virus to a certain degree and that they are also a sign of respect for another person’s life. Then I may

¹⁸³ Daniel J. Daly. *The Structures of Virtue and Vice*. 155.

decide to put on my face a mask and go visit my friend in a hospital who would like me to visit him and show him my care and support.

In conclusion, I argued that the virtue theory helps us to better understand moral acts as a whole in a relation to the human person and his or her intentions, will, and emotions. It also helps us understand our moral character and how it is formed. Through practice, norms, good examples, and virtues themselves we discover little by little the meaning of doing good and avoiding evil found in the voice of conscience, which corresponds to our desire for the ultimate good and happiness found in God. Since we live in a world where we face complex moral problems, virtue theory presents as a method of discernment where we want to know what is a virtuous action in this particular circumstance. On the other hand, since our actions entail not just a temporal consequence but also those of eternal significance, I would like to offer Ignatian spirituality and in particular the method of discernment of spirit as a tool that can help us in leading a virtuous life, and in guiding conscience.

3.3. Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola and discernment process

Our discussion on virtue ethics and conscience showed us how different forces from within us and from without can make an influence on our moral decision-making. Our character, disordered or ordered inner movements of our inclinations, the world around us, and social factors, all play part in our moral decision-making. Thus, we need to be aware of those things that are obstacles to pursuing the good. Besides the virtues that order human conduct in a way that contributes to the good of the person and his or her moral development, I propose the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius of Loyola as a good help in moral discerning and development.

They are the fruit of his own experience of conversion in 1521, and progress in his spiritual life. They are meant to help one to conquer oneself and regulate one's life without determining

oneself through any disordered tendency. Pierre Hadot in his book *Philosophy As a Way of life* reminds us that the practice of “spiritual exercises” has its origin in ancient Greco-Latin philosophy. The ancient philosophers, argues Hadot, were not so much interested in developing a system of thought, but to develop the human person. “The philosophical act is not situated merely on the cognitive level, but on that of the self and of being. It is a progress which causes us to be more fully, and makes us better. It is a conversion which turns our entire life upside down, changing the life of the person who goes through it.”¹⁸⁴ Later with the advent of Christianity, the Spiritual Exercises took the specific Christian character inspired by the death of Christ and the Trinitarian life of the divine Persons, carried by monasticism. Thus, Ignatius builds on this long tradition of *askesis* to help a Christian to become an authentic human being with the assistance of God’s grace.

The distinctiveness of Ignatius Spiritual Exercises lies in their dynamic where an exercitant through the practice of prayer and meditation on the fall of mankind and God’s salvific action through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, is trying to reform his life to love and serve God and neighbor. Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius possess transformational power in character change for authentic human living because they involve all human powers of intellect, will, emotions, desires, and senses. The exercises follow the structure of personal and moral development divided into four successive stages or weeks as Ignatius called them. The first week corresponds to what we saw earlier in Pinckaers as a stage of discipline where we try to put in order our inordinate inclination reflecting on the cause and effects of sin. Experiencing God’s mercy and love despite our sins, our inner response should be: “what I have done for Christ, what I am doing for Christ, what I ought to do for Christ?” The answer to that question we find in the second week that corresponds to what we called earlier “the progress in virtue”.

¹⁸⁴ Pierre Hadot. *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1995. 83.

Reflecting on the life of Christ and the exercises like the Two Standards, the Three Classes of Men, and the Three Kinds of humility, the exercitant purifies his desires, grows in indifference with “a greater desire to know, love and serve the Lord.” The exercitant goes beyond what is exterior actions toward the “heart.” In the Third week reflecting on Christ’s suffering and death on the Cross for our sake, exercitant asks to share the suffering of Christ. This phase of the Exercises corresponds to what we called “maturity” characterized by self-mastery and the development of a profound interiority. We live not anymore for our self-interest but others. Frederick E. Crowe argues that on this level of the exercises the emphasis is no longer on a virtue to be gained or on the reform of life, the stress is on communion, the sharing. “There is effort to be expended, there is great effort (*magno nisu*), but it is not directed to the reform of life or the gaining of virtue: it is directed toward feeling what Christ feels.”¹⁸⁵ The Forth Week has the same purpose, union with Christ through the experience of joy because of His resurrection.

Through this short exposition of the dynamic of the Spiritual Exercises, we can see why they can be of great use for Christians who seek to reform their life according to the principles of the Gospel, to live life in accord with God’s will. The essence of the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises is contained in what Ignatius called the Principle and Foundation. “Man is created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by this means to save his soul. And the other things on the face of the earth are created for man and that they may help him in prosecuting the end for which he is created.”¹⁸⁶ Therefore we should orient our life toward God, desiring only what better leads us to that end. A crucial role in this orientation of one’s life toward the right direction has the practice of discernment.

¹⁸⁵ Frederick E. Crowe. “School Without Graduates: The Ignatian Spiritual Exercises.” In *Developing the Lonergan Legacy*, 207. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016.

¹⁸⁶ Elder Mullan. *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola*. New York: P. J. Kennedy & sons, printers, 1914. Paragraph 23.

This practice of spiritual discernment is a discovery of saint Ignatius who developed a psychological sophisticated system by which we can discern where is God calling us through attention to the inner movements and inclinations. Ignatius calls us to pay attention to the experience of consolation and desolation. David Lonsdale notes that the practice of discernment takes into consideration all the different dimensions of the human person. When we move toward God or in opposition to God, we discover through our conscious feelings, moods, and desires who we are in relation to God and the world. “Thus, our affective movements and responses, which can relatively easily be aware of and name, are signs of how we actually stand in relation to God at a deeper, more hidden level of ourselves.”¹⁸⁷ For Ignatius feelings and emotions play a valuable role as well as a right reason in the discernment process. In this process we have to pay attention to different forces: the good spirit coming from God, the evil spirit who is trying to deceive us, and also our own thoughts and imagination which can be misleading too. “I presuppose that there are three kinds of thoughts in me: that is, one my own, which springs from my mere liberty and will; and two others, which come from without, one from the good spirit, and the other from the bad.”¹⁸⁸ We are all aware of the different motions in our being inclining us to eat this food, or to visit that place over there, to love this person, or to hide ourselves before the responsibilities, and countless more push and pulls. Therefore, we have to discern which one is directing us toward God and to the greater freedom, and which one is distracting us from greater freedom, life, and God. The discernment is an act of informing our conscience where we take into consideration particular moral issues, Church teaching, the Scripture texts, general norms, and the context where the person is. The process of discernment is done in the context of prayer and reflection under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Of great importance for good discernment is to have a trustworthy and experienced

¹⁸⁷ David Lonsdale. *Listening to the Music of the Spirit: the Art of Discernment*. Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1993. 73.

¹⁸⁸ Elder Mullan. *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola*. New York: P. J. Kennedy & sons, printers, 1914. Paragraph 32.

person as a spiritual director, and support of the community, so as not to fall into self-deception. Livio Melina notes that in this sense, Christian conscience is “ecclesial”, it arises from a personal response to a common vocation. “It begins with a conversion: I cease to be an autonomous subject that has its own proper consistency, but enter into that new subject which is Christ, whose historical space is ecclesial *communio*.”¹⁸⁹

This discernment process originally take place during the first and second week of the Spiritual Exercises where the exercitant tries to discover where is God calling him or her. On the other hand, the process of discernment has practical application in ordinary life as well. For this reason, Pope Francis calls the Church to grow in the ability of spiritual discernment, not just in teaching the clear and distinct ideas, that are rigidly defined *a priori*, and that set aside concrete situations:

Today the Church needs to grow in discernment, in the ability to discern. And priests above all really need it for their ministry. This is why we need to teach it to seminarians and priests in formation: they are the ones usually entrusted with the confidences of the conscience of the faithful. Spiritual direction is not solely a priestly charism, but also lay, it is true. But, I repeat, you must teach this above all to priests, helping them in the light of the Exercises in the dynamic of pastoral discernment, which respects the law but knows how to go beyond.¹⁹⁰

Pope Francis points out that the process of discernment is not an act of *a priori* imposing on the moral subject an already established set of rules, but rather a source of objective inspiration for the deeply personal process of making decisions. “Discernment must help to find possible ways of responding to God and growing in the midst of limits. By thinking that everything is black and white, we sometimes close off the way of grace and of growth, and

¹⁸⁹ Livio Melina. *Sharing in Christ's Virtues: for a Renewal of Moral Theology in Light of Veritatis Splendor*. 189.

¹⁹⁰ “Pope’s Conversation With Jesuits During His Trip to Poland,” *ZENIT - English* (blog), August 25, 2016, <https://zenit.org/2016/08/25/popes-conversation-with-jesuits-during-his-trip-to-poland/>.

discourage paths of sanctification which give glory to God.”¹⁹¹ Thus, the process of discernment is dynamic and open to growth and the context of the person searching to find God’s will. “Discernment links closely with the themes of conscience and gradualness, as it is the process by which judgments of conscience are made and an essential component of processes of moral development.”¹⁹²

The Spiritual Exercises with the process of discernment and together with the promotion of the virtue development can contribute greatly to character development oriented toward good. Because they don’t touch just the norm and the rule but the person as a whole and her stage of life and context, a person can grow in the responsibilities of his or her life, in the knowledge of the truth, and the love for God and neighbor. The person can find the right measure between obedience to the Law and the promptings of the Spirit.

Conclusion

In this thesis I have showed that it is morally inconsistent and dangerous to base our moral decisions only on our subjective judgements without any reference to objective moral laws. As Taylor showed us, we can easily fall victims of our own self-interest. On the contrary, we discover our true identity from the demands that emanate from beyond the self. Since our nature is social, we need each other and we need objective norms that hold us together as a society. Created in God’s image out of love every human person possesses inalienable dignity and value. Thus, our free acts should always respect the dignity of another human dignity, and also, as we saw in the explanation of Paul J. Wandell and John Rziha our acts should be directed toward our true end, the union with God. If we lose this horizon, we could easily fall into

¹⁹¹ Pope Francis. *Amoris Laetitia*. Paragraph 307.

¹⁹² Caleb Bernacchio. “Pope Francis on Conscience, Gradualness, and Discernment: Adapting *Amoris Laetitia* for Business Ethics.” *Business Ethics Quarterly* 29, no. 4 (2019): 438.

pursuing self-interest, self-fulfillment, become enclosed in our hearts, which eventually leads to the negation of others' dignity. As atomized individuals, we can easily be manipulated by others, by structures, by authorities, in pursuing their goals and ends. Our freedom is conditioned, never absolute and we should be aware of those conditions. Thus, the act of conscience must emanate from our condition as vulnerable to others, just as God is vulnerable to us.

The second chapter argued that we need the freedom to act morally and to listen to the voice of conscience to do good and avoid evil. But freedom has to be always in reference to objective moral order revealed in the Word of God, and the tradition of the Church. Our moral decisions should always reflect the freedom for God, for the good, and the other. The examples of the manuals show us that there is no true moral life without the involvement of the whole person, and commitment to heed the voice of conscience to do the good, to grow, to seek the truth. When only a minimum is required and formal obedience to the law is demanded, we are less equipped to recognize dangerous ideologies and oppressive social structures. On the other hand, a freedom that has no basis in objective truth can easily turn to the tyranny of the strong over the weak. The danger of modern emphasis on “autonomy” leads to a more individualistic lifestyle, unconcern for the others in need, or compassion. Conscience reduced to subjective certainty does not liberate but makes us dependent on personal taste or prevailing opinion. For this reason, many theologians together with Vatican II documents and *Veritatis Splendor*, invite us to promote the formation of conscience, to foster virtues, human dignity, values, and social justice.

In the third chapter, I argued that the virtue theory helps us to better understand moral acts as a whole in a relation to the human person and his or her intentions. Virtue ethics possess an explanatory power to understand our moral character and how it is formed. Through practice, norms, good examples, and virtues themselves we discover little by little the meaning of doing

good and avoiding evil found in the voice of conscience, which corresponds to our desire for the ultimate good and happiness found in God. Since we live in a world where we face complex moral problems, virtue theory presents as a method of discernment where we want to know what is a virtuous action in this particular circumstance. As Christians our moral decisions also reflect God's will for our lives, therefore I have argued that Ignatian spirituality and in particular the method of discernment of spirit as a tool can help us in leading a virtuous life, and in guiding conscience.

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