

Josephinum Journal of Theology
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Introduction

In recognition of the fifteenth anniversary of Pope John Paul II's encyclical *Veritatis splendor*, this issue of the Josephinum Journal of Theology opens with five essays touching upon the theme of moral action, which was perhaps the central concern of the encyclical. In particular, *Veritatis splendor* responded to a post conciliar situation in which traditional moral doctrines, such as the teaching that certain human actions are intrinsically evil or the corresponding view that certain precepts of the natural law were universal and permanent, were subject to "an overall and systematic calling into question" (no. 4). These problematic aspects of post conciliar moral theology followed as the earlier moral manuals were abandoned, and as both revisionist and more tradition-minded thinkers sought to overcome perceived difficulties in moral theory. Among these perceived difficulties – in what was seen to be "the Catholic natural law tradition of Thomas Aquinas" – was a neglect of the distinctively personal level of reason and will due to the emphasis on our lower bodily "nature," a corresponding reduction of what Aquinas understands as the properly moral order (of directing acts to ends) to the natural order, an emphasis on natural law at the expense of virtue and action theory, a reduction of practical reason to speculative reason, and an overly legalistic view of morality that was difficult to reconcile with the true Christian freedom of which the New Testament speaks.

In light of such criticisms, moral theology in the post conciliar generation tended away from the work of Aquinas. Since at least the early 1990s, however, there has been a growing retrieval of Thomistic ethics as a wide range of scholars – Catholics and Protestants, tradition-minded thinkers and revisionists, philosophers and theologians – have come to appreciate the unique value of his synthesis, and to recognize that it does not embody the alleged weaknesses for which it fell out of favor. In this new context, some of the complex theoretical challenges at the root of post conciliar debate among Catholics are receiving new attention. Arguably, the most important and contested is Aquinas's account of human or moral action and, in particular, how one determines the good or evil of moral acts. This, of course, concerns the traditional doctrine of the "three sources of morality" (the object, the ends intended, and the circumstances), and especially "the object" upon which "the morality of the human act depends primarily and fundamentally" (*Veritatis splendor* no. 78). Much of the debate, both before and after the encyclical, is rooted in the inherent complexity of the subject matter, in the difficulty of making sense of the primary and secondary literature, and in the challenge of articulating a coherent theory that can deal convincingly with the various cases, not only the simple and uncontested, but the complex and highly contested. To the extent that this can be done, valuable consensus can be achieved among a broad range of ethicists.

This issue of the Josephinum Journal of Theology, therefore, opens with an essay by William F. Murphy, Jr. that introduces the retrieval of Thomistic action theory as articulated by the Swiss Philosopher Martin Rhonheimer, and tries to locate his approach to the object and evaluation of human acts in light of alternatives. Rhonheimer's work offers an apt entry into our theme of moral action 15 years after *Veritatis splendor* because he was arguably the most effective defender of the encyclical in the years following its publication, and because his work has been

at the center of the more recent and very lively debate on these matters among those seeking to support the Magisterium. Central to Rhonheimer's approach, but contrary to that of many traditional interpreters of Aquinas, is the assertion that the object is not merely something of the physical order (including natural ends or caused effects), but a human act specified by the (normally proximate) end intended by the agent. These emphases in Rhonheimer's approach are worthy of attention, not only because they are contested by many traditional Thomists, but also because they seem to be encouraged by the encyclical (cf. no. 78). Our second and third essays are both drawn from a recent and comprehensive study by Duarte Sousa-Lara, whose work is distinguished by addressing not only Aquinas's primary texts, but also the classical and contemporary interpreters in the effort toward overall coherence. Our second essay, therefore, is Sousa-Lara's reading of Aquinas on the object of the human act, which not only traces the subtle movement among subsequent commentators toward a largely physical account of the object, but concludes by supporting the general direction followed by Rhonheimer and – less explicitly – by other moralists known for their support of contested Magisterial teachings. In our third essay, Sousa-Lara argues – against most classic and contemporary commentators – for a largely new reading of what Aquinas means by the interior and exterior act. In particular, he argues that the binomial interior/exterior corresponds to intention/choice (plus commanded act) instead of to elicited/commanded acts. As his essay explains, this new reading not only strengthens the case against the revisionist reading of Aquinas, but facilitates a more coherent theory, while providing further rationale as to why the object can not be a merely physical thing (a *res physica*) but a human act ordered to an end.

The fourth essay by William E. May discusses a contemporary and trusted text in moral theology that follows a more traditional reading of Aquinas's moral theory, and therefore reflects the movement among what might be called "traditionally naturalistic" Thomists to advance such approaches against alternatives like those noted above. After noting the many admirable features of the book, May appeals to Aquinas to argue against its understandings of natural law, of the relation between metaphysics and ethics, and of the moral object. His critical comments about the lack of clarity regarding the moral object are particularly relevant to our present theme. May attributes these deficiencies to a neglect of the central role of intended ends in determining the object and species of the act, according to the teaching of Thomas himself, and of John Paul II in *Veritatis splendor*. He also objects to the author's reliance upon the later notion of the *finis operis* (literally, the "end of the act," but typically understood as natural or physically caused effects) as understood by subsequent commentators, which tends toward a merely physical understanding of the object. In our fifth essay, Thomas Berg, LC and E. Christian Brugger reply to some fairly typical revisionist arguments of Christine E. Gudorf against Catholic teaching on abortion and contraception. This essay complements the others on action theory, especially, through the response of Berg and Brugger to the typical revisionist claim that contested Catholic teachings (i.e., against contraception) should be dismissed precisely because they depend upon "physicalism," which corresponds to a merely physical approach to the good and evil of human acts. In their response, Berg and Brugger make clear that – although writers in the Catholic tradition have provided inadequate appeals to the moral relevance of the "natural" in the sense of "physical" – neither Aquinas himself, nor *Humanae vitae*, nor John Paul II can be dismissed by such charges. The remaining essays address a range of topics. In our sixth essay, Joseph Torcia, OP presents Cyril of Jerusalem's late fourth century interpretation of the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, showing its sophistication and how it anticipates the later doctrinal formulation.

Next, Roger W. Nutt treats the role of reason in a Thomistic account of the act of faith, considering the place of the *praeambula fidei*, and how this account can address the challenges posed by modern critics. In the eighth contribution, James F. Caccamo traces the major documents and themes of twentieth-century Catholic teaching on social communications, and draws insights that can shape our approach to the use of the media in our new century. Finally, in a topic that pertains to pastoral ministry, Edward N. Peters discusses the canonical, and also cultural, developments that have culminated in the ordination of deaf men as priests and deacons.

It is our hope this issue of the *Josephinum Journal of Theology* will not only contribute to the realization of Pope John Paul II's efforts toward a renewal of moral theology, but also contribute more broadly to the intellectual and pastoral mission of the Church.

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