

# Moral Action and Revisionist Thought: A Reply to Joseph A. Selling

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**Abstract:** *This essay is a response to an article by Joseph A. Selling in Theological Studies that criticized the author's interpretation of St. Thomas Aquinas on the good and evil of human action that had drawn upon and supported the decisive paragraph no. 78 of St. John Paul II's 1993 moral encyclical Veritatis splendor (VS). Whereas the author's prior article had argued, somewhat in passing, that the contemporary recovery of Aquinas's action theory by various scholars—ranging from the initial explication of Aquinas's theory in support of the encyclical by Martin Rhonheimer to the more recent and widely-cited monograph by Joseph Pilsner—had resulted in a sufficient consensus to support the key directions encouraged by the encyclical against revisionist thought, Selling's article disputed that there even was such a contemporary renewal of Thomistic ethics, and challenged both the author and VS as misreading Aquinas. On the basis of his critique on action theory, Selling claims to have refuted the author's defense of Humanae vitae, which was the focus of the original article. This article responds to Selling's critique by defending the points he challenged, and by demonstrating some serious errors in his own article, thereby indicating that Selling's essay was a rushed and failed attempt to undermine an appeal to the manifest recovery of Aquinas's moral theory as fruitfully stimulated by VS and thus able to support contested Catholic teachings such as that of Humanae Vitae.*

Joseph A. Selling is professor emeritus from *KU Leuven* in Belgium,<sup>1</sup> and has written extensively—from a revisionist<sup>2</sup> perspective—on the key disputed questions of fundamental moral theology and sexual ethics. His work is of interest

1. This is a recently autonomous university that was formerly known as the *Katholieke Universiteit Leuven* or *Catholic University of Louvain*.
2. I will employ the term “revisionist” in its normal sense, as a self-description of those who depart or “dissent” from moral teachings that the Magisterium has consistently proposed to be held as Catholic doctrine. By “proportionalist,” I indicate the most common term (associated especially with the late Richard McCormick, S.J.) for the moral theory or

for several reasons, including the fact that he studied under and wrote on the work of Louis Janssens who was one of the more influential European revisionists of the conciliar era, and that he was the dissertation director of one of the leading American revisionists, namely Todd A. Salzman. For the purposes of this article, Selling's thought is of interest because he has published an article in the prestigious journal *Theological Studies* that criticized my reading of Aquinas's teaching on the object and specification of the moral act that had previously appeared in the same venue, as a relatively small but important part of an article on contraception, which was the first dedicated defense of *Humanae Vitae* to have been published there in some decades.<sup>3</sup> I will engage his thought primarily by summarizing the main areas in which he disputes my interpretation of Aquinas on moral action in support of *VS*, and by outlining his contrary positions, on which basis I will defend my interpretation and demonstrate several of the ways in which his fails. By so doing, I will illustrate how the directions encouraged by *VS* retain their importance as a vital corrective to the thought of a leading revisionist who badly misreads Aquinas, and on the basis of which he—like other revisionists—advocates a departure from not only the Catholic and Christian moral tradition, but from what the tradition would say is sound reason about human flourishing.

Selling's most important disagreement with my article centers on the way it supports the teaching of the decisive paragraph no. 78 of *VS*, especially the way the moral object is expressed in terms of the proximate end (of a deliberate choice) through the encyclical's assertion that the "object is the proximate end of a deliberate decision which determines the act of willing on the part of the acting person." I will focus on this central point, which will involve some related matters. But before getting into these most substantive matters of debate, I will note and challenge a surprising claim Selling makes early in his article, namely that my "entire theory stands or falls on the presumption that there exists 'a contemporary retrieval/recovery of Thomistic ethics.'"<sup>4</sup> It is surprising that an emeritus professor of moral theology would dispute this point, given the shelves of books and plethora of articles on Thomistic ethics that have been published in recent decades. Perhaps he was thinking of books centered on Thomistic action theory or closely related matters, but I can readily think of almost a dozen relatively recent ones, just in English, besides many articles. From the broader content of Selling's article, it seems to me that he would want to focus his claim to say that there is no broadly agreed-upon recovery of every aspect of Aquinas's action theory in support of *VS*. While I would agree

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approach used by revisionists in the English speaking world. For recent examples of "revisionist" literature in which the authors embrace this terminology, see Todd Salzman and Michael Lawler's *The Sexual Person: Toward a Renewed Catholic Anthropology* (Georgetown: Georgetown University Press, 2008), xii-xiv, chapter three, and Charles E. Curran's *The Development of Moral Theology: Five Strands* (Georgetown: Georgetown University Press, 2013), 98-116, 142, 263-4.

3. Selling's article was "The Recovery of Aquinas's Action Theory: A Reply to William Murphy" in *Theological Studies*, 73 (2012): 139-150, which criticized my "Revisiting Contraception: An Integrated Approach in Light of the Renewal of Thomistic Virtue Ethics: *Theological Studies*, 72 (2011): 812-847.
4. Selling, "Reply to Murphy," 140.

that there remain various points of dispute, a wide variety of interlocutors have, for example, expressed general approval of a text like Joseph Pilsner's *The Specification of Human Acts According to St. Thomas Aquinas*, so there is a renewal even in this area and a significant degree of convergence.<sup>5</sup> The relevant point, however, is that Selling's reading is clearly untenable in light of the fundamental points that should be undisputed.

Regarding the central points of my reading that he disputes, namely the interpretation of a fundamental principle Aquinas establishes in the very first and programmatic question of his moral teaching (*ST* I-II, q. 1, a. 3, ad. 3), Selling makes a major mistake from the outset, based on what—as will become clear—is his physicalist<sup>6</sup>

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5. Joseph Pilsner, *The Specification of Human Acts According to St. Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). See, for example, the favorable review by Jean Porter in *Religious Studies* 43.3 (September 2007): 359-363, and the one by Joseph W. Koterski in *International Philosophical Quarterly* 47.2 (2007): 241-243, among others.
  6. The term "physicalism" is used by different authors in somewhat different ways, and especially in reference to theories that determine morality in terms of the physical or natural order. The fundamental problem with physicalism can be seen, for example, in making judgments of *moral evil* based on a consideration that is focused on the *physical or natural order* (e.g., the frustration of a natural end, or a physical behavior pattern causing an ontological evil) *without providing properly moral reasons* for why causing a physical or ontological evil (like frustrating the "natural end" of a faculty or causing an *ontological evil* like death) is also *morally evil*. I will argue that consideration of moral questions according to the properly moral order (corresponding to "the perspective of the acting person"), and not merely the physical or natural order, is essential to move beyond the post conciliar crisis addressed by *VS*. One reason for this is that revisionists typically avoid the properly moral order by failure to consider the actual choices made by the agent (related to their neglect, or physicalist misunderstanding, of the *finis proximus*), and by their focus on producing effects (corresponding to Aristotle's *poiesis*, "to make") through maximizing the proportion of what they often call "ontic" goods over evils, whereas a more conservative physicalist, who might similarly neglect the *finis proximus* and/or the properly moral order, thinks effects in the physical or natural order determine morality without providing properly moral reasons for why the chosen human act causes these effects in a way that is contrary to right reason and virtue. I will also use "traditionally naturalistic" to refer to the physicalism of the manuals, and to corresponding readings of Aquinas that try to establish moral objectivity in the natural or physical realm, in priority to Aquinas' emphasis on reason, albeit a reason that is ultimately a reflection of the Eternal Law, and has its roots in the natural order whose inclinations Thomas teaches are the seeds of the virtues. Although a detailed discussion is beyond the scope of this essay, it seems to me that recent tendencies to read Aquinas's ethics in terms of physical action—as, e.g., treated in his Commentary on Aristotle's *Physics*—are a more sophisticated form of physicalism; although these approaches are proposed by serious scholars and deserve careful study and respectful dialogue, they would seem to be an alternative to the directions encouraged by *VS*, driven largely by intuitions for more rigorous conclusions on some disputed questions, a long tradition of physicalism, and by the fact that Aquinas's synthesis can be read from different perspectives. Because Aquinas seems to rely, moreover, on physicalist arguments on topics like the sin against nature and lying, there is need to address how the former (the sin against nature) relies on the mistaken teaching of Aristotle that there is something divine in the semen, and how both are deliberately treated within the broader context of the *Summa* where the rule and measure of human acts is right reason, and where this is understood within the context of the appropriate virtues, respectively chastity and justice.

misunderstanding of the proximate end.<sup>7</sup> With no basis in anything I wrote in the article he is criticizing or in anything I have ever written, and directly contrary to much of what I have written against physicalism and in support of *VS*, Selling asserts I have a physicalist understanding (actually a misunderstanding) of the proximate end (which is actually what he holds)!

When Murphy puts forth the theory that it is the *proximate end* of the human act that determines the moral species, he is in effect, simply repeating the notion that physical, material events (or omissions) have a meaning that can be determined on the basis of an observation of “what happens.” He may very well hold this as a moral theory, but it cannot be said to be based upon the teaching of Aquinas in the first 21 questions of the *ST* 1-2, where the phrase of proximate end appears nowhere else outside the text he refers to (where it describes only the natural species of the physical component of human action).<sup>8</sup>

In the second sentence of this text Selling makes two grave mistakes. First, he boldly asserts that “proximate end” “appears nowhere else” in “the first 21 questions of *ST* 1-2,” and—to highlight what he thinks to have discovered as a major flaw in my article (and, indirectly, in *VS*)—Selling later reiterates that q.1, a.3, ad.3 “is an *unicum* in the treatise, for it is the only place where the terminology *proximate end* is used.”<sup>9</sup> Quite unfortunately for Selling, I count *four additional times* that “*proximate end*” occurs within this very treatise, so his assertions that it is “an *unicum*” that “appears nowhere else” are clearly false.<sup>10</sup> As I had supported with a footnote reference in my initial article and as I will expound briefly below,<sup>11</sup> reference to the proximate end occurs numerous times in the remainder of the *Secunda Pars* as Thomas applies what he had stated in this programmatic first question throughout

7. A physicalist understanding of the proximate end is common among both revisionists and physicalists. On the latter, see my “*Veritatis Splendor* and Traditionally Naturalistic Thomism: The Object as Proximate End of the Acting Person as a Test Case,” *Studia Moralia* 45 (2007) 185-216.

8. Selling, “Reply to Murphy,” 143-146.

9. Selling, “Reply to Murphy,” 146.

10. The first is in q.12, Thomas discusses how “a man intends at the same time both a proximate and the last end. Three others are in q.21, a.1, ad.2, part of an article on “Whether a human action is right or sinful, in so far as it is good or evil?” The second objection concludes that “it seems that the malice of an action does not make it sinful” because “the goodness or malice of a human action depends, before all, on the intention of the end.” The reply to this objection makes three points about the *proximate end*: that it is distinct from the last end; that the sin of nature does not oppose any proximate end whatsoever; and although sin fails in regard to the last end “yet it does not fail in respect of some proximate end intended.” Other explicit texts in the *Secunda Pars* will be discussed below.

11. The book by Pilsner that I had cited in my original essay included a complete chapter going through Thomas’s texts on proximate versus remote ends. Selling simply notes (143, n.15) that Pilsner’s book was “a revision of his doctoral dissertation”; he would have done better to study it, as it would have helped him to make a more serious response to my essay.

his broader exposition of moral theology.<sup>12</sup> Selling's next error in the second sentence cited above is his claim that the reference to proximate end in q.1, a.3, ad.3 "describes only the natural species of the physical component of human action." Through points that are clearly stated in Thomas's text, it is not difficult to show that Selling has badly misunderstood this article. In an article (a.3) that affirmatively answers the question of "whether human acts are specified by their end," the third objection (that is, the third position that Thomas will refute) is "one thing cannot be in more than one species. But one and the same act [the objector is using "act" ambiguously as a physical act] may happen to be ordained to various ends. Therefore the end does not give the species to human acts." The reply to this objection—the text of q.1, a.3, ad.3 about which Selling writes—reads as follows, with my explanatory clarifications in brackets.

One and the same act [here Thomas speaks of a human act], in so far as it proceeds once from the agent [that is, from reason and will as a human act], is ordained to but one proximate end, from which it has its species [its kind as a human act]: but it can be ordained to several remote ends, of which one is the end of the other. It is possible, however, that an act which is one in respect of its natural species, be ordained to several ends of the will: thus this act "to kill a man," which is but one act in respect of its natural species, can be ordained, as to an end [as proceeding from the agent as a human act], to the safeguarding of justice, and to the satisfying of anger: the result being that there would be several acts in different species of morality [different moral acts]: since in one way there will be an act of virtue, in another, an act of vice. For a movement does not receive its species from that which is its terminus accidentally, but only from that which is its "per se" terminus [the per se for human acts is the end sought by the agent]. Now moral ends are accidental to a natural thing, and conversely the relation to a natural end is accidental to morality. Consequently there is no reason why acts which are the same considered in their natural species, should not be diverse, considered in their moral species, and conversely.

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12. In my article that Selling criticizes, I had cited an essay (my "*Veritatis Splendor* and Traditionally Naturalistic Thomism") in which I explore whether—given the fact that both revisionists and physicalists tend to systematically ignore the teaching on the proximate end in *ST* I-II, q.1, a.3, ad.3—Thomas had somehow made a mistake in this text (an *unicum* as Selling asserts), or whether what he wrote about the proximate end giving species (and the strong and corresponding distinction between natural/physical and moral species) is a principle that he follows throughout the *Summa Theologiae*; my finding was that Thomas consistently (but with various complexities) follows what he wrote in the programmatic first question. Unfortunately, Selling doesn't seem to have read the article even though it addresses precisely the points on which he wishes to criticize me, and regarding which he clearly misunderstands my position.

Let us bring this together for the sake of clarity. To answer the objection that same “act” can be ordained to various “ends,” Thomas must resolve ambiguities in the objection itself regarding two different kinds of ends, namely *proximate* and *remote*, and two different ways of considering acts, namely in their *natural* and *moral species*.

Regarding the two different kinds of ends, Thomas’s principle is clearly stated, namely that an act “in so far as it proceeds from the agent [that is, in so far as it is a “human act” ordered by reason and will], is ordained to but one proximate end, from which it has its species” (that is, its species or kind as a human act); Thomas continues that beyond a proximate end, a human act “can be ordained to several remote ends . . .” So Thomas distinguishes between proximate and remote ends, stating clearly that the moral species comes from the former.<sup>13</sup> Notice that, whereas Selling claims that the proximate end “describes only the natural species of the physical component of human action,”<sup>14</sup> Thomas is speaking of the specification of a *human act* that proceeds from the reason and will of the agent for the sake of an end (a.2). It is hard to imagine how someone could claim from this text that Thomas is referring to a natural species; from Selling’s preference to speak of “moral events”<sup>15</sup> and “something that happens”—which could refer to natural events like earthquakes—instead of human acts done by agents for the sake of ends, there seems to be a confusion about the very notion of a human act.

Regarding the two different ways of considering acts, Thomas distinguishes between an act considered “in respect of its natural species”—that is, not as it proceeds from the reason and will of the agent, but instead in abstraction from the end for which it is chosen—and one considered according to its “species of morality” or moral species. His example of an act considered “in respect of its natural species” is “to kill a man” (with the natural end or caused effect of a man being dead). Keeping in mind that the article explores the question of whether an act (meaning a human act) is specified by the end, Thomas’s position is that such consideration “in respect of its natural species (and natural ends)” is not sufficient to specify a human act because an act in its natural species (killing, in the sense of “causing the death of,” a man) can be ordained to different proximate ends (the immediate good, or perceived good, sought by the agent) like “safeguarding justice” or “satisfying anger” from which the act will take on different moral species. In the concluding three sentences of the reply, Thomas reinforces his clear distinction between the natural order and the moral order, and the accidental relationships between moral ends and natural things, on the one hand, and natural ends and moral species on the other.

Overlooking these clear statements by Aquinas, Selling elsewhere in his article reiterates his claim that the reference to a proximate end in this text “describes

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13. I will cite further texts below that make the same point.

14. In his “Reply to Murphy,” 145, Selling’s first paragraph is much better in discussing Thomas’s text, except for the fact that he speaks of end in a general sense, ignoring the proximate end, and the fact that he introduces his notion of “what happens.”

15. Note the title of Selling’s “Understanding the Moral Event: The Polarity of Ethical Discourse” *Louvain Studies* 34 (2010), 19-38. This article lays out Selling’s own approach, which includes considerable appeal to Aquinas, though transposed in various ways into something quite different.

only the natural species of the physical component of human action,” and attempts to support his reading by appeal to a text that provides no evident help. Selling writes “[w]hat is proximate is the natural process or event (*ST* II, q.7, a.3) of the death of the human being. . . .”<sup>16</sup> It is unclear, however, why he has cited q.7 in supposed support of his claim that “proximate” in q.1, a.3, ad.3 means “the natural process or event” because q.7, a.3 treats of “whether the circumstances are properly set forth in the third book of the ethics,” and it says nothing about proximate ends, nor does anything in Thomas’s entire body of writings say what Selling claims, so it looks like he has made another clear mistake.<sup>17</sup> His misinterpretation of the proximate end as a natural end leads him to a further conclusion that can’t be reconciled with Thomas’s text: he writes that “[e]xamination of the text [q.1, a.3, ad.3] further reveals that the end that morally specifies the chosen activity of killing a person is actually a *remote one* [emphasis added]: either safeguarding justice. . . or satisfying one’s own anger.”<sup>18</sup> Although Thomas makes clear in the text under discussion that the moral species of a human act is given by the single proximate end, Selling claims that his “further analysis” reveals that the morally specifying ends are remote ends; but his further analysis is simply eisegesis to defend the revisionist moral theory that he holds.<sup>19</sup> Elsewhere Selling makes a different claim about specification by ends: he writes, “in the exposition provided by Aquinas in qq.1-21, it makes no difference whether the end aimed at is proximate or remote. The end is simply that which is embraced through the *intention* of the acting person.”<sup>20</sup>

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16. Selling, “Reply to Murphy,” 144.

17. Perhaps Selling sees help for his position in the reply to the third objection, which speaks of specification by end but does not specify proximate or remote. But in the context of an adequate interpretation of the specifying role of ends for Aquinas, which I will discuss further below, this text further refutes Selling’s interpretation.

18. “Reply to Murphy,” 149.

19. Although this is not the place to argue the point at length, I would claim that Selling’s revisionism, as with other forms, is a natural outgrowth of the moral theory of the manuals that relied on the distinction between *finis operis* (the “end of the act” understood as the natural end, or what the physical act tends naturally to cause) and *finis operantis* (further end of the agent). This approach generally ignored the *finis proximus*, or equated it with the natural end as opposed to the immediate end that specified the choice. The adoption of this interpretation by revisionists is why traditionally naturalistic forms of Thomism, which (having failed to study the problems surrounding revisionist thought) similarly ignore the *finis proximus*—and instead highlight the role of “natural teleology” (basically natural ends) in their “interpretations” of Aquinas’s action theory—indirectly support revisionist theory and thereby threaten to throw moral theology “into a loop” where we go back to the preconiliar situation of moral theory, and ignore the lessons reflected in *VS*.

20. I would describe the actual situation as follows: Aquinas clearly specifies the centrality of the proximate end in his programmatic first question and reiterates this teaching numerous times, some of which I will cite below. Very frequently, however, Thomas refers to an end but doesn’t specify whether he means proximate, remote or even final. Selling’s interpretation requires him to ignore the numerous explicit texts, whereas mine accounts for them in light of the widely-recognized fact that Aquinas uses many of his key terms in various analogous ways without specifying the sense in which they apply in a given context. It seems to me that Thomas thought the beginners for whom he wrote his *Summa theologiae* could remember the explicit texts in which he makes his distinctions

To further document Selling's misreading of Aquinas on the specification of human acts by ends, the following texts from the *Summa Theologiae* are direct and supporting parallel texts to the central text of *ST* I-II, q.1, a.3, ad.3, as I have interpreted it in support of *VS*. Although more could be cited from Thomas's broader works, these will suffice for my present purpose. According to *ST* I-II, q.60, a.1, ad.3 "moral matters do not receive their species from the last end but from their proximate ends." Similarly, q.107, a.1 explains that "this difference will be specific, especially if such ends are proximate." According to II-II, q. 11, a.1, ad.2, "vices take their species from their proximate end."

The following texts, moreover, not only express Thomas's key principle of specification by the proximate end, but directly contradict Selling's claim that the remote end gives the species. According to *ST* II-II, q.11, a.1, ad.2, "the proximate end of heresy is adherence to one's own false opinion, and from this it derives its species, while its remote end reveals its cause, viz. that it arises from pride or covetousness." So the former specifies the particular act of the vice, while the latter indicates the capital vice (e.g., pride) that gives rise to the "daughter vice" (i.e., heresy). Along these lines, II-II, q.66, a.4, ad.2 explains that "[t]he remote end of robbery and theft is the same. But this is not enough for identity of the species, because there is a difference of proximate ends, since the robber wishes to take a thing by his own power, but the thief, by cunning." Notice here Thomas's insight that if one just looked at the remote end of theft or robbery (appropriating something that belongs to another), we could not distinguish between taking something through violence or through cunning, though they are clearly distinct vices with differing gravity.<sup>21</sup> Similarly Thomas explains in II-II, q.111, a.3, ad.3 that "[g]ain or glory is the remote end of the dissembler as also of the liar. Hence [hypocrisy or dissimulation] does not take its species from this [remote] end [of gain or glory], but from the proximate end, which is to show oneself other than one is." Again, one must know the proximate end to make the needed distinction between these vices of differing gravity.

Towards the end of his article, after another questionable commentary on Aquinas's texts—this time on ends and choices—Selling builds to his culmination of how "Murphy departs from the insights of Aquinas, namely in referring to the object of choice as an end," a claim that he thinks also refutes *VS* no. 78. But, yet again, Selling is clearly mistaken about what he thinks are "the insights of Aquinas." Although Aquinas rarely makes this point explicitly, in *De Malo*, q.2, a.4, r 9, he writes that "[e]nds are twofold: proximate and remote. The proximate end of an act is the same as

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(like the programmatic first question of his *Secunda Pars*) and interpret the unspecified occurrences in light of what he has specified in key texts, and in light of the fact that he frequently uses explicit language (such as "proximate end"), in light of the context, and in the expectation that readers are able to distinguish between speaking of an act in its *properly moral species* and speaking of it in its *merely natural species*.

21. Similarly, for the remote end of practicing responsible parenthood, a revisionist like Selling can't distinguish between the moral good or evil of doing so through an act of periodic continence (which orders the sexual inclination under the dominion of reason and will), or through a properly contraceptive act according to *Humanae Vitae* no. 14 (like wearing a condom, or even taking a pill with possible abortifacient side-effects for the proximate end of preventing conception).

its object, and from this an act receives its species. From the remote end, however, an act does not have its species; but the order to such an end is a circumstance of an act."<sup>22</sup> This text is devastating for Selling as it directly supports not only my article, but also makes clear how the teaching of *VS* no. 78 on the object is that of Aquinas to whom it points for a further exposition. Many more texts could be cited, but from those I have already discussed (in support of q.1, a.3, ad.3), Thomas's basic teaching regarding proximate and remote ends—and how the former can be understood as the moral object—should be clear enough for present purposes.<sup>23</sup>

Speaking more broadly, Selling's attempt to attribute the specification of human acts to remote ends—or to some broader notion of intentionality—is central to revisionist thought, and echoes what can be found in the work of thinkers like Richard McCormick, S.J., Charles E. Curran, and the now prominent American revisionist team of Salzman and Lawler.<sup>24</sup> As we have seen from Aquinas, such "specification" from a remote end is insufficient, because it is unable to distinguish the different kind of human acts that could be further directed to such remote ends. To justify the free choice of moral acts that the tradition has forbidden, these revisionists must be able to overlook a particular choice, or "redescribe" it; for example, the actual choice of "putting on a condom to prevent pregnancy" is redescribed in terms of some hoped-for good end (a remote end), such as "expressing affection for my wife" or—to use Selling's example from the end of his article—" . . . to practice responsible parenthood . . ." by which he means regulating fertility.<sup>25</sup> But Selling's ". . . to practice responsible parenthood . . ." is clearly a remote end, because one

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22. The translation of this text from *De Malo* is taken from p. 135 of Joseph Pilsner's *The Specification of Human Actions in St. Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). Pilsner devotes a major and concluding subsection (135-143) of his chapter on object to a discussion of the object as a proximate end for Aquinas, so there is no need to repeat that here. I had cited this book in my original article, along with seven essays I had written on related matters. Selling could have avoided the many of the mistakes in his essay if he had taken advantage of these references, but he was apparently in a rush to publish a rebuttal of my article.
23. A final text brings up an important additional aspect of his moral theory. In q. 123, a.7 on whether an act of fortitude is directed to its own good, Thomas cites Aristotle in the *sed contra*, which reads "to the brave man fortitude itself is a good': and such is his end." In ad.3, Thomas answers affirmatively and writes "the brave man intends as his proximate end to reproduce in action a likeness of his habit, for he intends to act in accordance with his habit." This text illustrates a point that is overlooked by most interpreters of Aquinas, with the notable exception of Martin Rhonheimer, whose articulation of Thomistic ethics integrates the various elements beyond action theory such as virtue theory, making clear that for Thomas the proximate ends sought are also "the ends of virtues" (or vices) such that the person is acting for the goods of the virtues, such as acting for the sake of justice, for the good of truthfulness, or of courage, or magnanimity, or perseverance, or patience, or chastity, or temperance, etc.
24. For an extensive criticism of Salzman and Lawler's approach to moral action and sexual ethics, see the footnotes of my previously cited essay, *Revisiting Contraception*.
25. Selling, "Reply to Murphy," 150. In the main arguments about contraception in my article *Revisiting Contraception*, which Selling ignores, I had followed Rhonheimer's distinction between truly responsible (that is, consistent with the virtue of conjugal chastity) "procreative responsibility" (that integrates the sexual inclination under the dominion of reason and will) and lesser forms of responsibility that fail the requirements of chastity,

could practice what he means by it through various “means” (which, for Aquinas, are morally-evaluable human acts), and these different means could fall into different species of human acts. Acts of periodic abstinence from intercourse—when reason says conception is likely but not reasonable—are morally distinguishable (by kind and by good/evil) from contraceptive acts (like putting on a condom, or taking a pill) done to prevent the procreative consequences of a foreseen sexual act. Revisionists like Selling must, therefore, deny the doctrine of proximate end, the end for which a choice is immediately made, but the days when this could be presented as a credible reading of Aquinas are, hopefully, over, at least to the extent that education in moral theology and philosophy is attentive to these lessons as reflected in *VS*.

Selling’s article—and his broader approach to moral theory—can be criticized for other flaws,<sup>26</sup> but those treated above are more than sufficient to show that his criticism of the approach of *VS* to action theory does not succeed. It fails not only because the approach is robust when further supported by the broader moral theory of St. Thomas Aquinas, but also because he seems to have been a bit too anxious to publish a prompt “rebuttal” of such a prominently placed defense of *Humanae vitae*, especially because it does so in light of *Veritatis splendor*, and even more so because this latter encyclical’s response to revisionist moral theory is strongly supported by the widespread contemporary renewal of Thomistic virtue ethics. ■

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such as contraceptive acts. Selling ignores this argumentation and simply repeats what I had argued against.

26. Among these I would include: the fact that he ignored all the cited texts that further supported my abbreviated account and answered all the charges he would raise; his transposition of Aquinas’s precise technical language into his own terminology (e.g., “something that happens” and “event”); the problematic nature of such language as presupposing an eventistic notion of human action; a series of weak arguments against the text of *VS*; and, in his broader work, a problematic understanding of ontic evil and a deficient understanding of proportionate reason, both of which he takes from his mentor Louis Janssens.