

Fr. Christopher B. Etheridge, IVE

Thomistic Week

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Lost Principles, Lost Ethics

Morality. Complicated, right? G. K. Chesterton would agree. “Morality,” Chesterton is reported to have said, “is always dreadfully complicated to a man who has lost all his principles.” Does this insight help explain the complexity of modern ethics? I think Fabro would concur. “The crisis,” he says, “posed by these two fundamental disciplines of human action (ethics and the natural law) follows the fate of the ‘theory of being’.”¹ The ouster of being (*esse*) from the foundations of philosophy can only but lead to the ouster of God from ethics, making any effort to lay a new groundwork for moral philosophy painfully complex. To demonstrate this intrinsic relationship between the foundation of ethics and religion, I will follow the moral philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas under the guidance of Fr. Cornelio Fabro in answering three fundamental questions: (I) What is ethics? (II) What does it mean to “found” ethics? (III) Why is a theistic metaphysical foundation necessary?

I. What is ethics?

Unlike most philosophical disciplines, ethics (moral philosophy) is more practical² than theoretical; however, that does not mean that it is not grounded in fundamental metaphysical concepts, as we will see later. To best distinguish ethics from other philosophical disciplines it is important to examine its object of study. Like good students of philosophy we should make a distinction between the formal object and the material object of ethics. The material object of

¹ Cornelio Fabro, *God: An Introduction to Problems in Theology*, trans. Joseph T. Papa, ed. Nathaniel Dreyer (Chillum, MD: IVE Press, 2017), 140.

² Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones disputate de virtutibus*, online edition: <http://www.corpusthomaticum.org/qdw103.html#65635>, accessed 5 March 2018, art. 6, ad 1.

ethics—or *what* ethics studies—is human actions. Meanwhile, the formal object—or *under what light* ethics studies human actions—is their voluntariness, i.e., insofar as an action proceeds from an intrinsic principle with knowledge of the end.³ For instance, an example of a voluntary human action is *choosing* to fall asleep in one of the presentations. On the other hand, snoring as you sleep during the presentation is not voluntary.

Snoring is an operation that springs from the body without interaction of the will. If we could, we would probably choose not to snore while we sleep, and it is most certain that many who might have to share a room or a tent with us would prefer us not to snore either. Since it has its origin in nature and not the will, snoring, along with every other non-voluntary human act is properly considered an “act of man”.⁴ Ethics is not concerned about “acts of man”—like snoring or breathing or getting the hiccups—but about “human acts”, i.e. those operations wherein man is master.⁵

Human actions, therefore, are *what* ethics studies, but to fully understand it as a philosophical science, we must also indicate *why* ethics studies them. Ethics studies human actions to arrive at a knowledge (wisdom) of the order of voluntary actions—*considerando facit ordinem*, says St. Thomas.⁶ Ordered to what? Ordered to man’s last end. Man might be free and master of his actions, but his freedom is not indetermination⁷. It is freedom for something else; freedom for the good. Knowing this last end and knowing how to guide all voluntary actions towards it in accordance with reason is precisely *what* ethics does as a philosophical science.

³ *Id quod procedit a principio intrinseco cum cognitione finis*. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, q. 6, art. 1

⁴ *Ibid.*, I-II, q. 1, art. 1

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Thomas Aquinas. Commentary on Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. C. I. Litzinger, O.P. (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1964), online edition: <http://dhspriority.org/thomas/Ethics1.htm#2>, accessed 5 March 2018, L. 1, n. 1-2.

⁷ The will is determined to a universal end, but man is free to determine what means he chooses to such an end.

II. What does it mean to “found” ethics?

We have said, *what* ethics is, now we need to analyze what *to found* ethics means. “To found” in the general sense of the verb means “to set or ground on something solid”.⁸ “To found” ethics then would mean to firmly ground the study of the morality of human actions on something permanent. Kant understood the importance of “founding” ethics on something solid⁹, so where did he turn, but to the “transcendent” realm of consciousness.¹⁰ What Kant was most “conscious” of in the moral realm was the obligation to duty, and so he grounds his moral philosophy on the categorical imperative.¹¹ Consciousness is the solid foundation of Kantian ethics. In this regard, Kant failed. He established his ethics on an undue principle. The foundation of ethics must first and foremost, be built on a realistic understanding of the *principles* of human actions.¹²

Ethics, as we have said, is a practical philosophy. In the strict sense it is concerned with morality, understood as the *norms* (standards) of human action and not *principles* of human

⁸ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/found>

⁹ “The present treatise is, however, nothing more than the investigation and establishment of *the supreme principle of morality*, and this alone constitutes a study complete in itself, and one which ought to be kept apart from every other moral investigation.” Immanuel Kant, *Kant’s Critique of Practical Reason and Other Works on the Theory of Ethics*, trans. Thomas Kingsmill Abbott, 6th ed. (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1909), 7.

¹⁰ I mention only Kant, as the first major effort to re-develop morality. Hegel and Heidegger also greatly influenced morality because of their false notion of freedom. See Elvio Fontana, *Introduction to Cornelio Fabro*, trans. Nathaniel Dreyer, (Chillum, MD: IVE Press, 2016), 32-33.

¹¹ “Ethical reflection, however, finds significance in the fact that there is no moral life without a consciousness of duty, no matter how much the content of the duty in each particular case differs from all the others. In this sense the conformity of the will to duty is the general and supreme duty. As is well known, it takes the form in the Critical philosophy of the categorical imperative. The significance of this is its express opposition to every other system of morals... This is the categorical imperative: a precept, independent of any circumstances, in which Kant finds the meaning of the moral law... Kant discovered the categorical imperative as the general definition of the conscience that teaches each individual to submit his will to a law, a command, and tells him that this command is entirely independent of whatever tendencies and objects the individual finds already present in his will. It was therefore necessary to conceive this law as valid quite independently of all the variations of individual will and therefore equally valid for all individuals. This independence of the categorical imperative of every empirically existing will gave it a universal validity for all rational beings... The fact that the individual gives himself the moral law, which is to be valid for all others, shows that he bears in his own personality the dignity of the moral law.” W. Windelband, *An Introduction to Philosophy*, trans. Joseph McCabe, (London: T. Fisher Unwin Ltd., 1921), 235-237.

¹² Fabro, *God: An Introduction*, 141.

action (intellect and will). However, neither is ethics an autonomous science, and thus it must build on the knowledge offered her by the philosophy of man. There is no point in establishing the norms of human action before properly understanding the principles which serve as the cause of human actions. For a proper understanding of the cause of human actions we can turn to St. Thomas' treatment of the interaction between the intellect and will in *De Malo*, Q. VI, a. 1, corpus:

If we should consider the movement of the soul's powers regarding the object specifying the act, the first source of movement comes from the intellect, since the understood good in this way moves even the will itself. And if we should consider the movement of the soul's powers regarding performance of the act, then the source of the movement comes from the will. For the power to which the chief end belongs always moves to action the power to which the means to the end belongs.¹³

Here we find that in formulation of a human act (voluntary act) there is distinction between which faculty holds the primacy. As Fr. Fabro shows, "There is a "formal and objective primacy of the intellect, but real and subjective (existential) primacy of the will."¹⁴ What does this mean? It means that there is a hierarchy within the voluntary act. The intellect takes the primacy in *determining* the free act, i.e. in forming the intention (end) and judging between the possibility of means to such an end. However, the will takes the primacy in *exercising* the free act, i.e. in wanting to seek means to the end, in choosing the proper means, and in ordering the other faculties to the acquisition of such an end. Nevertheless, in the voluntary act we can say that the primacy belongs substantially to the will.

The will moves of itself, but it does not move for itself. The will, being an active potency, requires something in act to actualize its movement. The proper object of the will is the good,

¹³ *On Evil*, trans. Richard Regan, ed. Brian Davies, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 258.

¹⁴ Fabro, "Orizzontalita e verticalita nella dialettica della liberta," in *Riflessioni sulla liberta*, 55. Quoted in *Introduction to Cornelio Fabro*, 34-35.

and given the spiritual nature of the will, this “good” that satisfies (*quietare*) it must also be immaterial. Already we begin to see the necessity of transcendence in relation to the voluntary act. Given the immaterial nature of the will, nothing in the material world can fully satisfy its desire for the good and bring it to rest (happiness). On this fact, says, St. Thomas all men agree, that we seek happiness.¹⁵ Where men go wrong is in determining *what thing* this happiness consists in. The problem, he states, lies in man’s trying to place his happiness in a participated good.¹⁶ As the proper object of his will, man is open to the universal good. Within himself and in creation he only finds created-participated good. Thus, only that good which is uncreated and non-participated can fully satisfy man’s desire, and that Good we call God. Thus, the very *principles* of human actions, which are the object of study of ethics requires a theistic foundation. Grounding the principles and purpose of human actions, however, is not enough; there is another foundation that must be laid in reference to what is proper to ethics: the *norm* of human action.

As Fr. Fabro points out, “In the field of ethics, moreover, ‘to found’ means to draw upon the supreme norm of action, from which derives the immediate direct norm of the natural law.”¹⁷ The supreme norm cannot be man himself, otherwise, man himself would become the “immediate direct norm” of the natural law to which he himself is subject. This did not stop some from trying to place man as the supreme norm, however. Kant certainly tried to argue for it in his ethical “Copernican revolution”¹⁸, and we have been reaping the consequences of this

¹⁵ I-II, q. 1, art. 7, corpus

¹⁶ I-II, q. 2, art. 8, corpus

¹⁷ *God: An Introduction*, 141.

¹⁸ Giovanni Reale and Dario Antiseri, *De Spinoza a Kant*, trans. Juan Andres Iglesias, et. al., *Historia de la Filosofia II*, (Barcelona: Herder, 2010), 354-355.

immanentistic moral reasoning ever since.¹⁹ Kant's problem began with his starting point (*knowing* rather than *being*)²⁰ and method ("transcendental")²¹. The resulting loss of being (*esse*) and objectivity necessarily led him away from a true normative foundation. Kant's insistence that the categorical imperative makes man a law unto himself closes man within himself.²² Man is no longer master but slave. Instead of ordering himself to end, he must obey himself for the end which is himself. Kant thinks this safeguards man's freedom, making it autonomous, but in fact, it destroys it.²³ Against this, Fabro writes,

¹⁹ "The charge of eudaimonism and heteronomy made against theistic morality made it possible for Kant to open the path to all the aberrations of modern morality, down to the existentialist dissolution that identifies morality with the impulse of the individual will". Fabro, *God: An Introduction*, 143. "Kant was of the opinion that man is his own law (autonomy)—that is, he binds himself under the law which he himself gives himself. Actually, in a profounder sense, this is how lawlessness or experimentation are established." *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, X² A 396 (1850), vol. 1, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1967), 76. Quoted in Fabro, *God: An Introduction*, 143.

²⁰ "Kant no se pregunta por el ser, sino por el saber, por las cosas «en cuanto sabidas»." A. Rodríguez Luño and A. Bellocq, *Ética General*, 7th ed. (Pamplona: EUNSA, 2014), 68.

²¹ Here is Fabro's understanding of the Kantian "transcendental". "«Trascendentale» ha ricevuto nella filosofia un rilievo teoretico sempre più pregnante: da un significato ontico-logico, prevalente nella Scolastica, esso è diventato costitutivo della stessa «operazione filosofica» a partire da Kant. Da questo momento il termine «trascendentale» significa ciò ch'è e deve essere dato a priori nel soggetto nel senso di presupposto al sapere, e indica perciò la costituzione originaria in senso operante attivo dello spirito o soggetto come anticipante e indipendente e tuttavia determinante, rispetto all'oggetto di esperienza. Il trascendentale è diventato a questo modo la formula radicale del significato radicale del principio moderno di immanenza che afferma l'unità o identità di essere e pensiero. Ma non è facile determinare con sufficiente precisione il concetto di trascendentale: esso è fluttuante in tutto il pensiero moderno, e nello stesso Kant, poiché segue e si piega alla dinamica risolvente della soggettività che esso esprime e deve attuare di forma in forma nell'ascesa del conoscere. Tale dinamica risolvente, che appare in Kant proiettata e attuata in due sfere distinte come sono il conoscere (*Kritik der reinen Vernunft*) e l'agire (*Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*), ossia l'intendere e il volere, vengono unificate in un unico «sistema» di libertà nell'idealismo: «Un sistema di libertà—in linee altrettanto grandiose, in eguale semplicità come perfetta immagine rovesciata del sistema spinoziano—questo sarebbe propriamente l'obiettivo supremo». È sulla libertà come incondizionatezza radicale della coscienza che bisogna far leva, cioè sulla spontaneità creativa costituente, per afferrare l'essenza del pensiero moderno." Cornelio Fabro, *La svolta antropologica di Karl Rahner*, (Segni: EDIVI, 2011), 59.

²² "...although the conception of duty implies subjection to the law, we yet ascribe a certain *dignity* and sublimity to the person who fulfills all his duties. There is not, indeed, any sublimity in him, so far as he is *subject* to the moral law; but inasmuch as in regard to that very law he is likewise a *legislator*, and on that account alone subject to it, he has sublimity. We have also shown above that neither fear nor inclination, but simply respect for the law, is the spring which can give actions a moral worth. Our own will, so far as we suppose it to act only under the condition that its maxims are potentially universal laws, this ideal will which is possible to us is the proper object of respect; and the dignity of humanity consists just in this capacity of being universally legislative, though with the condition that it is itself subject to this same legislation." *Kant's Critique*, 58-59.

²³ "What else then can freedom of the will be but autonomy, that is the property of the will to be a law to itself? But the proposition: The will is in every action a law to itself, only expresses the principle, to act on no other maxim than that which can also have as an object itself as a universal law. Now this is precisely the formula of the

...the theological foundation of ethico-judicial normativity...belongs to the essence of the norm itself...the norm, which regulates man's action *qua* man, must be absolute and transcendent: (a) *absolute*, because it must be rooted in his spiritual nature in such a way as to be incapable of direct subordination to any empirical or finite end; (b) *transcendent*, both because it must be able to claim independence of action before one's equals (the non-subordinatability of the person), and because it must comprehend both the exterior and the interior, law and morality, individual and social relations, etc. This is possible only when one posits the Absolute as the original source and ultimate foundation of the norm, an Absolute also posited as transcendent and a Person endowed with fullness of life. It is in metaphysics, then, that man finds meaning for his being.²⁴

This brings us to our conclusion.

III. Why is a theistic metaphysical foundation necessary for ethics?

As Fabro has just hinted at, a theistic metaphysical foundation of ethics is necessary for safeguarding man's true transcendence. Without such, the moral problem of man will subject him to enslavement within his own historical circumstance. I will let the master speak for himself,

Here, then, is the metaphysical and theological moment: certainly, human nature too can be presented to individuals as an "absolute," but it is a "limited-absolute": on its own, if it does not proceed from and refer to an infinite Absolute, this finite absolute also vanishes. Left on its own, this particular absoluteness dissolves with the development of individuals and of positive institutions. In a metaphysical sense, humanity without God is reduced to a formal abstraction since then the only valid and effectual humanity would be one which succeeds in establishing itself in the passing historical moment: its essence would be subject to all of the vicissitudes of history, caught up in its whirlwind, at the mercy of power, politics, aristocratic, cultural, and industrial networks, etc.; reduced, in Kierkegaard's words, "to what others think"...If, on the other hand, humanity has a metaphysical foundation, it then claims for itself and for the individual a content of eternal and unchanging value; in this case he is an essence which comes from beyond this world and transcends it, which is preserved intact by the bond it maintains with its origin, and which does not follow the wagon of time and its changing fortunes, but judges them. Here the metaphysical foundation of humanity does not concern so much or only that which man will be one day, after this life, but first and foremost that *which man can and must be today*, in time, so as to then pass on to the next life.²⁵

categorical imperative and is the principle of morality, so that a free will and a will subject to moral laws are one and the same." *Kant's Critique*, 65-66.

²⁴ *God: An Introduction*, 142.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 143. Emphasis mine.

That “which man can and must be today” involves his freedom, his free actions, and necessitates an ethics built on a realist and transcendental metaphysics.

“Great truths can only be forgotten and can never be falsified,” writes Chesterton.²⁶ The great truth of ethics was lost to modern philosophy when it lost its principles. Only by returning to a metaphysical and theological foundation can we rebuild a true ethics from the rubble of its modern demise.

²⁶ *Illustrated London News*, September 30, 1933.

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