

Faith is the Light of the Soul¹

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Introduction

This volume of *Quaestiones Disputatae* centers on the question of whether morality must be grounded in God. One might ask this question with regard to moral theory; that is, can a purely secular ethics ultimately be coherent? Can a purely secular ethics explain not only the content of moral norms, but also the existence of those norms?

One might ask this question, not about ethical theory, but also about the realities of the moral life, which the theories are supposed to explain. Then the question could be restated in another way: does the moral perfection of the human person presuppose divine assistance? Christian tradition has answered this question in the affirmative: man needs the assistance of God both to know the nature of his ultimate end and to reach it. It is impossible for man to become perfected as a moral agent without the assistance of grace. This is not a point, however, I shall attempt to demonstrate, either philosophically or theologically, in this paper. Rather, I shall assume that the tradition is correct about this, and see what follows for the practical reasoning of the believer.

It will be helpful to begin with an example, taken from Athanasius's *Life of St. Antony*. Athanasius tells us that shortly after the death of his parents, Antony was walking to church one day, thinking about how the Apostles left everything to follow Christ and how, in the Acts of the Apostles, the faithful sold their possessions and laid the proceeds at the Apostles' feet.

With these thoughts in his mind he entered the church. And it so happened that the Gospel was being read at that moment and he heard the passage in which the Lord says to the rich man: *If thou wilt be perfect, go sell all that thou hast, and give it to the poor; and come,*

¹“Pseudo-Chrys. Or whence the day springs, thence came the first-fruits of the faith; for faith is the light of the soul. Therefore they [the Magi] came from the East...” (Aquinas, *Catena aurea in Matthaeum*, cap. 2, lect. 1. *Catena Aurea: Commentary on the Four Gospels Collected out of the Works of the Fathers*, trans. and ed. John Henry Newman, vol. 1, *St. Matthew, Part I* [Albany, NY: Preserving Christian Publications, 1993], 63).

follow me and thou shalt have treasure in Heaven. As though God had put him in mind of the saints and as though the reading had been directed especially to him, Antony immediately left the church and gave to the townspeople the property he had from his forebears—three hundred *arurae* [about 207 acres], very fertile and beautiful to see. He did not want it to encumber himself or his sister in any way whatever. He sold all the rest, the chattels they had, and gave the tidy sum he received to the poor, keeping back only a little for his sister.²

Having heard the Gospel and believed, Antony judged that he ought to sell his possessions in order more perfectly to follow Christ. On the surface, this seems rather straightforward. Antony believed in the truth of the Gospel, and the Gospel contains a teaching about voluntary poverty as an efficacious means to entering the Kingdom of God: that is, to salvation and beatitude. So Antony embraced voluntary poverty. However, reflection on the nature of faith and of practical reasoning immediately raises some difficulties.

Faith differs from other sorts of human knowledge. What is known through faith is not known by the exercise of human intellect, but is known by a divinely-infused habit by which man shares in God's own knowledge of Himself.³ The person who assents to this divine gift truly knows what he knows but does not have intellectual vision of what he knows. Although he does not see, he must still act on his knowledge, for what he knows is not irrelevant to how he lives.

Good human action requires the exercise of practical reasoning, which according to Aristotle's well-known discussion in book three of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, can be understood as the product of both universal and particular knowledge. For example, knowledge of the universal, "lying is evil," together with knowledge of the particular, "to say these words would be to lie," leads to the conclusion, "to say these words would be evil." This sort of reasoning is similar to the syllogizing of speculative reasoning, but differs in that it reasons about contingent and not necessary matters. This bears on intellect's relation to the conclusion of reasoning, as Thomas Aquinas points out in his commentary on book three of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

² Athanasius, *The Life of Saint Antony*, c. 2, trans. Robert T. Meyer, Ancient Christian Writers 10 (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1950): 19–20.

³ The first seven questions of the *Summa Theologiae* II-II deal with the nature of faith. The first question, on the object of faith, is particularly relevant. In the first article of this question, Thomas defines the formal object of faith as first truth, *veritas prima*, which is God. Everything believed by faith is believed by means of its being revealed by God. As the formal object of a science is that by means of which the conclusions are known, so the formal object of faith is God.

A conclusion of practical reasoning does not command the assent of the intellect in the way that the product of speculative demonstration does. In the latter, we see that it cannot be otherwise, and so long as we attend to the syllogism, we cannot withhold assent. The former, however, deals with contingent things, so that “a man has it in his power to assent to one or the other of contradictory propositions, as happens in all matters of opinion, and most of all in human actions, in which there are many attending factors, according to which someone may judge something to be good or not.”²⁴ In the example noted above, if one attends more to the circumstances of this particular speech act (for example, the untrustworthiness of the listener and his intention to misuse the speaker’s words), and less to the signification of the words themselves, the act may appear in a different light, no longer as a lie but as protection of the innocent. Such deliberation seems to presuppose a grasp of the universals that are being applied. How else would we determine which universal to apply to a given set of particulars? But when the universal is known by faith, and therefore not “seen” by the human agent, how can the agent determine when and how to apply it?

Let us return to the example of Antony. The evangelical counsels are perhaps so familiar that we might fail to see that the act of alienating all one’s goods is not easily reduced to an instance of pursuing good. One does not need faith to know that perfection requires detachment from evil, for instance from the excessive pursuit of wealth. One may further grasp, on the basis of natural reasoning, that even good and necessary things must sometimes be sacrificed for a greater good, and that it is reasonable to suffer a smaller loss to obtain a greater good. None of this, however, is sufficient to show the reasonability of evangelical poverty in general, nor to guide the application of this general counsel to one’s own particular circumstances.

As Pascal argues, it is reasonable to suffer any finite loss (including the loss of all one’s temporal goods) for an infinite gain (heaven). If, however, something can only be an object of appetite if it is somehow perceived, and if the good in question is nothing less than union with God, then desire for this infinite gain itself depends on divine revelation. Moreover, it would not be enough to see in general the reasonableness of voluntary poverty, in order to see that this particular act of alienation is to be done. It is also good

²⁴“Sed quia operabilia sunt contingentia, non cogitur ratio ad assentiendum huic vel illi, sicut accidit in demonstrativis: sed in potestate habet homo, quod assentiat uni vel alii parti contradictionis; sicut accidit in omnibus opinabilibus, et maxime circa operabilia in quibus plurima attenduntur, secundum quorum quodlibet aliquid potest iudicari bonum” (Aquinas, *Sententia libri Ethicorum*, lib. 3, lect. 13, n. 4, in *Corpus Thomisticum: S. Thomae de Aquino Opera Omnia*, collected and edited by Enrique Alarcón [Universidad de Navarra, 2000], www.corpusthomicum.org). Unless otherwise noted, translations from the works of St. Thomas are my own.

in general to give alms, to build a hospital, or to care for one's family, all of which can be accomplished only by retaining one's goods.

How did Antony arrive at the conclusion that the words from the Gospel applied to him in this way at this time? Surely this was not the first time he had heard this passage, and many others who heard it that day did not apply it to themselves in the same way. One needs to know not only a universal, but to attend to that knowledge in such a way that one brings it to bear on a particular action and that one attends now to this universal rather than to another.

Perhaps Antony's judgment that he ought to sell all his goods was simply a decision to obey an incomprehensible divine counsel. This sort of obedience, however, seems dangerous.

It is dangerous for a man to assent to things about which he is unable to judge whether that which is proposed be true or false.... But this kind of judgment is impossible for a man to make in matters of faith, for he cannot resolve [the things believed] into first principles, through which we judge about everything. Therefore it is dangerous to use faith in such matters.⁵

So runs an objection from the second question (article 3) of the *Secunda secundae*, which addresses the question about whether faith is required for salvation. The objection concludes that it is unnecessary for salvation to assent to anything that goes beyond human reason. We should note that the argument is also open to a fideist conclusion: one should just believe, and not make judgments. Both of these conclusions are unacceptable, not only doctrinally, but also phenomenologically. They simply do not account for the reality of the Christian life.

If faith were no more than true opinion, then the objection would have to be granted. It is dangerous to make an important decision on the basis of mere opinion. For example, an eighteen-year-old student who has formed an opinion of what it would be like to be a doctor may make an initial decision to take the courses required for admission to medical school. The medical profession seems to him an exciting, idealistic, romantic profession, a view based perhaps on the viewing of hospital television dramas. No doubt many initial vocational decisions are made on the basis of opinion. If someone went no further toward real knowledge of what the practice of medicine

⁵ "...periculose homo assentit illis in quibus non potest iudicare utrum illud quod ei proponitur sit verum vel falsum.... Sed tale iudicium homo habere non potest in his quae sunt fidei, quia non potest homo ea resolvere in principia prima, per quae de omnibus iudicamus. Ergo periculosum est talibus fidem adhibere" (Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 2, art. 3, obj. 2 [Ottawa: Dominican College, 1942]).

is like before taking out massive loans to support his medical education, he would be acting imprudently. But although the student cannot know through himself (that is, through reflection on his own experience) that the medical profession is a good fit for him, he can know this through another. The student may consult someone who knows both the student's character and aptitudes as well as the nature of the medical profession. This mentor is in the position of either confirming or correcting the student's initial judgment. The student who thus shares in the mentor's superior knowledge does not know for himself that his choice is a reasonable one. He does not know for himself because the principle or source of his knowledge is not in him, but in another. Yet the student has something more than opinion. His decision based on the mentor's reliable knowledge is not imprudent, as decision based on mere opinion would be. Having received and embraced the mentor's counsel, the student has a sort of participated practical knowledge, placing him in a state somewhere between opinion and practical wisdom.

Similarly, if St. Antony's act had been based on opinion, it would have been imprudent. But it does not appear to be the act of an imprudent man. Even as he gave away his substantial inheritance, Antony set something aside for the care of his dependent sister, which seems to be the work of practical wisdom. If, on the other hand, Antony was acting on his own practical reasoning alone, then his judgment would not have needed the gradual correction it received, as we read in the next chapter of Athanasius's *vita*:

But once again as he entered the church, he heard the Lord saying in the Gospel: *Be not solicitous for the morrow*. He could not bear to wait longer, but went out and distributed those things also [i.e., the money he had set aside for care of his sister] to the poor. His sister he placed with known and trusted virgins, giving her to the nuns to be brought up. Then he himself devoted all his time to ascetic living, intent on himself and living a life of self-denial, near his own house.⁶

Faith, according to Thomas Aquinas, is neither opinion nor science but a kind of mean between the two.⁷ The one who knows by faith does not simply opine; he knows with certainty. Yet the principle or source of his knowledge is not himself, but another. Faith is a participated knowledge. This point will help us to understand how faith relates to practical judgments.

⁶ Athanasius, *Life of Saint Antony*, c. 3 (p. 20).

⁷ "Fides est media inter scientiam et opinionem" (Aquinas, *ST II-II*, q. 1, art. 2, s.c.).

The Light of Habit

Let us return to the objection that it is dangerous to assent to things about which we are unable to judge. In his response to that objection, Thomas says:

As a man through the natural light of the intellect assents to principles, so also the virtuous man through the habit of virtue makes a correct judgment about those things which pertain to that virtue. And also in this way man assents to the things that pertain to faith, and not to their contraries, through the light of faith divinely infused into him.⁸

The reply directs us to the moral virtues as a model for understanding the mode by which the believer knows what he knows.

In the case of moral virtue, it is not simply that the virtuous man acts correctly through the habit of virtue—though this must be the case—but that he judges correctly through the virtue. As a man is, so does the end seem to him, and so does he judge about the means to that end. It is because he is courageous that the courageous man judges correctly that this enemy is now to be fought. He does not arrive at this conclusion through a process of abstract reasoning, but by a kind of instinct. Thus he may be unable to explain to others how he arrived at the conclusion that this enemy is to be fought. Virtue takes the place of science here, arriving with ease and certainty at the conclusion, but according to a different mode.⁹

It is not easy to understand what it means to say that a virtuous man judges through the habit of virtue, but it does seem to fit the facts. A virtuous person may not be able to explain why in such and such a circumstance, he ought to have done as he did. The virtuous man does the right thing with ease, and he knows that he is doing the right thing, and that he is doing it because it is right; yet when pressed to explain how he arrived at the conclusion that this was the right thing to do, he may simply say, “I just did what anyone in my position would have done.”

⁸ “...sicut homo per naturale lumen intellectus assentit principiis, ita homo virtuosus per habitum virtutis habet rectum iudicium de his quae conveniunt virtuti illi. Et hoc modo etiam per lumen fidei divinitus infusum homini homo assentit his quae sunt fidei, non autem contrariis” (Aquinas, *ST* II-II, q. 2, art. 3, ad 2).

⁹ This is not to say that the virtuous man does not need to deliberate. I am grateful to Patrick Gardner for pointing this out to me. The science of morals must be distinguished from practical wisdom, which includes good deliberation. The latter is not a speculative habit of mind. It is not concerned primarily with universal propositions or with demonstrations, but with actions.

The light of faith, it seems, acts in something like this way.¹⁰ The habit of faith, like a moral virtue, stands in place of scientific reasoning. A man judges correctly about those things that are to be believed because he believes. A judgment is produced, not in the syllogistic mode by which it is produced when the principles are apprehended, but by a sort of instinct, which is like the instinct that the virtuous man has through the habit of his virtue. The instinct does not give the believer vision, any more than virtue gives the virtuous man science, but it does enable him to move toward his perfection in accord with divine reason.

In our earlier example of the medical student, we saw that the mentor is able to share his knowledge with the student, not only by instruction, but also by what can best be described as participation. Our example dealt with making a vocational decision, dependent on many contingencies. To receive the judgment of someone else in such a matter largely depends on trust. The student, insofar as he trusts the judgment of the mentor, shares in the practical wisdom of another.¹¹ The mentor cannot show his reasoning to the student in such a way that the student necessarily assents to the conclusion that “I should pursue medicine.” This need not indicate any lack in the reasoning powers of the mentor, but simply the contingent nature of the matter. “And so we must attend to the undemonstrated remarks and beliefs of experienced and older people or of prudent people, no less than to demonstrations,” Aristotle says, “For these people see correctly because experience has given them their eye.”¹²

In what I have referred to as participated knowledge, we must admit of degrees. The participant knows what the primary knower knows to the extent that he trusts him to be a good judge in the matter in question, and insofar as the primary knower is able to communicate his judgment without misunderstanding. And of course, the participated knowledge is only knowledge to the extent that the primary knower truly knows, and does not simply opine. With regard to human knowers, participated knowledge will always fail in one of these ways. Moreover, participated knowledge remains inferior to knowledge that one has of oneself, for it can only extend as far as the primary knower chooses to reveal his knowledge.

Now faith itself is a participated knowledge; by this supernatural habit man shares in divine self-knowledge, as was said above. God knows Himself and in knowing Himself knows His creation. What if, in addition to

¹⁰ It should be kept in mind that the light of faith and the light of reason are from the same source. They are both participations in the one divine mind, the source of intelligibility.

¹¹ On counsel as an act of the virtue of prudence, see *ST II-II*, q. 47 and 51.

¹² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 6.11.1143b13–14 in Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1999), 96.

the virtue of faith, a believer were to be given a participation in divine knowledge of what he should do in particular situations (a share in the practical wisdom of God, as it were)? This is exactly what is necessary in order for the believer to direct his acts unfailingly toward his ultimate end. This participation corresponds to one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the gift of counsel.

The Gifts

Thomas defines the gifts of the Holy Spirit in general as “certain dispositions by which the soul is well disposed to be moved by the Holy Spirit.”¹³ These, Thomas maintains, are necessary in addition to infused virtues, because reason itself is insufficient for the perfection of man in the life of grace.¹⁴ “And such perfections are called gifts,” he says, “not only because they are infused by God, but because by them a man is disposed to be moved promptly by divine inspiration.”¹⁵ These persons who are moved by divine inspiration or an “interior instinct” are “moved by a principle better than human reason.”¹⁶ The gifts are necessary because human thought cannot operate discursively on the principles of faith as it can on principles that it apprehends through its own power. In the gifts, the recipient is passive, insofar as he is like the material cause to the divine agency.¹⁷ Yet the human agent is not purely passive, as matter itself is, but acts by “receiving an influx from God’s agency.”¹⁸

Two of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit are understood by Thomas to perfect the habit of faith: understanding (*intellectus*) and knowledge (*scientia*), but the gift most directly relevant to practical reasoning is the gift of counsel (*consilium*). The gift of counsel perfects the habit of prudence,¹⁹ such

¹³ “...quaedam dispositiones quibus anima redditur bene mobilis a Spiritu Sancto” (Aquinas, *ST* II-II, q. 52, art. 1).

¹⁴ Stephen Long, “The Gifts of the Holy Spirit and the Moral Life,” *Nova et Vetera* 11, no. 2 (2013): 368–69.

¹⁵ “Et istae perfectiones vocantur dona, non solum quia infunduntur a Deo; sed quia secundum ea homo disponitur ut efficiatur prompte mobilis ab inspiratione divina” (Aquinas, *ST* I-II, q. 68, art. 1).

¹⁶ “Et philosophus etiam dicit, in cap. de bona fortuna [Ethic. Eudem. vii, 8], quod his qui moventur per instinctum divinum, non expedit consilium secundum rationem humanam, sed quod sequantur interiorem instinctum, quia moventur a meliori principio quam sit ratio humana” (ibid.).

¹⁷ Aquinas, *ST* II-II, q. 1, art. 7, ad 3.

¹⁸ “In manifestatione autem fidei Deus est sicut agens, qui habet perfectam scientiam ab aeterno; homo autem est sicut materia recipiens influxum Dei agentis” (ibid.).

¹⁹ “Unde donum consilii respondet prudentiae, sicut ipsam adiuvens et perficiens” (Aquinas, *ST* II-II, q. 52, art. 2).

that the human mind is “ruled and moved by the Holy Spirit.”²⁰ Since, in receiving from the Holy Spirit, the human mind is as the thing moved to the mover, the gift perfective of prudence corresponds more to the act of taking counsel than to judgment or command.²¹ However, as noted above, man is not purely passive in receiving divine counsel. In the gift of counsel, the human intellect is a moved mover, and it does not cease to move or act because it is moved by the Holy Spirit; quite the reverse, it is empowered to act: “from being directed by the Holy Spirit, the human mind becomes able to direct itself and others.”²²

Man needs the counsel of the Holy Spirit about things to be done not because faith implies a new first principle of practical reasoning, but because “human reason is unable to comprehend all the singular and contingent things which may occur.”²³ By the direction from the Holy Spirit, “the anxiety of doubt is calmed,”²⁴ and deliberation is replaced with certitude. This is not the certitude obtained through perceiving that a conclusion follows necessarily from premises, or reducing a precept to the first principle of practical reason. It is rather a participation in divine certitude, which comes through an “interior instinct”²⁵ prompting the practical intellect to assent.

We have been using as an example Antony’s decision to sell all his property and give the proceeds to the poor, and it is appropriate that the gift of counsel be considered in the context of the evangelical counsels. But it should be noted that the gift of counsel is not limited to these sorts of examples. However, in cases where there is no doubt about what one ought to do, there seems no need for divine counsel, though there may be need for another gift, fortitude. Insofar as fear threatens the integrity of our practical reasoning, we need the gift of fortitude to reason clearly about what is to be done.²⁶

²⁰ “regulatur et movetur a spiritu sancto” (Aquinas, *ST* II-II, q. 52, art. 2, ad 1).

²¹ *Ibid.*, obj. 1 and ad 1. There is no gift corresponding specifically to judgment or command.

²² “mens humana ex hoc ipso quod dirigitur a Spiritu Sancto, fit potens dirigere se et alios” (*ibid.*, q. 2, ad 3).

²³ “humana ratio non potest comprehendere singularia et contingentia quae occurrere possunt” (*ibid.*, q. 1, ad 1).

²⁴ “sedatur anxietas dubitationis” (*ibid.*, 3).

²⁵ See Aquinas, *ST* I-II, q. 68, art. 1, quoted in n. 15 above.

²⁶ On fear as a threat to practical reasoning, see Thomas Hibbs, “The Fearful Thoughts of Mortals: Aquinas on Conflict, Self-Knowledge, and the Virtues of Practical Reasoning,” chap. 9 in *Intractable Disputes About the Natural Law: Alasdair MacIntyre and Critics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 298–99.

Conclusion

In answer to our initial question, the moral judgments of the believer can be grounded in faith, but in this grounding, faith works in a way more like a habit of character than a habit of thought; that is, by a kind of interior instinct rather than by ratiocination. This allows us to return once more to the example of Antony with additional insight.

We note first about Athanasius's account that Antony's decision was preceded by his pondering over the words of scripture on his way to church. Deliberating within himself, Antony is attracted by the apostolic life, but not sure if he can or should follow a similar course. His pondering, like that of Mary, who "treasured all these things in her heart,"²⁷ suggests a habitual disposition to receive the guidance of the Holy Spirit, whenever it should be given. That Antony had this disposition is evident in what happens.

Antony, hearing the Gospel preached as he entered the church, was moved promptly to put into action what he has heard. The promptness especially indicates the movement of the Holy Spirit. Antony was moved to act by a principle "better than human reason," and this interior inspiration gave him the certainty he lacked before. There was no need for further deliberation about whether the thing was to be done, but only how. Thus, Antony did not cease to exercise his own reason as he participated in the reason of another. Yet since the inspiration was received as a gift, and not as the result of his own reasoning, Antony remained open to receiving further illumination and correction of his interpretation of the previous insight. In fact, it is only through the willing acceptance and use of the first instinct that he is open to receiving the second. This disposition of continued and ever-expanding openness to the gift of counsel and to all the other inspirations of the Holy Spirit is what we see in the lives of all saints, and the very means by which their sanctity is achieved.²⁸

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²⁷ Lk 2:51 (RSV).

²⁸ This paper differs significantly from the original presentation on which it is based. It has benefitted greatly from the thoughtful critiques of Sister Mary Angelica, O.P., Patrick Gardner, and Michael Krom.