Anyone interested in learning how various Church teachings in the realm of morality are shaped, especially *Humanae vitae* junkies like me, will enjoy *John Cuthbert Ford, S.J.: Moral Theologian at the End of the Manualist Era*. This book is an analysis of the thought of Ford, one of the most influential American moralists of the last century.

Ford is best known for his classic article of 1944 explaining why obliteration bombing is immoral. His work on alcoholism was also seminal; a recovering alcoholic himself, he greatly assisted Bill Wilson in formulating the principles for Alcoholics Anonymous to be consistent with Catholic thought but not distinctively Catholic. His publications with Gerald Kelly, S.J., on medical moral issues and marriage and family matters were standard works in the middle of the last century. He began the feature “Notes on Moral Theology” in *Theological Studies*, which for many decades has not only reported on developments in moral theology but greatly influenced those developments.

The subtitle of the book is tantalizing and apt. Ford was trained in the manualist tradition, a tradition of moral theology that used casuistry to help priests in the confessional. Confessors needed guidance in determining what actions are mortally sinful, which venially sinful, and even in respect to some issues, what actions are sinful and which not. Genilo identifies two types of casuistry, high and low. High casuistry, said to have flourished from 1556 to 1656, involved a use of the deductive application of principles to issues.

Genilo finds that Ford used high casuistry in writing about what Genilo calls “standard cases” and low casuistry in dealing with “crisis cases.” I find Genilo’s taxonomy of Ford’s practice to be forced; the division could as easily be that Ford used high casuistry (which Genilo likes) in regard to the issues with which Genilo is in agreement with Ford, and that Ford used low casuistry (which Genilo does not like) in regard to the primary issue concerning which Genilo disagrees with Ford—that issue is contraception.

Ford made constant use of probabilism, another feature of the manuals. This is the practice of attempting to determine the status of a particular theological view and how free individuals were to act when the magisterium had not yet spoken on an issue or when the magisterium had not spoken authoritatively or infallibly on an issue. He was very attentive to the “theological note” that various teachings had; by paying particular attention to language and context, he worked to establish which teachings were provoked by particular historical situations and which transcended time and place. For instance, Pius XII approved of the sterilization of criminals, although Pius XI in *Casti connubii* had seemed to condemn all sterilizations. Ford did not find this to be a change in teaching but a clarification.

The book is marvelous in that it shows Ford’s patient, respectful, and occasionally critical engagement with the magisterium. Sometimes his reasoning prevailed and
sometimes it did not. The book reports on several “adjustments” to Church teaching that Ford influenced. For instance, Pius XII clearly instructed that Catholics were not permitted to opt out of legitimately declared wars on the basis of conscientious objection. Ford adroitly led the U.S. bishops not to adopt that position; he made some key qualifications on the basis of the obligation not to participate in unjust wars. Eventually, the Church became a strong advocate of conscientious objection and freedom of conscience in many realms. Ford’s arguments also prevailed over a statement of the Holy Office that a husband could not morally engage in sexual intercourse with a contracepting wife. One issue on which he did not prevail was on the question of the morality of removing a uterus judged to be incapable of sustaining a future pregnancy. Eventually the Vatican decided that it is moral to remove only a uterus that in itself is pathological without reference to future pregnancies.

Genilo had access to Ford’s private papers and letters and discovered gems there, many of them in reference to the years preceding Humanae vitae. Genilo has considerable respect for his subject, but an author who shared Ford’s fidelity to the magisterium would have written a very different book. Genilo reports on Ford’s remarkable efforts to guide Pope Paul VI in weathering the storm stirred up by the Pontifical Commission for the Study of Population, Family and Births, of which Ford was a member. Created in 1963 by Pope John XXIII and enlarged by Pope Paul VI, the commission met from 1964 to 1966. Genilo finds Ford to have been inappropriately interventionist and sadly inflexible. Seen through a different lens, his actions were heroic, and it is regrettable that Pope Paul VI did not follow Ford’s wise advice.

Ford worked behind the scenes to alert Pope Paul VI that the commission had decided to consider the question of the reformability of the Church’s teaching on contraception. Ford realized that theologians and the public were in danger of thinking that they were free to reject the Church’s teaching on contraception. He had multiple meetings with Paul VI to try to persuade him to make a strong public statement that the Church’s teaching on contraception was not under review nor could it be; it was an authentic, irrefutable, and, in fact, infallible teaching of the Church. It was Ford who counseled the Holy Father to shore up the footnotes of Gaudium et spes, although his recommended interventions were seriously modified by the Special Commission to weaken the force of Ford’s intention. Pope Paul VI might have saved the Church a world of grief had he followed Ford’s prescient counsel.

Ford tried to shore up the Church in the aftermath of Humanae vitae. Patrick Cardinal O’Boyle, Archbishop of Washington, delegated him to meet with the priests whom O’Boyle had suspended because of their dissent from Humanae vitae. Ford noted that the priests seemed to have completely closed minds in respect to the encyclical. Genilo notes that Ford was equally closed to the possibility of change in Church teaching. Let me note that Genilo seems closed to the possibility that Ford was on the winning side of this issue, both theologically and ecclesiastically.

Ironically, it was Ford who secured a place for John Noonan on the commission. Ford knew of Noonan’s support for a change in the Church’s teaching on contraception but wanted the commission to have the best possible understanding of the history of the Church’s teaching. Genilo pits Ford against Noonan in their understanding of the development of doctrine and clearly prefers Noonan’s understanding that the Church has unfailingly taught certain values in respect to procreation which would not be undermined by permitting contraception. Again, those who concur in Ford’s understanding that one of those values constantly taught is the wrongness of contraception will find Ford a more accurate interpreter of the tradition than Noonan.

Genilo has a curious chapter in which he compares Ford’s involvement in the Special Commission to that of Fr. Joseph Fuchs, S.J. Prior to the Special Commission, Fuchs was an eminent expositor of natural law and a strong supporter of the Church’s power to interpret natural law. He began his work on the Commission as a defender of the Church’s
teaching on contraception but underwent a fairly sudden conversion after listening to the testimony of spouses about how damaging the practise of rhythm was to their marriages. Fuchs came to reject the Church as an authority on moral matters and moved to trusting the consciences of spouses to decide the morality of actions.

Genilo reports that Ford had a very sophisticated and enlightened position on the need for confessors to respect the assessments of alcoholics on how much their own behavior was driven by uncontrollable compulsions. Genilo argues that openness to the judgments of individuals should have led Ford to follow the path of Fuchs in honoring individual consciences above Church teaching. Indeed, Ford was a fierce defender of the rights of conscience, even erroneous conscience, but he never exalted individual conscience over Church teaching.

On the matter of contraception, Ford insisted that the unbroken universal condemnation of contraception in Church history indicated that the teaching was irrefutable; he also warned that a lifting of the condemnation of contraception would have severely negative consequences and would lead to the approval of fornication, masturbation, and homosexuality, for instance. Genilo gives no indication that the last forty years of a contraceptive culture and the preponderance of theological writings of the last forty years have verified Ford’s concerns. Indeed, someone who is unaware that Humanae vitae confirmed the Church’s teaching on contraception and unaware that Pope John Paul II was a resolute defender of the teaching might well come away from this book thinking that Ford lost the battle on contraception and Fuchs won. Have the Jesuits become a ghetto so cut off from the Church that this is the prevailing view in the Society?

Genilo finds it frustrating and inconsistent that Ford was willing to challenge the magisterium on various issues, but was resolute in his defense of the Church’s teaching on contraception. He seems to think some curious intractable loyalty to the papacy kicked in on this particular issue. He goes to some length to show how flexible Ford was on another issue—that of the morality of periodic continence—and accuses Ford of inconsistency in accepting that the Church could reject St. Augustine’s highly influential disapproval of periodic continence and accept the eventual approval of it by Pius XII. Genilo never acknowledges that the teaching against contraception had a status on a high magisterial level never shared by the teaching on periodic continence.

Indicative of Genilo’s sometimes distorted interpretation of Ford’s approach is his accusation that Ford was guilty of “physicalism” for wanting to know the most modern information on male and female physiology before determining whether men who had had double vasectomies were impotent and thus not eligible for marriage and what use of hormones might be permitted to regularize a woman’s cycle. One more inclined to approve of Ford might laud him for his openness and his determination to let scientific truth be a decisive factor in moral judgments.

Genilo characterizes Ford as being closed to ecumenism because he refused to continue to teach at Weston when it merged with the theology faculty of other denominations. Yet is Ford to be faulted for thinking that authentic ecumenism does not mean that Catholic seminarians should receive their theological education from those who have rejected Catholicism?

In the final pages of the book, Genilo writes admiringly of Ford’s scholarly and personal efforts to protect the rights of the “vulnerable”: he devoted years of his life to counseling alcoholics and came to the defense of others whose rights were endangered.

Let me take up a side issue here in respect to Ford and casuistry. The work of Servais Pinckaers and others have raised questions about the casuistry of the manuals. Pinckaers argued that the manuals terribly distorted moral theology. Genilo notes that Ford found the manuals to be deficient for presenting a full picture of moral theology and himself tried to remedy some of their flaws, particularly in emphasizing the virtues. Among the most serious flaws of the manuals identified by Pinckaers were their affinity with the nominalists in viewing God’s laws as
arbitrary impositions. Ford did not share that view; he was a traditional natural law theorist who believed a good God created a good universe with laws reflecting his loving will. Certainly Ford had an enormous respect for conscience, but he maintained that Catholics should form their consciences in accord with Church teaching and obey that teaching.

I am among those who agree with Pinckers that the manualist tradition was flawed in ways, but I also believe it had strengths and, indeed, that bioethics cannot function without casuistry, both the use of paradigm cases to help determine the morality of new issues and the use of probabilism to guide individuals when no authoritative teaching of the magisterium is available. I believe Ford's careful work shows how both are necessary and, when practiced with a true fidelity to the magisterium, are immensely beneficial to individuals and to the magisterium.

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The Perspective of the Acting Person: 
Essays in the Renewal of Thomistic Moral Philosophy

by Martin Rhonheimer

367 pp., bibliographic notes and index, $39.95

Every so often, a book or collection of essays comes along that shifts a field in an entirely new direction. The ideas defended in such collections truly liberate one's mind from the perfunctory discussions preceding it. Examples from my own background and training include Linda Zagzebski's Virtues of the Mind: An Inquiry into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge, Alvin Plantinga's Naturalism Defeated? Essays on Plantinga's Evolutionary Argument against Naturalism and, closer to the field in which the NCBQ is situated, Eleonore Stump's Aquinas: Arguments of the Philosophers. I can add to this list Rhonheimer's work and especially the collection of essays under review here, edited and introduced by William F. Murphy Jr.

In this collection Rhonheimer tackles several errors manifested in somewhat recent moral theology. The three errors are: (1) the reduction of "natural law" to a law of nature, (2) the reduction of the moral act to a physical act, and (3) the idea that if one's intention indexes or en-forms the moral act, then moral realism is impugned. To be brief, and thus to avoid Rhonheimer's own nuances, his responses are roughly as follows.

To the first error, Rhonheimer argues that the natural law is 'human reason itself' because it commands us to do good and forbids us to sin. The natural law, therefore, is specifically practical reason, and, in more precise terms, the set of determined judgments of practical reason—those judgments, that is to say, that naturally make us do good and flee from evil. (164)

Natural law is not nature, as in physical biological nature. Reason does not "read off" from nature "out there," and determine what is good. Natural law, rather, is practical reason measuring human acts.

To the second, Rhonheimer argues persuasively that a human act cannot be reduced to a physical description of the act. In order to have a human act, a good must be apprehended by reason, and reason then commands the will to pursue the good. A moral act, then, must include what reason proposes as a good. Rhonheimer uses an illustrative example concerning theft. Consider two cases, one in which a magician surreptitiously removes the watch from an onlooker, and the other in which a thief surreptitiously removes the watch of an onlooker. Both are the same act.