Practical Truth and Its First Principles in the Theory of Grisez, Boyle, and Finnis

Rev. Stephen L. Brock

Abstract. This article offers an exposition and critical discussion of the account of the truth of practical reason in the natural-law theory of Germain Grisez, Joseph Boyle, and John Finnis. The exposition rests mainly on an article published by these authors in 1987. There they argue that “true” is said of theoretical and practical knowledge in radically diverse senses. They also distinguish, within practical knowledge, between two kinds of truth, practical and moral. This distinction is tied to their understanding of relations that obtain among the first principles of practical reason. The essay’s critical discussion raises problems for the account in all three areas and favors the view that “true” means the same for all knowledge. National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly 15.2 (Summer 2015): 303–329.

A well-known feature of the natural-law theory that Germain Grisez, Joseph Boyle, and John Finnis have crafted is its insistence on a strong distinction between theoretical and practical reason. Theoretical reason, they say, concerns things that do not depend on its knowledge of them. It describes and explains the reality of its objects. Practical reason concerns things that depend on its knowledge of them. It prescribes and directs toward the reality of its objects. “Ought” cannot be reduced to “is.” Practical reason’s first principles, the precepts of natural law, are not theoretical

Rev. Stephen L. Brock, PhD, is a professor of medieval philosophy at the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross in Rome and a member of the Pontifical Academy of St. Thomas Aquinas. The author thanks Kevin Flannery and Steven Jensen for very helpful comments on a draft of this essay.
propositions, and they cannot be deduced or inferred from theoretical propositions. Knowing them does presuppose some experience and theoretical knowledge of the given world, but it cannot be reduced to that experience or that knowledge. And so on.

In the now decades-old debate about this theory, much of the discussion has centered on its way of distinguishing between theoretical and practical reason. However, there is one aspect of the topic that, to my knowledge, has received relatively little attention. This is the theory’s account of how theoretical and practical reason possess truth. Here the distinction could hardly be stronger. It is not just that theoretical and practical truth regard different matters and have different conditions. The very nature of truth, what it is to be true, differs.

In the first part of the present essay, I try to expound this difference. I also try to show how the theory’s account of the truth of practical reason is connected with its account of the first practical principles. My main source is a long article published jointly by Grisez, Boyle, and Finnis in 1987.¹ It contains what I believe to be their fullest treatment of the topic, and I am not aware of their having subsequently modified the treatment in any significant way. Occasionally I also refer to passages in other writings of theirs that help to elucidate specific points. In the second part of the essay, I offer a critical discussion of the account.

The Theory’s Account of the Truth of Practical Reason and of Its Principles

Theoretical Truth and Practical Truth

**Different Meanings of “Truth.”** According to our authors’ theory, the seat of both theoretical truth and practical truth is the same: mind or intellect. Both sorts of truth are ascribed to such things as judgments, knowledge, and propositions. Each of them also involves a certain relation of conformity between the mind and its objects. They differ, however, in the direction of the conformity.

Theoretical truth is the mind’s conformity to what it knows. It is the familiar *adaequatio intellectus ad rem*. The thing known is the measure of this truth. Practical truth, however, is not measured by what is known, but measures it. What it consists in is practical knowledge’s own aptitude to be that to which what is known conforms. In other words, “a practical proposition is true by anticipating the realization of that which is possible through acting in conformity with that proposition, and by directing one’s action toward that realization” (116).

The reason why the two kinds of truth involve opposite conformities is that the two kinds of knowledge have opposite relations of dependency and priority to their objects. Theoretical knowledge depends on the thing known. The thing’s reality is prior to it. By contrast, “what is known by practical knowledge has its reality, not

prior to that knowledge, but through it. In coming to know theoretically, one comes into accord with prior reality. But in coming to know practically, one becomes able to bring something into reality. It follows that practical knowledge cannot have its truth by conformity to what is known” (115–116).

Here it should be stressed that, as our authors see it, practical knowledge is a cause, not only of the actual realization of what is known, but also of its very possibility. “What human persons can be through their freedom and action depends on practical knowledge rather than vice versa, and so the adequation which is the truth of practical knowledge is not conformity to some already existing order” (117, original emphasis).

Of course, practical knowledge is not the only condition of the possibility of the realization of what it knows. That possibility also has prior, given conditions (116). But these are not sufficient. The possibility of what is known with practical knowledge, as such, is a function of the knowledge’s own aptitude to direct toward it. The possibility is, so to speak, given by practical reason, not to it. This does not mean that the possibility is the result of free decision or creative thinking. It starts from first practical principles, which we do not select or fashion (118). But it really starts there.

If the truth of practical propositions is not their conformity to what they are about, is it their conformity to something else? No. “Practical propositions, including first practical principles, are true by anticipating the fulfillment possible through action in conformity with them and directing action toward that realization; practical propositions are not true by conforming to anything” (116, emphasis added).

In short, “‘true’ is said in radically diverse senses of theoretical and practical knowledge” (117). Still, it is not purely equivocal; “‘truth’ is said of practical propositions by analogy” (116). And there is a basis in reality for the analogy. “For although the relationships between the human mind and its objects are opposite in the two cases, truth in either case means that both the human mind and its objects conform to the mind of God” (117).

Different Ways of Signifying Truth. Just as theoretical and practical propositions differ in what it is for them to be true, they also differ in how their truth is expressed or signified. “The truth of theoretical knowledge is in the conformity of propositions to prior reality, actual and possible. This truth is signified by ‘is’: So it is. The truth of practical knowledge, beginning with its self-evident principles, is not signified by ‘is’ but by ‘is to be’—for example, Good is to be done and pursued” (115, original emphasis). It is important to see how radical the difference between “is” and “is to be” is supposed to be. The 1987 article does not dwell much on this, but plenty of passages from other writings do. For instance, in the 1965 article that launched the theory, Grisez says this:

The principles of practical reason belong to a logical category quite different from that of theoretical statements: precepts do not inform us of requirements; they express requirements as directions for action. The point of saying that good is to be pursued is not that good is the sort of thing that has or is this peculiar property, obligatoriness. … The point rather is to issue the fundamental
directive of practical reason. “Is to be” is the copula of the first practical principle, not its predicate; the gerundive is the mode rather than the matter of law.²

Grisez calls “is to be” a gerundive because he is using it to render that Latin verb form. This form is used in St. Thomas Aquinas’s formulation of the first principle of practical reason: “Bonum est faciendum et proseguendum.” Grammarians usually classify the gerundive as a verbal participle, one that functions as an adjective. Grisez, however, calls it a “mode,” and evidently what he means is that it is a verbal mood, which functions properly as a verb. In the proposition “Good is to be pursued,” the verb is not “is.” That would be an indicative, by which “to be pursued” would be ascribed to the good as a property. The verb is “is to be.” Its force is not to ascribe “pursued” to the good, as a property that the good already has, but to order or direct toward the good’s having that property—toward the good’s being pursued.

Making the gerundive a mood puts it on a par with the indicative and the imperative. Putting it on a par with them also means dividing it from both of them, which is exactly what Grisez wants to do.³ A gerundive is not an imperative, because it does not convey any motive force derived from some antecedent act of the will. The first principles of practical reason do not presuppose any acts of the will. They direct the will’s very first acts. And a gerundive is not an indicative, because it does not describe or represent some reality, but rather prescribes and directs toward some reality.

Hence the gerundive proposition’s truth does not consist in its conformity to the reality or the being of the thing signified by its subject. The truth of an indicative proposition is such conformity, because its copula signifies the thing’s being as the predicate signifies. Through that copula, the indicative proposition presents itself as somehow describing the subject’s being. That is why, for this proposition, truth means the description’s accuracy, its conformity to the being of the thing described. But the copula of a gerundive proposition signifies an ordering toward the subject’s being as the predicate signifies. Through it, the proposition presents itself as somehow directing toward the subject’s being. By so doing, it anticipates the conformity of the subject’s being to it. And its truth just is this anticipation.

Now, our authors do acknowledge that practical truths can be expressed in theoretical form, with “is.” When they are so expressed, one can even derive an “ought” from an “is.” “Logically, of course, one can derive a moral ought from an is, whenever the is expresses a truth about a reality which embodies a moral norm. Thus, from ‘This is the act an honest person would do’ one can deduce ‘This act ought to be done.’ But from a set of theoretical premises, one cannot logically derive any practical truth, since sound reasoning does not introduce what is not in the premises” (102). But even though a practical truth can be expressed indicatively, in theoretical form, evidently this is only a secondary way of expressing it. Practical truth is a principle of practical reality and is embodied in it, and theoretical thought can reflect on that reality and form indicative propositions about it, using “is.” But

³ See ibid., 190–196.
the proper or primitive way of expressing a practical truth—not as it is embodied in some reality, but just in itself—is not by “is” but by “is to be.” And “‘is to be’ cannot be uniformly replaced by ‘is’” (116).

Our authors also acknowledge that what practical reason chiefly concerns, namely, the human good, can be considered in a purely theoretical way, with no practical implications. “In the practical principle that knowledge is a good to be pursued, ‘good’ is understood practically in the light of the first practical principle: Good is to be done and pursued. If ‘Knowledge is a good for man’ were understood theoretically, simply as a truth of metaphysical anthropology, then it would have no more normative implication than ‘Knowledge is good for angels’ has practical implication for us.”

This is important, I think, because it helps to avoid a possible misunderstanding about why practical truths cannot be derived from theoretical truths. It is not that practical judgments and theoretical judgments can never be expressed in the same terms. What is distinctive about practical reason is not the mere fact that it considers something as good or even as a human good. “Knowledge is a good for man” can be understood either practically or theoretically. The difference is in the sheer mode of understanding. Theoretical reason’s understanding is descriptive or representative. Practical reason’s understanding is prescriptive and directive. No matter how they are expressed, you cannot derive the practical mode from the theoretical.

The Three Levels of First Practical Principles

Up to here my focus has been on the theory’s understanding of the difference between theoretical truth and practical truth. The theory’s complete account of how truth belongs to practical reason, however, also includes a third kind of truth. This is called “moral truth.” To understand what this is and how it relates to practical truth, however, we must first go into the theory’s account of the first principles of practical reason, the precepts of natural law.

These precepts are practical propositions that are naturally understood by human reason. They are not derived or deduced from any other propositions, practical or theoretical; they are self-evident, “per se nota—known just by knowing the meaning of their terms” (106). However, even though none of the principles is deduced from any of the others, they are not all on the same logical level. One of them, the first principle of practical reason, underlies all the others. Immediately above it are the self-evident principles regarding the so-called basic goods. (Why these constitute a single level will be explained below.) These in turn underlie one other self-evident practical principle, the first principle of morality. After a closer look at each of these three levels, I shall return to the theory’s account of moral truth.

The First Principle of Practical Reason. As our authors formulate it, the first principle of practical reason is “Good is to be done and pursued” (119). This is first in the sense that all practical reasoning supposes it. Our authors liken its function in

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practical reasoning to the function of the principle of noncontradiction in all reasoning whatsoever.

The principle of noncontradiction functions as the first principle of all reasoning “by prohibiting incoherence” (119). Reasoning can be incoherent, at least implicitly, but the principle of noncontradiction demands that when the incoherence becomes explicit, it be rejected. This demand extends to all reasoning, about anything whatsoever.

Similarly, the first principle of practical reason functions in all practical reasoning “by prohibiting pointlessness” (120). Pointless practical reasoning is reasoning that has no benefit, no possible instantiation of a basic good, in view. Practical reasoning can be pointless—as, for example, in the case of “people who . . . deliberate about what they might have done” even while thinking that doing so can lead to no benefit (120). The first principle of practical reason urges them to turn their thought to some possible benefit.

In other words, the principle “as it were demands: Take as a premise at least one of the principles corresponding to the basic goods and follow through to the point at which you somehow instantiate that good through action” (121). And this demand extends to all practical thinking, about any course of action whatsoever. This is how the first principle is first. All practical reasoning has some “basic good” in view, but this principle “underlies the directiveness of all the basic goods” (125).

Self-Evident Principles regarding the Basic Goods. All (non-pointless) practical reasoning has some purpose in view. Every purpose has something about it that explains one’s rational interest in acting for it. That is to say, every purpose instantiates some good. A good is a reason for acting. Some goods, however, are merely instrumental. They are sought only for the sake of something else. By themselves they do not explain the rational interest in acting for them; some further reason must also be involved. Ultimately there must be some reasons for acting that need no further reason, some goods that are not merely instrumental. They are good and reasons for acting in virtue of themselves. They are basic goods (103). Each of them is something that practical reason immediately understands as a good to be pursued. The propositions expressing this understanding are self-evident principles. Judgments regarding determinate actions to be performed are conclusions reached, through deliberation, from principles regarding basic goods (105–106). The basic goods and the principles regarding them also influence the will in a fundamental way. They give rise to simple volitions for the goods (106, 122, 126–127). These are at the root of all of the other forms of volition (105).

As is well known, our authors hold that there are many basic goods. In fact, there are many genera or categories of them. There are a definite number of categories. For present purposes, it is not necessary to go into the determination of what each category is or exactly how many they are (see 106–108). What is important is the theory’s insistence that they are “irreducibly” many. They cannot be collapsed into a single good or a single reason for acting; “there is no single reason underlying every purpose for the sake of which one acts” (110). Hence, “the basic goods of diverse categories are called ‘good’ only by analogy” (110). They “are called ‘good’ in irreducibly different senses” (137). There is no one standard against which they can all be measured, as goods. They are incommensurable. “For, if they were commensurable,
they would have to be homogeneous with one another or reducible to something prior by which they could be measured. If they were homogeneous with one another, they would not constitute diverse categories. If they were reducible to something prior, they would not be primary principles. Thus, they are incommensurable: No basic good considered precisely as such can be meaningfully said to be better than another” (110). In fact, their being incommensurable means that they cannot even be said to be equal to each other: “as ultimate reasons for acting, they are incommensurable: neither equally good nor more or less good than one another.”

However, they can be said to be “equally basic and equally essential to the ideal of integral human fulfillment.” This is why I say that the principles regarding them are on the same logical level. The first principle of practical reason underlies all of these principles, but no one of them underlies any of the others. None depends on any other for its intelligibility.

Nevertheless, the basic goods do come together into a certain intelligible unity. If each is “essential to the ideal of integral human fulfillment,” this is because each constitutes a part or an aspect of that fulfillment. “Integral human fulfillment” means nothing other than “the realization, so far as possible, of all the basic goods in all persons, living together in complete harmony” (131). It is also “the ultimate object of good will” (132). In a sense, integral fulfillment is the ultimate natural end of human persons and human communities (132).

Still, this is only in a sense. For integral fulfillment is not properly a purpose for which one acts, an outcome that one intends to reach through action. This is because it is not a real possibility. It is only an ideal (132). What one must always settle for, as a real possibility, is at best only an approximation of it. It is not an object of efficacious will, but only of wish (132). Thus, “integral human fulfillment cannot be the ultimate end in the sense of being the ultimate reason why one chooses or should choose whatever one chooses. In this sense, the basic goods are ultimate ends” (133).

In other words, “integral human fulfillment is not a basic good alongside the others, nor some sort of supergood transcending all other categories of goodness. For integral human fulfillment is not a reason for acting” (132). The basic goods are in a way subordinated to it, as parts to whole. But they are not chosen for the sake of it. Each of them is an ultimate reason for choice, and there is no other ultimate reason. The attractiveness of integral human fulfillment itself depends on them (132). The basic goods are aspects of human fulfillment—many, distinct, irreducible—which do not constitute a single ultimate reason why one chooses or should choose whatever one chooses. Is there no such thing? There would be, if there were some one

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intelligible good unifying all the goodness of all the basic goods. But there is none. For there is no intelligible principle other than the basic goods to make choiceworthy the possibilities for which persons can act” (133).

Integral fulfillment, then, does not form the basis of a principle from which the principles regarding the basic goods can be derived or to which they can be reduced. Nor, of course, can they be reduced to or derived from theoretical truths. Nevertheless, the reality of the goods does reflect a theoretical reality: “being aspects of the fulfillment of persons, these goods correspond to the inherent complexities of human nature” (107). There is thus a theoretical basis for their irreducible diversity: “the basic goods correspond to the irreducibly diverse components of complex human nature” (133).

The First Principle of Morality. Neither the first principle of practical reason nor any one of the principles regarding the basic goods, taken by itself, is a moral norm. These principles only establish the possibility of human action. All human action, whether moral or immoral, has a purpose and is aimed at instantiating some basic good. As Grisez says, “Practical reasoning has two phases, one concerned with what might be done, the other with what ought to be done.”8 Pertaining to the phase of “what might be done,” he goes on to say, are the “principles of practical reasoning in general,” namely, the first principle of practical reasoning and the principles regarding each of the basic goods. “Good and bad people alike use these principles in considering what they might do.” The principles that only good people consistently use, moral principles, pertain to the phase of “what ought to be done.” This is the domain of moral norms.

Moral norms presuppose the direction given by the “principles of practical reasoning in general,” but they cannot be reduced to that direction. The reasons why they presuppose it and why they cannot be reduced to it are the same: what they properly express is practical reason’s full directiveness. The immorality of immoral action consists in its somehow failing to comply fully with reason’s directiveness. What makes this possible is that nonrational factors, such as emotions, can fetter practical reason’s work of directing action (121–125).

Practical reason itself, however, directs toward full compliance with its directiveness. As we saw, having grasped each of the basic goods, it gathers them together into the single intelligibility of integral human fulfillment. And likewise, having grasped its very first principle and the principles regarding the basic goods, it considers its directiveness as a whole and prescribes compliance therewith in all actions. In other words, there is an “is to be” that arises from the consideration of integral fulfillment itself, and the birth of this “is to be” coincides with the birth of the moral “ought.” Its requirement can be expressed in a somewhat abstract way by saying that one is to be entirely reasonable in one’s practical reasoning (121). As a more concrete or explicit formulation of the requirement, the 1987 article offers the following: “In voluntarily acting for human goods and avoiding what is opposed to them, one ought to choose and otherwise will those and only those possibilities

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whose willing is compatible with a will toward integral human fulfillment” (128). This is the first principle of morality.

Obviously, this principle is not the same as the very first principle of practical reason. Nevertheless, our authors maintain that responding to the first principle of practical reason as fully as possible requires complying with the first principle of morality. This, again, is because the first principle of practical reason underlies the directiveness of all the basic goods (125). It permeates all of practical reason’s work. Immoral action is not pointless, and it does aim at some basic good. To that extent, it embodies the first principle. But it does not reflect the whole range of the principle’s applicability. Morally good action does.

**Practical Truth and Moral Truth**

**The Difference between Practical Truth and Moral Truth.** Now we are in a position to understand the theory’s distinction between practical truth and moral truth. As mentioned earlier, theoretical truth and practical truth are not two species of a genus. They are two different meanings of the word “truth.” Moral truth, however, is not still another meaning of the word “truth.” It is a species of the genus of practical truth (125). What distinguishes moral truth from practical truths that are not moral is “the integrity with which it directs to possible human fulfillment” (126). For, “in the moral domain truth is the whole, and falsity is a part, abstracted from the whole and thereby made to rationally guide action in a misguided way, just as if the part were by itself the whole” (126).

There are two kinds of practical truths that are not moral truths. One kind is premoral (126). The practical principles that direct toward each of the basic goods are of this kind; for instance, “Knowledge is a good to be pursued.” These “fall short of integral adequacy to human fulfillment,” although they do so “only because their proper directiveness is no more than an element of the directiveness of practical knowledge as a whole” (126). They are “operative before moral issues arise” (126) because they are conditions of simple volition, which is prior to deliberation and to the possibility of reason’s either exercising its integral directiveness or failing to do so through being fettered. But since these principles are elements in that directiveness, they always have relevance in moral issues (126).

The other kind of practical truths that are not moral truths are moral falsities, “for example, ‘That so-and-so should be wiped out’ and ‘One must look out for number one’” (126). These are practical truths, because they do give some rational direction to action. They anticipate the conformity to themselves of things brought about under their direction. But they are moral falsities because they positively deviate from reason’s full directiveness. They do not fit with the order to human fulfillment as a whole.

If “is to be” is the typical expression of practical truth, the typical expression of moral truth is “ought to be.” Since moral truth is a species of practical truth, presumably “ought to be” is a special form of “is to be.” But it is no more reducible to “is to be” in general than “is to be” is reducible to “is” (127).

**A Peculiarity of Practical Truth: No Falsity Opposed to It.** Before concluding this exposition of the theory’s account of practical truth, I wish to draw attention
to a point that I do not find explicitly asserted by our authors, but that their account seems to entail. This point is that there is no such thing as practical falsity.

Of course there is such a thing as theoretical falsity. There can be disconformity between a theoretical proposition and what it is about. As just explained, there is also such a thing as moral falsity. Practical propositions can deviate from the integral directiveness of practical reason. But according to the theory, moral falsities are still practical truths. “That so-and-so should be wiped out” is morally false, but it is practically true. And evidently there is no practical falsity opposed to it. For if it is morally false, then its negation, “That so-and-so should not be wiped out,” is morally true. And hence it is practically true as well. For moral truth is a kind of practical truth.

Of course there are propositions that do not have practical truth. Theoretical propositions do not have it. But neither do they have practical falsity. They are not practical at all.

Practical truth is a feature of practical propositions. A practical proposition is one that directs toward something’s being brought about through action. Such a proposition has practical truth insofar as it anticipates the conformity to itself of what is brought about under its direction. But all practical propositions do that. The ones that are morally true do it; the ones that are morally false do it; and the ones that are in a sense premoral—the first principle of practical reason and the principles directing to the basic goods—do it too.

What about practical thinking that fails to fulfill even the first principle of practical reason, that is, pointless thinking? Here our authors are explicit. “If pointless thinking is coherent, it does not fall short of truth and falsity in the way that incoherent thinking—whether theoretical or practical—does. However, since it does not direct action toward bringing something into conformity with a practical proposition, pointless thinking falls short of practical truth and falsity” (120, original emphasis). Pointless thinking falls short of both practical truth and practical falsity. It is not even false. Presumably in saying that it does not fall short of truth and falsity in the way that incoherent thinking does, they do not mean that there is some truth or falsity that it does have. The only possibility would be theoretical truth or falsity, and practical thinking has neither.

Evidently there can also be incoherent practical reasoning, that is, practical reasoning that violates the principle of noncontradiction. This is important. Our authors do not restrict the principle of noncontradiction to theoretical reason. It extends to all reasoning whatsoever. As Grisez says, “The whole analysis assumes that reason is a single power, and that whatever is characteristic of reason as such is common to both its theoretical and practical functions. Theoretical and practical thinking are the same in presupposing the principle of noncontradiction, proceeding according to the valid forms of syllogism, and so forth.” But the quotation in my previous paragraph above suggests that our authors do not regard incoherent practical thinking as a seat of practical falsity either. And indeed, what they say about pointless thinking does also seem to apply to incoherent thinking insofar as it is incoherent. Such thinking

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does not direct action toward bringing something into conformity with a practical proposition.

So it seems safe to say that, on our authors’ account of practical truth, there can be no such thing as practical falsity.

**Critical Discussion**

The problems that I find in the foregoing account of how truth belongs to practical reason are several. They fall into three groups. The first concerns the distinction between practical truth and moral truth. I shall argue that it is not a sound distinction, and that we should not countenance the idea of a practical truth that is not a moral truth. As we saw, however, the theory’s distinction between practical truth and moral truth follows on its view of how the first principles of practical reason are related to each other, and so I need to address this view. It is the concern of my second group of problems. The final group concerns the distinction between practical truth and theoretical truth.

*The Distinction between Practical Truth and Moral Truth*

**Truth as the Good of the Intellect.** Over the centuries, philosophers have proposed many different theories of truth. There is the correspondence theory, the coherence theory, the pragmatic theory, and so on. Among these theories there are profound differences.

Nevertheless, I think it is safe to say that there is something about truth that virtually everyone agrees upon, something that seems to be built into the very meaning of the word. Thomas Aquinas calls attention to it when he introduces the topic of truth in the *Summa theologiae.* “Just as ‘good’ names that toward which appetite tends,” Aquinas says, “‘true’ names that toward which intellect tends.”

The very word “tends,” of course, suggests appetite. Appetite in general tends toward the good, and any particular thing’s appetite tends toward that thing’s good. The intellect’s appetite is for the true. Aquinas is saying that “truth” means the intellect’s proper good. We can argue about what truth is, but do we not assume that whatever it is, it is something good and desirable, fit for the mind to accept; and that falsity is something bad and fit for the mind to reject? Insofar as a work of the intellect is true, to that extent it is good. It cannot be bad insofar as it is true, any more than it can be false insofar as it is true.

This is my first problem with the above account of practical truth. The proposition, “That so-and-so should be wiped out” is a practical truth. It directs toward something, and it is not pointless. The same could be said of the proposition, “Infants are to be slaughtered.” This too would be a practical truth. If realized, what it directs toward—slaughtering infants—would conform to it, and it anticipates that conformity. But slaughtering infants is bad. And surely the proposition too is bad, just by its directing toward that. It is bad just insofar as it is practically true.

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10 Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I.16.1. All translations are mine.
I do not mean to suggest that our authors would say that “Infants are to be slaughtered” is good. They would say that it is bad, because it is morally false. Perhaps their final judgment would be that it is true only in a qualified way. Practical reason is reason directing action, and its unqualified goodness and truth consists in full, unfettered directiveness, toward integral human fulfillment. Its unqualified truth is moral truth. But, they could insist, even immoral directives give some direction toward some aspect of fulfillment. Even Herod had some human good in view. Such directives are defective, but they still have some rectitude about them. To that extent, they still have truth, at least in a qualified way.

This, however, is merely to say that everything bad has something good about it, some qualified goodness. One could say the same about false theoretical judgments. They always contain some truth. To think that the moon is made of green cheese is to think that it is made of something, and to this extent the thought is true. We could posit a generic sense of “truth,” applicable to all theoretical judgments, insofar as each implies some correct description of its object, and a special sense, applicable only to the judgments whose descriptions are fully accurate. But what would be the point of such talk? Would it not just cause confusion?

**Practical Truth and the Principle of Noncontradiction.** A more substantive problem that I find with the notion of practical truth as distinct from moral truth has to do with there apparently being no such thing as practical falsity. Aristotle associates the thesis that everything is true and nothing false with the denial of the principle of noncontradiction.\(^1\) If everything is true, then a proposition and its negation are both true.

Now, as we saw, our authors do hold that the principle of noncontradiction applies to practical reason. Also, they do not say explicitly that all practical propositions have practical truth. However, even if some practical propositions do qualify as practical falsities after all, not every negation of a practical truth is a practical falsity. “Infants are to be slaughtered” is a practical truth, and so is “Infants are not to be slaughtered.” How then does the principle of noncontradiction apply here?

They would say that it applies by prohibiting incoherence. These propositions are incoherent with each other, and the principle of noncontradiction prohibits one’s assenting to both. But why should one not assent to both if both are true? Indeed, if both are true, how can they be incoherent with each other? How can one truth exclude another?

**Conformity to the Mind of God.** Another problem is that, according to the theory, insofar as practical propositions have practical truth, both they and the actions that comply with them conform to the mind of God. So both the proposition “Infants are to be slaughtered” and any slaughtering of infants that complies with it conform to the mind of God. Can this possibly be right?\(^2\)

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\(^2\) For Aquinas’s view on the relation of immoral actions to God’s mind, see Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I.17.1.
How Moral Truth Is Distinguished from Other Kinds of Practical Truth.
The final problem that I wish to raise about the distinction between practical and moral truth concerns the distinction’s very nature. The problem is somewhat concealed by the way our authors present the distinction. Their presentation fails, I think, to reflect its true logic, according to their own way of understanding it. I will suggest a way of remedying it. But once it is remedied, I think a difficulty emerges to which they have provided no solution.

Moral truth is supposed to be a species of the genus of practical truth. In the expression “moral truth,” the word “truth” stands for practical truth. What differentiates moral truth is the integrity with which it directs to possible human fulfillment. This differentia is signified by the term “moral.” There are two other species of practical truths. One consists of the practical principles that do not per se have integral directiveness, but that do enter into it. This species could be called “premoral truth.” The other species consists of practical truths that depart from integral directiveness and are immoral. This is called “moral falsity.”

But now, from a logical point of view, this last designation is not well coordinated with the other two. If the genus common to all of these species is “truth” (meaning practical truth), and if the differentiae of the other two are “moral” and “premoral,” then this species should not be called “moral falsity.” It should be called “immoral truth.” Nietzsche would smile.

Perhaps we can remedy this by introducing a reference to moral truth or falsity into all of the designations. We could call the third species of practical truth “morally false practical truth.” The other two species would be “morally true practical truth” and “morally pre-true practical truth.” These would be the logically accurate ways of designating the different kinds of practical truth. They look paradoxical, but we could argue that they are not absurd. This is because “moral” and “practical” are not synonyms. “Practical” refers to the first phase of practical reasoning, that of “what might be done.” “Moral” refers to the other phase, that of “what ought to be done.”

Even if our designations are not absurd, however, they do set before us a problem that the expressions “moral falsity” and “moral truth” might allow us to overlook. This is the simple fact that we are now dealing with two kinds of truth, not just one. No doubt we are relieved to learn that “Infants are to be slaughtered” is not so true as to be in no way false. But the real difficulty is, on what grounds can we speak of yet another kind of truth and falsity?

The distinction between practical truth and theoretical truth was clear enough. It was based on the distinct modes of understanding attributed to practical and theoretical reason. Practical knowledge and theoretical knowledge are not intelligible in the same way. To their distinct intelligibilities answer distinct senses of “truth.” But moral truth and moral falsity are said to be species of practical truth. They pertain to the intellect’s practical mode. They have practical intelligibility. But if they have a distinct kind of truth, should this not answer to a distinct intelligibility? This moral intelligibility would not be opposed to the practical, as the theoretical is, but it should be distinct from and added to the practical. And yet we are told, “Kinds within a genus often are differentiated by the addition of some further intelligibility. But moral truth as a kind of practical truth is not differentiated from moral falsity.
by the addition of any intelligibility other than the intelligibility proper to practical knowledge as such” (125–126). Evidently, then, “moral” does not add any new mode of understanding to “practical.” The difference between moral truth and moral falsity is not a difference with respect to any mode of understanding other than the practical mode. It is strictly a difference with respect to practical understanding. Moral truths have complete or perfect practical intelligibility. Moral falsities have incomplete or defective practical intelligibility. And yet practical truth belongs equally to them, as a genus to its species. To me this seems incoherent. How can they have unequal practical intelligibility and equal practical truth?

**Why Not Set Aside the Distinction?** I do not mean to suggest that the notions of moral truth and moral falsity should be set aside. The first three problems that I raised concern only the notion of practical truth, not moral truth. Moral truths would all be goods of the intellect, their negations would be falsities, and there would be nothing unsuitable about saying that they conform to the mind of God. What I think should be set aside is the distinction between moral and practical truth. There should be no sense in which a practical proposition calling for immoral action is true. In the practical sphere, there should be only moral truth—and moral falsity.\(^{13}\)

This, of course, would mean that practical reason does not have two phases. I think this is right. What practical reason directs is human, voluntary action. Voluntary action is moral action. It is always either morally good or morally bad. The practical and the moral are one.

Is it any objection to this, that practical reason can give both morally good and morally bad direction, and that bad direction always has something in common with good direction? Does this fact imply a phase of practical reasoning that is neither moral nor immoral but simply practical? On our authors’ own account, practical reason gives immoral direction only through being somehow fettered. Immoral reasoning is defective practical reasoning. Granted, sound and defective reasoning have something in common. But is this common element, in itself, neither sound nor defective? Are they like two animals, dog and cat, whose common attribute, the nature of animal, is in itself neither canine nor feline? Are they not rather like a healthy dog and a sick dog? A sick dog is a dog at all, not a dog-carass, only because it has some measure of health. Fettered, immoral reasoning is practical reasoning at all only because it is somewhat sound, somewhat in compliance with reason’s directiveness. If it were totally fettered, it would not be practical reasoning at all. The common element is moral.

However, it seems clear that our authors’ primary motive for positing two phases, and hence two kinds of truth, in practical reasoning is not the mere fact that

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\(^{13}\) If we take the term “practical” in a broad sense, such that it refers not only to what Aristotle calls *praxis*—human conduct—but also to production, then we can distinguish between practical truth and moral truth, because what moral truth properly directs is conduct. Truths directing production would be technical, not moral. But clearly our authors are saying that not all practical truths directing conduct are moral truths. It is to this, the distinction between practical truths directing conduct and moral truths, that I am objecting.
it can be either moral or immoral. The primary motive is their understanding of its first principles and of how these are related to each other; in particular, their view that the first full-fledged moral principle presupposes other practical principles. These underlying principles are not immoral, but they also are not, in themselves, fully moral. I shall now address this view.

Premoral and Moral Practical Principles

The Alleged Priority of the First Principle of Practical Reasoning. According to the theory, the principle “Good is to be done and pursued” is practical reason’s very first principle. It is said to underlie the directiveness of all the other principles. All the others regard determinate goods, either as taken separately or as taken together to form integral human fulfillment. It seems to me, however, that the theory’s account of how the first principle actually functions does not give it the priority that it is alleged to have.

The first principle’s function is to prohibit pointlessness. It directs practical reason toward having a benefit in view in all of its thinking. It demands that at least one principle corresponding to a basic good be used as a premise. It is not itself confined to any one kind of good, and the use of any other principle presupposes the direction offered by it.

Now, I do not quite see how “Good is to be done and pursued” constitutes a prohibition of pointlessness. Prima facie, it does not seem to prohibit anything at all. Perhaps we can say that to pursue something is, in effect, to avoid its opposite, and so in a sense this proposition prohibits the opposite of the good—the bad. But “bad” and “pointless” are hardly synonyms. At best, the pointless is a particular kind of bad. But if so, then having a point is only a particular kind of good. And so this principle will regard a determinate kind of good after all.

Moreover, if this principle is really prior to all the others, then practical reason is aiming at something prior to directing action toward anything. Prior to that, it is aiming at having a point, having something to direct action toward. As Grisez says in the 1965 article, “the establishment of the first precept of practical reason determines that there shall be direction henceforth.” Before it has anything to direct action toward, practical reason directs itself toward directing. An infinite regress looms. If practical reason must direct itself toward directing, must it not also direct itself toward directing itself toward directing, and so on?

On the other hand, if what this principle demands is that one “take as a premise at least one of the principles corresponding to the basic goods” (121), then its intelligibility supposes that of the other principles, since it refers to them. And then it is not prior to them.

14 They make it seem to fall short of being either good or bad by saying that it falls short of both practical truth and practical falsity just as incoherent thought falls short of truth and falsity entirely. I notice that for Aquinas, incoherent thought does not fall short of truth and falsity; it is false. See Aquinas, Summa theologiae I.17.3.

I do not think our authors succeed in making this principle underlie the *directiveness* of all the others. At most, they only make it underlie the *use* of the others. In using any of the others, reason complies with it. But to underlie the *directiveness* of the other principles surely means to underlie their practical *intelligibility*, their very status as primary practical truths. It means that their sheer existence in practical reason, not just their use, depends on this one. This is really how the principle of noncontradiction underlies all other principles. It does not just tell us to take some principle and to think coherently with it. If the principle of noncontradiction could be truly denied, there would be no principles at all, no criteria for discerning truth from falsity. No proposition would be truer than its negation. It is not that incoherence would be allowed. There would be no such thing as incoherence. I think our authors fail to give either the principle of noncontradiction or “Good is to be done and pursued” the priority that they claim to give them.

Further on I shall explain how I think “Good is to be done and pursued” does underlie the intelligibility and directiveness of all other practical principles. But what I am driving at here is that, on our authors’ account, what is really first in practical reason is not this principle, but rather the set of principles regarding the basic goods. This, in turn, means that the chief basis for the distinction between practical reason’s merely practical phase and its moral phase, and hence for the distinction between practical truth and moral truth, lies in the priority of the principles regarding each of the basic goods over the first principle of morality. The reason for this priority lies in the fact that the first principle of morality regards integral human fulfillment, and that the intelligibility and attractiveness of integral fulfillment are strictly a function of the intelligibility and attractiveness of the basic goods. Practical reason first understands and prescribes the basic goods separately, in accordance with their irreducible diversity. Only afterward does it integrate or synthesize them and thereby establish the properly moral domain. If they were integrated by something prior to them—prior to them as goods—they would not be incommensurable. What I next wish to consider is how our authors understand the incommensurability of the basic goods.

**What the Incommensurability of the Basic Goods Amounts To.** Let us look again at their explanation of why the basic goods must be incommensurable. “For, if they were commensurable, they would have to be homogeneous with one another or reducible to something prior by which they could be measured. If they were homogeneous with one another, they would not constitute diverse categories. If they were reducible to something prior, they would not be primary principles. Thus, they are incommensurable: No basic good considered precisely as such can be meaningfully said to be better than another” (110). The basic goods constitute diverse categories. The word “categories” might make us think of Aristotle’s categories of *being*. But here, I assume, it means categories of *good*. Otherwise we would need an explanation of why diverse categories of being cannot form a single category of

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16 In *Summa theologiae* I-II.94.2, Aquinas formulates the principle of noncontradiction, not as a prohibition of incoherence, but simply as a denial that contradictories cohere: “affirming and denying do not go together” (*non est simul affirmare et negare*).
good. Without such an explanation, we might wonder whether the practical order were not being confused with the theoretical. Moreover, what our authors tell us about the categories of the basic goods does not quite fit with Aristotle’s account of the categories of being. To be sure, the categories of being are not homogeneous. Being is not one genus. Each of the categories is itself an ultimate genus, a different sense of “being.” Nevertheless, it is not at all the case that there is nothing prior to any of them, as beings. There is one primary category, substance. As said of any of the categories, “being” always refers to substance. For each of the others, to be a being means, in part, to be of a substance. Substance underlies the being and the intelligibility of all the other beings, as beings. It is prior to all the others.

The reason why there can be nothing prior to any of the basic goods, we are told, is that otherwise they would not be primary principles. That is, they would not be basic goods after all, but only instrumental goods. Instrumental goods are distinct from basic goods, but they do not really add any goodness to the basic goods. They have no goodness of their own. They are not good per se or in virtue of themselves, but only by virtue of their order to basic goods. Basic goods are good per se. This would be why there can be nothing prior to any of them.

Is this a good argument? Consider again Aristotle’s categories. Properly speaking, what they are categories of is per se being. They are, so to speak, the categories of basic beings. Per se being is opposed to coincidental being. This is being that consists in a combination of per se beings, such as “white dog.” Coincidental being is distinct from per se being, but it does not add any nature of being, any reality, to per se being. Merely combining dog and whiteness does not add any further being to them. Both dog and whiteness, however, are per se beings. Each has its own reality. Whiteness does add being to dog. And this is true even though it is not equal, as a being, to dog. It is not even equal to dog as a per se being. Dog is a substance, a primary per se being. No other being underlies it. Whiteness is a per se being too, but it is so only in a secondary way, as an addition to the substance underlying it. Why, then, does the mere fact that the basic goods are basic, or good per se, entail that there is nothing prior to any of them? Why must all basic goods be equally basic?

Moreover, if the fact that each of the basic goods is basic, and hence a primary principle, excludes any order or priority among them, as goods, how is it that there is an order among the primary principles of practical reason, as truths? Each of these

17 See Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1.5.6 ad 1: the division of the good according to the categories of being is not a division of it qua good.

18 Aquinas, at least, certainly holds that even where there is no common species or genus, but only a common analogy, there can be comparison and ranking with respect to the common item. “Even those things that differ in species allow for more and less, namely, insofar as they agree in a genus, for instance, if we say that white is more colored than black; or [insofar as they agree] according to analogy, for instance, if we say that act is better than potency or substance than accident.” Thomas Aquinas, *In decem libros Ethicorum Aristotelis ad Nicomachum expositio*, 3rd ed., ed. R.M. Spiazzi (Turin: Marietti, 1964), 8.1.1549, emphasis added.


20 Ibid., 6.4.1027b33–1028a2.
principles is self-evident. They are all per se nota. Yet among them, one is said to be first, underlying all the rest; and another, the first principle of morality, is said to be last, with all the others underlying it. Why then can there be no first basic good and no order of priority among basic goods as such?

Another question is this: how can the basic goods be equally basic without being equally (or even unequally) good? This would be easy if their goodness and their basic-ness were merely incidental to each other. But their basic-ness is nothing other than their mode of goodness. The answer must lie in their being called “good” in different senses and “only by analogy.” However, we are not told exactly what this analogy consists in. I think that if we try to pin it down, we find that it does not, after all, make for different senses of “good.”

Obviously the analogy does not consist in the fact that one sense of “good”—one basic good—is primary, with the others signifying different analogies, different proportions, to that one. It must be that between each of the goods and something else—something different in each case—the same proportion is found. What “good” means for them is partly the same—the same proportion—but it also partly differs, because the proportion is to different things. This would be why the goods are neither equally nor unequally good. They would be “good” in the way that a roof and a helmet are “protective.” A roof protects a house, and a helmet protects a head. It makes no sense to say that one is more protective than the other, or even that they are equally protective, because their protectiveness is relative to different things.

Now, our authors do indicate that each of the different categories of basic goods corresponds, in the same proportion, to something different. Each corresponds to a diverse component of human nature (133). Each is the fulfillment of the corresponding component. However, this is only a theoretical consideration. It is not what practical reason means by calling them “good.” What would the different things be, by proportion to which the categories of basic goods are called “good” by practical reason?

I find no answer to this question in our authors. On the contrary, what I find them saying is that practical reason calls the goods “good” according to the proportion that they have, not to different things, but to the same thing, namely, the human will. The basic goods, they say, “mark out the finite boundaries of possible fulfillment. Any two options do have it in common that either can be chosen. The ground of their unity in this respect is not the different intelligible goods which make each choiceworthy, but their community in intelligible goodness, for which the will is the appetite. While each of the principles of practical knowledge directs that some good be done, all of them in common direct that good be done, and this common aspect of their directiveness corresponds to the will’s natural openness to goodness” (135). Practical reason considers goods insofar as they are reasons that motivate voluntary action. They motivate action by eliciting the will’s desire. The basic goods are the primary reasons, being good per se. They are the objects of the will’s primary desires, its simple volitions. Of course each is a different object of desire. But what it is for each to be an object of desire is the same, because it is the same kind of relation to the same power of desire.

It seems to me, then, that “basic good” is being said of the basic goods quite univocally. Although our authors deny it, I think that in fact they are treating each of the basic goods as a species, of which “basic good” is the genus.
By this I do not mean that the essential definition of a thing that is a basic good would include “basic good” as its generic term. Life, for instance, would not be essentially defined as such-and-such a basic good. The essential definitions of things express what they are in themselves, taken absolutely, just as the beings that they are. To call things good is to consider them, not absolutely, but in relation to appetite. But this only means that “basic good” is not a genus of being. It could still be a genus of good. It would be an ultimate genus, a category. Another category is “instrumental good.” This, indeed, is a different, secondary sense of “good.” It means to be an object, not of simple volition, but only of choice. “Basic good” is the primary sense of “good.” And it is one sense. The basic goods are equally basic.

Of course they are different goods. “Basic good” is only one genus, not one species. Each species has something that the others do not. None is in every respect superior to the others. That is why there can be free choice between options that promote different basic goods. They are not merely distinct quantities or intensities of the same form. (This is perhaps how the good tends to be treated in consequentialism.) They are not uniform, any more than lion, tiger, and giraffe are uniform. These are “irreducibly diverse” kinds of animal. And none is more of an animal than the others. They are equally animals. This is so even though each is in some respect superior to the others in its way of being an animal, having something that the others lack. None is called “animal” by reference to any of the others.

As far as I can tell, this is all that the incommensurability of the basic goods amounts to: basic goodness comes in many forms, none of which is called “good” by reference to any of the others. We have been given no reason to think that they are any more diverse, as goods, than kinds of animal are, as animals. We can very well think of them as different species of the genus of “basic good.”

The only way to avoid understanding the notion of “basic good” as a genus, it seems to me, would be to allow for inequality under it. This is the reason why “per se being” is not a genus to which all the Aristotelian categories belong. They are not equally per se beings. One is primary. What I next wish to suggest is that, rightly understood, the notion of “basic good” does allow for, and even requires, inequality. There is a primary basic good after all. To be sure, it is not one of their basic goods. It is precisely integral human fulfillment. I think our authors’ reasons for not acknowledging this are mistaken.

The Relation of the Basic Goods to Integral Human Fulfillment and to Morality. If indeed the basic goods are species of the genus “basic good,” this would explain why no one good, no single reason for acting, underlies them all. Obviously the common notion of “basic good” would not be such a reason. No genus is one of its own species. “Animal” is not a kind of animal. Every animal is a specific kind. Every basic good is a specific kind of good.

That the basic goods make up a genus would also explain why integral human fulfillment is not a more fundamental good or reason for action underlying them. Integral human fulfillment is nothing but the perfect synthesis of the basic goods. Can it be called “good” at all? Our authors seem to shy away from calling it so, but they do treat it as a good in some sense. They make it attractive and an object of the
human will. However, it is not a basic good, and it cannot be called “good” in the primary sense. The primary sense is “basic good.”

If the basic goods are like kinds of animal, integral fulfillment is like the ideal zoo. A zoo is in some sense an animal thing, but it is not an animal. Each animal is only a part of the zoo, and each has to be in some way subordinated to it or subject to its order; but the only reason for going to the zoo is to see the animals. And all the attractiveness of integral fulfillment is that of the basic goods. Its goodness is strictly a function of theirs. Like instrumental goods, it is only a secondary good. It is so even though it is the basis for the first principle of morality.

Granted, the comparison with the zoo limps somewhat. Animals are not born to live in a zoo. The basic goods are first conceived by practical reason, which is one power, and which naturally tends to gather them together into unity. So although the first principle of practical reason, and the principles regarding the basic goods, are not yet moral, they are on the way toward morality; that is, toward the principle regarding integral fulfillment. Perhaps, then, instead of a zoo, we can say that integral fulfillment is like the ideal jungle. But in any case, the practical intelligibility of integral human fulfillment is posterior to that of the basic goods. They enter into the concept of it and, more precisely, into practical reason’s first concept of it.

What I wish to suggest is that integral human fulfillment is prior both in goodness and in practical intelligibility to what our authors call the basic goods. The word “integral,” of course, suggests an integration, a synthesis of elements already distinguished. But we can just as well call it simply human fulfillment as a whole.

Our authors themselves point to a reason for thinking that this has priority. They tell us that “the basic goods correspond to the irreducibly diverse components of complex human nature” (133). I take it that they do not mean to suggest that the multiplicity of the components of human nature is prior to its unity, as though the components were first given separately and then synthesized. They vigorously reject dualism and insist on the human person’s unity (100, 113). If human nature were the result of a synthesis of already existing parts, it would not really be one nature at all, that is, a fundamental unit, something substantial. It would exist in the way that Empedocles thought animals exist, by mere coincidence of natures. Of course it has a multiplicity of parts. But this multiplicity must presuppose and be reducible to its source in the nature’s essential unity.

Surely the unity of human nature also has priority in our understanding. We do not first conceive a human head, a human hand, a human mind, and such, and then conceive a human being as their ideal synthesis. Our first conception of something human is a conception of a whole human being. It is a very imperfect, confused conception. As we articulate the nature’s parts, we perfect and sharpen our conception of it. But we understand the parts as parts from the very start. Their belonging to the whole is in our very notions of them.

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See Aristotle, Physics, 2.8.198b27–32; and De anima, 3.6.430a28–30.
So if, as our authors say, the diversity of the basic goods corresponds to the diversity of the components of human nature, should not the unity of the goods correspond to the unity of human nature? And should not the relations between the unity and the diversity in the two cases also correspond? That is, should not the unity of the goods be prior to their diversity—prior both in its own goodness and in our understanding of its goodness? Our authors seem quite ready to say, with Aquinas, that what belong to natural law are all “things that practical reason naturally understands to be human goods.”\footnote{Aquinas, \textit{Summa theologiae} I-II.94.2, emphasis added.} The goods all fall under the notion of “human.” Does this not mean that the various aspects of human fulfillment enter into natural law insofar as they are naturally understood as aspects of human fulfillment, as parts or components of it? Its unity comes first. And yet our authors insist that the parts first appear separately, and only subsequently are integrated. It is a kind of moral Empedocleanism.

I do not mean to say that human fulfillment is as strictly one or indivisible as human nature itself is. Human nature, as such, does not admit of more and less. It is all or none. One either is or is not a human being, but one may be more or less fulfilled as a human being. Human fulfillment involves multiple additions to human nature, some of which can be had without others, and many of which can be had in varying degrees. Its unity is not that of one substantial nature. But this does not prevent it from having the unity of one good. It can still be one, by being the good of one nature. “Good” bespeaks perfect, and “perfect” bespeaks whole. Human fulfillment is, and can be first conceived as, one whole, the one whole perfection proportioned to the one human nature. As so conceived, it can be understood as one good, an object of one desire. It can also be understood as one end, an object of one pursuit—however complex that pursuit may be.

How are its parts related to it, as goods? Obviously they are not subjective parts of it, that is, species of which it is the genus. They are its integral parts. If they too can properly be called human goods, this is simply because “human good” is not, after all, a genus. It is indeed said “by analogy.” It is said primarily of the whole, and secondarily of the parts, insofar as they belong or are ordered to the whole. (I think that there can also very well be an order of priority among the parts, as human goods, but I shall not go into the question here.)

To say that the parts are good insofar as they are ordered to the whole is not to say that they are instrumental goods, mere means—as though we only pass through them to get to the whole. They are essential, intrinsic, to the whole’s existence. They are indeed good in themselves, good per se, genuine ends, desirable for their own sake. But even though the whole’s existence depends on them, their being desirable for their own sake depends on the whole’s being desirable for its own sake. Their basic goodness is on account of its basic goodness, a participation in it. They share per se in its goodness. We find them desirable because we understand this. Our whole good, the fulfillment of our whole nature, is what we primarily desire.

So it is not our only end, but neither is it an end alongside the others. It is our 	extit{ultimate} end, that which we understand to leave nothing else to be desired. In desiring
any of the parts, we are also desiring the whole. What chiefly belongs to natural law is human fulfillment as a whole. This is what practical reason understands as primarily to be done and pursued. It understands the parts as to be done and pursued insofar as they contribute to the whole.

To be sure, we may pursue this or that part by a course of action that is out of order with respect to the whole. In judging how to act, we may fail to make a complete use of our understanding of the whole and its requirements. In that case, we act contrary to reason’s full directiveness. We act immorally. But again, one thing is the use of our understanding, which may be fettered, and another is the understanding itself. We would not understand the goodness of the parts if we had no understanding of the goodness of the whole.

And because “good” itself bespeaks perfect and whole, it seems to me that the primacy of the goodness of complete human fulfillment, as a principle of practical reason, is contained in the very proposition that “Good is to be done and pursued.” Something is to be done and pursued insofar as it is good, and what is primarily good is the whole, perfect good. This is how “Good is to be done and pursued” really underlies all the other principles.

Of course, the whole good is to be done or pursued only insofar as doing or pursuing it is possible. Perhaps our conditions are such that achieving it always remains an ideal. But is this not also true of its parts? If we cannot expect to achieve perfect fulfillment on earth, neither can we expect to achieve a perfect instantiation of life, or of knowledge, or of friendship. The fact that fulfillment is an ideal does not make it be any less of a basic good.

Our authors argue that the principles regarding the basic goods are in a sense premoral, because “their proper directiveness is no more than an element of the directiveness of practical knowledge as a whole” (126). I do not understand why this makes them premoral. Could the same not be said of unquestionably moral precepts? “Treachery is to be avoided.” This does not properly express reason’s whole directiveness. One may comply with it and yet act in very immoral ways. And as for the fact that the principles regarding the basic goods are conditions of simple volition, which is prior to any moral issues (126), well, is not integral human fulfillment itself an object of simple volition, of wish (132)?

I see no good reason, then, for positing a dimension of practical reason that is prior to the moral dimension, or a practical truth that is not moral truth. I am thinking of moral truth just as our authors do: “in the moral domain truth is the whole” (126). From the start, practical reason aims at the whole human good. The first principle of practical reason is the first principle of morality. Other dictates are true insofar as they maintain the order to the whole. Those that depart from this order are false. And there are no grounds for positing a sense in which the false ones are true. Being morally false, they are practically false.

Practical Truth and Theoretical Truth

Up to now I have argued three things: that our authors’ account of practical truth is very problematic; that they have provided no account of how moral truth is anything distinct from practical truth; and that the understanding of the principles of
practical reason that grounds the supposed distinction is flawed. In this final section, I shall argue that their distinction between practical truth and theoretical truth is not well founded either.

**Indicatives and Gerundives.** Practical truth is supposed to be most properly expressed by gerundive sentences. These are supposed to have a distinctive copula, “is to be.” It seems to me that our authors are lucky to be writing in English. In “Good is to be pursued,” it may indeed look as though “is to be” could be the copula. But what about the Latin equivalent, *Bonum est prosequendum?* What is the copula? Is it *est ( ndum)?* But the *um* in *ndum* is adjectival, agreeing with *Bonum.* Is it *est ( nd)?* It looks as though the copula is simply *est.* And *est* is in the indicative mood.

As it happens, that is exactly what Aquinas says about the sentence *Hoc est tibi faciendum* (“This is to be done by you”): its verb is in the indicative.23 Finnis tells us that Aquinas only means to contrast the gerundive with the imperative, and that the sentence “does not state what is the case or what will be the case, but rather, as he says in explaining the point, directs . . . someone to something to-be-done.”24 In fact, nowhere in the article does Aquinas say that *Hoc est tibi faciendum* “directs” someone. He there ascribes directing, *ordinare,* only to commands. But as to what he means by “indicative,” I think we should look at his commentary on Aristotle’s *De interpretatione.* There he says that truth and falsehood belong only to statements with verbs in the indicative mood.25 Immediately before this, he says that a statement is true or false “from the fact that the *res* is or is not.”26 That is, as he said earlier in the commentary, the truth or falsity of a judgment, which is what an indicative statement signifies, consists in its conformity or disconformity with the *res* that it is about.27 Nowhere does Aquinas posit statements signifying judgments that have a truth consisting in something other than their conformity to the things that they are about. Finnis does not address this.

I do not understand the claim that “This is to be done” does not “state what is the case.” Is it unintelligible to say, “It is the case that this is to be done”? Granted, “‘is to be’ cannot be uniformly replaced by ‘is’” (116). The case being stated here is not that this is done. But “is to be done” does, after all, *contain “is.”* And “to be done” can very well be replaced by other expressions. Aquinas indicates that *faciendum* can be replaced by *debitum fieri.*28 Is there any loss of meaning if we say “This is due to be done” or, perhaps, “This is ordered toward being done,” or “This is in need of

23 Ibid., I-II.17.1.
26 Ibid., 1.7.84[3].
27 Ibid., 1.3.31[9].
28 He says, “Some precepts of any law have obligatory force from the very dictate of reason, because natural reason dictates this to be due to be done or avoided.” Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I-II.104.1.
being done”? Here the copula is clearly “is.” Why must the “is to be” locution be the most proper or primitive way of stating the thought?

Statements, however, only signify thoughts. The real questions are about the thoughts.

**The Unity of Theoretical and Practical Intellect.** Earlier I proposed a common notion of “truth” that leaves open the question of truth’s essential nature. Whatever it consists in, truth is that toward which the intellect intrinsically and properly tends. This is as much as to say that truth is the intellect’s *proper object*. And this, in turn, is to say that the intellect’s very nature is in function of it. Order toward truth pertains to what intellect is, its essential definition. Our authors surely do well in assigning truth to works of practical intellect. Otherwise it would not be intellect.

Now, as we saw, they also assume that intellect, or reason (specifically human intellect), is a single power. Practical and theoretical reason are functions of one power, having in common whatever pertains to reason as such—for instance, the principle of noncontradiction. Earlier I questioned whether their account really does make the principle of noncontradiction apply to practical reason. But if “truth” means different things for practical and theoretical reason, can these even be functions of one power? Is it one in *definition*, or only by analogy?

Aquinas argues that practical and theoretical intellect are the same power, because in both its practical and its theoretical activity, the *ratio* of the activity’s object—the aspect in virtue of which a thing falls under the activity and which defines the activity’s power—is the same. This *ratio* is truth. The difference between practical and theoretical intellect, he says, is incidental to what truth is. It is in the use of the truth known. Theoretical intellect simply considers truth. Practical intellect both considers truth and uses it to direct action. In another place, Aquinas tells us that the good of all intellectual virtue, whether theoretical or practical, is the true, and that this consists in conformity to the *res*, that is, in saying that what is, is, or that what is not, is not. The measure of all intellectual virtue and truth, he says, is its *res*.

Aquinas is not saying that theoretical and practical reason know the same truths, or even that their truths are about the same things. They can have different material objects. But for both, knowing truth about a thing constitutes the same kind of relation to the thing. Of course, our authors might wish to say that the *ratio* common to the objects of theoretical and practical intellect is something other than truth. However, they do not say this. And what they do say is that in the two cases, “the relationships between the human mind and its objects are opposite” (117). How, then, can the *ratio* of the objects be the same? How can the same aspect be a

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29 On “due” as signifying an “order of exigency or necessity,” see Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I.21.1 ad 3.


31 Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I.79.11c and ad 2.

32 Ibid., I-II.64.3c and ad 2. He also says here that practical intellectual virtue measures something, namely, appetitive acts. He sees no incompatibility between its measuring and its being measured.
principle of opposite relationships? It seems to me that, despite themselves, our authors make theoretical and practical reason to be different powers with different proper objects.

**Measured and Measuring.** But let us consider the opposite relationships to things that theoretical and practical knowledge are supposed to have. This, I think, is the crux of the entire matter. Theoretical knowledge is measured by what it knows. It is meant to be conformed to what it knows. Practical knowledge measures what it knows. It is meant to be that to which what it knows conforms. The conformities go in opposite directions. Our authors therefore regard them as incompatible. If practical knowledge is meant to be that to which what it knows conforms, it cannot also be meant to conform to what it knows. This would amount to its being both prior and posterior to what it knows, which seems absurd.

I wish to argue that it is not absurd. This is because the conformities need not be with respect to the same form. Practical knowledge can both measure and be measured by what it knows, and be both prior and posterior to it, in different respects.

Take the proposition “The potatoes are to be peeled.” Let us assume, for argument’s sake, that this proposition can be understood in what our authors regard as a merely theoretical way. That is, let it mean that the potatoes have a certain property or feature. This feature is a relation, an order. The proposition would mean that the potatoes are ordered toward being peeled or in need of being peeled. Of course, their being peeled does not really exist yet; it is merely something that reason has conceived. So their relation to it is only a relation of reason, not a real relation. This is not a peculiarity of gerundive propositions. What many nongerundive propositions ascribe to their subjects are relations of reason. The proposition is true if the subject has this relation, false if it does not. What is the case—the subject’s having the relation or not—is independent of and prior to the proposition’s affirmation of the relation, and it measures the proposition’s truth.

The question, then, is whether understanding the proposition in this way must constitute mere theoretical knowledge, knowledge that cannot serve per se to direct action. Our authors’ position is that it cannot, because if it did, then it would measure what is known rather than be measured by it. But now, suppose we do take the proposition practically, seeing it as a directive for action. What is that toward which it directs action? Toward the potatoes’ being peeled, of course. If the potatoes get peeled, they will be in conformity with the proposition. Its saying that they are to be peeled is prior to, and in some sense a cause of, their being peeled. It measures them with respect to their being peeled.

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33 According to Aquinas, the reason why intellect and will are not the same power is that, through them, the soul bears on things in opposite ways. Their proper objects, truth and goodness, are convertible aspects of things, but they are principles of opposite relationships to the soul. See ibid., I.59.2 and I.78.1.

34 This does not mean that the relation is merely fictional or is not said truly of them. It simply means that the relation is mediated by reason’s apprehension—in this case, by its conception of the peeling.
This, however, is a different feature from the previous one. It is one thing for the potatoes to be in need of being peeled, and another for them to be peeled. If the proposition said that they are being peeled, it would indeed be theoretical. It would not direct toward, or cause, or measure their being peeled. But what it says is that they are to be peeled. Why cannot this be understood to mean that they are in need of being peeled, and, just by being so understood, function as a cause and measure of their being peeled? Granted, its being so understood does not suffice for it to function in this way. The mind considering it must also have power over the potatoes’ being peeled or not. But, assuming this power, the proposition’s being so understood suffices to determine how the power is used. Knowing that the potatoes need to be peeled can incline one to peel them.

In short, the truth of a proposition, whether theoretical or practical, is its conformity to what it is about, with respect to the form, the feature, that it ascribes to what it is about. With respect to that feature, what it is about measures it. But this does not prevent it from also directing action and measuring what it is about. It can do so if the feature that it ascribes to what it is about is an order toward a feature that the mind considering it can effect through action. By being effected, the feature brings what the proposition is about into a kind of conformity with the proposition. In this respect, the proposition measures what it is about.

But it is a good measure only if it is true. And its truth is its conformity to what it is about, with respect to a feature that the mind considering it, as such, does not effect, but only knows.

There is one last point of dispute. If the potatoes’ order toward being peeled measures the knowledge that serves to direct toward their being peeled, then it is prior to that knowledge. If so, then presumably the possibility of the potatoes’ being peeled is also prior to that knowledge. Our authors would deny this. They hold that the very possibility of the fulfillment toward which practical knowledge directs depends on that knowledge. It is impossible that the potatoes be peeled without someone’s thinking that they are to be peeled.

I think this last statement is true. But it does not mean that the possibility of the potatoes’ being peeled depends on actual knowledge that they are to be peeled. What that possibility depends on is only the knowledge’s own possibility. Suppose we cannot peel the potatoes without having a peeler, and we do not have a peeler. Does this mean that our peeling the potatoes is impossible? No, for perhaps we can get a peeler. If our getting a peeler is possible, then our peeling the potatoes is possible. It is possible even prior to our actually having a peeler. Quite generally, the possibility of our pursuing the good is prior to our actually knowing that the good is to be pursued, because the possibility of this knowledge is prior to its actuality.

**Reducing Practical Knowledge to Theoretical Knowledge.** Our authors insist that anyone who holds that “‘truth’ can only mean conformity of knowledge to subject matter”—that it means the same as said of practical and theoretical knowledge—“tries to reduce practical to theoretical knowledge” (116). It seems to me that this is the only way to avoid reducing one to the other. It means that truth is said equally of them. If we hold that “animal,” as said of horse and cow, means the same thing, are we trying to reduce horse to cow, or vice versa? Practical intellect
and theoretical intellect have truth in the same sense, just as they are intellect in the same sense. If they were not, then the only way to maintain their unity would be to reduce one to the other. One of them would have to be called intellect, and true, in the primary sense, and the other would have to be called so in a merely secondary sense, as having some proportion to the primary one.

To say that practical and theoretical intellect have truth in the same sense does not entail that practical truths—truths that serve per se to direct action—can be deduced from nonpractical truths. Conclusions cannot contain what is not in the premises. A practical conclusion needs at least one practical premise.

However, this way of understanding the truths of theoretical and practical intellect does seem to allow for more overlap in their contents than our authors do. What makes a practical truth practical, able to serve per se to direct action, is not merely its saying that something is to be done or pursued. In addition to this, the mind considering it must also be able to effect the doing or the pursuit. Otherwise it is theoretical. But are there not such theoretical truths? Our authors themselves recognize that “any creature which acts is one whose reality is not fully given at the outset; it has possibilities which can be realized only through its acting” (114). They also recognize the intelligibility of, for example, “Knowledge is good for angels.”

As they say, this has no practical implication for us. But it does have practical implication for angels, and we can see that it does. We can understand that knowledge is to be pursued by intellectual creatures. We can also understand that survival is to be pursued by living things, that mating is to be pursued by animals, and so on. That we cannot direct the actions of all such beings does not exclude such understanding. Indeed, no one of us can even direct all human beings. Yet we can understand that natural law applies to them.

As for “Good is to be pursued,” do we not understand that its truth applies to everything? It is practical insofar as it applies to us. Only insofar as it applies to us can our understanding of it serve to direct action. But its intelligibility to us is not confined to this application. I would even suggest that our first understanding of it is not in this application, but rather that we first understand it in light of our experience of the world around us. In this sense, I think practical knowledge would indeed be reducible to theoretical knowledge.

The natural-law theory that Grisez, Boyle, and Finnis have framed is meant to be a basis for deriving specific moral norms. For practical thinking, the interest of a theory usually lies in the specifics. But my quarrel has not been with any of the norms generated by this theory. It has been with the theory’s account of what it is for the norms, and the principles underlying them, to be true. The issue is rather abstract. Nevertheless, in an age rife with skepticism about there being any such thing as truth in morals, I do not think it is merely theoretical.

36 I discuss this idea at some length in Stephen L. Brock, “Natural Law, the Understanding of Principles, and Universal Good,” *Nova et Vetera* 9.3 (Summer 2011): 671–706.