

The Case for an Exemplarist Approach to Virtue in Catholic Moral Theology

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IN THE CONTEXT OF HIS THEOLOGICAL ACCOUNT of the crucifixion, St. Thomas Aquinas writes that “in his passion Christ offers himself to us as the perfect model of all the virtues.”¹ What is the meaning and value of such a statement? Is Aquinas trying to say that one of the reasons Christ suffered and died was to provide us with a perfect model of the virtues? Is the goodness of the passion reducible to the goodness described by the language of virtue and the virtues? The passion illuminates the virtues, certainly, but to claim that the virtues can give an exhaustive account of the goodness of the passion indicates a gross misunderstanding of the theological meaning of the passion. The passion is prior to any such account; it forms part of the horizon against which Christian conceptions of virtue emerge. The passion thus illustrates the way in which certain discrete acts can take on a paradigmatic significance that precedes the more general accounts of moral goodness which may develop in light of them. The role played by the paschal mystery in the Christian tradition indicates the manner in which certain acts may *reveal* rather than merely conform to standards of human goodness and moral perfection. Yet to what extent can Christian theories of virtue accommodate the priority of particular events of this kind?

THE EXEMPLARIST APPROACH TO VIRTUE

Particular “heroes” or exemplars have always played an important role in moral reflection; but are such references merely supplementary, or are they in some sense bound to the moral ideals they exemplify? Do the virtues need exemplars only for pedagogical or illustrative purposes, or are particular figures intrinsically linked to the virtues with which they are associated? In recent years, some notable moral thinkers have pursued “exemplarist” theories of virtue in which the reference to particular individuals is foundational to the meaning and practice of the virtues. Exemplarism presents us with the hypothesis that particular exemplars, rather than abstract concepts, serve as the deepest foundation of practical reason and thus

¹ *ST* I-II q. 46, a. 3.

should be at the center of our ethical reflection. After outlining one representative example of this approach, I attempt in this essay to test the compatibility of this hypothesis with recent trajectories in magisterial thought as well as the standard Aristotelian-Thomistic account of virtue more broadly. I argue that there is a striking fit between the basic exemplarist approach and the approach to moral theology advocated by *Veritatis splendor*, and that this fit also extends to some central underpinnings of Aquinas's system of virtue in ways that suggest alternative modes of developing and employing Thomistic moral categories. My overall aim is to offer an initial glimpse of the degree to which a prioritization of particular individuals rather than concepts would determine the shape and function of a theological theory of virtue.

The Exemplarist Virtue Theory of Linda Zagzebski

Among contemporary moral philosophers working in the analytic tradition, Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski has done more than anyone else to advance a moral theory in which reference to exemplars is at the center. In her 2010 article "Exemplarist Virtue Theory," she explains that her theory does not seek to be either descriptively or prescriptively comprehensive. Like many of the so-called "anti-theorists" in contemporary moral philosophy (associated most often with the thought of Bernard Williams), Zagzebski worries that the pursuit of comprehensiveness in moral theory—in terms of either universality, obligation, or action guidance—inevitably leads to a level of artificiality that renders accounts of human action unrecognizable to the typical human agent, offering at best a rather "hollowed out" depiction of the moral life. According to her, constructing a moral theory is like making a map: just as a cartographer must make decisions about which features of a particular geographical area to include on a map, so the ethicist must make decisions about which components of human action to prioritize in their moral theory. "If every feature of the city [were] on the city map, the map would be as complex as the city is, and the map would not help us understand the city's layout. So the map leaves out many things, and it may also distort some things."² Likewise,

[s]ince one of the aims of a moral theory is to simplify [moral judgment], it will leave out many subtleties and complexities in the practice of morality. There is nothing wrong with that as long as we do not think that the features of moral practice left out of the theory disappear.³

² Linda Zagzebski, "Exemplarist Moral Theory," *Metaphilosophy* 41:1-2 (2010): 42.

³ Zagzebski, "Exemplarist Moral Theory," 42.

One must thus be attentive to the ways in which the object of one's inquiry remains vulnerable to the method by which one pursues it, since "what [one] seek[s] to understand can be altered by the process of seeking to understand it."⁴ Seeking to avoid this danger, Zagzebski grounds her theory in the relation of actions to personal identity.

Most moral theorists believe that a good moral theory leaves out the identity of the persons in the practice and there is no first person pronoun in the theory. Others believe it would be better if we identified certain persons, or at least put thicker descriptions of persons into a theory. It seems to me that just as a two-dimensional map of the world distorts the shape and relative size of countries, a moral theory without personal identity distorts the moral relations among persons.⁵

Zagzebski contends that what constitutes virtue is neither an empirical state of affairs nor any abstract correspondence to universal norms, but rather the motives of a paradigmatically good person. To explain the foundational character of these judgments, Zagzebski appropriates the direct reference theory of meaning developed by Saul Kripke and Hilary Putnam. Under this theory, the conceptual definition of any reality corresponds to some instance of that reality to which one can point.⁶ Formulated in order to account for the

⁴ Zagzebski, "Exemplarist Moral Theory," 43.

⁵ Zagzebski, "Exemplarist Moral Theory," 43.

⁶ The theory was first formulated in Hilary Putnam's 1979 article "The Meaning of Meaning" (appearing as a chapter in *Mind, Language and Reality*, vol. 2 of *Philosophical Papers* [Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1979]) and then fleshed out in Saul Kripke's 1980 book *Naming and Necessity* (Oxford: Blackwell Press, 1980). This theory of reference closely coheres Eleanor Rosch's work in the field of cognitive psychology, which has attempted to demonstrate that human concepts function according to a "radial structure" of categorization, in which prototypical singulars serve as the point of reference to which non-prototypical instances are related. See especially her essay "Principles of Categorization" in *Cognition and Categorization*, E. Rosch & B.B. Lloyd, eds. (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1978). In his 1998 article "Ethics and Imagination: Implications of Cognitive Semantics for Medical Ethics" (*Theoretical Medicine and Bioethics* 19: 117-41) Anders Nordgren applies Rosch's theory to the field of medical ethics, drawing also upon the work of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson on the importance of metaphor in human reasoning. According to Nordgren, since metaphor is the principal mode by which prototypical instances are related to non-prototypical instances, the role of metaphorical description in moral reasoning is at least as determinative as any abstract ethical principle like "do no harm." "Reasoning in medical ethics," he writes, "is a reasoning in metaphors, and the main questions are not matters of deduction but of what metaphors we should use and how far we should extend them." ("Ethics and Imagination," 124). Like Putnam & Kripke's theory of reference, Rosch's theory of categorization and Nordgren's account of metaphor shows the extent to which concrete particulars can determine the shape of the concepts we use in the course of practical reasoning.

meaningful distinction of kinds among common language users, the theory states that any natural kind term such as “water” or “gold” acquires its intelligibility in relation to some concrete instance of the given nature which it is attempting to signify. The innovation of this theory is that it accounts for the way in which language users can correctly refer to natural things prior to any conceptual definition. It also accounts for how conventional references to natural kinds can endure over time even as the conceptual definitions of those kinds change. For instance, we do not need to know that the chemical formula for water is H₂O in order to successfully identify instances of H₂O in the world around us as “water.” Our ability to refer to natural kinds through language finds its origin not in our ability to match things to definitions, but rather in our ability to compare things in the world analogously with paradigmatic instances. Zagzebski reasons that

[b]ecause speakers need not associate descriptions with natural kind terms in order to successfully refer to the right kinds, an important consequence of this theory is that it is possible that speakers succeed in referring to water and gold even when they associate the wrong descriptions with terms like ‘water’ or ‘gold’. What is required instead is that they be related by a chain of communication to the actual stuff water and gold.⁷

Zagzebski appeals to direct reference theory in order to advance the more general point that any definition of moral goodness has to trace itself back to an individual manifestation of that goodness in the world. One must be able to point to this manifestation as an instance of the natural thing which such a definition attempts to describe. Such instances of moral goodness naturally manifest themselves through the lives and actions of concrete individual persons. Zagzebski calls these persons the *phronimoi*, the “practically wise ones,” who serve to establish an original point of reference for the moral goodness to which all other instances in some way relate. Zagzebski defines virtue as a good motive disposition combined with success in bringing about the end (if any) of one’s motives. This definition characterizes virtue as a kind of refinement of perception—a way of seeing things—rather than a set of technical skills. Thus what makes the *phronimos* truly virtuous is her ability to perceive an entire situation as an intentional object in a way that reliably generates a good motive for action within those given circumstances. Under Zagzebski’s theory, a right act is one that a *phronimos* might do without guilt in similar circumstances. A wrong act, by contrast, is one that a *phronimos* would not characteristically do in like circum-

⁷ Zagzebski, “Exemplarist Moral Theory,” 50.

stances, and if she did, she would feel guilty about it. A moral duty, then, is an act that the *phronimos* would insist upon doing, and would feel guilty about if left undone. On her account, an act is fully virtuous only if it is motivated by the motive that the *phronimos* would have in like circumstances, and subsequently leads to the successful performance of an act that the *phronimos* would characteristically perform out of that motive.⁸ For Zagzebski, the virtuous person does not *create* the good; she *embodies* it. The moral exemplar is therefore the ultimate reference point for moral goodness. This sort of “ethic based on exemplars,” she explains, “has both the advantages of thickness desired by the anti-theorists and the advantage of aspiring to a high level of comprehensiveness, as desired by the theorists.”⁹ The comprehensiveness derives from her appeal to God as the supreme exemplar, and the thickness from her emphasis on the individual incommunicability of exemplars as persons. What ties these two appeals together is Zagzebski’s incorporation of the Christian doctrine of the incarnation: that universal Good became a human being, able to be encountered as an individual among individuals.¹⁰

The Christocentric Exemplarism of Veritatis Splendor

This philosophical account of exemplarism coheres with certain developments in contemporary Catholic moral theology that have emphasized Christ’s irreducible role in the moral life. For the most part, Catholic moral theology responded to the Second Vatican Council by expanding its focus beyond the mere evaluation and classification of acts so as to consider the nature of morality more generally, in its human and historical dimensions. One prominent theme that emerged from this broader mode of reflection was the nature of the relationship between the moral life and the life of faith, and more specifically between the moral agent and the person of Christ.¹¹ In the one place where the Council directly addresses the practice of moral theology—*Optatam totius*—this relationship clearly takes center stage:

⁸ Linda Zagzebski, *Divine Motivation Theory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 130-45, 160.

⁹ Zagzebski, “*Divine Motivation Theory*,” 183.

¹⁰ Zagzebski, “*Divine Motivation Theory*,” 228-70.

¹¹ The most prominent representative of this trend is Bernard Häring’s three-volume work *The Law of Christ*, which was widely published and translated in the years following the Second Vatican Council. As James Keenan chronicles in *A History of Catholic Moral Theology in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Continuum, 2010), Häring’s trailblazing work was in many ways made possible by earlier twentieth-century theologians such as Odon Lottin, Fritz Tillmann and Gérard Gillemann (35-82).

Special care must be given to the perfecting of moral theology. Its scientific exposition, nourished more on the teaching of the Bible, should shed light on the loftiness of the calling of the faithful in Christ and the obligation that is theirs of bearing fruit in charity for the life of the world.¹²

This same “mystery of Christ” also serves as the foundation of the anthropological vision articulated by *Gaudium et spes*. Paragraph 22 of the constitution lays out this Christological foundation quite explicitly:

It is Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His love, who fully reveals man to himself and makes his supreme calling clear....

He Who is ‘the image of the invisible God’ (*Col. 1:15*), is Himself the perfect man. To the sons of Adam He restores the divine likeness which had been disfigured from the first sin onward. Since human nature as He assumed it was not annulled, by that very fact it has been raised up to a divine dignity in our respect too.¹³

Thus the anthropological focus of the Council proceeds alongside a firm insistence upon the normativity of Jesus Christ in the Church’s definition and elaboration of human nature.

This methodological focus on the person of Christ is also at the heart of John Paul II’s 1993 encyclical *Veritatis splendor*, which is by far the most extensive magisterial treatment of the nature and content of moral theology in the postconciliar era. Conceived as an integral outgrowth of the Council, *Veritatis splendor* has become a touchstone of Catholic theological inquiry in its own right, especially for the discipline of moral theology.¹⁴ The imperative to seek what is good and avoid what is evil is part of what it means to be a rational animal, and yet in order to do so in accordance with the truth we need assistance from outside ourselves; we need to *see* the truth shining through that which precedes and conditions our search. Our desire to do the good is thus always mediated, emerging from our engagement with the world around us. Yet can we refer to such engagement only in a general sense? Is there any intentional object in the world which itself discloses the standard by which the good of all others is to be judged? John Paul does not hesitate in offering the person of Christ as the answer to this question:

¹² *Optatam totius*, no. 14.

¹³ *Gaudium et spes*, no. 22.

¹⁴ Part of the motive for attempting to explore the prospect of developing a Christocentric exemplarism rooted in Thomistic virtue derives from the universal role which both of these magisterial sources accord to the person of Christ in their conception of human nature and its perfection.

The light of God's face shines in all its beauty on the countenance of Jesus Christ, 'the image of the invisible God' (*Col* 1:15), the 'reflection of God's glory' (*Heb* 1:3), 'full of grace and truth' (*Jn* 1:14). Christ is 'the way, and the truth, and the life' (*Jn* 14:6). Consequently the decisive answer to every one of man's questions, his religious and moral questions in particular, is given by Jesus Christ, *or rather is Jesus Christ himself*, as the Second Vatican Council recalls: 'In fact, *it is only in the mystery of the Word incarnate that light is shed on the mystery of man.*'¹⁵

Without any ambiguity then, *Veritatis splendor* presents Christ as both the mediator of moral norms and their ultimate end.

Perhaps the best reflection of the priority given to the person of Christ in *Veritatis splendor* is the very mode of investigation by which the encyclical proceeds. Rather than beginning with metaphysical or even anthropological claims, the encyclical appeals to a story taken from Scripture, claiming that it can serve as "a useful guide for listening once more in a lively and direct way to [Christ's] moral teaching."¹⁶ Some interpreters of the encyclical have expressed puzzlement or dissatisfaction at this approach, characterizing it as either an overly broad allegorical interpretation of the text, or as simply a kind of pre-emptive proof-texting.¹⁷ Yet if we take seriously the claims made by the Second Vatican Council regarding the anthropological significance of Christ, it should come as no surprise then that the encyclical would begin its investigation of the moral life with the scriptural depiction of an individual's encounter with Christ. As an encounter with the *reality* of Christ, it must necessarily be a *particular* encounter, and so the human person must be a particular individual: in this case, "the rich young man."

John Paul chooses this particular encounter because it models in a striking way the search for the good which characterizes the moral life. The quest to do the good has led the rich young man to Jesus. The man's encounter with Christ affirms the necessity of keeping the commandments for the attainment of this end, but it also elicits the question of "what more" is required. To this question Jesus answers with the call to perfection: "If you wish to be perfect, sell all that you have and give it to the poor... then come, follow me" (*Matt* 19:21). The implication of course is that the particular precepts and principles of the Law, as vital and indispensable as they are, do not ultimately satisfy the hunger for the good underlying all human action.

¹⁵ *Veritatis splendor*, no. 2. Emphasis added

¹⁶ *Veritatis splendor*, no.6.

¹⁷ For an example of this line of critique, see William C. Spohn's "Morality on the Way of Discipleship: The Use of Scripture in *Veritatis Splendor*" in *Veritatis Splendor: American Responses*, ed. Michael Allsopp and John J. O'Keefe (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1995), 83-105.

Yet this “lack,” felt so keenly by the rich young man, finds its answer not in any conceptual synthesis or mystical technique, but in the *person* of Christ, the good to whom all other goods must be subordinated. Here we see the climactic moment of the moral life dramatized in the climactic moment of this encounter. Moral perfection comes to be identified with discipleship: “the way and at the same time the content of [human] perfection consists in the following of Jesus.... *Following Christ is thus the essential and primordial foundation of morality.*”¹⁸ This call to follow Christ surpasses and fulfills the human dialectic of receiving and appropriating propositional precepts.¹⁹ It is reasonable then to assume that John Paul is not simply being metaphorical when he says that

Jesus’ way of acting and his words, his deeds and his precepts constitute the moral rule of Christian life. Indeed, his actions, and in particular his Passion and Death on the Cross, are the living revelation of his love for the Father and for others. This is exactly the love that Jesus wishes to be imitated by all who follow him.²⁰

In the total giving of himself on the cross, Jesus himself becomes “a living and personal Law, who invites people to follow him.”²¹ His “law” is his very identity, his very person, to which the disciple becomes conformed in baptism, not in any heteronomous way as an external object of aspiration, but rather as the living principle that animates their every action. In other words, to take Christ as the exemplar of the moral life is not simply to bear a likeness to him in one’s actions, but rather to allow Christ *himself* to become the principle of one’s agency. The paradox of this personal conformity, namely that Christ’s identity does not efface or disfigure one’s own, becomes intelligible only in the light of the confession of Christ as Lord and *Logos*. Only this strong form of personal exemplarism seems able to accommodate the progression from the claim that “the Word Incarnate reveals humanity to itself” to the personal profession that “the Word Incarnate reveals *me* to *myself*.” The prospect of Christ being *interior intimo meo* is only tolerable if the *entirety* of his person stands in the same non-competitive relationship to human individuals as God himself.

The question still remains, however, as to how exactly to pinpoint the central feature or features that identify the person of Christ. One

¹⁸ *Veritatis splendor*, no. 19.

¹⁹ *Veritatis splendor*, no. 19. “More radically, it involves *holding fast to the very person of Jesus*, partaking of his life and his destiny, sharing in his free and loving obedience to the will of the Father. By responding in faith and following the one who is Incarnate Wisdom, the disciple of Jesus truly becomes *a disciple of God.*”

²⁰ *Veritatis splendor*, no. 19.

²¹ *Veritatis splendor*, no. 15.

might ask, for instance, whether Jesus' skill as a carpenter is a central feature that should serve as the object of our imitation. In order to address this question, *Veritatis splendor* goes on to specify the precise shape of the disciple's conformity to Christ, which unfolds over a lifetime of acts and ultimately comes to resemble Christ's voluntary self-oblation on the cross. Hence to follow Christ ultimately means

To become part of the unfolding of his complete giving, to imitate and rekindle the very love of the 'Good' Teacher, the one who loved 'to the end'. This is what Jesus asks of everyone who wishes to follow him: 'If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me' (Matt 16:24).²²

To imitate him is to imitate his gift of self, which manifests itself in the form of redemptive suffering. Yet this "form" is neither purely abstract nor purely subjective; it is a concrete pattern of human life impressed upon the disciple in the waters of baptism. The sacramental character received in baptism makes possible the cruciform life to which every disciple is called. The sacraments are thus what mediates Christ's personal presence to us; they are not simply reminders or heuristics that produce governing concepts or emotions. Rather, they unite us and conform us to the person of Christ himself."²³

Livio Melina's Christocentric Exemplarism of the Virtues

Livio Melina, an Italian priest and head of the John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family in Rome, attempts an extensive theoretical development of the major claims of *Veritatis splendor* in his book *Sharing in Christ's Virtues*.²⁴ Melina begins by emphasizing the significance of the encyclical's first chapter, which proposes a robustly Christological foundation for Christian morality. Melina attempts to advance the thesis that the acts of virtue performed by those who follow Jesus Christ are only adequately under-

²² *Veritatis splendor*, no. 20.

²³ To drive home this point, John Paul echoes the bold words of Augustine to the newly baptized: "'for we have become not only Christians, but Christ.... Marvel and rejoice: we have become Christ!'" *Veritatis splendor*, no. 21.

²⁴ *Sharing in Christ's Virtues* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2000) is a volume comprised of two parts, the first of which (entitled "Toward a Christocentrism of the Virtues: Lines of Renewal") was originally presented as a series of talks given to students of the John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family in Washington, DC in 1997. The essays comprising the second part, entitled "Ecclesial Sense and the Moral Life: Perspectives and Developments" were originally published in the journal *Communio*. Many of the points argued in *Sharing in Christ's Virtues* have been developed at greater length in Melina's more recent monograph entitled *The Epiphany of Love: Toward a Theological Understanding of Christian Action* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010).

stood when they are conceived as participations in the virtues of Christ himself. Thus he describes his own constructive efforts in this regard as a “Christocentrism of the virtues:” an understanding of the Christian moral life “as a participation in the virtues of Christ, by means of the grace of one’s incorporation into the Church.”²⁵

As this description itself suggests, Melina does not attempt to provide a universal account of human virtue independent from Christian theological claims about the good, nor is he hesitant about assuming the perspective of a distinctly “Christian subjectivity, which springs from encountering the person of Christ and from ecclesial participation in his grace.”²⁶ At the same time, though, he argues that this Christian subjectivity remains rooted in the “originality of the moral perspective” which he identifies as the experience of gratuitous love preceding and informing the universal human desire for happiness. Melina characterizes this experience as a kind of “anticipatory promise” of the agent’s ultimate fulfillment, which in turn serves as the basis of the moral life. Thus for Melina, “human action, animated by the virtues, is an expression of freedom reaching out for the fullness of love, in which the person fulfills himself.”²⁷ This experience of gratuitous love is something that can only be given and received in the concrete, by particular individual persons. While recognizing the many ways in which each human being experiences this nascent anticipation of happiness, Melina claims that for the Christian, this “originality of the moral perspective” derives from an encounter with the person of Christ, who holds out an image of human fulfillment in which the singularity of the human person and the universality of human nature converge. “Christian life comes to birth in the encounter with Christ,” he writes, “who attracts and at the same time calls us to conversion.” Although Melina stays close to Aquinas in affirming Aristotelian categories of virtue as the best conceptual framework within which to offer descriptions of Christian moral development, he nevertheless insists that these categories find their fullest intelligibility only in the individual’s personal and ecclesial encounter with Christ, an encounter that serves as both the original ground and the final culmination of the moral life.

The encounter with Christ is an encounter with the *truth* about the human person, a truth which binds the conscience. Yet for the Christian disciple, this truth binds only to the extent that it remains an expression of one’s original relation to Christ, in whose love one receives an anticipation of human fulfillment. Thus from the start, Christian subjectivity consists in a personal relation which is irreducible. Like the persons of the Trinity in whose image it was created,

²⁵ Melina, *Sharing in Christ’s Virtues*, 7.

²⁶ Melina, *Sharing in Christ’s Virtues*, 8.

²⁷ Melina, *Sharing in Christ’s Virtues*, 8.

the Christian “self” has meaning only in so far as it refers to a relation. As Melina remarks, “the promising experience of an ideal is not born in an individualistic isolation, but is anticipated in the interpersonal encounter of love.”²⁸

This relation is mediated through the communal memory and practice of the Church, such that the Christian cannot truly posit her own identity without also pointing to others, and through those others to Christ. For Melina, the moral subject is born not when it comes to realize that it is autonomous, but rather when it realizes that it is loved.²⁹ In this experience of love freely given, it perceives a glimpse of the fulfillment to which it is called. The moral life consists entirely in the pursuit of this ideal, whose attainment has already been promised through the love that grounds one’s self-understanding.

Consequently, the self-understanding of the Christian subject comes not from any intellectual or emotional exercise, but rather from a personal encounter,

An encounter, namely, between the quest for happiness or blessed fulfillment, which dwells in the human heart and motivates every initiative of his freedom, and the person of Jesus, the one whose charm has awakened even in the rich young man the promise of an unexpected fulfillment of his own destiny.³⁰

The moral life becomes re-oriented by and around this person, in so far as one’s very self becomes inextricably linked to him. It is crucial to reiterate at this point that for Melina this encounter is not merely an encounter with an “archetype,” “image” or “spirit” in which various human subjects may find common ground. Rather,

Ethics is born [only] from an encounter in which the communion of persons is anticipated. The desire for happiness, now confused and restless, finds in this encounter its fulfilling hermeneutic: love precedes desire and reveals the true dynamic of the gift of self.³¹

²⁸ Melina, *Sharing in Christ’s Virtues*, 24.

²⁹ The Australian philosopher Raimond Gaita also advances a similar view in his 2002 book *A Common Humanity* (New York: Routledge, 2002): “Often,” he writes, “we learn that something is precious only when we see it in the light of someone’s love.... We would not find it even intelligible, I think, that we have obligations to those whom we do not love unless we saw them as being the intelligible beneficiaries of someone’s love. Failing that, talk of rights and duties would begin to disengage from what gives it sense. One of the quickest ways to make prisoners morally invisible to their guards is to deny them visits from their loved ones, thereby ensuring that the guards never see them through the eyes of those who love them. That is a fact of considerable importance to reflection about the nature of morality. Our talk of rights is dependent on the works of love” (24, 26).

³⁰ Melina, *Sharing in Christ’s Virtues*, 27.

³¹ Melina, *Sharing in Christ’s Virtues*, 28.

Only particular, concrete persons can perform this role, and only to the extent that other individuals are capable of entering into communion with them. With regard to persons other than Christ, such communion is possible but nevertheless incomplete, since it necessarily remains partial in scope. At the same time, however, our access to this highest form of communion remains dependent upon the mediation of real, concrete persons in all their particularity.

Melina goes so far as to argue that this encounter which anticipates communion is prior even to any deliberate intention on the part of the one who experiences it. It is thus the concrete action of an acting subject that brings about the birth of another's subjectivity by drawing it into an antecedent world of interpersonal communion. This emergence of subjectivity is not an emergence into a vacuum, or the gradual self-definition of personal identity through the divestment of dependence, but rather the actualization of a potency by means of the disclosure of subjectivity's proper object. Thus as Melina sees it, we do not so much *choose* to become subjects immersed in the cosmic web of interpersonal communion so much as we are "awakened" or "enticed" into subjectivity by the promise held out to us in the concrete love which we receive from others.

Freedom, in this original experience, manifests itself more as an assent to a promise gratuitously given and as an encounter with the other than as a choice. It is as it were a call to us to transcend ourselves, to attain the good that is anticipated and promised.³²

This anthropological claim is crucial to Melina's account of moral exemplarity not only because it places interpersonal bonds at the very core of human agency, but more importantly because it requires that those bonds—bonds which color and contextualize the content of practical rationality—be embodied by particular individuals. As Melina puts it, "the desire that moves one to act is not first of all the expression of a lack but is preceded by an initial gift that serves as a foretaste or promise of a dimly seen fullness."³³ For Melina, this fullness has content. It is not simply some transcendental placeholder, but rather names something particular and *real*, something that can actually be obtained by a human agent. In other words, the desire for happiness that initiates and animates the moral life is first and foremost a desire for a person.

In his own account, which he refers to as a "Christocentric exemplarism of the virtues," Melina seeks to integrate an Aristotelian framework of virtue with an account of human agency rooted in the desire for the Good *as it has been apprehended in the personal*

³² Melina, *Sharing in Christ's Virtues*, 41.

³³ Melina, *Sharing in Christ's Virtues*, 41.

realm. Contrary to the perennial strain of Christian tradition that suggests the normativity of direct, unmediated access to the divine will, Melina follows *Veritatis splendor* in opposing any conception of morality that subordinates or relativizes human reason's dependence upon concrete interaction with the sensible world. In Melina's view, ethical theories that appeal to abstract notions of "fundamental freedom" necessarily tend toward an "angelic" view of the human person, in which "the unrepeatable uniqueness of the person is thought of as outside the universal coordinates of nature."³⁴ Moral acts, like all properly human acts, take place in the realm of concrete particulars, where intention becomes determined by *choice*.³⁵

Melina nevertheless argues that within the framework of these "universal coordinates," practical reason always operates at a personal level, seeking to secure not only the goods *for* the person but also and primarily the goods *of* the person. Even the various levels of natural inclination common to other living things—self-preservation, procreation, cooperation—become in the human being aspects of the person, in so far as their objects are pursued as personal goods. "*Human acts* are therefore acts of *operable practical goods*, relevant to the different goods of the person, acts that permit the realization of the communion of persons in the truth."³⁶ Indeed, for human agents the personal realm is coextensive with the "good" which is identified in the first principle of practical reason (do the good and avoid evil), and therefore colors every aspect of properly human action.

The personalistic interpretation identifies the moral good with the 'good of the person' and the fundamental norm of morality with the personalistic norm: 'the person is to be affirmed in and for himself', thereby extricating it from indetermination and formalism. Here is the proper level of morality, which springs from the relationship of the will not with particular external goods but with the good of the person.³⁷

It is this claim, borrowed from the philosophical personalism pervading all of John Paul II's writings, that provides Melina with the middle term between the framework of virtue that situates human action within the "universal coordinates of nature" and the Christocentric exemplarism that grounds the Christian moral life in the concrete encounter with the person of Christ. An ethic rooted in the agent's reference to concrete exemplars eminently preserves and prioritizes this personal dimension of moral action, and even more so in

³⁴ Melina, *Sharing in Christ's Virtues*, 102.

³⁵ Cf. *Veritatis splendor* nos. 65-7.

³⁶ Melina, *Sharing in Christ's Virtues*, 77.

³⁷ Melina, *Sharing in Christ's Virtues*, 78.

the context of Christian morality where the governing exemplar is Christ himself.

Melina's overall aim in sketching out his exemplarist ethic is to develop the trajectory for moral theology set out in *Veritatis splendor*, which he characterizes as "Christocentric." In *Veritatis splendor*, John Paul II went on to provide an account of human morality from the perspective of this Christocentrism and issued a broad critique of the moral methodologies he believed to be fundamentally at odds with it. There he affirmed that Jesus Christ is not only the center of history, but also "the 'beginning', who, having taken on human nature, definitively illumines it in its constitutive elements and in its dynamism of charity toward God and neighbor."³⁸ Melina's development of this claim attempts to preserve the edifice of Aquinas's theory of virtue while reconceptualizing the ontological and phenomenological aspects of moral development in terms of the human person's transformative encounter with the person of Christ. He contends that before it is conceived as an activity associated with natural faculties, powers, virtues or precepts, the Christian moral life is first and foremost an encounter, a vital and ongoing relationship with a real living person. Like the original "encounter" from which all human subjectivity emerges, this point of interpersonal contact establishes a dynamic movement toward the good initiated and defined by an experience of love in which the fulfillment of human nature is held out as a promise. This encounter may involve the sorts of agents we encounter every day, be they parents or friends; yet for the Christian these agents become a catalyst for an encounter with Jesus Christ, thereby establishing a determinative and transformative bond of discipleship. Such an encounter is no less "real" because others mediate it, nor are the human agents involved any less distinctly human on account of their mediating role. Exemplarist accounts of virtue are not only able to accommodate this kind of concrete mediation, but place it at the center of moral action and development. Particularly when it comes to a theological account of moral development, this fundamental dependence of practical reason upon concrete individuals seems especially cogent and persuasive.

EXEMPLARIST VIRTUE AND THOMISTIC VIRTUE THEORY

Though a broadly exemplarist approach to virtue may seem to cohere more easily with the patterns of moral thought found in the New Testament and *Veritatis splendor*, one may object that it does so at the price of becoming irreconcilable to the general Aristotelian-Thomistic framework that has grounded the vast majority of accounts which we have come to recognize as "Christian virtue theory." In the remainder of this essay, I will attempt to argue that there

³⁸ *Veritatis splendor*, no.53.

remain sufficient links between an “exemplarism of the virtues” and Aquinas’s own account to recognize the two as members of a common methodological family. I will defend this claim by indicating two fundamental areas of convergence between Aquinas’s account and the type of exemplarism proposed by Zagzebski and Melina.

The Priority of Sense Experience

Unlike many modern theories of morality, there is no essential separation in Aquinas between empirical knowledge and “moral knowledge.” In both cases, the human intellect remains fundamentally dependent upon sense experience for its proper operation. Aquinas follows Aristotle rather than Plato in maintaining that the intelligibility of things in the world is not entirely extrinsic to those things themselves, but rather emerges from our intellect’s engagement with them. Yet for Aquinas this engagement cannot occur except by means of the sense’s apprehension of objects in the material realm. The senses thus provide the intellect with the “raw material” it needs for abstraction, and in this way the operation of the intellect remains linked to the apprehension of singulars. Zagzebski and Melina both presume this epistemological view with regard to the intelligibility of a “good human being.” Although their respective versions of exemplarism do not go into the process by which we arrive at a uniform conception of “human being,” their insistence on the need to refer directly to particular individuals in order to arrive at a common conception of human goodness is consistent with the essential dependence of all human knowing upon direct sense experience. Just as we cannot gain access to the concept “human being” before we have some sense experience of *particular* human beings, we cannot gain access to the concept “virtuous human being” or “good human life” before we have some direct experience of virtuous individuals and good lives as mediated through the sensorium.

According to Melina, the moral subject is born out of an original experience of gratuitous love in which the fulfillment of human life and agency is glimpsed as a possibility and a promise. Thus for him, the anticipation of personal communion acts as the fundamental dynamic animating the moral life. In an analogous way, the Christian moral subject is born out of an encounter with Christ, who holds out a promise of fulfillment to which the person freely responds. Yet what is the precise relationship between these two determinative experiences? Do they represent two completely different forms of moral agency, or does the latter build upon and perfect the former? It would seem that, at first glance, Melina could easily appeal to the classic principle of *gratia non tollit naturam sed perficit*, yet in the absence of any philosophical framework to provide common ground between the “original perspective” of morality and the Christocentric perspective, the connection between these two “moments” appears

difficult to support. Without an underlying framework of this kind, Melina remains open to the charge that he is simply imposing a phenomenology of Christian conversion back upon an account of moral subjectivity as such.

Zagzebski's exemplarist virtue theory provides precisely the kind of underlying philosophical framework that Melina's Christocentrism requires. On her account, just as we form our contingent definitions of "human nature" relative to *this* or *that* being which we identify as embodying a particular nature in an archetypal way, so we also center our various moral judgments around those concrete exemplars who embody for us the different forms of human goodness we perceive in the world.³⁹ Thus to exhibit courage is not only to act as the courageous person would, but more specifically to act in a relevantly similar manner to *this* person or *this group* of concrete persons with whom I associate this quality of "courage" in a prototypical way. Certainly, more nuanced descriptions and abstract definitions may follow upon this basic correlation, but throughout this process what secures the link between such descriptions and the objective nature of the thing described is the capacity to refer to an embodiment of that particular nature in the world. Zagzebski's application of this general feature of knowledge to the moral realm reinforces the link between speculative and practical reason affirmed by Aquinas, a link ultimately based upon the sense-dependent character of all forms of human knowing.

Christian virtue ethicists can thus take from Zagzebski's exemplarism the vital insight that direct reference to individual human agents constitutes a basic and constant feature of the epistemic structure through which we come to identify and describe the various qualities that form the content of our moral judgments. The claim that descriptions of virtue always imply a prior apprehension (however mediated) of concrete embodiments of virtue remains a very basic claim about the moral development of rational animals. Even when we have isolated through abstraction a particular tendency or disposition which we associate with moral goodness, we always presume it to be somehow compatible with the individual human actions or lives whose goodness serves as the experiential template of our reflective activity. It is true that our speculative reflections on what make human actions and lives good may lead us to change how we see those whose lives or actions we take to be paradigmatically good, but they can only reverse or invalidate such judgments on the basis of principles drawn from equally concrete paradigms of goodness in the world. While our evaluations of competing principles in the abstract realm can become very complex indeed, the conclusions of such dis-

³⁹ Zagzebski, "Exemplarist Moral Theory," 50. See also *Divine Motivation Theory*, 130-131.

putes only make a transformative impact on our practical rationality to the extent that they illumine the individual embodiments of human goodness by which we orient and apply those conclusions. Far from challenging Aquinas's account, the fundamental insight upon which exemplarist virtue theories rest—namely, that moral development emerges and remains continually connected to individual embodiments of human goodness in the world—more adequately emphasizes the concrete theological claims upon which his conception of virtue rests.

Paradigmatic Acts of Virtue

The second point of convergence with exemplarism is Aquinas's own systematic reference to paradigmatic acts in his exposition of the virtues. This reference suggests an acknowledgement—however limited—of the fundamental role played by concrete examples in the determination of the moral good. In her widely influential book *Nature as Reason*, Jean Porter argues that Aquinas's systematic reflection on the virtues often takes as its starting point “general paradigms for virtuous behavior—our images of what it means to be an honest person, to behave reliably, and the like.”⁴⁰ As Porter points out, instead of identifying the virtues solely by means of their relation to some unified conception of human well-being, Aquinas roots his conception of the virtues “in the notions of paradigmatic kinds of actions which we associate with particular virtues—either exemplifying them or representing contrary vices.”⁴¹ Since for Aquinas a virtue is a disposition of a human capacity toward a particular type of action, one may define any given virtue by the kind of action it typically produces. “Hence, every particular virtue is conceptually linked to a specific kind of action, which represents a paradigmatic instance of acting out of the virtue in question.”⁴² These paradigmatic instances display the “object” associated with a virtue, and so may lead to more abstract formulations of its definition. Yet, as Porter observes, “formulation at this level presupposes that we are already familiar with concrete kinds of actions that provide the paradigms for actions expressing the virtue in question.” In this way, “our paradigms for kinds of actions offer concrete examples and images, in terms of which we are able to formulate reflective concepts of the object of a kind of action stemming from a given disposition.”⁴³ Since according to Aquinas, “it belongs to the concept of a virtue that it be determined by its utmost expression,”⁴⁴ courage finds its fullest exempli-

⁴⁰ Jean Porter, *Nature as Reason* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 179.

⁴¹ Porter, *Nature as Reason*, 181.

⁴² Porter, *Nature as Reason*, 182.

⁴³ Porter, *Nature as Reason*, 182.

⁴⁴ *ST I-II* q. 123, a. 4.

fication in the willingness to face death; and thus, as Porter elaborates, “we can only fully understand what it means to be truly courageous by reflection on the example of the person who is willing to die for the sake of the good.”⁴⁵

While the general definition of a virtue identifies them all as dispositions toward properly human (and therefore rational) action perfective of natural human capacities, Aquinas nevertheless discriminates between them as specifically as possible by appealing to the kinds of actions they characteristically produce. These actions are paradigmatic precisely because of the way in which they speak to the specific “matter” of any given virtue: namely, the distinct way in which they perfect a particular aspect of the human agent. In this way, Aquinas holds true to the general methodology of the *prima secundae* in examining the operation and flourishing of the human creature in all its complexity and contingency. Aquinas plainly says as much at several points in his general treatment of the cardinal virtues.⁴⁶ The cardinal virtues are considered “principal” not because the other virtues reduce to them, but because they each address a particularly important dimension of human life. They share common ground in this respect, but otherwise Aquinas insists that they be firmly distinguished according to their various objects.

While Porter persuasively argues that the main purpose of paradigmatic acts in Aquinas’s moral theory is to specify the particular domain of human nature whose perfection corresponds to a given virtue, she also recognizes the need, both within Aquinas’s moral system and in the course of an individual’s moral development, for the contextualization of the virtues within a broader conception of human life taken as a whole. When one considers the principles that are drawn from specific paradigmatic acts, such as “reason should order bodily appetite toward physical well-being” or “reason should inform one’s irascible appetite in light of a hierarchy of goods,” it can be tempting to turn to reason itself to provide the unifying ideal of the good life taken as a whole. Indeed, as Porter points out, that seems to be the strategy of the Stoics, and in a different way it is also the strategy of St. Augustine, who simply replaces “reason” with “charity” as the governing quality that of itself ensures the goodness of any and all human action. Porter herself resists this comprehensive reduction on the grounds that it renders Aquinas’s appeal to paradigmatic acts superfluous and even misguided. If the virtues pertaining to specific faculties of the human agent could be simply deduced *in toto* from a single “master virtue” such as reasonableness or charity, then why would Aquinas provide descriptions of paradigmatic acts *prior* to his theoretical articulation of the virtues associated with

⁴⁵ Porter, *Nature as Reason*, 184.

⁴⁶ *ST* I-II q. 61.

them? Porter's answer, which I believe is correct, is that while certain universal characteristics among the virtues may be discerned speculatively, such conclusions presuppose an existing account of those virtues connected to the basic needs, desires and exigencies of human nature, as these are expressed through the concrete exercise of human agency. Aquinas rightly recognizes the extent to which this prior account of the virtues must emerge inductively in order for it to retain a vital link to the "coordinates of nature" as they are experienced on the ground. As Porter puts it,

These paradigmatic acts convey ideals of reasonable passions, as these are evoked and expressed in the recurring situations that are characteristic of a distinctly human way of life. As such, they cannot be analyzed reductively in terms of purely formal ideals of reasonableness [or charity], to be applied in an ad hoc and seriatim fashion to each and every instance of choice.⁴⁷

Thus paradigmatic acts help to retain in Aquinas's moral theory the vital distinction between the variegated manner in which the virtues correspond to the particular demands of our created nature and the reflective conceptions of human life taken as a whole within which the virtues act to bring the agent toward some unified purpose or good.

The Irreducibility of Exemplars in Moral Reasoning

I see no reason why the exemplarist approach could not preserve this distinction between the various domains of particular virtues and the conception of the good life in light of which all may be identified as perfective dispositions, although such an approach would describe the relation of these two "levels" of virtue somewhat differently than Porter does. Porter seems to defend an account of moral development in which virtues emerge solely in their distinct correspondence to basic human needs, desires and exigencies, and only then begin to take on a "global" quality as the social and reflective aspects of the human person mature.⁴⁸ The exemplarist account of moral development, on the other hand, would contend that the various virtues emerge only against a given horizon of the human good held in place by individual exemplars. The appeal to paradigmatic acts already presumes an act of abstraction in so far as it points to particular *kinds* of acts drawn out of our direct experience of human agency and then categorized in a particular way. We may not think of particular individuals (like Socrates or St. Stephen) as we conceptualize paradigmatic acts, yet our judgments regarding them cannot be separated

⁴⁷ Porter, *Nature as Reason*, 199.

⁴⁸ She provides this account of moral development in *Nature as Reason*, 195-202.

from our formative encounters with those individuals who ground and contextualize our own understanding of human goodness. The normative role played by these encounters does not dissolve in the act of moral reflection, nor can these encounters remain entirely independent from the moral judgments we presume to be based on theoretically derived principles alone.

The claim that our encounters with particular individuals (however mediated) constitute an irreducible and inextricable component of moral knowledge does not entail that they be uniformly ordered or strictly ranked. We may often be unaware of the role exemplars play in our lives, and we may even sometimes deceive ourselves about those we claim to take as our exemplars. Moreover, we may find that several exemplars claim an equally determinative role in our moral vision, offering us different and sometimes incompatible embodiments of human goodness. Although the Christocentric exemplarism of the variety Melina proposes does hold out a particular individual as the single perfect embodiment of human goodness against which all others must be compared, moral exemplarism taken more generally does not make any such requirement, nor does it necessarily presume the ability to resolve any and all conflicts among the particular embodiments of the good which may be operative in an individual's moral agency. Moral reflection may indeed impact and even arbitrate the various representations of goodness that serve as the lenses of our moral vision, but they cannot reconstitute them entirely. We always view the human good through the lens of some concrete embodiment of it.

The irreducibility of exemplars is a function of the embodied and relational nature of the human person. Porter claims that a moral agent comes to develop a reflective conception of the human good only after the practice of the more basic virtues associated with proximate natural variables. For her, it is only after an initial immersion in these basic virtues (such as temperance and courage) that we then move on to consider the social and relational aspects of our moral agency. "The practice of the relevant virtues," she writes, "will necessarily draw us into interactions with other people," whose needs and claims must be integrated with our own.⁴⁹ Yet as Alasdair MacIntyre points out in his 1999 book *Dependent Rational Animals*, the exercise of practical rationality already presumes a relational nexus that bears upon our moral responsibility in decisive ways. The relations that serve as the condition for the possibility of practical rationality do not acquire their moral relevance only upon an agent's reflective conclusions; rather, they precede moral agency and serve as its foundation. The exemplarist theory I am defending here simply acknowledges the role these relations play in establishing an agent's

⁴⁹ Porter, *Nature as Reason*, 201.

fundamental view of what it means to act well. It does not insist that this view is immune from development or revision, but only that such a view accompanies moral agency from the very beginning, as something that is given together with the other essential components required for the exercise of practical reason.

Toward a Thomistic Moral Exemplarism

As Louis-Bertrand Gillon points out in his small yet illuminating study *Christ and Moral Theology*, the concept of exemplarity as an operative feature of moral agency has come to the fore in the modern era through the work of Max Scheler. Of particular importance in this regard is his posthumously published essay “Vorbilder und Führer,” which argues that an agent’s “engagement” with person-models (*Vorbilder*) precedes and conditions reflective moral judgment.⁵⁰ For Scheler, personal values are categorically superior to any other sort, and so the particular person who is the subject of the highest values of this order is the most proper object of moral reference: she or he is the exemplar that stands at the center of moral deliberation.⁵¹ In developing his own theological exemplarism based on Thomistic premises, Gillon appropriates from Scheler the formal principle that “[b]efore any kind of education the moral person must be ‘taken in charge’ by another person or by the idea which he forms of this person.”⁵² On this view, one’s attachment to a determinative person-model establishes the fundamental orientation of one’s practical reasoning. Gillon interprets this “principle of exemplarity” as more than simply an *ad hoc* integration of examples into a moral theory. Rather, he takes Scheler’s decisive insight to be that any “comprehension of values and norms presupposes in the moral agent a prior adhering to the ‘Person-Model’, an adhering which is rooted in love.” As Scheler himself puts it:

Before singular individual actions are either accepted or repelled by the moral mentality, *before* values are recognized as such or rejected, *before* obedience is given to commands or there be refusal to obey, there is the affirmation of love or the rejection of hate towards a *person* considered in its totality as a person of value.⁵³

⁵⁰ This essay appears in the collection of his translated essays entitled *Person and Self-value*, trans. Manfred S. Frings (Boston: Nijhoff, 1987).

⁵¹ It bears mentioning that Scheler was one of the most influential figures in the development of what we today refer to as “philosophical personalism,” and also a great influence on the thought of Karol Wojtyła, who would come to import, as pope, many of Scheler’s insights and paradigms into his own magisterial teachings. Some of these insights and paradigms even appear in *Gaudium et spes*, in whose composition Wojtyła was intimately involved.

⁵² Gillon, *Christ and Moral Theology* (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 1967), 42.

⁵³ “Vorbilder und Führer” in *Schriften aus dem Nachlass* (Bern: Francke, 1957), 272, as quoted by Gillon in *Christ and Moral Theology*, 43.

Although person-models may eventually become objects of reason, reflection and sentiment, their initial apprehension takes the form of an “emotional intuition” which is more or less identifiable with love.⁵⁴

Yet as Gillon acknowledges, a major objection typically arises at this point: adherence to a person-model does not really enter the realm of reason—and therefore morality—until it corresponds to some basic reflective criteria which stand independent of the person-model. Scheler himself concedes that to deny this fact would be to deny personal freedom. “There would, however, be one solution to all this,” Gillon writes: “and that would be to see in God himself the ‘person of value’ who is to constitute for us the principle by which we come to a knowledge of values and who is at the same time the perfect exemplar of their concrete realization.”⁵⁵ This identification would unite the person-model with the criteria by which their exemplary status is justified, thus foreclosing any possibility of a conflict. But Scheler rejects this solution, since for him God’s transcendence precludes his entry into the personal realm. For Scheler, “it is contradictory that a finite person should take as [the] personal exemplar of his acts an infinite person.”⁵⁶ The total involvement required by adherence (*Nachfolge*) to a person-model can only fully materialize within a relationship conforming to the personal order, which means that the moral agent must be able to enter into authentic *dialogue* with the “person of value.” Scheler rejects the possibility of personal dialogue with God for much the same reasons that Aquinas rejects the possibility of “friendship with God” in any univocal sense.⁵⁷ Here we begin to see the vital importance of the person of Christ for exemplarist theories of virtue. The hypostatic union of humanity and divinity in Christ opens up the possibility of identifying a genuinely personal exemplar with the transcendent criteria that substantiates it in the rational order. “For the Christian,” Gillon writes,

Christ [must be] something much more than the ‘hero’, the ‘genius’ and the ‘saint’ as analyzed by Scheler in his description of ‘persons of value’. Because he is God, Christ can be and in fact *is* the source of all value, he can make a claim to that absolute confidence, that to-

⁵⁴ This view bears notable resemblance to the one MacIntyre advances in *Dependent Rational Animals*—one which he appropriates in large part from contemporary discourse surrounding the “ethics of care”—namely that the development of human autonomy (“independent practical reasoning” in MacIntyre’s terms) presupposes an initial “heteronomy” of relational dependence. See *Dependent Rational Animals* (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1999), ch. 1, 1-11.

⁵⁵ Gillon, *Christ and Moral Theology*, 49.

⁵⁶ Gillon, *Christ and Moral Theology*, 50.

⁵⁷ See *III Sent.*, dist. 27, q.a.2 ad 4.

tal submission which the human heroes, and men of genius and saints cannot demand with the same right and in the same degree.⁵⁸

Yet can this Christologically grounded exemplarity cohere in any meaningful way with the approach Aquinas himself takes to human virtue?

Aquinas makes clear in his prologue to the *prima secundae* that he conceives of the human agent as a reflection of divine goodness in so far as it has been created *ad imaginem Dei*: in or according to the image of God. Although God's likeness is present in the activity of all created things as a metaphysical exemplar, human agents exhibit God's *image* through their own proper mode of reflective and self-directed action. Thus human creatures not only participate in God through their natural operations but do so *in concert* with God, who as the first Truth and sovereign Good becomes an object of those operations. With the incarnation, however, another more exalted possibility appears: not only can human beings participate in God freely and knowingly, but they can also do so directly. Thus Aquinas begins the *tertia pars* with the bracing claim that Jesus Christ has not only redeemed us from our sins, but also "showed us in His own person the way of Truth, whereby we may attain to the bliss of eternal life."⁵⁹

As Nicholas Healy remarks in his book *Thomas Aquinas: Theologian of the Christian Life*, "the event of Jesus Christ is [for Aquinas] a pedagogical as well as salvific act: God teaches us by his Word; Jesus Christ is the teacher."⁶⁰ The pedagogical dimension of this act, while rooted in his identity as the Word, encompasses all Christ's words and actions *as a human being*. Hence Aquinas affirms that "everything that Jesus said and did was in order to teach those around him."⁶¹ The humanity of Christ provides a unique point of focus for the moral life: in him we find not only an embodiment of human goodness, but an embodiment of the Good itself, which can at once serve as the foundation, measure and guide of human perfection. In this way, Christians can regard "following Christ" as the fundamental rule of the Christian life. Summarizing Aquinas's general view on this Christocentric obedience, Healy writes:

Thomas considered apostolic obedience to be something of far more account than any precept, rule, principle or system, all of which must give way to obedient following of Jesus Christ in our thinking, our action and the interpretation of our experience. Obedience to Christ

⁵⁸ Gillon, *Christ and Moral Theology*, 51.

⁵⁹ *ST I-II*, prolog.

⁶⁰ Nicholas M. Healy, *Thomas Aquinas: Theologian of the Christian Life* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), 29.

⁶¹ Healy, *Thomas Aquinas*, 29; see also *ST I-II* q. 40, a. 2.

is the highest point of perfection. (*Sup. Matt.* 19:21, n. 1598: *Hic est finis perfectionis*).⁶²

Aquinas's prioritization of Christ as exemplar and teacher seems to imply that for him, the bond between Christ and the disciple is more fundamental to human perfection than any other conceptual criteria which could stand over and against that relationship. At the same time, however, the life of discipleship does not consist in mere mimicry. Rather, the primary meaning of discipleship for Aquinas is participation in the mystery of the incarnation.

This participation takes a distinctive form, however. For Thomas all creatures in some way "imitate" the divine exemplar in so far as they proceed from God's wisdom:

For there cannot be anything that does not proceed, by a certain imitation, from God's wisdom as a first effective and formal principle—in the way that artifacts proceed from the wisdom of the craftsman. So, then, since the likeness of God's wisdom proceeds in degrees from the highest things, which have a greater participation in His likeness, all the way to the lowest things, which have a lesser participation, God's wisdom is said to have a 'procession' and 'motion' toward those things.⁶³

This metaphysical "imitation" is categorically different from the kind of imitation commonly associated with adherence to a person-model. Practical imitation of this sort does not imply any metaphysical disproportion, whereas the metaphysical "imitation" Aquinas is talking about clearly does. Hence Aquinas speaks only of "a certain imitation" (*per quondam imitationem*) and then introduces a more precise term for this type of similitude: participation. Although as finite creatures we are unable to reproduce divine attributes, we can *contain a part* of them (*partem capere*) in proportion to the limits of our nature.⁶⁴ In the case of human beings, for instance, we "contain a part of" the divine in the exercise of our reason, which Aquinas also takes to be the primary meaning of the doctrine that we are "created in God's image." Yet as Gillon points out,

⁶² Healy, *Thomas Aquinas*, 32.

⁶³ *ST I-II* q. 9, a. 1 ad 2.

⁶⁴ The most important modern studies on Aquinas's doctrine of participation are Cornelio Fabro's *La nozione metafisica di partecipazione secondo S. Tommaso d'Aquino* (Turin: Società editrice internazionale, 1950) and Rudi A. te Velde's more recent *Participation & Substantiality in Thomas Aquinas* (Leiden: Brill, 1995). For a more concise account of participation in Aquinas, as well as a more comprehensive review of the literature on this topic, see Ch. 4 of John F. Wippel's *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2000), "Participation and the Problem of the One and the Many," 94-131.

The image also implies degrees. In man and in the angel, in spite of their greatness, the image remains very imperfect. The Son of God alone is the perfect *image* of the Father, whereas the angel and man are rather *ad imaginem Dei*, in the image of God, [and] not the image [itself].⁶⁵

Thus for Aquinas, the human will is conformable to the divine will, yet not *per aequiparantiae* (by means of equality) but only rather *per imitationem* (by means of imitation):

The human will cannot be conformed to the will of God so as to equal it, but only so as to imitate it. In like manner human knowledge is conformed to the Divine knowledge, in so far as it knows truth: and human action is conformed to the Divine, in so far as it is becoming to the agent: and this by way of imitation, not by way of equality.⁶⁶

This distinction paves the way for Aquinas's account of the unique manner of participation which the incarnation makes possible.

With the incarnation, an entirely new mode of participation has been opened up to us: in Jesus Christ we behold not only one who acts according to the divine image, but the divine Image itself. The incarnation therefore makes possible a form of *univocal* participation in which there is no disproportion of nature. The created grace of the person of Christ correlates directly to our created nature, such that humans receive it according to its specific manner of existence in the person of Jesus. Since Christ's words and deeds represent the most perfect example of human participation in the divine goodness, our own imitation of those words and deeds (by means of grace) comprises the highest possible form of human participation in divine perfection.⁶⁷ In this way, the hypostatic union ensures an unbreakable (though mysterious) ontological link between our univocal participation in Christ's humanity and our analogical participation in his divinity. Thus Gillon concludes that "it can be said that [although] the grace of Christ is infinitely more perfect than ours... it is *of the same nature*: in him as in us it is a [human] participation of the divine nature."⁶⁸ The imitation of Christ therefore comprises in one and the same mode of human activity both the pinnacle of human virtue and the supreme embodiment of the divine goodness in the created realm.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Gillon, *Christ and Moral Theology*, 64.

⁶⁶ *ST I-II* q. 19, a. 9. ad 1.

⁶⁷ Gillon, *Christ and Moral Theology*, 67.

⁶⁸ Gillon, *Christ and Moral Theology*, 105.

⁶⁹ This distinctive form of participation in God through Christ draws the doctrine of metaphysical exemplarity, which Aquinas affirms sporadically throughout his corpus, directly into his account of human action. See, for example, *Sup. Ioan.* 1:10, n.

Having largely bracketed in his ethical treatise the significance of the person of Christ for the moral life, Aquinas boldly asserts his primacy in the *tertia pars*. The participation in divine life to which we are called in Christ is made possible only by the mystery of the incarnation: by the words and deeds of Jesus as they occurred in human history. Thus Aquinas concludes in *ST III.8.5ad1* that the grace required for the attainment of this final end “is not given us by means of human nature, but solely by the personal action of Christ Himself.” Yet Aquinas does not view this “personal action” as something only incidentally related to the proper content of the Christian moral life. Rather, Christ’s human actions show us the precise way in which human activity may become a fitting mode of participating in God himself. As Nicholas Healy explains, Christ’s actions reveal the form God’s grace takes in the context of human agency:

Grace is mediated to us by Christ’s humanity, which is the ‘instrument of the Godhead’, the means whereby creation is drawn into full participation in the life of the triune God (*ST III.1.2*). Any instrument shapes the work of the agent who uses it. So God’s salvific activity—grace—bears the mark of Christ’s humanity. And this is as it should be, argues Thomas, because Jesus is fittingly the mediator in his manner of life, his nature and his person. His actions are [therefore] morally exemplary: when we act in obedience to him, we act fittingly. And in acting fittingly through his grace, we become fitting [*conveniens*] because we become conformed to his humanity, and so become adopted sons and daughters in the image of the Son.⁷⁰

CONCLUSION

Aquinas’s own account of the moral exemplarity of Christ displays a striking congruence with the accounts of exemplarity advocated by Zagzebski and Melina. Assigning to exemplars more generally a fundamental role in moral agency would therefore help to clarify the way in which the exemplarity of Christ *perfects* human agency *qua* human. This new “christomorphic” mode of participating in the Good constitutes a first principle of theology, in so far as the divine wisdom reflected in the economy of salvation constitutes a form of God’s own self-knowledge. Thus the contingent historical events of Christ’s life assume a kind of necessity in the realm of “theological science,” since they are in fact the means God has chosen for the redemption and perfection of the human race. Grounded as they are in God’s own revealed self-knowledge, their necessity cannot be

136, in which Aquinas states that “the whole world is nothing other than a kind of representation of the divine wisdom” made know through light of God’s Word (as cited by Healy in *Thomas Aquinas*, 39).

⁷⁰ Healy, *Thomas Aquinas*, 38. See also Aquinas, *Sup. Rom.* 8:29, nos. 704-6, which Healy also cites to support his line of reasoning.

proven according to any higher principles that would supercede them. These concrete events are therefore as irreducible for the science of theology as the first principles of logic are for the Aristotelian sciences. Though they remain historical and human in nature, their certainty surpasses any and all modes of human knowledge.⁷¹ Thus without in any way compromising the methodological integrity with which Aquinas treats the natural structure of human action in his ethical treatise, one may conclude that for Aquinas the Christian moral life receives its full intelligibility only in the light of the historical events surrounding the incarnation of the divine Word.

Yet beyond this Christological focus, the question still remains as to whether and to what extent there is room in Aquinas's moral theory for "the principle of personal exemplarity" (*das Vorbildsprinzip*). Gillon for his part concludes that a broad accommodation of this sort is not in fact possible, at least in so far as one considers Aquinas's treatment of the structure of human action taken in itself. Here reason and reason alone determines the nature of the human act in light of its object, end and circumstances.⁷² One could not without significant distortion add to these three "coordinates" a fourth referring to the act's level of conformity with a person-model. As to this particular question there can be little doubt. "But matters change altogether," Gillon adds,

If, instead of considering the human act in isolation and in all its individuality, we seek to examine *the totality of a human life* and its complete development, which finds in death its total fulfillment and its limit. For death is 'the end of being in the world'. This end, which belongs essentially to existence, to the very possibility of being, limits and determines the total possibility 'of being in the world'.⁷³

In his ethical treatise, Aquinas focuses primarily and deliberately on what makes human acts human, and how some patterns of action perfect human agents in their characteristic manner of existence. Aquinas thus presumes that there is a common underlying structure that characterizes all human action, though he also admits to the explanatory limits of this common ground. Thus for him, the structure itself cannot supply the ultimate meaning of human life taken *as a whole*. A broader context of intelligibility is necessary for questions of that kind, which perhaps explains why Aquinas places his ethical treatise *after* his treatise on "man's last end."⁷⁴ This supernatural destiny can only be discerned from a perspective "over and above" the natural virtues. As mentioned above, human actions may be regarded

⁷¹ Healy, *Thomas Aquinas*, 39.

⁷² Gillon, *Christ and Moral Theology*, 78.

⁷³ Gillon, *Christ and Moral Theology*, 79.

⁷⁴ Cf. *ST* I-II, prologue.

from this perspective as “exemplary” in a merely metaphysical sense, assimilating man “to the mind of God by an unending pact in so far, namely, as he imitates it.”⁷⁵ Yet for the Christian, this exemplarity involves more than just brute similitude; “it is [also] a question of imitating the ‘living’ God, who manifested himself in history.”⁷⁶ As the great Tübingen theologian Theodor Steinbuchel put it, the Christian “does not come to grips with an impersonal cosmos, but rather he is confronted with a God who is person.”⁷⁷ And so, unlike Aristotle’s Absolute, the God of Jesus Christ demands a personal response in the realm of human action. This personal dimension becomes particularly significant in light of the absolute character of Christian moral demands.

As St. Paul points out, the prospect of dying for another—and most especially dying for an enemy—makes little sense when considered from a “worldly” or purely natural perspective (Rm. 5:7-8). The intelligibility of such an act only becomes apparent when considered from a supernatural perspective, namely from the perspective of God’s salvific love made manifest in Jesus Christ. These two perspectives are intertwined in Aquinas’s moral theory, even if in his ethical writings the natural is given methodological pride of place. This methodological emphasis explains in large part the relative absence of personal exemplarity in Aquinas’s moral theory. When it comes to the supernatural perspective, however, personal exemplarity comes to the fore. “On this plane of supernatural morality,” Gillon concludes,

There is something fundamentally exact in the ethics of personal exemplarity. St. Thomas writes that the very first conversion of man to God is through faith: *man’s first turning to God is brought about through faith*.⁷⁸ Now, faith is essentially the adhering of the mind to the testimony of a person, and in the case of divine faith, it is an adhering to Christ, to the person of Christ, God and man.⁷⁹

While from a “natural” or philosophical perspective, we are dealing with the various expressions and developments of a common nature, from the theological perspective, the person-model is primary, since the particular nature whose full expression serves as the final end of action is only fully accessible through faith. Thus the imitation of Christ can serve as the basis for Christian ethics in a way that imitation of “person-models” cannot for a purely natural account of mo-

⁷⁵ *ST I-II* q. 61, a. 5, as quoted in Gillon, *Christ and Moral Theology*, 81.

⁷⁶ Gillon, *Christ and Moral Theology*, 81.

⁷⁷ *Religion und Moral im Licht personaler christlicher Existenz* (Frankfurt am Main: J. Knecht, 1951), 164, as quoted in Gillon, 21.

⁷⁸ *ST I-II* q. 11, a. 3-4.

⁷⁹ Gillon, *Christ and Moral Theology*, 137.

rality. Aquinas's moral theory is suffused with the exemplarity of Christ, in so far as

The sacred humanity of Christ and the mysteries of his life, exercise a *universal instrumental causality* on each and every one of the structures of the supernatural life. Through this instrumental efficient causality Christ produces in these structures... a specifically Christological modality.⁸⁰

Though Aquinas himself expatiates little on this modality in his ethical writings, it nonetheless appears in his portrayal of the moral life taken in its broadest scope. In his treatment of the essential structures of the life of grace, such as the infused moral virtues and the gifts of the Holy Spirit, one discovers not simply an *ad hoc* addition to an autonomous moral philosophy, but rather a depiction of human nature imprinted with the image of the person of Jesus Christ. Inasmuch as Aquinas points to Christ as the "universal instrumental cause" of this transfigured life, it should not surprise us to see him point to Christ as the universal model for human virtue, the perfect embodiment of human goodness. This exemplary modality finds its most complete and ultimate expression in Christ's passion and death, which Aquinas takes to be not only the salvific communication of divine love to a fallen world, but also the ultimate exemplar of human perfection as well. **M**

⁸⁰ Gillon, *Christ and Moral Theology*, 139.