

Veritatis Splendor After Thirty Years: Exposition and Critique

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Abstract: Some thirty years ago, as an antidote to widespread dissent from Catholic sexual teaching among many theologians and faithful, Pope John Paul II published his encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*. His stated purpose was “to reflect on the whole of the Church’s moral teaching with the precise goal of recalling certain fundamental truths of Catholic doctrine which, in the present circumstances [a ‘new situation’] risk being distorted or denied.” In this essay, we focus on John Paul’s teaching on natural law in *Veritatis Splendor* and offer several critiques of it.

THE MAJORITY OF CATHOLICS AND CATHOLIC THEOLOGIAN DO not accept official teaching on many sexual ethical issues. These teachings are grounded in the Magisterium’s interpretation of natural law. That dissent became very public with the publication in 1968 of Paul VI’s encyclical letter *Humanae Vitae* and its claim that “each and every marital act [of sexual intercourse] must of necessity retain its intrinsic relationship to the procreation of human life” (no. 10). This particular doctrine, the encyclical continues, “is based on the inseparable connection, established by God, which man on his own initiative may not break between the unitive significance and the procreative significance which are both inherent in the marriage act [of sexual intercourse]” (no. 12).¹

Humanae Vitae was greeted with worldwide dissent, and that dissent has not only been sustained but has also grown. In a major study by Univision Communications in 2014, some 80 percent of Catholics worldwide were ignoring its ruling. The number dissenting in France was 94 percent, in Brazil 93 percent, in Spain 90 percent, in Mexico 88 percent, and in the United States 79 percent.² As an

¹ We recognize the lack of inclusive language in the official English translation of Church documents. Although we disagree with the exclusive male-dominated language, we will follow the official translation throughout our essay.

² Francis X. Rocca, “After 50 Years, a Pope’s Birth-Control Message Still Divides Catholics,” *Wall Street Journal* (May 10, 2018), www.wsj.com/articles/after-50-years-a-popes-birth-control-message-still-divides-catholics-1525962322.

antidote to the widespread dissent on sexual morals (*Veritatis Splendor*, no. 4), John Paul II published his encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, setting forth for the first and, indeed, the only time in a papal encyclical what he considered to be an orthodox theory of Catholic moral theology. In this essay, we present John Paul II's treatment of natural law in *Veritatis Splendor* and argue that natural law, as the Pope describes it, is not as new as he might intend and suffers from many of the same drawbacks suffered by a traditional Catholic theory of natural law.

VERITATIS SPLENDOR

John Paul II states at the very beginning of his encyclical the Catholic position that “the splendor of truth shines forth in all the works of the Creator and, in a special way, in man, created in the image and likeness of God” (*Veritatis Splendor*, Introduction). That assertion runs all through and controls the message of his encyclical. He notes, however, that “a new situation has come about within the Christian community itself, which has experienced the spread of numerous doubts and objections of a human and psychological, social and cultural, religious and even properly theological nature” (no. 4). In response to this new situation, he says, his encyclical has

the aim of treating “more fully and more deeply the issues regarding the very foundations of moral theology,” foundations which are being undermined by certain present-day tendencies. . . . Certain of the Church's moral teachings are being found simply unacceptable; and the Magisterium itself is considered capable of intervening in matters of morality only in order to “exhort consciences” and to “propose values,” in the light of which each individual will independently make his or her decisions and life choices. (no. 5)

Veritatis Splendor opens with two claims that control what follows, namely, that women and men can know truth because God has shown it to them, and that the encyclical and its author, John Paul II, are setting forth Catholic moral truth. For the Pope, the splendor of the truth “enlightens man's intelligence and shapes his freedom, leading him to know and love the Lord” (no. 1). The question that has arisen throughout human history and been famously formulated by Pilate arises here too: “What is truth?” (John 19:38). There have been many answers in intellectual history to that crucial question, but here we reflect on only two, one religious and the other philosophical.

The Christian religious answer to that question is easy and straightforward. It was given by Jesus in answer to a question from his Apostle Thomas. His answer could not be clearer: “I am the way, and

the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). In his life, actions, and relationships, Jesus is the truth for all to see. "The decisive answer to every one of man's questions, his religious and moral questions in particular," John Paul II argues, and we agree, "is given by Jesus Christ or rather is Jesus Christ himself" (no. 2). Man and woman, "as a result of that mysterious original sin" dwell in a "darkness of error" (no. 1). Jesus dispels that darkness by his way, his truth, and his life. "Following Christ," therefore, "is the essential and primordial foundation of Christian [truth and] morality" (no. 19). Jesus asks his followers to follow specifically along the path of love: "This is my commandment that you love one another *as* I have loved you" (John 15:12). The "*as*" in that invitation, John Paul II insists correctly, "requires imitation of Jesus and of his love" (no. 19). For that to happen, of course, Jesus must first be known and understood, and that brings us to the philosophical question of what it is to know and understand.

God, John Paul II teaches, has already given an answer to the philosophical question of what it is to know and understand by creating man and woman and wisely ordering them to their final end through the law inscribed in their nature, the natural law. This natural law "is nothing other than the light of understanding infused in us by God, whereby we understand what must be done and what must be avoided. God gave this light and this law to man at creation." He also gave it "in the history of Israel, particularly in the 'ten words,' the commandments of Sinai" (no. 12). He also gave it, as we have already noted, in the life, actions, and relationships of Jesus, his incarnate Son, who could ultimately reply to the rich young man's question, "What good must I do to have eternal life?," with the simplest of answers: "Follow me" (no. 6; see Matthew 19:16–21). Follow me in my life, actions, and relationships.

The natural law receives its name "not because it refers to the nature of irrational beings, but because the reason that promulgates it is proper to human nature" (no. 42). The human, rational creature "is subject to divine providence in the most excellent way, insofar as it partakes of a share of providence, being provident both for itself and others. Thus it has a share of the Eternal Reason . . . [and] this participation of the eternal law in the rational creature is called natural law" (no. 43). Human reason and human law are essentially subject to divine reason and law. Leo XIII appealed to the higher reason of the divine lawgiver and argued that no prescription of human reason could have "the force of law unless it were the voice and the interpreter of some higher reason to which our spirit and freedom must be subject" (no. 44). It follows that the natural law "is the same thing as the eternal law, implanted in rational creatures, and inclining them to their right action and end; and can be nothing else but the eternal reason of God,

the Creator and Ruler of all the world” (*Libertas Praestantissimum*, no. 8). We are now in a position to understand the meaning of the natural law. “It refers to man’s proper and primordial nature, the nature of the human person, which is the person himself in the unity of soul and body, in the unity of his spiritual and biological inclinations and of all the other specific characteristics necessary for the pursuit of his end” (*Veritatis Splendor*, no. 50). Thus understood, the natural law “does not allow for any division between freedom and nature,” as is frequently argued. “Indeed, these two realities are harmoniously bound together, and each is intimately linked to the other” (no. 50).

At this point, our inclination is to deal with conscience, for “in the depths of his conscience man detects a [natural] law which he does not impose on himself, but which holds him to obedience. Always summoning him to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience can when necessary speak to his heart more specifically: do this, shun that” (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 16; *Veritatis Splendor*, no. 54). Since conscience will be dealt with more specifically and extensively elsewhere in this issue, we content ourselves with one single but crucial statement for this essay: “The judgment of conscience is a practical judgment, which makes known what man must do or not do. . . . This first principle of practical reason is part of the natural law; indeed, it constitutes the very foundation of the natural law” (*Veritatis Splendor*, no. 59).

IN SEARCH OF A UNIVERSAL ETHIC

Given its foundational and essential importance in the Catholic moral theological tradition, it is critical to understand how natural law is to be understood, which is brilliantly articulated in a recent document from the International Theological Commission (ITC), *In Search of a Universal Ethic: A New Look at the Natural Law*.³ The ITC makes the contemporary Catholic position clear from the beginning of its document, inviting those who ponder the ultimate foundations of morality “to consider the resources that a renewed presentation of the doctrine of the natural law contains. This law affirms that persons and human communities are capable, *in the light*

³ International Theological Commission, *In Search of a Universal Ethic: A New Look at the Natural Law*, www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20090520_legge-naturale_en.html. We refer to this document as quasi-magisterial because of its statutory relationship to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith; see John Paul II’s *Motu Proprio Tredecim Anni*, w2.vatican.va/content/john_paul_ii/en/motu_proprio/documents/hf_jp_ii_motu_proprio06081982_tredecim_anni.html.

of reason, of discerning the fundamental orientation of moral action in conformity with the very *nature of the human subject* and of expressing these orientations in a normative fashion in the form of precepts or commandments” (no. 9, emphasis added).

At the beginning of this section, we wish to draw attention to the use of two words throughout *In Search of a Universal Ethic*, for these words both point to the ITC’s presentation of natural law as something dynamic, “far from a static given” (no. 64). The words are *inclination*, including the verb *incline*, and *orientation*, including the verb *orient*. *Inclination* and *incline* are used thirty-one times in the English version of the document, and *orientation* and *orient* twenty-four times.⁴ There can be no doubt, therefore, how important both words are for the document’s authors. We agree with William Mattison III that *inclination* “is used primarily to refer to those ‘givens’ discerned by practical reasoning.”⁵ Human persons are morally inclined to, or actively inclined toward, certain givens discerned as the result of a rational search of practical reasoning, and those givens are part of the natural law. The word *orient* is used in a more active sense, as something moving a person towards her fulfillment. “By the dynamisms that the Creator Word has inscribed in the innermost part of beings, he orients them to their full realization. This dynamic orientation is none other than the divine government that realizes within time the plan of divine providence, i.e., the eternal law” (no. 69).

“Every creature,” the document continues, “in its own manner, participates in the *Logos*. Man, since he is defined by reason or *logos*, participates in it in an eminent manner. In fact, by his reason, he is capable of interiorizing the divine intentions manifested in the nature of things. He formulates them for himself under the form of a moral law that inspires and orients his actions” (no. 70). This reason-as-nature approach is the ancient Catholic approach to morality recovered. The ITC details the roots of this approach in the older moral tradition (chapter 1) but, given space restrictions, we choose to begin our analysis in the medieval world. The Scholastics, in general, consider reason to be the human characteristic *par excellence* and frequently speak of the natural law as being tantamount to reason. Aquinas, for instance, argues that what is distinctive about the human person is the capacity for rational self-direction (ST I-II, q. 1, a. 6) and

⁴ See William C. Mattison III, “Part of the ‘New Look’ at the Natural Law: The Use of ‘Orientation’ Alongside ‘Inclination,’” in *Searching for a Universal Ethic: Multidisciplinary, Ecumenical, and Interreligious Responses to the Catholic Natural Law Tradition*, ed. John Berkman and William C. Mattison III (Eerdmans, 2014), 284n6 and 287n13.

⁵ Mattison, “Part of the ‘New Look’ at the Natural Law,” 285.

that, while every creature acts in accordance with rational principles established by the Creator, only rational creatures are capable of following rational principles (ST I-II, q. 91, a. 2, ad 3). This Thomistic stance, which Jean Porter correctly describes as broadly Scholastic, is encapsulated in the phrase “reason as nature, which appears to have been first used by Philip the Chancellor.”⁶ Around 1188, the distinguished medieval canonist, Huguccio of Ferrara, sums up this stance. “The natural law is said to be reason, that is to say, a natural power of the soul by which the human person distinguishes between good and evil, choosing good and rejecting evil. And reason is said to be a law because it commands, also because it binds.” It is said to be natural “because reason is one of the natural goods, or because it agrees with the highest nature, and does not dissent from it.”⁷ To embrace reason as a source of moral wisdom, Huguccio judges, is to embrace the natural law, and this is precisely what most contemporary Catholic natural law theologians do with, however, “a new look.”

Jean Porter argues that, in contradistinction to the neo-Thomists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, medieval natural law theorists, including Aquinas, “did not attempt to derive moral principles from a supposedly self-evident and fixed conception of human nature.”⁸ For them, “the natural law in its primary sense was identified either with reason or with the most basic principles of action, which were in turn linked to the image of God, that is, the capacity for moral judgment found in all men and women.”⁹ Germain Grisez and John Finnis, the founders of what is called the New Natural Law Theory, agree, teaching that nature, understood as what is pre- or non-rational, stands in contrast to reason and that moral terms are derived from reason alone.¹⁰ Already sixteen years ago, we argued that “God has created an orderly universe, and every created thing within that universe participates in the eternal law according to its nature. Natural law is the participation of humans in the eternal law through reason.”¹¹ In *Veritatis Splendor*, John Paul II agrees, arguing that thus the rational creature “has a share of the Eternal Reason, whereby it

⁶ Jean Porter, *Natural and Divine Law: Reclaiming the Tradition for Christian Ethics* (Eerdmans, 1999), 87.

⁷ Odon Lottin, *Le droit naturel chez saint Thomas D'Aquin et ses prédécesseurs*, 2nd ed. (Beyart, 1931), 109.

⁸ Porter, *Natural and Divine Law*, 17.

⁹ Porter, *Natural and Divine Law*, 17.

¹⁰ See John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2011); Germain Grisez, “The First Principle of Practical Reason: A Commentary on *Summa Theologiae* Ia IIae, q. 94, a. 2,” in *Natural Law Forum* 10 (1965): 162–201.

¹¹ Todd A. Salzman and Michael G. Lawler, *The Sexual Person: Toward a Renewed Catholic Anthropology* (Georgetown University Press, 2008), 62.

has a natural inclination to its proper act and end. This participation of the eternal law in the rational creature is called natural law” (no. 43).

Catholic moral theory, as the ITC document lays out, has largely moved away from a focus on a fixed “human nature” to an evolving “rational human person” (nos. 113–115). The once narrow, classicist understanding of human nature and natural law is in the process of being transformed into a broader, historically conscious, rational, and personalist understanding. The former defines the morality of acts based on the physical structure of those acts; sexual intercourse, for instance, is moral only when it is for procreation within a marital relationship. The latter defines the morality of acts based on the meaning of those acts for persons in relationship. Sexual intercourse, for instance, is moral when it is to celebrate and enhance the love between two partners, even when procreation is impossible, as it is for most of the life of every human female. Although Catholic moral theology has moved beyond physicalism and theoretically embraces personalism, there continues to be an epistemological distinction and ontological prioritization in various personalist accounts. Whereas John Paul II’s personalism prioritizes the biological over the personal in his “ontological complementarity,”¹² we and other personalists prioritize the personal over the biological. In the former, the biological genitalia, penis and vagina, are the *sine qua non* for personal complementarity; in the latter, the personal looks at the human person holistically, including sexual orientation, to discern the appropriate genitalia, penis-vagina, penis-penis, or vagina-vagina, depending on a person’s sexual orientation, for realizing truly human sexual acts.¹³ Despite claims that John Paul II’s theology of the body or official magisterial sexual teaching is not physicalist, both prioritize the biological over the relational in the absolute sexual doctrines that prohibit any non-reproductive marital sexual acts.

The ITC rejects a most important and, for some, much-contested fact, namely, that reason *deduces* “the precepts of the natural law, beginning from the definition of the essence [nature] of the human being.” In reality, we have no access to unembellished pure nature; we experience nature only as interpreted and socially constructed by rational, social beings.¹⁴ When we derive moral obligations from nature, we are actually deriving them from our interpretation of nature. Porter, therefore, is correct in her judgment that “a contemporary

¹² John Paul II, *Letter to Women*. See also, Pontificium Consilium Pro Laicis, *Men and Women: Diversity and Mutual Complementarity*.

¹³ See chapter four in Salzman and Lawler, *The Sexual Person*. We note here that the ITC distinguishes John Paul II’s perspective from physicalism, a different interpretation from ours (*In Search of a Universal Ethic*, no. 79).

¹⁴ Porter, *Nature as Reason*, 117.

appropriation of the Scholastic concept of the natural law would undoubtedly go beyond the Scholastics in recognizing the element of human construction in the development of social practices and mores.”¹⁵ The ITC does precisely that and highlights its reason for doing so. “Oriented by the persons who surround him, permeated by the culture in which he is immersed, the person recognizes certain ways of behaving and of thinking as values to pursue, laws to observe, examples to imitate, visions of the world to accept. Social and cultural context exercises a decisive role in the education in moral values” (no. 38). In plain language, the human, rational construction of natural law is culturally and historically influenced.

Every moral norm derived from natural law is not neutrally derived from a static human nature but interpreted from an evolving understanding of human nature perceived and understood through historical and/or cultural perspectives. The ITC is correct: “in morality, pure deduction by syllogism is not adequate. The more the moralist confronts concrete situations, the more he must have recourse to the wisdom of experience, an experience that integrates the contributions of the other sciences and is nourished by contact with men and women engaged in the action” (no. 54). The specification of natural law does not, indeed cannot, take place through syllogistic deduction but through a communal reflection on human experience and tradition.

It is inevitable that different groups of equally rational but historically and culturally diverse human beings may arrive at different interpretations of nature and the moral obligation deriving from nature, on the one hand, and that any given interpretation may be either right or wrong, on the other. This fact has been demonstrated time and again in history, including Catholic theological and ethical history (no. 53).¹⁶ *In Search of a Universal Ethic* observes “convergences” in the wisdom traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, China, Africa, and Islam (nos. 13–17). The social scientific enterprise known as the sociology of knowledge also forefronts the origin of human knowledge in human culture, history, and experience. One of the founders of that discipline, Alfred Schutz, presents its taken-for-granted principle: “It is the *meaning* of our experiences and not the ontological [physical] structure of the objects that constitute [human] reality.”¹⁷ “The potter, and not the pot,” Alfred North Whitehead adds

¹⁵ Porter, *Natural and Divine Law*, 307.

¹⁶ See Michael G. Lawler, *What Is and What Ought to Be* (Continuum, 2005), 127–129; Todd A. Salzman, *What Are They Saying About Catholic Ethical Method?* (Paulist, 2003).

¹⁷ Alfred Schutz, *Collected Papers* (Martinus Nijhoff, 1964–1967), 230. See also Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Doubleday, 1966).

judiciously and metaphorically, “is responsible for the shape of the pot.”¹⁸ The uninterpreted experience of nature, as of every other objective reality, is restricted to the mere noting of its facticity and is void of meaning, a quality that does not inhere in nature but is assigned to it by rational beings in interpretive acts. The decisive criterion for the meaning of any human action, including any moral action, is the project of the actor. Meaning is what is meant by the *actor*, always to be understood not as an Enlightenment individual but an Aristotelian-Thomistic social being. The Catholic natural law tradition is fully committed to a universalist, objectivist ethic grounded in human nature, reason, and creation. Yet, it also recognizes the particularity of these foundations, influenced by history, culture, communities, familial relations, and power structures.¹⁹

The sociology of knowledge reveals that individuals and the society in which they live are not two completely separate and independent realities but rather conjoined realities in an ongoing dialectic of interdependence. Human society, with its symbols, meanings, and values, is a human product and nothing but a human product. “Despite the objectivity that marks the social world in human experience, it does not thereby acquire an ontological status apart from the human activity that produced it.”²⁰ And yet this humanly produced social world, including the natural law, constantly acts back on its producers, conforming them to itself and controlling their understanding, judgment, and action. Thus, in their life expressions, humans are simultaneously social products and actors who modify and give new form to the society that produced them. The ITC is seeking to articulate something similar regarding the natural law. The relationship between men and women, the producers, and the social world, their product, is dialectical. Social reality is a product of human activity and humans, in their social and personal reality, are products of social reality. The dialectic tension between humans and society has three moments: a moment of externalization, a moment of objectivation, and a moment of internalization.

Humans do not have a given relationship to the world that is out, there, now, and real; they must establish one. In the process of establishing this relationship, they simultaneously produce both a *human* world and themselves as social beings in this world. The world produced is called, broadly, culture, the totality of human products,

¹⁸ Alfred North Whitehead, *Symbolism: Its Meaning and Effect* (Putnam's, 1959), 8.

¹⁹ Todd A. Salzman, “Natural Law and Basic Goods: Particular to Someone Everywhere,” in *Moral Theology: New Directions and Fundamental Issues*, ed. James Keating (Paulist, 2004), 252.

²⁰ Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, 60.

both material and non-material.²¹ Men and women produce tools of every kind. They also produce language and, via this language, complex constructions of meaning that permeate every aspect of their lives. They produce, in Schutz's terminology, complex and finite provinces of meanings;²² in Lonergan's terminology, they produce perspectives,²³ a concept we shall return to at the end of this essay. Society is part of that complex of meanings, the part that structures men's and women's ongoing relations with their fellow men and women. Humans define themselves, and are socially defined, through the opportunities and constraints others set before them as either socially appropriate and right or socially inappropriate and wrong. "It is human nature," David Martin asserts, "to grow real in the mirror of other people's eyes."²⁴ As an element of the cultural meaning complex, society fully shares in culture's character as a human product. Society and its citizens are both constituted, socially constructed, and maintained by the activity of human beings and have no meaningful reality apart from such activity.

Social reality, like natural law, then, is an externalized product of the human animal. To speak, however, of an externalized product is already to imply that the product achieves a certain autonomy from its producer. The process of transformation of human products into a world that not only derives from humans but also confronts them as an objective reality apart from them is called objectivation. The product of objectivation becomes something as out, there, now, and real as any physical object, endowed with the status of objective reality. For the material products of human activity, that objectivity is readily grasped. Men and women construct automobiles, computers, houses, and cakes, and by their actions, increase the totality of physical objects that confront them as out, there, now, and real, independent of them. So it is, too, with the human products they produce. They construct a language and then find that their verbal communication is controlled by that language and its rules of syntax. They construct laws, natural and civil, and then feel guilty when they contravene them. They fashion structures of meaning and institutions that then confront them as powerful forces in the external world apart from their activities. Institutions such as family, education, politics, economics, and religion; meaning structures such as mythology, philosophy,

²¹ The use of "culture" in this broad sense to refer to the totality of human products is adopted from the discipline of American cultural anthropology. Sociologists tend to use it in a sense restricted to symbolic spheres. The broader sense is more appropriate to the argument of this essay.

²² Schutz, *Collected Papers*, I: 230.

²³ Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (University of Toronto Press, 1990), 217.

²⁴ David Martin, *Reflections on Sociology and Theology* (Clarendon, 1997), 48.

theology, and science; roles and identities such as parent, child, theologian, and scientist; all these are apprehended as out, there, now, and real phenomena in the social world apart from human activity, though both they and the social world are nothing but the products of creative human activity.

Morality, the ITC asserts, “deals with contingent [objectivated, human] realities that evolve over time” (*In Search of a Universal Ethic*, no. 53). Moral reflection, then, “must descend into the concreteness of action to throw its light on it. But the more it faces concrete and contingent situations, the more its conclusions are affected by a note of variability and uncertainty” (no. 53). Thomas Aquinas recognized this contingent character of morality. Practical reason, he wrote, “deals with contingent realities, about which human actions are concerned. Therefore, although there is some necessity in the general principles, the more we descend to particular matters, the more we encounter indeterminacy.” The devil, Aquinas is arguing in his academic language, is always in the details. The variety of particular matters and actions in both history and culture means that “truth or practical rectitude is not the same for all in its particular applications, but only in its general principles. . . . And here, the more one descends to particulars the more the indeterminacy grows” (ST I-II, q. 94, a. 4).²⁵ Different objectivated particularities and concreteness will present themselves to different historical and cultural actors, and those different actors living in different historical and cultural worlds may define the meaning of an action in radically different ways. A question then arises: which action is true and moral? Common sense suggests that something is the same for each and every historically and culturally different actor, but common sense cannot determine how that sameness is to be understood.

The divinely created goodness of human nature, a fact that should never be ignored or forgotten in any discussion of natural law, is undoubtedly the ultimate ground for human morality but, in Porter’s apposite articulation, human nature also “under-determines morality.” Porter articulates what many Catholic moralists, including ourselves, have pointed out, namely, that there can be “more than one natural morality. Indeed, there are many such, because every indigenous moral tradition should be considered as a distinctive form of natural morality.”²⁶ Common sense cannot determine which of these moral traditions and actions is really true and moral. Only rational research

²⁵ For the first time ever in an official magisterial document, Francis approvingly cites this passage from Aquinas in *Amoris Laetitia* (no. 304), recognizing the importance of the particular historical, cultural, and relational context when discerning if, or how, a norm applies in a particular situation.

²⁶ Porter, *Natural and Divine Law*, 308.

and examination can, we suggest, an approach affirmed by the ITC (*In Search of a Universal Ethic*, no. 61).²⁷ The human subject “must discover the ‘right rule of acting’ and establish an adequate norm of action.” The “right rule follows from preliminary principles. Here one thinks of the first principles of practical reason, but it also falls to the moral virtues to open and connaturalize both the will and the sensitive affectivity with regard to different human goods, and so to indicate to the prudent person the ends to be pursued in the midst of the flux of everyday events” (no. 57). The ITC goes on to insist that “prudence is indispensable to the moral subject because of the flexibility required to adapt universal moral principles to the diversity of situations” (no. 58). From both nature and serious research on nature, reliable moral norms can be constructed, especially in open dialogue.²⁸ Any discussion of moral norms, therefore, must include radical research, both scientific and theological, careful attention and interpretation, and open and honest dialogue, such as the synodal process initiated by Francis, between the supporters of different interpretations of nature and the moral norms derived from it.

We summarize the contemporary Catholic approach to natural law in four statements. First, there is a meta-ethical level of nature that provides first principles known by “an innate intellectual disposition called *synderesis*” (ST I, q. 79, a. 12; see *In Search of a Universal Ethic*, no. 39). Second, there is a normative moral level on which these meta-ethical first principles are concretized by rational human persons in different times and cultures into specific moral norms. Third, flowing from both the meta-ethical and normative ethical levels, there is a level of concrete moral judgments made by rational human beings in concrete life situations. Fourth, the judgment of conscience, as John Paul II asserts, “states ‘in an ultimate way’ whether a certain particular kind of behavior is in conformity with the [natural] law; it formulates the proximate norm of the morality of a voluntary act, ‘applying the objective law [norm] to a particular case’” (*Veritatis Splendor*, no. 59). This Catholic perspective on the natural law, the ITC states, “gives an account of the historicity of the natural law, whose concrete applications can vary over time. At the same time, it opens the door to the reflection of moralists, inviting them to dialogue and discussion. This is all the more necessary because in morality pure deduction by

²⁷ See Lisa Sowle Cahill, “Natural Law, Global Justice, and Equality,” in *Searching for a Universal Ethic*, 239–249.

²⁸ See Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Sex, Gender, and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 14–72; also “Feminist Ethics, Differences, and Common Ground: A Catholic Perspective,” in *Feminist Ethics and the Catholic Moral Tradition*, ed. Charles E. Curran, Richard A. McCormick, and Margaret A. Farley (Paulist, 1996), 184–204.

syllogism is not adequate. The more the moralist confronts concrete situations, the more he must have recourse to the wisdom of experience” (*In Search of a Universal Ethic*, no. 54). We second that invitation to moral dialogue and discussion and urge that it be the honest and open kind of dialogue consistently advocated by Francis.

RELATIVISM VS. PERSPECTIVISM

Early in *Veritatis Splendor*, John Paul II identifies relativism as the intellectual issue at work in what he calls a “new situation” within the Church. According to him, such a situation has caused and promoted widespread dissent from traditional moral doctrine and constitutes a distorted understanding of, and fundamental challenge to, natural law (nos. 1, 4). John Paul II does not treat relativism in depth in *Veritatis Splendor*, though he hints at it regularly. Both he and Benedict XVI, however, continually raise concerns over relativism, which denies the existence of universal truth, like objective natural law, and fundamentally threatens the human search for truth. In his homily at the opening of the 2005 papal conclave, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, soon to be Benedict XVI, spoke of the “dictatorship of relativism” that “does not recognize anything as definitive and whose ultimate standard consists solely of one’s own ego and desires.”²⁹ In this section, we will be specifically concerned with moral relativism, which denies the existence of universal, objective moral truth. Such truth is necessary, the Magisterium argues, as the foundation for absolute norms asserting that certain acts—contraceptive and homosexual acts, for example—are intrinsically evil and can never be morally justified regardless of intent or circumstance. Concern about relativism is undoubtedly warranted in the twenty-first century, but the Magisterium fails to discern the difference between *relativism*, which rejects all objective moral truth, and *perspectivism*. The latter acknowledges that there is objective moral truth we can grasp reliably and adequately but affirms that we can only attain it partially. Accordingly, for perspectivism, moral truth is always in need of further clarification. The Magisterium also fails to discern legitimate theological pluralism, which the ITC’s recent document, “Theology Today,”³⁰ advances as an essential criterion for Catholic theology. Neither moral nor theological pluralism is to be unquestionably equated with the relativism John Paul II warned the Church about. To

²⁹ Joseph Ratzinger, “Homily for the Pro Eligendo Romano Pontifice Mass,” April 18, 2005, www.vatican.va/gpII/documents/homily-pro-eligendo-pontifice_20050418_en.html.

³⁰ International Theological Commission, *Theology Today: Perspectives, Principles, and Criteria*, www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_doc_20111129_teologia-oggi_en.html.

demonstrate this point, we consider the difference between relativism and what we name perspectivism in some detail.

In modern times, moral relativism has been the subject of much magisterial concern. As far back as 1952, Pius XII condemned “situation ethics,” which he believed to be a form of relativism that denies universal moral truth.³¹ Paul VI warned of moral relativism that claims that “some things are permitted which the Church had previously declared intrinsically evil,” and that this vision “clearly endangers the Church’s entire doctrinal heritage.”³² In *Veritatis Splendor*, John Paul II warns that, since the Second Vatican Council, “there have developed certain interpretations of Christian morality [like relativism] that are not consistent with ‘sound doctrine’” and that “the Magisterium has the duty to state that some trends of theological thinking and certain philosophical affirmations are incompatible with revealed truth” (no. 29). Some Catholic moralists complain that in *Veritatis Splendor* John Paul II falsely accused them of “canonizing relativism.”³³ Cardinal Ratzinger often warned of the dangers of a relativism that denies the existence of objective truth, calling it “the gravest problem of our time.”³⁴ Concern with relativism and its impact, especially in the area of morality, continued to be a central concern of his pontificate as Benedict XVI.

With Bernard Lonergan, we prefer to speak of *perspectivism* rather than relativism. “Where relativism has lost hope about the attainment of truth, perspectivism stresses the complexity of what the historian is writing about and, as well, the specific difference of historical from mathematical, scientific, and philosophic knowledge.”³⁵ While relativism concludes to the falsity of a judgment, perspectivism concludes to its *partial* truth. According to Lonergan, perspectivism in human knowledge arises from three factors. First, human knowers are finite; the information available to them is incomplete, and they do not attend to or master all the data available. Second, the knowers are

³¹ See Pius XII, “Allocution to the Fédération mondiale des jeunesses féminines catholiques,” January 18, 1952, *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 34: 413–419 (henceforth AAS); “Radio Message About the Christian Conscience,” March 23, 1952, AAS 34: 270–278; and “Instruction of the Holy Office,” February 2, 1956, in *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, ed. Henry Denzinger and Adolf Schönmetzer, 33rd ed. (Herder, 1965), no. 3918.

³² Paul VI, “Address to Members of the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer,” AAS 59: 962.

³³ Maura Anne Ryan, “Then Who Can Be Saved?: Ethics and Ecclesiology in *Veritatis Splendor*,” in *Veritatis Splendor: American Responses*, ed. Michael E. Allsopp and John J. O’Keefe (Sheed & Ward, 1995), 11.

³⁴ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, “Christ, Faith, and the Challenge of Cultures,” March 3, 1993, www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/incontri/rc_con_cfaith_19930303_hong-kong-ratzinger_en.html.

³⁵ Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 217.

selective, given their past socialization, personal experience, and range of data offered. Third, knowers are individually different, and we can expect them to make different selections of data. The theologian trained in the philosophy of Plato, Augustine for instance, will attend to different data, achieve different understanding, make different judgments, and act on different decisions from the theologian trained in the philosophy of Aristotle, Aquinas for instance. They produce different theologies, both of which will be necessarily incomplete explanations and partial portrayals of a very complex divine mystery. They are like two viewers respectively at the fourth-story and twelfth-story windows of a skyscraper; each gets a different, but no less partial, view of the total panorama that unfolds outside the building.

Every judgment of truth, including, perhaps especially, every judgment of theological truth, is a limited judgment and commitment based on limited data and understanding.³⁶ “So far from resting on knowledge of the universe, [a judgment] is to the effect that, no matter what the rest of the universe may prove to be, at least *this* is so.”³⁷ It is precisely the necessarily limited nature of human, socio-historical sensations, understandings, judgments, and conceptual knowledge that leads to perspectivism, which is, to repeat, not a source of falsity but of partial truth.

True “objective” knowledge, therefore, is a *tertium quid*, a third thing that results from the dynamic interaction of the out, there, now, and real object, on the one hand, and the attending, understanding, judging, and deciding subject, on the other. It does not derive from objective structure alone but from the interaction of object and intelligent human subjects, who socially construct reality, meaning, value, and truth. What is frequently called *objective* reality by non-critical common sense is more properly called *social reality* or reality humanly invested with *social existence, meaning, and truth*. Objective knowledge is “an arbitrary construct in which a given society in a given historical situation has invested its sense of meaningfulness and value.”³⁸ Such an approach to the relationship of being, meaning, and truth in the human world precludes the absolute connection of meaning and truth with objective being alone and explains why plural meanings and truth about the “same” reality abound in the human world. Plural meanings and truth, deemed objective by the actors who

³⁶ On limit language, see David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (Seabury, 1975); *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (Crossroad, 1987); *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, and Hope* (Jossey-Bass, 1987).

³⁷ Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (Longmans, 1957), 344, emphasis added. See also *Method in Theology*, 217–219.

³⁸ Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture* (Doubleday, 1969), 215.

subscribe to them, derive inevitably from the plural socio-historical perspectives that abound in the human world.

Objectivist meta-ethical theories, such as natural law, claim both that moral terms do have meaning and that their meaning can be justified.³⁹ In Catholic moral theology, the moral terms *good* and *right* are defined in relation to human dignity and human fulfillment, or some such formulation. What is good or right facilitates human dignity and fulfillment; what is bad or wrong frustrates human dignity and fulfillment. The great religions of the world all agree with the Golden Rule in the wisdom tradition of Israel: “And what you hate, do not do to anyone” (Tobit 4:15; see Matthew 7:12; see also, *In Search of a Universal Ethic*, nos. 12–21). Virtually every Catholic moralist espouses such an objectivist meta-ethic and defines the human good or right on the basis of what facilitates human dignity and fulfillment. There are among them, however, a variety of theological anthropologies and understandings of human dignity. Perspectivism is an epistemological theory that explains this variety and the different formulations and justifications of norms facilitating or frustrating human dignity and fulfillment.⁴⁰

When facing a question about moral principles, norms, or actions, there must be a first step towards an answer. That first step, moralist James Sellers suggests, is the stance the person takes *vis-à-vis* the question,⁴¹ a notion even the distinguished Catholic moral theologian Charles Curran adopts.⁴² Instead of the metaphor of stance, we prefer the visual metaphor of *perspective* introduced by James Gustafson, which suggests that the way we look at something puts everything about it into focus.⁴³ John Paul II also prefers the metaphor of perspective in *Veritatis Splendor*, where he notes, “In order to be able to grasp the object of an act which specifies that act morally, it is therefore necessary to place oneself *in the perspective of the acting person*” (no. 78, emphasis original). The analogy we offer to clarify the notion of perspective is that of a man in a multi-story building. The perspective he gets when he looks out a first-floor window is quite different from the perspective from a twentieth-story window. The two

³⁹ William K. Frankena, *Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Prentice Hall, 1973), 97–102. Robert Veatch distinguishes four types of absolutist theories: Supernatural, Rationalist, Intuitionist, and Empirical (“Does Ethics Have an Empirical Basis?,” *Hastings Center Studies* 1 [1973]: 50–65). Catholic natural law is considered an empirical absolutist theory. See David F. Kelly, *Contemporary Catholic Health Care Ethics* (Georgetown University Press, 2004), 81–85.

⁴⁰ See Cahill, “Natural Law, Global Justice, and Equality.”

⁴¹ James Sellers, *Theological Ethics* (Macmillan, 1968), 34–38.

⁴² Charles E. Curran, *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today: A Synthesis* (Georgetown University Press, 1999), 30–55.

⁴³ James M. Gustafson, *Christ and the Moral Life* (Harper and Row, 1968), 240–247.

perspectives, though different, put into reliable and adequate focus what really lies outside the windows.

Perspectivism applies to questions about natural law in that different perspectives on nature and norms that derive from nature result from different perspectives or ways of looking at nature. The perspectives from two different windows lead the man to different but reliably and adequately true views of what truly lies outside his building. Similarly, the approach to questions about human nature from two different perspectives lead to two different but reliably and adequately true answers to questions about nature and natural law and the principles and norms that facilitate or frustrate its attainment. This perspectival approach confronts magisterial charges of relativism aimed at those who disagree with some of its absolute norms and shows that they are not sustainable. Relativism concludes to the falsity of a judgment; perspectivism concludes to its partial but reliable and adequate truth. Again, this does not mean that anything goes. For any perspective to be moral, there still remains the judgment about how it contributes to human dignity and fulfillment.

Every human judgment of truth, including every judgment of moral truth, is a limited judgment and decision based on limited data and understanding. In Bernard Lonergan's words, "So far from resting on knowledge of the universe, [a judgment] is to the effect that, no matter what the rest of the universe may prove to be, at least *this* is so."⁴⁴ Relatedly, the moral judgment of a well-informed conscience is to the effect that, no matter what the rest of the universe may prove to be, at least *this action* is to be done and *that action* is to be avoided. It is precisely the necessarily limited nature of human understanding and judgment that leads to perspectivism, not as to a source of falsity but of partial, reliable, and adequate truth. We offer here an analogy between moral knowledge and the systematic theological knowledge of God, whom "no one has ever seen" (John 1:18). Restating earlier Greek theologians, Augustine expresses the basic Christian approach to truth about God in a famous declaration: "*Si comprehendis non est Deus,*" if you have understood what you have understood is not God.⁴⁵ Aquinas expresses the same truth in his mature doctrine: "Now we cannot know what God is but only what God is not; we must, therefore, consider the ways in which God does not exist rather than the ways in which God does exist" (ST I, a. 3, Preface). Theologian Karl Rahner writes in the same vein: "Revelation does not mean that the mystery is overcome by gnosis bestowed by God. . . . On the

⁴⁴ Lonergan, *Insight*, 344, emphasis added. See also *Method in Theology*, 217–219.

⁴⁵ *Sermo* 52, 16, *Patrologia Latina* 38, 360; and ITC, *Theology Today*, no. 97. For a detailed analysis, see Victor White, *God the Unknown* (Harper, 1956) and William Hill, *Knowing the Unknown God* (Philosophical Library, 1971).

contrary, it is the history of the deepening perception of God as mystery.”⁴⁶ The God whom Christians believe in is always *Deus absconditus*, a hidden God.

Human nature is inarguably not the depth of mystery that the wholly other God is,⁴⁷ but still a mystery to be plumbed, and no single natural law, objectivist definition of it can comprehensively capture either its full truth or the full truth of the dignity flowing from it. However, there are partial, reliable, and adequate truths, and perspectivism can account for their plurality. Perspectivism offers a theory of knowledge that presents human persons as human experience and praxis shows them to truly exist, selects those dimensions of the human person deemed most important for defining common human dignity, interprets and prioritizes those dimensions if and when they conflict, and formulates and justifies norms that facilitate, and do not frustrate, the attainment of human dignity. The only way for women and men to achieve universal knowledge is via perspectives that are particular.⁴⁸ It is thus necessary to focus on different particular perspectives that lead to different, partial, and reliably true definitions of human dignity and the formulation of different objective norms that facilitate or frustrate its attainment.

CONCLUSION

There is broad meta-ethical agreement within Catholic moral theology. First, it accepts meta-ethical objectivism; there *are* objective, universal definitions of human nature and dignity. Second, it defines and justifies the moral terms *good* and *right* in relation to an objective definition of human dignity. Third, it justifies the definition of human dignity through the selection, interpretation, prioritization, and integration of the sources of ethical knowledge, scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. Fourth, given different perspectives, different Catholic moral theologians can and sometimes do disagree on both the definition of universal human dignity and the formulation and justification of objective norms that facilitate or frustrate its attainment. Fifth, perspectivism, which recognizes the inherent

⁴⁶ Karl Rahner, “The Hiddenness of God,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 16 (Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1979), 238. This dialogue is precisely what Francis is promoting through the Synod on Synodality.

⁴⁷ See Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Ideas of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational*, trans. John W. Harvey (Oxford University Press, 1923).

⁴⁸ Bryan Massingale, “Beyond Revisionism: A Younger Moralism Looks at Charles E. Curran,” in *A Call to Fidelity: On the Moral Theology of Charles E. Curran*, ed. James J. Walter, Timothy O’Connell, and Thomas A. Shannon (Georgetown University Press, 2002), 258.

limitations of human knowledge, helps to account for the different definitions of human nature and human dignity and the different formulations and justifications of objective norms that facilitate or frustrate its attainment. Sixth, the variability that arises from perspectivism is an essential part of an objectivism that recognizes universals, including the natural law; the good is objectively defined as human dignity. *Magisterium non-obstante*, different objective definitions of human dignity are not *eo ipso* a form of relativism that denies universal truth but simply the unavoidable outcome of defining human dignity, formulating and justifying norms, and viewing moral questions from different human perspectives or stances.

In this essay, we have shown that the meta-ethical foundation of all Catholic morality is natural law, understood in the Catholic tradition to be nature-as-reason, and that moral norms are interpreted from natural law under the influence of various cultural and historical perspectives. We have further shown that, though Catholic moral norms are magisterially acknowledged to be related to historical and cultural perspectives, they are not to be understood as untrue as in relativism but as partially, reliably, and adequately true as in what we have called perspectivism. We have also shown that moral perspectives reaching different normative conclusions than Catholic moral norms are not *necessarily* to be understood as untrue as in relativism but as possibly partially, reliably, and adequately true.

Much of what was written by John Paul II and his advisors thirty years ago in *Veritatis Splendor*, especially regarding the understanding of natural law and objective moral norms, has been superseded by the more nuanced perspectives of the ITC, Catholic moral theologians, and Francis. John Paul II's posture of suspicion and negative judgment of new theological trends and, by implication, the theologians behind those trends, has also been superseded by Francis's judgment that the vocation of a theologian is to go beyond existing doctrine because she or he is trying to make theology more explicit and relevant to people's lived experience. Francis is critical of past attempts to control theologians and emphasizes that different perspectives on theological and pastoral thought, "if they allow themselves to be harmonized by the Spirit in respect and love, can also make the Church grow."⁴⁹ Sound advice and a perspective to guide moral theologians beyond the restrictive theological and ethical confines of *Veritatis Splendor*. **M**

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⁴⁹ Elise Ann Allen, "Pope Charges New Doctrine Czar to Spurn 'Immoral Methods' in Defense of the Faith," *Crux* (July 1, 2023), cruxnow.com/vatican/2023/07/pope-charges-new-doctrine-czar-to-spurn-immoral-methods-in-defense-of-the-faith.

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