

# Action and Virtue

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Dr Adam G Cooper

In his first epistle on love, St John lays down a principle which stands for all time as a critical and incisive commentary on the inextricable relation between action and virtue. The principle is as follows: 'he who does what is right has been born of God' (1 John 2:29). The brevity of this phrase belies its profundity. In the context of the letter, it is clear that the doing of what is right (*poiein ten dikaiosynen*) is another way of speaking about love. Later St John will offer an exact parallel phrase: 'he who loves has been born of God' (1 John 4:7). To do what is right is to love, and to love is the connatural activity of those 'born of God.' The connection suggests that, for all our fundamental natural drives towards nobility and self-realisation, for all our most passionate endeavours, God is ultimately the author of virtue. God is love, and love is the mother of all the virtues. Thus God is the source and origin of the good life which every human person naturally seeks in communion with his fellow human beings.

Although this insight is prominent in the New Testament and in theological tradition, it seems to have been anticipated by numerous representatives of classical moral inquiry. In answer to the question whether virtue can be taught, Socrates, having explored at length the questions what virtue is, how it can be acquired, whether it is natural or not, finally concludes: 'If all we have said in this discussion, and the questions we have asked, have been right, then virtue will be acquired neither by nature nor by teaching. Whoever has it gets it by divine dispensation....'<sup>1</sup> Aristotle's position on the question might be called less religious and more 'naturalistic.' We become just by doing just acts, brave by doing brave acts, and so on. Virtue according to this schema is very much the direct fruit of habitual action. Yet Aristotle also held that virtue depends in some way on our birth or origin: some people are born naturally virtuous, others are not. Each in their own way, Plato and Aristotle realise that virtue is a mystery that calls either for some kind of divine inspiration, or at least a specially privileged generation. St John brings both these dimensions together in his phrase 'born of God', which is no incidental comment.<sup>2</sup> To be 'born of God' is of course to have been spiritually regenerated through baptism, faith, and the indwelling *sperma* (1 Jn 3:9) or *chrisma* (1 Jn 2:20-21) of the Holy Spirit. Love is concretely realised in action, in doing what is right, not just in word but in deed and truth (1 Jn 3:18); but it must somehow first come to birth in us, or we in it, so that our action arises intrinsically from the truth of who we are.

This intuition that there is a fundamental relationship between birth or being born and the capacity for virtue is illuminating in several ways. First, it tells us that whatever virtue consists in, however much I am its proper subject, its presence and possibility in me is preceded by a generative act in which I play at most a purely passive role. The analogy is far reaching. My very existence depends on my being born. Yet it is

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<sup>1</sup> Plato, *Meno* 100a.

<sup>2</sup> See the significant uses of *gennao* in 1 Jn 3:9; 4:7; 5:1; 5:4.

not an act that lies within my power. Some other agency must bring it about. To be born is to receive being from another, to be constituted in existence through an act of creative love.

Secondly, as mentioned in the case of the Christian moral subject, to be born is a Spirit-given event by which one is inserted into a filial, adoptive relation to God the Father in Christ the Son. The love which characterises all acts of perfect virtue is first of all a Trinitarian love, the love of the Father for the Son, a love which overflows in the self-diffusive, creative act of creaturely being and goodness, a love which constitutes the home or native atmosphere in which the believing moral subject lives and moves and has his being.

Thirdly, and quite concretely, the birth of the Christian is an essentially communal event. His birth through the laver of regeneration places him in relation to the Father through the Son in the Spirit, and this relation only 'comes to be in a specific place; it arises in a womb: the Church as *Mother*.'<sup>3</sup> As Professor Melina has argued, this question of the home or dwelling place of the moral subject is essential for ethics 'because it is impossible to propose a morality which is objectively faithful to the truth of the "I" without touching upon the I's necessary belonging to a "We."<sup>4</sup> This is entirely in keeping with the important thesis of Alisdair MacIntyre, that virtue for its birth and dynamic formation depends upon a certain cultic and cultural environment, for no one is born in isolation.

St Thomas Aquinas also taught that true virtue, that is, virtue that has come to full flower in holy union with God, is ultimately a work of the Holy Spirit. Yet it must be asked how this action of the Holy Spirit is related to human freedom and the self-determining action of the human person. If the person plays only a passive role, in what sense can virtue be said to be human at all? It is here that St Augustine's understanding of virtue as *ordo amoris* – the ordinate condition of the affections – provides an invitation to consider the integral place of the affections in the structure of love.

Love is the root motivation of all activity. We act as we love, and to the extent that we become what we do, we thereby become what we love, so that, as Paul Wadell has put it, 'We are our desires.'<sup>5</sup> This truth holds good for moral action too. Moral goodness is impossible without strong feeling and even a certain pleasurable delight. Even if we seek to follow faith-informed reason, reason does not operate in a vacuum, but 'resides in the entire unity of our self'.<sup>6</sup> Reason only acts 'together with affective inclinations and the dispositions of the will, and is guided and directed by them.'<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Livio Melina, *The Church: The Dwelling Place of Christian Moral Action* (Washington D.C.: John Paul II Institute, 2002), 5.

<sup>4</sup> Melina, *The Church*, 4.

<sup>5</sup> *The Primacy of Love: An Introduction to the Ethics of Thomas Aquinas* (NY: Paulist Press, 1992).

<sup>6</sup> Giussani, *The Religious Sense*, 34. See further Paul J. Wadell C.P., *The Primacy of Love: An Introduction to the Ethics of Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992).

<sup>7</sup> Jacques Maritain, 'On Knowledge through Connaturality', in id., *Natural Law: Reflections on Theory and Practice*, ed. William Sweet (South Bend, Indiana: Saint Augustine's Press, 2001), 15. On the relation between knowledge and affective love in Thomas's theology, see further Victor White, 'Thomism and Affective Knowledge', *Blackfriars* 25 (1944), 321-8; Thomas Merton, *The Ascent to Truth* (London: Hollis and Carter, 1951), 204-13; Anthony Moreno, 'The Nature of St. Thomas's Knowledge *per Connaturalitatem*', *Angelicum* 47 (1970), 44-62; Walter Principe, 'Affectivity and the

Inclination works by way of sense, feeling, and intuition. We ‘feel’ that something is right; we ‘smell’ a rat; we ‘sense’ when something is wrong. We cannot justify our judgement to ourselves or anyone else on rational grounds. Indeed, the rationale for such a judgement is inherently incommunicable. Knowing what is right by inclination is a judgement that takes place in the heart and the affections.<sup>8</sup> If our inclinations are sound, the judgement they give rise to is certain: maybe not clear, not necessarily even understood, but certain, and therefore sufficient grounds for action. The question is: are our inclinations sound or misguided?

At first glance there seems to be something unsettlingly subjective and circular about a morality of connatural inclination. It recognises the priority of moral experience over moral principles, of action over thought. It recognises that judgements of practical reason cannot be arbitrated by mathematically or syllogistically precise norms. It recognises a relation of responsible dependence upon the prudent counsel and holy example of wise and saintly friends.<sup>9</sup> A good act is not just one that accords with objective standards of moral rectitude. Rather it also requires on the part of the agent a subjective affectivity for the morally good act, so that the subject performs the act willingly, joyfully, spontaneously. This sets it in contrast with the Stoic or Kantian tradition of deontology, where the good act often requires the self-assertion of the will over against one’s natural desires. However, it is not that the objective quality of the act is not important, but that the unity of morality, experience, and action implies instead an affirmative and freely accepted participation of the whole person in all that makes for human happiness. By experience one comes to know what is good, and the good is that which one delights to do.<sup>10</sup>

From this we see that it is not the case that the virtues have nothing to do with objective standards of good. They are formed in us by divine and human acts performed in conformity with objective good, by the willed, deliberate response to true, objective values, perceived by the reason or intellect as such. What is vital to note is that the ‘objective good’ is always our good, our truth. It corresponds to our deepest desires, discernible to experience, even if these desires are distorted and overlaid by the wounding of sin. Yet as the virtues take firmer shape, that is, as our affections and desires are integrated and conformed to the rule of right reason, which

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Heart in Thomas Aquinas’ Spirituality’, in Annice Callahan (ed.), *Spiritualities of the Heart* (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 45-63.

<sup>8</sup> See Yves Simon, *The Tradition of Natural Law*.

<sup>9</sup> See Robert L. Wilken, ‘The Lives of the Saints and the Pursuit of Virtue’, *First Things* 8 (1990), 45-51.

<sup>10</sup> Referring to connatural moral knowledge in this way, Professor Melina has commented: ‘It is precisely here that the decisive contribution of the virtues enters in: by means of a connaturality of the subject with the true Good, they make it possible for what really is good in itself and in accordance with the truth also to appear good to the virtuous person. By means of a virtuous connaturality, that which is good “in itself” (*bonum simpliciter*) is perceived also as good “for me” (*bonum conveniens*).... The reason for this is found in the fact that human affectivity, thanks to the virtues, is impregnated with reason and thus reacts to concrete goods in accord with the order human reason impresses on it in the experience of the fullness of the Good that has been promised it.’ *Sharing in Christ’s Virtues: For a Renewal of Moral Theology in the Light of Veritatis Splendor*, tr. William E. May (Washington D.C.: CUAP, 2001), 44

in turn is docile to the new connatural impulses of the Holy Spirit, they increasingly come to incline to the good all by ourselves, as it were.<sup>11</sup>

The doctrine of connatural virtue reminds us that virtue is not about overcoming our natural inclinations, but about giving us what is needed to follow our natural inclinations in the right way. ‘Yes, the highest realizations of moral goodness are known to be such precisely in this: that they take place *effortlessly* because it is of their essence to arise from love.’<sup>12</sup> The virtues give a person power to realise his or her natural inclinations to the good and true. Becoming virtuous involves an inner transformation so that we desire and love what is good, so that doing good is not onerous but comes ‘naturally.’ When the virtues are perfected in someone, he or she has become an accurate measure of what is good, exhibiting what John Paul II called ‘participated theonomy’<sup>13</sup> or what Aquinas called ‘truth of life.’<sup>14</sup>

So far I have focused on the theme of virtue, its relation to reason and affectivity, and the notion of connatural morality. Yet we have not yet fully answered the question asked earlier, namely, how the gratuitous action of the Holy Spirit in drawing us into the orbit of divine love is related to human freedom and the self-determining action of the human person. To answer this we must still discuss in more detail the related question of action.

We said earlier that love is the motivating source of all human action. Human action is traditionally distinguished from acts of a human by its essentially purposeful quality. ‘Every agent acts for an end’, and ends are defined precisely as such by their intelligible desirability, the *ratio* under which they present themselves to our cognitive and affective appetites as good, as things to be sought and pursued. It is for this reason that by our actions we internalise the ends we pursue by them. This simply restates the ancient insight that through action the human person is *dominus sui* and his own efficient cause. In this respect Jean Paul Sartre was correct: man is what he makes of himself. As John Paul II put it in his seminal work *The Acting Person*, ‘It is clearly visible in human experience that indeterminism assumes a secondary role while auto-determinism has primary and fundamental significance.’<sup>15</sup> ‘Human actions once performed do not vanish without a trace: they leave their moral value, which constitutes an objective reality intrinsically cohesive with the person....’<sup>16</sup>

At the same time, as John Paul II also saw, love involves a kind of ‘surrender’ of this inviolable autonomy and incommunicability. On the one hand, the person is *alteri*

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<sup>11</sup> Melina comments: ‘Thanks to the virtues, human affectivity can react and incline man not only “*secundum rationem rectam*” (according to right reason) but above all “*cum ratione recta*” (with right reason). This removes talk about the virtues from the danger of the subjectivism of arbitrary tastes and the historical relativism of different cultures and social contexts.... The mature Thomistic synthesis articulates a theory of practical reason that begins with the universal principles, the expression of the truth about the Good (the natural law), but that can develop the light of those truths in concrete action only in a synergistic union with the virtues, by reason of a connaturality of the good of the moral subject as a whole. The rationality of the virtues is not rationalism.’ *Sharing in Christ’s Virtues*, 53-4.

<sup>12</sup> Josef Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, 17-18.

<sup>13</sup> VS 41.

<sup>14</sup> ST II-II, 109, 3 ad. 3.

<sup>15</sup> *The Acting Person*, from the corrected Polish edition, p. 166, translated by J. Kupczak, *Destined for Liberty*, 121.

<sup>16</sup> *The Acting Person*, quoted by J. Kupczak, 126.

*incommunicabilis*. He is determined by no extrinsic force; he is uniquely his own person, responsible to himself. Nevertheless,

love forcibly detaches the person, so to speak, from his natural inviolability and inalienability. [Love] makes the person want to do just that – surrender itself to another, to the one it loves. The person no longer wishes to be its own exclusive property, but instead to become the property of that other. This means the renunciation of its autonomy and its alienability. Love proceeds by way of this renunciation, guided by the profound conviction that it does not diminish or impoverish, but quite the contrary, enlarges and enriches the existence of the person. What might be called the law of *ekstasis* seems to operate here: the lover ‘goes outside’ the self to find a fuller existence in another.<sup>17</sup>

The inexact use of language in this passage does not detract from its incisiveness. While the human person is self-constituted through action, the kind of action which most perfects him is none other than the action that most empties him. No adequate anthropology can fail to take account of this striking phenomenological fact, most evident in the experience of love. The implications for an account of action and virtue are clear. For sensuality and reason to be integrated in loving action, ‘the body must become a wounded body’, since love, says Thomas, ‘is a passion that wounds the lover.’<sup>18</sup> In this connection Thomas often refers to Dionysius the Areopagite, who spoke of love (*agape*) as a kind of yearning (*eros*) or ecstasy (*ekstasis*). Dionysius argued that *agape*, a term used primarily in the sacred Scriptures, and *eros*, more common in the extra-biblical writings, mean essentially the same thing. ‘What is signified is a capacity to effect a unity, an alliance, and a particular commingling in the Beautiful and the Good... This divine yearning brings ecstasy so that the lover belongs not to self but to the beloved.’<sup>19</sup> Thomas follows Dionysius in saying that by love the lover goes out of himself towards the object in a kind of metaphysical ecstasy (*excessus*). Love is a transformation, a change into the form of another; it involves the emptying of oneself and the ecstatic assimilation of oneself to the object of one’s love. The problem with our sensual desires lies in their potential for self-centredness, their proneness to fix upon material objects that provide only for their immediate pleasure and gratification. Thomas noted that these sensual appetites, naturally oriented to particular objects, are limited to converting those objects into themselves, just as food is assimilated into the body. By contrast, the rational appetites, which are naturally oriented towards universal and immaterial objects, are, by desire, themselves converted into their objects, just as man is assimilated to God. Thus sensuality without reason is not capable of true metaphysical ecstasy, for it ‘can only simulate nutrition in which the object of desire is converted into the one desiring.’<sup>20</sup> Sublimated under reason’s royal rule, however, sensuality can attain - in integral harmony with the intellect - a transrational, ecstatic union with God, the human being’s true Good and ultimate object of desire. The body, or rather, the embodied person, experiences dei-formation in this life only under the form of suffering love,

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<sup>17</sup> Karol Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, 125-6.

<sup>18</sup> G. J. McAleer, *Ecstatic Morality and Sexual Politics* (NY: Fordham University Press, 2005) 51.

<sup>19</sup> Dionysius Areopagite, *On the divine names* 4.12-13.

<sup>20</sup> McAleer *Ecstatic Morality*, 41.

ecstasy, and wounding, or what the medieval mystical tradition commonly knows as the experience of ‘liquefaction.’<sup>21</sup>

Put another way, the true lover must be prepared to suffer some kind of liquefaction or death with respect to those sensual impulses whose native aims revolve only around pleasure and animal survival. Indeed, since the vision of God to which all human beings naturally aspire is only accessible by supernatural means, reason itself must be finally overwhelmed in what Blondel called ‘the great act’ or the ‘good option’ which throws us open to the divine action. ‘To appropriate nothing for oneself is the only way of attaining the infinite.’<sup>22</sup>

We may now proceed to some concluding comments. Hopefully it has become clear that the relation between action and virtue can by no means be reduced to a simple relation of cause and effect, one way or the other. As Josef Pieper once observed, ‘Man’s moral deeds are not more or less identifiable handholds as he scales the heights of technical accomplishment but rather are steps in his self-realization. The human self, which grows towards its fulfilment by performing the good, is a “work” that surpasses from the very beginning all human plans and designs.’<sup>23</sup> We have here taken that ‘work’ to be the work of God who is active in the lives of the faithful ‘to will and to do’ according to his good purposes (Phil 2:12). This of course presupposes what *Veritatis Splendor* calls ‘the intrinsic and unbreakable bond between faith and morality.’ (4) At the heart of the moral vision of the New Covenant lies God’s own way of making people just through the Gospel, which is nothing less than the forgiveness of sins received as a pure gift. Like St Paul, St Augustine never dismissed the reality of pagan or pre-Christian virtue. Yet he felt bound to point out its relative character. ‘Our righteousness, though genuine... is nevertheless only such as to consist in the forgiveness of sins rather than in the perfection of virtues.’<sup>24</sup> If it is Christ who ‘reveals the full truth about man and his moral journey’,<sup>25</sup> then only in and with Christ can man discover the concrete universal norm of moral action. Such a discovery calls for faith which, as an act involving the will and the heart, draws the whole person into real union with and participation in the holy Trinity. Through faith the human person comes to abide in a love that formally qualifies and changes him from the inside out. ‘This forgiveness once again shows the complete supremacy of “logos” over “ethos.” It is only by starting from the fullness of love manifested on the Cross of Christ that the Christian receives the power to act in love.’<sup>26</sup> Here the ontology of the mystery opens the way to the morality which follows.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> ‘Because nothing recedes from itself unless dissolved from what holds it inside itself, just as a natural thing is not detached from its form unless the dispositions are dissolved by which the form is retained in the matter, so it must be that the lover is removed from the boundaries inside of which the lover is held and on account of this love is said to liquefy the heart, because a liquid is not contained by its boundaries.’ Quoted by McAleer, *Ecstatic Morality*, 84.

<sup>22</sup> Blondel, *L’Action* (1893), quoted by Illtyd Trethowan in the Introduction to Maurice Blondel, *The Letter on Apologetics and History and Dogma*, tr. Alexander Dru and Illtyd Trethowan (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 90.

<sup>23</sup> *A Brief Reader on the Virtues of the Human Heart*, tr. Paul C. Duggan (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1991), 17.

<sup>24</sup> *City of God* 19.27.

<sup>25</sup> *Veritatis Splendor* 112; cf. *Gaudium et Spes* 22-23.

<sup>26</sup> Melina, *Sharing in Christ’s Virtues*, 145-6.

<sup>27</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, quoted by Melina, *Sharing in Christ’s Virtues*, 151.

By no means does this fact detract from the constitutive role of personal responsibility in the vocation to human fulfilment. The human person is essentially a self-determining creature, whose integral freedom and happiness depend on his unique and nontransferable capacity to judge, to choose, to act from within. 'The intellect is free: but freedom is intelligent.'<sup>28</sup> Of course, it goes without saying that we are referring here to a freedom characterised not by indifference, the simple ability to choose between contraries as though each free act were independent of the unity of our being. Rather we are referring to what Servais Pinckaers has called 'freedom for excellence' or something like Blondel's *la volonté voulante*, an original aspiration that proceeds from the human person's immanent longing for truth, goodness, and happiness, and which engenders a concrete moral action that arises from interior, connatural inclinations.<sup>29</sup>

Yet in all this, we are not dealing with an autonomous being whose fulfilment can be realised without reference to its constitutive relatedness to God, in terms of its origin (being), its current providential existence (well-being), and its transcendent goal (eternal well-being). Thus when Christians pray the universal Christian prayer, the nuptial prayer of both Mary and Christ, in which they ask God's will to be done, they are not repressing their freedom but revealing it, enacting it, perfecting it. Through action, the human being must himself become what he is called to be according to his divine vocation, and what he has been made by divine grace. St Paul's ethical exhortations everywhere follow this pattern: be what by God's grace you already are! Yet the power - the *virtus!* - which makes this possible must be received each day anew as a supernatural gift, for our ultimate end consists in a mode of existence utterly disproportionate to his natural state. The Christian is exhorted to be filled with the Spirit not just once, but continually, as the indispensable life-source.<sup>30</sup> As St Maximus the Confessor stated: 'For nothing created is by nature capable of deification, since it is incapable of grasping God. Rather it is intrinsic and peculiar to divine grace alone to bestow deification proportionately on beings, for only divine grace illuminates nature with supernatural light and elevates nature beyond its proper limits in excess of glory.'<sup>31</sup> I leave the final word to Henri de Lubac, who with the help of the Fathers has brought the distinct features of this paradoxical theandric drama into sharp relief:

*Gloria Dei, Vivens Homo*: the words of Saint Irenaeus express this truth well, but, on the other hand, man has access to life, in the only total society that can exist, only by saying quite by himself: *Soli Deo Gloria*. Whatever therefore might be the natural progress gained, even in moral values... something else must intervene in order to confer on all this its definitive value: a transfiguration, incommensurate with all natural transfigurations.... Let man, therefore, confident of divine assistance, take responsibility once again for the work of the six days. Let him prolong it throughout the seventh day. Let him be bold, victorious, inventive.... But the eighth day, on which alone everything is brought to completion and renewed, is the day of the Lord: man can only receive it. Let him pursue, as long as the world lasts, the activities of Prometheus: let him light in every century a new fire, the material basis for

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<sup>28</sup> Iltyd Trethowan in the Introduction to Blondel, *The Letter on Apologetics*, 84.

<sup>29</sup> *Morality: The Catholic View*, tr. Michael Sherwin (2001), 74.

<sup>30</sup> Ephesians 5:18. The 'continual' sense is expressed in the Greek present imperative.

<sup>31</sup> *Q. Thal.* 22, 79-98 (CCSG 7, 141).

new human strides, new problems and new anguish. But at the same time, let him beg for the descent of the unique Fire without whose burning nothing could be purified, consumed, saved, eternalized: *Emitte Spiritum tuum et creabuntur, et renovabis faciem terrae....*<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> *At the Service of the Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1993), 244 (from a lecture delivered in 1947).