THE PERSPECTIVE OF MORALITY

Philosophical Foundations of Thomistic Virtue Ethics

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PHILOSOPHICAL ETHICS AS VIRTUE ETHICS

1. Classical Ethics in the Tradition of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas

Many introductory treatments of philosophical ethics are available; the present one pursues at once a theoretical and a didactic objective. It is not intended to provide a survey of various approaches or methods of argumentation or problematic issues in the field of ethics. Nor is it intended as a history of ethics. What this book offers instead is a methodical, closely argued, step-by-step presentation of a fundamental course in philosophical ethics, while developing a systematic ethical position—an ethical theory, in fact. More precisely, it is concerned with working out the fundamental elements of a *virtue ethics* in a consistent train of thought, and in conscious contrast to a form of ethics that primarily understands itself as a discourse of justification for "moral norms."

This is a virtue ethics of a "classical" type, which reaches back to ancient tradition[1] and builds upon Thomas Aquinas in a running debate with modern moral philosophy; it can therefore also be categorized, after a fashion, as "Aristotelian." But was not Thomas a theologian? He certainly was. And consequently a moral philosophy[2] that takes its inspiration from Thomas cannot limit itself to a mere repetition or compilation of what the Parisian Master wrote some seven hundred years ago. And this applies even more in the present case, which offers a *philosophical* ethics. Although the proof that a genuine philosophical ethics can be found in Thomas the *theologian* was produced

1. For a comprehensive orientation, cf. the outstanding study by J. Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

2. The concept "moral philosophy" will be used here as synonymous with "philosophical ethics" and (in case it is not immediately obvious from the context) *not* in opposition to classical appetitive or virtue ethics. "Morality," on the other hand, denotes the subject matter of ethics or moral philosophy. Sometimes, in any case, I will use the adjectives "ethical" and "moral" as synonymous, in the classical meaning of the words.

some time ago, it still requires some special effort to extract the *philosophical* method and content from the theological synthesis, granted that for Thomas the "last word" is the theological word.[3]

But what still needs to be done is to actualize this content today—to refine, complete, and develop it through the asking of new questions, with a more differentiated sense of the issues. We cannot simply "go behind" Kant, J. S. Mill, G. E. Moore, or J.-P. Sartre. If we were to attempt such a thing, we would not only be deprived of many lines of inquiry and approaches to finding solutions, we would also not be able to inspect these philosophers' arguments carefully, and when appropriate, refute them. What is needed is not a "return to Thomas" or a "return to Aristotle," but *both,* and in this way retrieve for the present day the entire tradition that takes its beginning with the Platonic Socrates, in order to have it all before us once again, and relearn much that we have possibly forgotten. Despite all the fascination with modern and contemporary moral philosophy, which is generally only a reflex of a fascination with the modern as such, and despite all the complexity of newer problems and lines of inquiry, this book was written in the conviction that an ethics of a classical type that is especially indebted to the tradition of an Aristotelianism as developed by Thomas remains decisively superior to contemporary approaches at the fundamental ethical level. The reader, of course, will have to form his own judgment on this. Whether I have actually succeeded in handling the material as it deserves in the pages that follow is another question altogether. This too must be left to the reader's judgment.

As long as we understand "Aristotelian ethics" not simply as a certain instance of ethics from history, but rather as a *type* of ethics that, although taking shape in history, by being *true* nevertheless transcends the confines of the merely historical, then it seems to me that the position of Thomas Aquinas can be described as a kind of advanced Aristotelian ethics.[4] Its basic categories have an undeniable currency and fruitfulness. That Thomistic moral philosophy is fundamentally Aristotelian and despite other far-reaching influ-

3. W. Kluxen, *Philosophische Ethik bei Thomas von Aquin* (Mainz: Matthias Grünewald, 1964; cited here according to the second edition, Hamburg: Meiner, 1980), was a pioneer in this regard. My own contribution to the effort can be found especially in *Natural Law and Practical Reason: A Thomist View of Moral Autonomy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000); *Praktische Vernunft und Vernünftigkeit der Praxis: Handlungstheorie bei Thomas von Aquin in ihrer Entstehung aus dem Problemkontext der aristotelischen Ethik* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1994). A criticism of this and other attempts to find a philosophical ethics in Thomas Aquinas has been most recently expressed by D. J. M. Bradley, *Aquinas on the Twofold Human Good: Reason and Happiness in Aquinas's Moral Science* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1997).

4. On the double meaning of the concept "Aristotelian ethics," see my treatment of this matter in *Praktische Vernunft und Vernünftigkeit der Praxis* (see previous note), 6ff.

5. On this, see the classic work by M. Wittmann, *Die Ethik des Hl. Thomas von Aquin* (Munich: M. Hueber Verlag, 1933).

ences[5] can only be adequately understood from the Aristotelian perspective has been increasingly emphasized in recent years.[6] This "Thomistic Aristotelianism" makes possible—indeed, directly requires—an engagement with Thomas today not merely from historical interest, but rather in the sense of a productive and updated appropriation that would not neglect the demands of a historically exact hermeneutic and textual interpretation. In this way the moral theory of Aristotle as further studied and transposed into another cultural context proves to be an approach that contains unexpected answers to questions discussed today: questions, that is, that are especially capable of being fruitfully developed in the context of contemporary moral-theoretical problems. Certain aspects of moral thought of decisive import in connection with questions asked today can be found in Thomas, either in statements he makes in passing, or simply as something he presupposes. And this very fact makes the study of Thomas especially attractive. In this sense, much of what the "School Thomism" of the twentieth century had often as not concealed has been brought to light once again only in recent years. In any event, I would not like to make the claim that here at last can be found the "authentic" Thomas, unless we understand that the "authenticity" of a reception of earlier thought involves a development and an updating of the "received" philosophy in question. The question is not so much whether Aristotle or Thomas had really said this or that, but rather whether they *would* say it today, or whether we can or should say something *with them*. The present introductory presentation, consequently, is intended to develop the nonexplicit suppositions—especially ones that concern action-theory—of an Aristotelian virtue ethics as further developed by Thomas (above all, through his theory of the principles of practical reason) in hopes of contributing to the task of bringing a classical tradition to the level of reflection required today. This is a claim that reaches rather high, particularly in the framework of an introductory text, and is certainly not going to be fully accomplished by any single author.[7]

6. To name a few items: in works by R. McInerny, *The Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1992); C. Martin, *The Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas* (London: Routledge, 1988); A. J. Lisska, *Aquinas' Theory of Natural Law: An Analytic Reconstruction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); D. Westberg, *Right Practical Reason: Aristotle, Action, and Prudence in Aquinas* (Oxford: Claranden Press, 1994); and Kevin L. Flannery, S.J., *Acts amid Precepts: The Aristotelian Logical Structure of Thomas Aquinas's Moral Theory* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press). Like McInerny, I have also expressed in detail in *Praktische Vernunft und Vernünftigkeit der Praxis* my disagreement with the reproach of R. A. Gauthier ("Introduction" to Aristotle, *L'Ethique a Nicomaque, Traduction et Commentaire,* with J. Y. Jolif, vol. 1 [Louvain: Publications universitaires, 1970]), that Thomas distorted Aristotle for theological reasons.

7. This kind of undertaking would thus be different from the rather restorative "neo-Aristotelian" tendency of Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory,* 2nd ed. (South Bend, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984). In contrast with MacIntyre, my approach sees in modern moral philosophy not simply the results of a decline and a forgetfulness of tradition, but rather the specifically modern answer to unsolved problems and inadequacies of premodern ethics.

The so-called higher level of reflection of modernity is, of course, in part also a myth. The drive toward ever "higher" levels of reflection should not be automatically understood as progress. The "level of reflection" of the Ptolemaic astronomy was higher than that of the Copernican; geocentrism needed an ingenious mechanism to "save the phenomena," the need for which increasingly fell by the wayside with the Copernican revolution.

The impulse toward a constant expansion of the mechanism of reflection in philosophy is largely caused by the effort to overcome the problems that result from philosophical one-sidedness and reductionism. The philosophy of the modern era begins with *terribles simplificateurs* like Descartes, Locke, Hume, and then—to put it simply—with the antithesis between rationalism and empiricism. Kantianism both in its theoretical and its practical sides marks the definitive beginning of a still unfinished effort to bring under control the problems that result from such one-sidedness. In ethics, the lofty compound expression "meta-ethics" as distinguished from "normative ethics" (e.g., the question, what the word *good* is supposed to mean) should only with caution be taken as a sign of a "higher level of reflection" or of an advanced awareness of problems; it can also be understood as the expression of moral-philosophical crisis management, the consequence of a loss of reflective *content,* that must now be compensated by the "technique" of reflection. Meta-ethical problems appear mostly not to be problems *of* ethics at all, but rather problems that philosophers have *with* ethics. Now this is not to say that questions about the meaning of the word *good* are meaningless questions; it means only, that they are not questions *about* ethics, but must be answered in the course of undertaking ethical reflection itself, and this leads to an unavoidable "sinking" of the level of reflection.[8]

If someone is only a little acquainted with current approaches to ethics and the discussions that go along with them—whether this has to do with the question of "ultimate justification" or with questions of concrete ethical norms—there is no doubt that such a person can also catch a glimpse in Thomistic ethics (or in classical ethics in general) not only of the possibility of finding some decisive completions, but often also the crucial point of view—the "perspective of morality"—that really makes it possible to grasp the phenomenon of morality and moral action in an adequate way. Now, the representative of classical ethics today will have for rivals, besides the representative of discourse-ethics, two others as well: the moral philosophy of Kant and that

8. That ("meta-ethical") questions about the foundations of ethics are not to be distinguished from the questions of ethics itself, but are themselves part of ethics, is characteristic of the antique-classical ethical tradition; cf. J. Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (note 1 above), 135. This does not explain away "meta-ethical" questions as meaningless, but suggests another approach to be taken to them.

of the utilitarians or consequentialists. Of course, an exhaustive confrontation with Kant cannot be provided here—a man whose genius, although trapped in so many prejudices of historical awareness, possessed nonetheless such a profundity and brilliance of thought that even his critics cannot withhold their admiration. Whether or not justice is done to Kant or his moral philosophy in these pages will, again, have to be left to the reader's judgment. One may even come to the conclusion that the confrontation with Kant contributes more to the understanding of my own viewpoints than to the understanding of Kant's. In any case, the development of my own position is the central concern, so that I can limit myself to making occasional references to essential, and thereby illuminating, differences from Kant. Less frequently, references to discourse-ethics (which is in the Kantian tradition) will be of some use now and then, even though discourse-ethics constitutes in many respects an outspoken "contrasting project" to an Aristotelian virtue ethics; discourse-ethics understands itself as arising straight out of a diagnosis that a classical ethics of the good life has been shown to be *impossible* within modern conditions, and gains no small part of its legitimacy from precisely this. But the largest space will be given to the confrontation with consequentialist utilitarianism, or so-called teleological ethics, because consequentialist moral rationality is the real *antipodes* to what is here understood as the "perspective of morality." This confrontation will run like a red thread throughout the entire book, to emerge, finally, in a thorough discussion in the penultimate section (on the "calculation of goods" and the "weighing of consequences").

2. The "Perspective of Morality"

The "perspective of morality" intended here is not identical with what may currently be known in the English-speaking world as "the moral point of view."[9] This "moral standpoint" would place value on the interests of others or the community, while reducing the pursuit of a person's own interests. As against the subject who pursues merely personal interests, morality would represent the standpoint of the community and of impartiality, of what is valid for all, and takes into account the interests of all concerned.

Of course, by no means will it be maintained in this work that the perspective of morality is *not* that of a "universal" or "higher" standpoint that corrects pure self-interest. To that extent the *moral point of view* is in fact the standpoint of morality. The only thing I dispute is the alleged opposition between

9. Cf. K. Baier, *The Moral Point of View: A Rational Basis of Ethics* (Ithaca, N.Y., and London: Cornell University Press, 1958).

"personal interest" and "morality," or a conception of morality as a restriction on what belongs to our personal interest.[10]

The "perspective of morality" as it is to be understood here is the standpoint of the human being as body-and-soul unity and *acting subject,* equipped with drives, affects, and emotions, weak in instinct but at the same time capable, through intellect and will, of moving out from his own center and transcending himself toward what is "other"; free, and at the same time constantly liable to the loss of his freedom, master of his own action and yet always in danger of becoming the slave of this very action and of his often unclear motivations; and from this perspective, the standpoint of the acting subject, who in his striving, willing, and acting seeks the "good for himself," and thereby, finally, heads toward something ultimate that is sought for its own sake and is capable of satisfying all desires, a fulfillment that we call "happiness." From this perspective, the dichotomy "self-interest" versus "morality" makes no sense. This is because here morality is placed right at the service of one's own interest in the good, namely, in the service of the *truth* of this good, and thereby serves an interest in the success of one's own existence, of the "good life." At the same time, however, the interest of the others or the community in *their* well-being and in the good for *them,* can be understood as one's own interest as well, since it seems impossible—at least, if we want to be consistent—to recognize and pursue "what is truly good for myself," if I do not also understand it as fundamentally "a good for others" as well, even to the extent of having a personal interest that others also partake of that good.

This fundamental orientation of practical reason not to an "ought" transcending merely subjective inclination, but to the "good" as presented to a rationally guided desiring, may not, of course, guarantee the harmony of self-interest with the interests of others, but on the other hand, it does ensure that one's own interest can also *include* the interests, and the well-being, of another, because it is an interest in the truly good. The relevance of morality and its truth-claims for the carrying out of my own personal interest guarantees the universalizability of such claims, the commonality of interests, and consequently a fundamental—and not necessarily flawless—*intertwining* of morality and self-interest. Of course, this does not mean that the moral demands of practical judgments are essentially universal or universalizable. On the contrary, they are particular judgments, situationally bound, and concrete;

10. In his *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 313ff., J. Raz criticizes in exactly the same sense the opposition current in today's ethics between *morality* directed toward what is in the interests of others, and *prudence,* which follows one's own interests. H. Krämer, *Integrative Ethik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1992), on the other hand, offers what is really an apotheosis of this typical modern-contemporary opposition in an approach that he conceives of as "postmodern."

as Aristotle has it, they are "always capable of being otherwise." But just to the extent that practical judgments are judgments of particular actions, they are, in turn, not a theme of moral philosophy or ethics, but rather the subject of prudence as it guides action. Moral philosophy really concerns itself with the universal that underlies these judgments: the universal whereby concrete judgment and action themselves become "moral." This is also why in any case moral philosophy must be concerned with the boundaries of what is "morally possible," since nothing can be positively determined if it is not at the same time understood both in terms of what it includes and what it excludes. *To the extent* that ethics concerns itself with the boundaries of what is moral, to that extent also will it arrive at concrete assertions about what "may" or "may not" be done.

The true dichotomy that is proper to the perspective of morality is therefore the dichotomy between the merely subjective appearance of good and the truth of this "appearance of good" to the practical reason. "Morality" does not stand in the service of overcoming or suppressing subjectivity (not even empirical and sense subjectivity), but rather in the service of subjectivity's *truth,* and even—this is said with a critical glance at Kant—the truth of subjectivity as molded through our empirical and sensitive drives. The perspective of a morality that has to do with such a "truth of subjectivity" is always the perspective of the acting subject, of the "first person."[11] The standpoint is that of an acting human being, always and necessarily looking toward a good, and, because the acting subject does not want to be deceived in his movement toward the good, always looking for what is "truly good"—this is the standpoint that must come into view, as well as the ethical discourse that reflects it. Contemporary work on ethics, especially if it is understood primarily as a discourse for the establishment of "norms," often suffers from not getting this perspective right, despite all the valuable partial insights acquired. It suffers from the loss of the question about just what is ethical.[12] This is especially so when ethics only lays a claim to ground formal rules for the establishment of norms, but not the material content and values to which such norms are supposed to relate and which would be capable of providing some kind of practical orientation to the process. Such orientations become longer and longer with each attempt; it is not surprising that philosophical ethics is turning increasingly today to a discourse about content and values, which can perform the work of orientation.

But an ethics that confines itself to the establishment of formal procedures

11. See II.1.a, below.

12. Cf. also F. Ricken, "Kann die Moralphilosophie auf die Frage nach dem 'Ethischen' verzichten?" *Theologie und Philosophie* 59 (1984): 161–77.

for the justification of moral norms on the analogy of ethical-political and legal-political discourse appears to lose sight of just what is "moral" about these moral norms, even when fully concerned with the solution of "moral problems." Does the "basic question of morality" really consist in determining "how interpersonal relationships can be legitimately regulated"?[13] Is that not rather the basic question of all politics and the theme of political justice? Finally: where moral norms are understood in a Kantian manner (but still not going as far as Kant did) as "practical rules for the self-limitation of freedom for the sake of everyone's freedom," which essentially reflect the "mutual process of recognition within a lived context,"[14] then that also means that ethics corresponds to what Charles Taylor called the "Ethics of Inarticulacy,"[15] in which no hierarchies of value can be established, since the question about the superiority of some understandings of the good over other understandings is excluded from discussion at the outset. And yet authors like Joseph Raz and Charles Taylor have pointed out clearly that there cannot be *any* autonomy if the meaning of autonomy is not related to that good for which autonomy is good, which again requires criteria for the designation of morally valuable possibilities of action and forms of living;[16] the "authenticity" of the autonomous individual who seeks self-fulfillment is not possible if the horizon of meaning and significance prior to all autonomy is not first recognized: the horizon which makes possible, *independently* of what the autonomous subject in each case considers valuable and therefore chooses to value, that certain things are more important and more significant than other things.[17]

The often one-sided concentration on the question about the merely procedural conditions of the legitimate justification of moral norms is connected essentially with an opinion that has acquired canonical status (at least among professional philosophers) that such a thing as "truth" is not a theme for ethics; this holds for the philosophy of consciousness, for Kantian and post-Kantian critical philosophy, for Nietzschean metaphysics-criticism, and finally for the postmetaphysical epoch characterized by the *linguistic turn*. For similar reasons, the modern style is also very uncomfortable with posing the

13. J. Habermas, "Richtigkeit versus Wahrheit. Zum Sinn der Sollgeltung moralische Urteile und Normen," in Habermas, *Wahrheit und Rechtfertigung. Philosophische Ansätze* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1999), 301.

14. A. Pieper, *Ethik und Moral. Eine Einführung in die praktische Philosophie* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1985). Pieper defines here as "morality" what for Kant was merely subject matter of the "law doctrine" of the metaphysics of morals, which Kant nevertheless supplemented with a virtue ethics.

15. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 53ff.

16. J. Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (see above, note 10), 400ff.

17. Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1991), 38f.

classical question that is still central for "common sense" and everyday reasoning: the question about "the good life."[18] Even the (pejoratively) so-called neo-Aristotelianism[19] that depends for its life on premodern sources is aware, of course, that in Aristotle too there is a difference between *practical* truth, and truth in the epistemic-theoretical sense. Consequently, ethical discourse in the modern manner (in case it does not, in "neo-Aristotelian" fashion, tie practical reason to the tradition of the community) replaces truth with validity, or rightness (of a utilitarian or pragmatic type), or purposefulness. Strategies of justification replace knowledge of the truth, even though one may be well aware that normal everyday use of reasoning is "realistic" and is thus oriented toward certainty and truth-claims.[20] It is nevertheless illuminating that in such a situation ethics can still only be understood as an activity for the establishment of norms, since programs of norm establishment can leave questions of truth aside in favor of strategies of mere justification.[21]

3. Norm-Ethics Approaches to Moral Philosophy and the "Perspective of Morality"

Serious norm-ethics approaches of a philosophical kind are current today above all in the form of utilitarianism and discourse-ethics. Kantian ethics, by contrast, is not so much a norm-ethics as a maxim-ethics.[22] Even so, it shares with utilitarianism and discourse-ethics the central characteristic of every norm-ethics, which is to judge actions from the point of view of an observer, from a standpoint *outside* that of the acting subject. Again, this is an expression of the typically modern opposition of morality to self-interest, which leads one to let morality begin where one's own interests are limited by the interests of another. Virtue ethics in the classical tradition, however, is eudaimonistic and (consequently) "first-person" ethics, which is to say, it begins with the fundamental ethical question, "What constitutes good for one who acts?" and it asks this question from the perspective of the person acting

18. Cf. U. Wolf, *Die Philosophie und die Frage nach dem guten Leben* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rovohlt, 1999); A. W. Müller, *Was taugt die Tugend? Elemente einer Ethik des guten Lebens* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1998), a splendid, engaging summary of a virtue ethics.

19. H. Schnädelbach, "Was ist Neoaristotelismus?" in W. Kuhlmann, *Moralität und Sittlichkeit. Das Problem Hegels und die Diskursethik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986), 38–63.

20. Cf. J. Habermas, "Richtigkeit vs. Wahrheit" (see note 13 above), 288ff.

21. An exception can be made here for the "moral realism" that has planted a kind of colony in the territory of consequentialism; this position maintains, again in the "commonsense" tradition, the truth-capability of moral judgments, since this results from the "idea of the right moral answer" or the "right solutions to moral problems"; cf. P. Schaber, *Moralischer Realismus* (Freiburg and Munich: Alber, 1997), 34f. and 41f.

22. Cf. O. Höffe, *Immanuel Kant* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1983), 186ff.

(which, as we have said, has nothing whatsoever to do with egotism, since in a correct interpretation of eudaimonism—i.e., one that does not mistakenly interpret it as mere hedonism—the good of the other person also belongs to the good of the person acting).[23] Nevertheless, for Kant, the subjective maxims remain central and they express wishes and interests of the acting person, but only on a premoral level. It is unthinkable for Kant that there is such a thing as a subjective interest in the good that could be moral to begin with, and not just "egotistical" in itself.

Utilitarianism and discourse-ethics (or combinations of the two, such as ethical contract theories that bear certain utilitarian and discourse-ethics traits) both fail in their own ways to capture what is here understood as the "perspective of morality," although they are both more consistent in this respect than Kantian ethics. As will be shown, thanks to its "eventistic" concept of praxis, utilitarianism (or consequentialism) excludes the acting person from consideration for the sake of optimizing the consequences and states of affairs that result from the person's actions. Consequentialists[24] proceed from the idea that the acting person is obliged in each case to perform that action by which he can predictibly optimize the consequences for all concerned. Not only do consequentialists assume it as obvious that one action with better consequences is to be preferred to another with less good consequences; according to them, this is also the single point of view from which the moral rectitude of actions can meaningfully be judged. This makes it very difficult for them to have any dealings with virtue ethics arguments, since for a consequentialist virtue is at most a name for the disposition to carry out in each case the right action, that is, the action with the best consequences. Consequentialists arrive at this position because they exclude from consideration that which is central for virtue ethics: namely, that the subject of action himself or his choice of actions has a privileged status with respect to the subjects affected by his actions. This makes judgments of the following kind possible: an action *x* (e.g., the killing of a man in an extreme situation, in order to prevent the death of many others) would probably have better consequences for *all* concerned than *not* doing the same action; nevertheless, *I* will not do it, because by doing it, I would commit an injustice, and would become an unjust person. From the consequentialist perspective, such judgments are not possible, since what is "just" can be determined only on the basis of the consequences of actions for all concerned, so that actions and omissions are ac-

23. On this, see below II.1.a, and III.1.a. Cf. "The Good Life and the Good Lives of Others," part III of J. Annas, *The Morality of Happiness,* 223ff., esp. 322ff.

24. For a precise definition of different forms of consequentialism, see J. Nida-Rümelin, *Kritik der Konsequentialismus,* 2nd ed. (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1995).

corded the same status. Virtue ethics criticisms of consequentialism will be circular precisely when they presuppose a consequentialist concept of "virtue."[25] Within the tradition of utilitarianism, consequentialism has the peculiarity of permitting to count as "moral" only what includes the interests of all possibly concerned persons. Consequentially established moral norms then necessarily reflect this intersubjective viewpoint.

By contrast, discourse-ethics approaches seem from the outset to discount (or treat as simply impossible to think about) the moral discourse of the individual subject, and aim instead for an intersubjectively attained consensus for the establishment of norms that would be acceptable for all concerned, in the context of the entire society. Discourse-ethics thereby presupposes, first of all, participants in the discussion who are already constituted as moral subjects (without offering any ethical theory for this, whether with Habermas, in the form of sociological evolutionary theories, or with Apel—and against Habermas—in a transcendental analysis of an a priori communicative praxis, understood as an ultimate grounding);[26] secondly, the doctrine also calls for a "discourse of application" [*Anwendungsdiskurs*] to complete the discourse-ethics norm establishment—somewhat akin to a prudential discourse[27]—in which fully consequentialist points of view can be drawn upon and—rather "too late" for discourse-ethics to have anything to add—the whole gamut of fundamental ethical issues can emerge.

Discourse-ethics reveals the symptoms of modern moral philosophy, insofar as it proceeds as a cognitive ethics from the starting point that, under the modern conditions of a "postmetaphysical" epoch, practical reason can no longer find an answer to the question of "What is good for me?," but rather can only be competent for an answer (ascertainable through consensus) to the intersubjective question, "What should *one* do?"[28] This leads, as to be expected, to the insight that a discourse-ethics is really only practicable as a

25. That is the case, e.g., with P. Schaber, *Moralischer Realismus* (see note 21 above), 309–14, and his criticism of P. Foot, "Utilitarianism and the Virtues," in S. Scheffer, ed., *Consequentialism and Its Critics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 224–42. Schaber's criticism is a *petitio principii.* Cf. also below, V.4.f.

26. K. O. Apel, "Das Apriori der Kommunikationsgemeinschaft und die Grundlagen der Ethik. Zum Problem einer rationalen Begründung der Ethik in Zeitalter der Wissenschaft" in Apel, *Transformation der Philosophie,* vol. 2: *Das Apriori der Kommunikationsgemeinschaft* (1973), (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1976), 358–435.

27. J. Habermas, "Diskursethik—Notizen zu einem Begründungsprogramm," in Habermas, *Moralbewusstsein und kommunikatives Handeln* (Frankfurt am Main: 1983), 114 (= *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action,* trans. Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholsen [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990]), and also J. Habermas, "Treffen Hegels Einwände gegen Kant auch auf die Diskursethik zu?" in Habermas, *Erläuterungen zur Diskursethik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991), 24.

28. Cf. J. Habermas, "Lawrence Kohlberg und der Neoaristotelismus," in Habermas, *Erläuterungen zur Diskursethik,* 77–99.

theory of legal and political discourse,[29] that the discourse principle is then no longer understood as a moral principle,[30] which has led in turn to the diagnosis of a "definitive collapse" of discourse-ethics.[31] But still, this shows that discourse-ethics is not a supplement to the practical reason of the individual, but at best a theory of how the social validity of moral norms—and ultimately, legal norms—is brought into being. This is how it becomes a political ethics—a tendency that goes to its very foundations from the outset, in its character of allowing only intersubjective reason, and the "communicative" actions that correspond to this, to be the criterion of rationality.[32]

Virtue ethics does not in principle need to enter into rivalry with discourse-ethics. To the extent that someone emphasizes the political-legal ethical logic of discourse-ethics and thereby its intersubjective basis of legitimacy in opposition to virtue ethics, then it really does not have to be considered an "alternative paradigm." From the perspective of classical virtue ethics, one would have to say that discourse-ethics simply lacks the really fundamental subject matter of ethics: the acting subject in his original striving for the good, his interest in the rectitude of this striving, and the corresponding practical truth of his concrete action. Discourse-ethical viewpoints are very suggestive for a political ethics, which is closer to an institutional and legal ethics than to a virtue ethics. Institutional and political-ethical discourses are essentially disposed toward the solution of conflicts. And that is exactly what discourse-ethics seeks (as opposed to utilitarian reasoning, which really "argues away" conflicts for the sake of a rationalized social technology). Discourse ethics relocates the classical theme (still dominant in Kant's thinking) of the conflict between false (ego-centered, irrational) interests and true interests—at once retranslating Kant back into Rousseau—onto the level of social discourse, in which an unforced consensus, acceptable to all, represents the reason of morality, which rejects all reasoning that is trapped in mere (or at least, unenlightened)

29. J. Habermas, "Vom pragmatischen, ethischen und moralischen Gebrauch der praktischen Vernunft," in *Erläuterungen zur Diskursethik,* 117. The program is in fact carried out in *Faktizität und Geltung. Beiträge zur Diskurstheorie des Rechts und des demokratischen Rechtstaats* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1992) (= *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy,* trans. William Rehg (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996).

30. Ibid., 140.

31. K.-O. Apel, *Auseinandersetzung in Erprobung des transzendentalpragmatischen Ansatzes* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1998), 733ff.

32. This tendency is only increased by Apel, by his addition of a realistic responsibility-ethics, the so-called completion principle or Part B of discourse-ethics, a (fully pragmatic/utilitarian) ethics, which is concerned with creating the social conditions that alone can make possible the ideal discourse. Cf. K.-O. Apel, *Diskurs und Verantwortung. Das Problem des Übergangs zur postkonventionellen Moral* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1990), e.g., 453ff; also Apel, "Diskursethik vor der Problematik von Recht und Politik," in Apel and M. Kettner, eds., *Zur Anwendung der Diskursethik in Politik, Recht und Wissenschaft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1992), 29ff.

self-interest. The discourse-ethical requirements of uncoerced acceptability, reaching all those affected, of the foreseeable consequences of a generally valid norm, and the discursive and consensus-driven redemption of normative validity-claims in an ideal discussion, becomes thereby a moral principle that applies to everything, and includes the "application of a substantial, content-rich moral point of view."[33] It can readily be seen that such a viewpoint appears, at any rate, to be more relevant for the political-legal realm. This is because it does not ground any substantial comprehension of the good, but is rather a principle of political justice, according to which—in the sense, perhaps, of Rawls's "overlapping consensus"—conceptions of the good that are not generally accepted or acceptable are to be excluded from public validity.[34]

As virtue ethics, *The Perspective of Morality* is concerned directly with the space or region that lies in front of all possible intersubjective discourse and communication-oriented action. This region comprises a double aspect: first, the conditions under which discursive behavior, communicative praxis, is possible at all (such behavior only being possible among subjects who are already constituted as moral subjects with corresponding convictions and a moral language intelligible to all of them; although this is not developed as a distinct theme in discourse-ethics, it is never denied).[35] Secondly, it contains the basic contents of such ethical discourses: discourses without nonformal (i.e., substantial) criteria of rationality—primarily, but not exclusively, criteria of justice—are not possible, least of all in a political context. But then there is a third level, alongside and above every norm-related discourse, which surpasses as well the so-called discourse of application: that of the concrete action of the individual subject. That is why there is also a need for an ethics of particular judgments of actions (prudence). Here there is no longer any recourse to any intersubjective agreement, but only to personal responsibility. What is moral is not unconditionally that concerning which there has come into being some consensus, but rather, as Robert Spaemann emphasizes, in certain conditions, is what breaks free of all consensus, or even opposes it, and by that very fact makes a claim to be right.[36] An ethics which, like discourse-ethics, permits only an intersubjective understanding of the good must

33. J. Habermas, "Treffen Hegels Einwände gegen Kant auch auf die Diskursethik zu?" (see note 27 above), 21.

34. J. Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 133ff., now also in Rawls, *Collected Papers,* ed. S. Friedmann (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 421ff. ("The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus").

35. From a completely different perspective, E. Tugendhat, "Drei Vorlesungen über Probleme der Ethik," in Tugendhat, *Probleme der Ethik* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1984), 118, has pointed out that "consensus-theory is useless as a general theory of justification."

36. R. Spaemann, *Happiness and Benevolence,* trans. J. Alberg (South Bend, Ind., and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), 140.

finally omit this decisive level, or be blind to it. It would replace practical truth with consensus-created rectitude.[37]

In what follows, I am concerned to present an introduction to philosophical ethics, with a special emphasis on developing what has been called "the moral perspective" in contrast with the various forms of norm-ethics. This of course has nothing to do with "moralism" but rather with understanding that the answer to the question about the establishment of moral norms has already been decided at a place where it cannot yet be expressly stated: namely, at the level of insight into just what "human action" or "practical reason" is to begin with—in short, by insight into what an acting human being is. The conceptions that ethicists have about this are often silently presupposed or only brought to light afterward, once everything has already been treated. But these conceptions are ultimately what determine everything. And it is just for this purpose that decisive foundations of virtue ethics can be elaborated in the tradition that runs from Aristotle through Thomas Aquinas. A few distinctions and clarifications will be necessary.

4. Philosophical Ethics as Rational Virtue Ethics

Classical virtue ethics, the tradition to which the present text on the fundamentals of ethics claims to belong, differs from many contemporary forms of *virtue ethics,* especially those that have been elaborated in the English-speaking world and have become widespread in recent decades, in opposition to the dominant *moral philosophy.*[38] It begins with a now famous 1958 article by G. E. M. Anscombe[39] and the criticism made by her of the category of the "mor-

37. Cf. also A. Wellmer, *Ethik und Dialog. Elemente des moralischen Urteils bei Kant und in der Diskursethik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986), 69ff., who, like Tugendhat, points out that the reasons why we take something for true or right are prior to every intersubjective communicative action and any consensus aimed at thereby: "The fact of consensus, even when it arises under ideal conditions, can be no reason for the truth of what is held to be true" (72; trans. G. Malsbary here). Habermas replies to this today with the replacement of "truth" by rightness: "A discursively sought agreement about norms or actions under ideal conditions has more than a merely authoritative power; it holds within itself the rightness of moral judgments. Ideally justified assertability is what we mean by moral validity" (J. Habermas, "Richtigkeit versus Wahrheit" (297; see note 13 above; trans. G. Malsbary here).

38. A few important classical contributions pro and contra virtue ethics and further bibliography can be found, e.g., in R. Crisp and M. Slote, eds., *Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); P. Rippe and P. Schaber, *Tugendethik* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1998); cf. also in more detail M. Slote, *From Morality to Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992). Important contributions are also to be found in P. A. French et al., eds., *Ethical Theory: Character and Virtue,* Midwest Studies in Philosophy 13 (South Bend, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988). See further: Philippa Foot, "Virtues and Vices," in Crisp and Slote (see above), 163–77; A. W. Müller, *Was taugt die Tugend? Elemente einer Ethik des guten Lebens* (see note 18 above). A critical overview of modern virtue ethics and an analysis is offered by J. Schuster, *Moralisches Können. Studien zur Tugendethik* (Würzburg: Echter, 1997).

39. "Modern Moral Philosophy," *Philosophy* 33, no. 124 (1958): 1–19; also available in Crisp and

al ought" or "moral duty." According to Anscombe, this category should be replaced by a return to the paradigm of "moral virtue."[40] Explorations of virtue ethics received a definite impetus with the publication of Alasdair McIntyre's epoch-making *After Virtue* (1981). In its more extreme or "radical" forms,[41] this type of virtue ethics has a largely noncognitive character, that is to say, it maintains that the morality of an action and finally of the subject himself does not really originate from the recognizable rectitude of ways of acting—that is, from what is subsequently capable of being formulated as norms, principles, or rules—but much more from the current moral state or competency of the acting subject. "Rightness of acting" does not here define what the virtue of the subject is; rather, virtue, as the right disposition of the subject, defines and generates the "rectitude of action." What is most important, then, is not so much doing what is "right" (and certainly not on the basis of norms, principles, or rules) but rather feeling the right way, thinking the right way, having the right motives—in sum, to be a subjectively rightly disposed actor. From this follow right, morally worthy actions.

These are in fact characteristics of any virtue ethics, even of a classical virtue ethics. But modern virtue ethics theories tend to exalt these motivational aspects and separate them from the rationally cognitive aspects. Now, they are correct, it seems to me, to hold that the principal moral question is "What kind of a human being should I be?" and not "How should I behave?" but they have difficulties with posing the first question—the question about the good life—at least, with how to arrive at it, starting from the question about right actions. "Virtue" as the subjective disposition of the acting subject thereby becomes more or less sharply opposed to the awareness of and compliance with principles, moral norms, and rules of right action.[42] Right motivation through the virtuous disposition of the subject stands over against "duty" as expressed through principles, norms, and rules. While the (modern) moral philosopher places at the forefront the awareness of the rectitude of ways of acting, the corresponding principles, norms, or rules, and the moral duty that these create, and conceives of the virtues, by contrast, as merely derived factors, in the sense of a subjective disposition that is in *accordance with* the known prin-

Slote (see note above), 26–44, and in *The Collected Papers of G. E. M. Anscombe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 3.26–42.

40. Cf. also the criticism of the concept of moral obligation and its central position in modern moral philosophy by Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1985), 174ff.

41. Cf. K. Baier, "Radical Virtue Ethics," in P. A. French et al., eds., *Ethical Theory: Character and Virtue* (see above, note 38), 126–35.

42. Cf. also here N. J. H. Dent, *The Moral Psychology of the Virtues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 31f.

ciples, norms, and rules, the (modern) virtue ethicist understands the moral virtues as the primary thing, and as the source of morality, while the rectitude of actions, by contrast, is something derived from the virtue of the subject, from the rightness of his disposition. In this way, "virtue" or right motivation is put in the place of moral duty: one carries out the morally right and good, not because one is fulfilling duties, rules, or norms, but rather because one is rightly disposed, a good person.

Contemporary virtue ethics, especially as pursued in the English-speaking world, justly criticizes some weak points of "modern moral philosophy" and thereby accentuates the essential concerns of classical virtue ethics. But the differences that remain are considerable. Contemporary virtue ethics is often one-sided and extremist, and consequently not seldom dismissed as a "shot in the dark," since ultimately virtues, too, can only be defined on the basis of the rightness of actions.[43] To be sure, today's exponents of virtue ethics do not absolutely deny this. Some of them recognize explicitly that the rectitude of actions is distinguishable from dispositions and is not completely derivable from the latter.[44] Nevertheless, the two aspects do not appear to be very satisfactorily reconciled in today's virtue ethics.

But classical virtue ethics, in any event, is *not* noncognitivist (i.e., it maintains that the rightness of a way of acting does not simply spring from positively valued motivations, and it understands virtue as intimately related to reason),[45] nor does it recognize an opposition between virtue and duty. Virtue in the classical sense likewise does not attempt simply to justify our given moral intuitions, nor is it (in neo-Aristotelian fashion) tied to the predominant ethos of any given time. As a rational category, virtue aims to clarify our moral intuitions as given to us through upbringing, custom, and character and, in given cases, improve on them. On the other hand, classical virtue ethics does not reduce the virtues, in the way modern moral philosophy does, to a merely habitual appropriation of principles, norms, and rules. On the contrary, it is an outspoken doctrine of happiness, conceiving the good, the right, and the obligatory always with a view to attaining what truly conduces to happiness—even if it is only a very imperfect happiness in certain circumstances. Classical virtue ethics in the Aristotelian tradition understands virtue as that emotional or affective disposition of the subject that is (1) grounded in rationally recognized principles and through which (2) what is right, duty, or the "ought" is only really adequately understood in the individual case, because moral vir-

43. F. Ricken, "Aristoteles und die moderne Tugendethik," in *Theologie und Philosophie* 74 (1999): 391–404.

44. This is maintained, e.g., by M. Slote, *From Morality to Virtue* (see note 38 above), 89.

45. Cf. J. Annas, *The Morality of Happiness*, 450.

tue disposes affectivity according to reason and thereby enables and confirms rationality in particular actions.

This second point is really the decisive characteristic of every genuine virtue ethics. According to a current misunderstanding, which degrades the concept of virtue to the point of triviality, virtues are simply positively valued character qualities[46] or, as already mentioned, dispositions to fulfill moral rules or norms—dispositions especially important in the case of children, who do not yet have the rational competence to understand moral rules or to have a discriminating engagement with them.[47] The salient point is really this: working with a concept of moral virtue that is not *trivial,* "virtue" does not consist in a disposition, an affective tendency or inclination to do "whatever is right," but rather in doing what is right *by affective inclination,* that is, *on the basis of an emotional disposition or inclination, to hit upon the right thing to do in each case.* If virtue were to be understood only in the trivial sense of "a disposition to do whatever is right," this would indeed mean that virtue in itself cannot really be a foundation for determining this "right thing," since the action that is according to virtue would be determined by the "right thing." But it is the other way around: the virtuous disposition first makes it possible even to recognize what is concretely right and effectively to carry it out, because practical reason effectively leads and confirms virtue. Moral virtue is not simply the mere affective disposition or inclination to do whatever is right (one's "duty"), but rather an inclination or affective disposition through which what is right—here and now—is adequately recognized as "good," and is effectively met with (and of that, of course, there can be no theory or universally normative assertion). Moral virtue is the empowering of rationality with respect to concrete actions.

Once virtue is understood in these terms, then it seems really out of place to speak of possible conflicts between single virtues as if they were collisions between various moral obligations, and then (on the grounds that this problem was not sufficiently addressed in Aristotle's virtue ethics) to promote a "ready power of judgment for virtue conflicts" as a "metavirtue."[48] This notion simply bypasses the classical and Aristotelian understanding of moral virtue which, to begin with, in its basic concept already provides room for the adequate understanding of what is to be done in particular cases, and second, insists that there could not even be such a thing as "single virtues" coming

46. Thus, e.g., J.-C. Wolf and P. Schaber, *Analytische Moralphilosophie* (Freiburg and Munich: Alber, 1998), 63.

47. B. Gert, *Morality: Its Nature and Justification* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 277ff. (= the third edition of B. Gert, *The Moral Rules: A New Rational Foundation for Morality,* 1970).

48. O. Höffe, "Aristoteles' universalistische Tugendethik," in Rippe and Schaber, eds., *Tugendethik* (see note 38 above), 42–66, 61.

into conflict with one another, since in the truly virtuous person all the virtues form an organic unity that in fact enables the virtuous person to do what is right in any concrete situation. "Real virtue has, so to speak, already resolved the conflict, before the conflict could impair the decision."[49]

Now this does *not* in any way entail that what is right in a particular situation cannot be rationally justified or be dependent on rationally transparent normative presuppositions, or could not appear before the conscience of the acting person as "duty." The virtuous person's judgment of action is always a judgment of reason, or to be precise, of prudence. The affectively guided practical understanding of the virtuous person is nevertheless a superior mode of practical knowing, especially distinguished by three features: (1) such knowing makes possible *a flexible approach* to the concrete situation, and does this through meeting the morally right that corresponds to the goal of the appropriate virtue; (2) it not only refines the understanding, but also leads to the effective *accomplishment* of the recognized good (in contrast with the *akratos,* or incontinent, weak-willed person, so thoroughly analyzed by Aristotle); and finally, (3) (in contrast this time with the *merely* continent person, who fulfills his recognized duty against his inclination) such a mode of knowing brings together motivation and the rationale of action to a full, and *subjectively satisfying, harmony.*[50] The affectively guided practical judgment of the virtuous person is still a rational judgment, and is in fact more rational than the practical judgment of an affectively misguided person. In the latter case, the judgment does not arise from a reason that has been empowered through well-ordered emotions, but from a reason that finds itself in the tow of affects and emotions that have been left to follow their own logic, and is thus less "rational" than the reason of the virtuous person.[51] In this way, moral virtue defines and confirms the conditions under which our striving toward happiness is accomplished on the tracks of reason, so that we are after an ultimate, or a good-for-its-own-sake, that can also be *reasonably* willed as an ultimate and highest good. Classical virtue ethics, as presented here, is *rational* virtue ethics.

This kind of virtue ethics, then, does not hold the rightness of actions to be derived, in a one-sided way, from favorably judged emotional attitudes and motives, but in fact links the latter to rational criteria, permitting a discourse about moral rules and norms, and firmly retaining a normative concept of the "good" that is preordained to a teleology of the subject's wishes, inclinations,

49. A. W. Müller, *Was taugt die Tugend?* 17 (trans. G. Malsbary here).

50. Cf. also M. Stocker, "The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories" (orig. *Journal of Philosophy* 73 [1976]: 453–66; also in Crisp and Slote, eds., *Virtue Ethics,* 66–78).

51. The anthropological implications and presuppositions of this assertion cannot be developed at this stage. But see below, III.4.

and striving. And just because of this, it has been maintained that neither Aristotle nor Thomas represented "pure virtue ethics."[52] But such a view is a misunderstanding and only makes sense to someone who is already starting with a radical concept of virtue ethics. A rational virtue ethics, as the one presented here, is a no less "pure" virtue ethics—just without the one-sidedness of the radical form of it sometimes encountered.

Nevertheless, in a rational virtue ethics fashioned after the classical model, principles, rules, and norms do have a different status than they have in modern moral philosophy. They are ultimately the expression of the goals of striving, which, since they are also linked anthropologically, are oriented toward the good-for-man and bring that good to expression on the foundational-universal level. "Moral virtue" here does not mean a disposition to satisfy laws, norms, or rules, but rather the complete kind of fulfillment of what comes to expression in laws, moral norms, or rules: not just the fulfillment of a norm, but the targeting, at once cognitive and affective, of the good that principles and their corresponding norms indicate. According to a deep-seated prejudice, the Aristotelianism of Thomas Aquinas succeeded in bringing nothing more than a conception of virtues as the "habits of obedience to laws."[53] We should say, rather, that for Thomas the (natural) law—the *lex naturalis*—made explicit the rationality of the virtues. Virtues do not help us fulfill a moral law that stands over against us or that is imposed upon us; as "natural law," the moral law is rather the fundamental cognitive principle that makes virtue possible at all. Virtues are not to be understood as "means" or dispositions to fulfill the moral law, but contrariwise, the moral law is a "means" or the principle with whose help we can acquire virtues. And as a "means," it is not something standing over against us or imposed upon us, but rather the structural principle of practical reason itself. The basic phenomenon is always the human person as a cognitive, appetitive being, and not norms, rules, or laws. Norms and rules are normative statements, derived linguistic universals, by which we are able to come to an understanding about the practical good. Practical principles, on the other hand, insofar as we *distinguish* them from norms and rules (as will be the case in what follows), are at the same time the intelligible moving causes of praxis—that is, principles of praxis as such, and not simply normative assertions *about* it—and are thereby the foundation as well of the entire intelligibility of the concrete good that a judgment of action has for its object at any given time. This means that the principles of practical reason are the principles both of actions and of morality.

52. J. Schuster, *Moralisches Können* (note 38 above), 52.

53. J. B. Schneewind, *The Invention of Autonomy: A History of Modern Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 20.

Virtue ethics in this sense investigates the conditions under which an appetitive being is reasonable, or the conditions under which it strives for a good that alone is *reasonably* to be striven for. To do this, virtue ethics recurs in the greatest variety of ways to the "rational by nature" or the "naturally rational" [*das von Natur aus Vernünftige*]. It is common to all forms of classical virtue ethics that "natural" is not understood in a "naturalistic" sense, but rather as what is really and primarily good for man, as an ideal of successful human existence.[54] The "rational that comes from nature" is what grounds the moral competence of the acting subject and praxis as such—it is the original cognitive achievement of the practical reason, which broadens out into moral virtue, and which, as thus constituted, is interpreted as "natural law."

Virtue ethics understood in this way would have the same goal as all virtue ethics—namely, the rehabilitation of the moral competence of the acting subject—but will also link this competence to definite conditions. The concern is not with an ultimate justification of ethics, but rather with an identification of the unavoidable and ultimate moral "givens" that will not be logically derivable—in fact they are more like starting points or preliminary conditions for any moral discourse—but nevertheless, as stated before, are "naturally" open to every acting subject as an *individual*. Now this is not to be taken, of course, in the sense of a special "feeling" of value, in Max Scheler's or Nicolai Hartmann's sense: a kind of "organ" for understanding values that would be distinct from the practical reason. Rather, it is the very starting point of practical reason, and a component of practical reasoning as such. The view that ethical validity-claims can be made intelligible only through the medium of intersubjectivity would conflict with maintaining an immediately possible and inescapable givenness of what grounds all morality, or the entire sphere of the moral as such.[55] These givens are by no means controversial—that it is good for us to live, to survive, to live with other human beings in society, to behave rationally, to know the truth, to enjoy the deserved fruits of our labor, to join with the opposite sex, to have children, and so on—are normally not subject to dispute today. What is controversial, however, is not only the importance of these actions but above all the interpretation of them as "goods." One can, that is, explain them as mere "raw material" or material starting points for the not-yet-attained individual and social creation of values that is ever renewed in the historical process, and through which human identity and corresponding moral norms are formed, historically and socially conditioned at

54. Cf. J. Annas, *The Morality of Happiness*, 135ff.

55. For a criticism of the juncture of ultimate justification and intersubjectivity in discourse-ethics, cf. also V. Hösle, *Die Krise der Gegenwart und die Verantwortung der Philosophie* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1997), 179ff.

every stage; alternatively, they can be understood as the unavoidable, "natural" presuppositions of practical reasonableness, upon which human identity and the creation of values depends. And this must not be understood naturalistically—no more so than in the tradition of natural rights that adopted the same approach. A virtue ethics in the classical tradition represents in any case a certain "naïve" interpretation of these givens as principles, as the unavoidable starting points of all practical reasonableness, which also requires an ethical clarification of these givens on the horizon of rationality[56]—in this sense, the approach is neither "naïve" nor naturalistic.

This means also that virtue ethics is the opposite of a "morality of the experts." It is essentially different from conceptions of ethics, which, like discourse-ethics, only proceed from intersubjective communication processes and only accept validity-claims as based on consensus, or, like utilitarian consequentialism, need to collect an abundance of consequences of all kinds, affecting as large as possible a circle of concerned parties, for its calculation of maximum utility. These procedures reflect the reasoning of "ethics committees" rather than the daily behavior of morally competent subjects (which does not mean that such subjects cannot be greatly assisted by ethics committees, or that such committees for decision making are not important within certain institutions such as hospitals). Virtue ethics does not reproduce the reasoning of philosophizing or scientifically enlightened subjects—although it can be suggestive, of course, even for these; rather, it considers the reasoning of the person as a moral subject *tout court,* that each one of us is: subjects who lead their lives and intend to live this life "well." What this "well" (and the "good") means, and what it contains, we call "morality," and ethics is the philosophy about it.

The moral givens that have just been mentioned ground the moral competence of the acting subject. In this presentation of a rational virtue ethics, such givens will be referred to as "the rational by nature" [*das von Natur aus Vernünftige*]. This is not an *ultimate* justification (that would not be possible)

56. U. Steinvorth, *Klassische und moderne Ethik. Grundlinien einer materialen Moraltheorie* (Reinbek von Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1990) maintains the view that an ethics is "modern" if it grounds moral obligation on the "binding nature of human interests, needs, and decisions," but "classical" if it bases its determination of moral bindingness on objective relationships, "which are constituted independently of human interests and desires" (56). This statement with its bald opposition between "subjective interests" and "objective relationships" must be questioned because classical virtue ethics proceeds precisely from the fact that our conceptions of goods and their bindingness *are* in fact based on our interests and wishes, especially our *true* interests and our *rational* wishes. The distinction of "objective" as opposed to "merely subjective" is not then one of "outer" versus "inner," but rather of "rational" versus "contra-rational." For classical virtue ethics, "the good" is only what we reasonably strive for. Only *then* is it also true that the morally binding is what is "good," independently of our actual wishes and interests (implying that the "good" is in fact the "rationally striven for").

but rather the indication of something "final" or "primary," depending on how we approach it.[57] These givens, the "rational by nature" and the corresponding practical principles, are not "grounded" or "derived" but are simply discovered.

But a price must be paid for the rehabilitation of the moral competence of the subject. This price consists, first of all, in no longer treating all the interests and preferences of such subjects as of the same weight. "Advantage" here is not utilitarian advantage, the fulfillment of preferences of the largest possible number of affected persons, and normative rectitude here is not, as in discourse-ethics, the unforced agreement of moral norms with the (subjective) interests of all discussion participants. Secondly, virtue ethics in the classical tradition maintains that moral competence has a connection with the moral disposition of the subject. Being morally good is itself, to a certain extent, held to be the condition for understanding what is good. "Moral virtue" is in fact that disposition of acting persons, in which the good in reality also really *appears* good to them. Contemporary virtue ethics in many respects is relativistic in its approach.[58] It differs in this way from the classical tradition, which although treating the good that corresponds to virtue as a good also "in relation to us," nevertheless keeps firmly, at least in its Aristotelian form, to a concept of the practical truth of this good. This kind of truth, however, does not consist in the correspondence of judgments to some state of affairs that exists outside of the subject. Instead, it consists in the correspondence of the concrete judgment made in each case about the practical good (and about the willing that goes with that) with right appetition. Of course the "right appetition" is itself a state of affairs, and the rectitude of this appetition [Ger. *Streben*, "striving," cf. Lat. *ad-petere*, to "seek toward"] implies a relationship to the "objective world," but it is the "objective world" that the acting subject itself is.[59] Even the intersubjectively created rectitude in Habermas's sense does not come without a "relationship to the objective world," and is in fact

57. Apel's transcendental/pragmatic "ultimate justification" appears to be not a *grounding* at all, but rather has the character of a *discovery* of something presupposed in every communication process. In any case, what is here discovered (the structure of mutual recognition that underlies every communication process) is much too "thin" from the virtue ethics perspective to serve as the foundation of an ethics.

58. M. C. Nussbaum disagrees with this somewhat: "Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach," in P. A. French, T. E. Uehling, and H. K. Wettstein, eds., *Ethical Theory: Character and Virtue* (South Bend, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 32–53; slightly expanded in M. C. Nussbaum and A. Sen, eds., *The Quality of Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

59. The statement of J. Habermas (in "Richtigkeit *vs.* Wahrheit" [note 13 above], 296) really misses the point of practical truth: "Moral validity claims lack the relationship to the world that is characteristic of a truth-claim. This deprives them of a transcendentally justifying point of reference" so that they can only be created through a "discursively targeted agreement." The substitution of consensually attained rectitude rests upon an initial narrowing of what "truth" can mean in the philosophy of praxis.

that ever-changing objective world *to which* I relate as a subject, a relationship in which mutual recognition is offered as to a member of a communicative community and as a discussion participant. The insistence on the underlying moral rectitude of such mutual recognition—and this doctrine is the soul of all discourse-ethics—consequently does possess the character of an assertion of truth about reality [*Wahrheitsbehauptung*].

The rectitude of appetition, or striving, arises fundamentally from these previously mentioned givens that are not chosen by the subject, but are discursively demonstrable as ultimate moral givens or principles; it forms the foundation of the "rightness" or practical truth of all judgments of action, but such rectitude still lags behind what is concretely to be done: what is to be done cannot be derived with rigid logic from the principles, since the principles are at the same time underdetermined with relation to the concrete direction of actions; what is concretely done and willed can still be critiqued as being in contradiction to the principle. Practical principles are consequently the foundation and limit of rectitude and as such are the ground of all practical truth. One of the decisive contributions of Thomas Aquinas to philosophical ethics lies in the supplementation of Aristotelian virtue ethics with just such a doctrine of principles.[60]

In this way, ethics keeps the profile that it typically held in antiquity, with the exception of the Cyrenaic school of hedonism. It is a doctrine of the "good life" in the sense that it compels us to think about our priorities and standards and to revise our mode of living as circumstances require. In any event, according to this viewpoint, ethics can only be practiced by subjects who are striving for an improvement of their way of life. Precisely thanks to its eudaimonistic character, classical virtue ethics seeks a rationally oriented revision of spontaneous and unreflective ideas of happiness. The motive to improve

60. This hermeneutical perspective of a completion of Aristotelian ethics through a Thomistic doctrine of principles, as developed in my work entitled *Praktische Vernunft und Vernünftigkeit der Praxis* [*Practical Reason and the Rationality of Praxis*; see note 3 above] has been opposed by D. J. Bradley, *Aquinas on the Twofold Human Good* [see note 3], 250ff. Bradley holds, first, that the Thomistic doctrine of principles cannot be united with the Aristotelian conception of the *phronimos* and the plurality of human goods maintained by Aristotle (on why such a unity is indeed possible in my view, see below, especially II.3.b and V.1.f.). Second, Bradley holds that Thomas is not filling in something that was missing in Aristotle, and consequently not solving an Aristotelian problem, but rather one that arises from the Christian-theological law perspective, especially from the moral commandments of the Decalogue. My response to this objection is that the thesis that Thomas is supplying what was lacking in Aristotle was not meant to imply that Thomas was solving a problem of the historical Aristotle; rather, that Thomas's expansion of Aristotelian virtue ethics through a doctrine of principles of the practical reason responds to an inner necessity of Aristotelian virtue ethics as a *type* of ethics, and the expansion begins exactly at the place where it would be both possible and natural to begin, if seen from an "Aristotelian" perspective it is possible for it to begin, and is required by the nature of things (on why, according to my view, such an expansion was needed, see below, IV.2.d and 3.c).

one's praxis of living still survives in Kantian ethics, but only in a rudimentary, anti-eudaimonistic form. Kant's ethical doctrine is not a program for the reform of "the inner man," but rather a program for the defeat of the amorality, evil, and selfishness of the inner man, under the demands of morality. Such motives are scarcely present any longer in utilitarianism and discourse-ethics. Instead, they aim in a rather more classical manner for the improvement of praxis and for "reform" in the widest sense—for the improvement of a *social* praxis that transcends the subject; without this, they would not be ethics at all. Utilitarianism thereby functionalizes the acting subject for the purpose of optimizing the world situation, while discourse-ethics would like to coordinate individual interests harmoniously and in a noncoercive manner toward what is best for all with a view to society as a whole, transposing in this way the essential motive of Kantian legal philosophy into ethics.

5. Philosophical Ethics and Religious Belief

As stated at the beginning, the presentation of virtue ethics in this book is inspired above all by Thomas Aquinas, but now a second point must be added to that statement: everyone who pursues ethics finds himself in his "own situation." This means that before he even begins to reflect on ethical problems and express his conclusions, he has already lived a substantial part of his life span. He has his own experiences, and writes from within a certain lived context. This cannot be more obvious in the case of the classical founders Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, but it is no less valid for the Greek and Roman Stoics and Epicureans. None of them were philosophers in a vacuum. And of course the same goes for Thomas Aquinas as well as Kant, Hegel, Sartre, Rawls, or Habermas. There is no such thing as "philosophy in itself"; there are only philosophers, that is, philosophizing human subjects, and these subjects are acknowledged as philosophers when they attempt to ground their thinking rationally, without recourse to myths or the tenets of faith or majority opinion. Certainly, Aristotle's statements about friendship are conditioned by the fact that he knew what friendship was, since he had friends himself and understood how to be a friend to others. Someone who was not capable of that would scarcely have been in a position to say something reasonable about friendship. But this does not mean that Aristotle's analysis of friendship is "unscientific." Prescientific experience—"prejudging" or *prejudice* in a good sense—is always a factor, and whoever claims to be free of that, to represent "philosophy itself" and not simply a certain human being who philosophizes, deceives not only his readers, but himself.

As a philosopher, someone can be pagan, Muslim, Jew, or Christian, be-

liever or nonbeliever, man or woman, married or single, raised in the country or in the town; one has enjoyed a certain upbringing; one is molded by relationships with others, by cultural prejudices, cognitive habits, a certain level of education. Thinking is determined not only by what we know but also by what we do not know. Everyone has a temperament, ideals, regrets. There have been pagans who were outstanding philosophers and Christians who were inferior philosophers. Aristotle was a great philosopher not just because he was Greek but because he searched for the truth and knew how to think. If someone is a Christian, that is still far from meaning that he will take upon himself the effort of a rational search for the truth or that he can think; but neither is the opposite true. Is there any reason why someone who is an unbeliever will be able to think better? If he can think well regardless, it is certainly not *because* he lacks faith. True philosophy lives in the conviction that the rational discourse we call philosophy is, so to speak, always possible *anyway,* because it originates in an interest in truth.

What is the purpose of these remarks? Philosophical ethics under the conditions of the religious beliefs of one who practices it (and this pertains to the author of the present work) and under the conditions of the religious faith of those for whom it is written, is not free of problems: believing Christians in a certain respect already "know too much" for philosophy. After all, are they not already in possession of the most important answers? As Heidegger put it, is philosophy under the conditions of faith not an oxymoron, "wooden iron," a misunderstanding?[61] Is it meaningful, or even possible at all, for a Christian to practice *philosophical* ethics? Can there be any "nonbelieving" knowledge as such for a believing Christian? Can philosophy exist alongside theology?

The present work expresses the conviction that while it is not possible for a human subject who is a "philosopher" simply to shut off his faith, even when he philosophizes, just as little is it possible for one who philosophizes simply to forget how much his horizons have been widened by the personal experience of wishing the good of someone else, or of loving or being attracted to someone. It is still possible, and in fact indispensable, that the *philosophy* he pursues does not *argue* on the basis of any truths of faith. In the case of ethics, a comparable kind of exclusion or bracketing should come into play: the theme of philosophical ethics needs to be distinguished from moral theology.

How far such bracketing may succeed in each case is not, finally, the decisive question. The decisive question is whether the arguments that a philosopher uses are *philosophical* arguments that can be discussed within the forum of reason as such. Arguments are philosophical when they rely neither

61. M. Heidegger, *Einführung in die Metaphysik,* 3rd ed. (Tübingen: M. Niemeyer, 1966), 6.

on authority nor on religious revelation, but arise from generally accessible experience and justifiable insight.

And this is a situation that *every* human being is in, not just the believer. Prescientific or nonscientific experience should never be simply shoved aside, and in fact nobody does this. Someone who has never felt the attraction of a man or a woman would not have much to say on the theme of love and sexuality. But if what someone is going to say is not going to be poetry but philosophy, it must be presented with justified arguments. If someone wanted to have knowledge or some ethnological information about the people of a newly discovered continent, he would first have to believe the people who told him of the existence of the continent in the first place. In order to acquire scientific knowledge, of course, he would have to go there himself. But he would never progress even as far as that if he had rejected mere traveler's reports as having nothing whatever to contribute to ethnology.

Faith is related to philosophy as hearing is to seeing.[62] Through the "hearing" of belief, one who philosophizes is able to grasp much that for a long time had remained outside his field of vision, but which he is now able to find by looking in the right direction. But what he *cannot see with his own eyes*—because it exceeds the power of his vision—that he must leave to the hearing of faith. And who would maintain that the believer can see with his own eyes—his reason—only as much, and no more than, the nonbeliever would, independently of the "hearing" of faith? All that is required is that the one who sees something be able to *make it visible to others too*—and that means (to abandon the metaphor) that he can rationally justify it.

But then a new question arises: Does the believer need philosophy at all? This question is definitely to be answered, "Yes." First, because faith does not take the place of natural knowing ability, but only supplements it, and raises it to a higher level. "Supplementation" and "elevation," however, are not possible unless there is something already there to be "supplemented" and "lifted up." And following from this is the second reason: faith does not tell us *all*. It is light *in* the human intellect and strengthening *in* the human will. This is why faith can never replace human, naturally reasoning insight, and in fact presupposes it in many respects.

Now the suspicion may arise that we are speaking here in favor of philosophy as the "handmaiden of theology" (*ancilla theologiae*). There are various ways of interpreting this. One could take it to mean that theology has need of philosophy, and that philosophy is not of service to theology, but *subservient*

62. This happy metaphor comes from J. Pieper, *In Defense of Philosophy* [*Verteidigungsrede für die Philosophie*], trans. L. Krauth (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 118–20.

to it, even if that is not the original meaning of this very doubtful metaphor.[63] In any case, this would not be any downgrading of philosophy. Mathematics also "serves" the natural sciences, and this does not degrade mathematics or threaten its independence. On the contrary, if such a use were *not* being made of it, mathematics would be living a merely "academic" existence and would have a socially marginal status—just as philosophy does, now! But philosophy has in fact the highest value not only academically but socially, whenever faith flourishes and theology is considered important. This would apply not only to the Christian Middle Ages but also to the seventeenth century, arguably the most theological century of all time.

So, then, let philosophy be the *ancilla*. But she will not prove to be a useful servant unless she *really is* philosophy—and in this sense she is essentially *not* a "handmaid," but rather is that "opening up" to the whole of reality that is peculiar to the human being, arising (to use Kant's expression) from a "natural disposition" of man. She is the search for the whole *as* the whole, that is, the search for the understanding of reality on the basis of its ultimate and most deeply lying reasons and causes. As a human undertaking, such searching is essential for philosophy. More than possession of truth, she is the love of truth, because her wisdom must ever remain incomplete. Furthermore, this kind of knowledge is always bound up with one's own way of living. Knowledge and personal interest cannot be separated here. For this very reason, philosophy will always remain controversial in itself. This is no argument against it, only a sign that it is really concerned with the "whole." And this is also why as an academic discipline philosophy is always an "institutionalized crisis about fundamentals."[64] The crisis is not just about "issues" but more immediately the philosophizing human being in his existential understanding of himself. There comes to mind what Nicias says to Lysimachus in Plato's *Laches:* "You seem not to be aware that anyone who is close to Socrates and enters into conversation with him is liable to be drawn into an argument, and whatever subject he may start, he will be continually carried round and round by him, until at last he finds that he has to give an account both of his present and past life."[65]

63. For its origin, cf. the article "Ancilla Theologiae," in J. Ritter, ed., *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* (Basel: Schwabe, 1971), 1.249ff.

64. R. Spaemann, "Die kontroverse Natur der Philosophie," in Spaemann, *Philosophische Essays* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1983), 104–29, esp. 117. In a similar way, MacIntye diagnoses the insurmountably controversial nature of various versions of moral philosophy in Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (South Bend, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990).

65. Plato, *Laches* 187e–188a, trans. Jowett, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato,* ed. E. Hamilton and H. Cairns (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1961), 131.

The believer has *his* knowledge interests. In the context of a believing life, philosophy will then truly be *philosophy* when she exclusively uses her own methods, without looking furtively to theology and the needs of theology, but also without falling victim to the error of thinking that she must arrive at the same exact place where the believing philosopher already is located. Philosophy must often exercise "heroic self-denial" for the sake of truth. The difficulty consists in the fact that we all live and philosophize in the context of a Christian ethos, in which moral values have a validity that is positively Christian and cannot really be justified *purely philosophically*. Such, for example, are the commandment to love one's enemies, the ethos of compassion, the beatitudes, and above all the "wisdom of the Cross" which must seem to the merely philosophical reason as foolishness. All attempts, such as the Kantian one, to justify the Christian ethos in purely philosophical terms ultimately lead to the destruction of that ethos. But just because Kantian ethics in its fundamental structure as a *philosophical* ethics is *too* Christian, it ceases to be Christian (and something similar can be said about the entire tradition of German idealism, especially Hegel). Philosophically, one must restrain oneself, by rendering unto Caesar what is Caesar's but to God what is God's. This does *not* mean that God has no place in philosophy. But it is not *the same place* in philosophy as in theology—this point will soon be clarified further.[66]

6. Moral Philosophy and Ultimate Theological Justification: What It Includes and What It Excludes

There is a temptation for the Christian to think with the presupposition, even in ethics, that nothing can happen without God. He might think that only a "theological ethics" is possible. In my view this would be a serious mistake. Certainly, without God, nothing exists or happens at all. And the philosopher would want to find reasons why that is so, even in ethics. But many contemporary moral theologians are less distant than might seem at first from the error of thinking that everything in ethics "hangs upon" God. Even though they may vouch for the autonomy of morality, still the whole must be ultimately grounded in God, to keep everything from falling into the void.

In reality, not even morality in its "ultimate justification" is "hanging upon" God. Like everything that exists—stars, planets, atoms, grass, flies, and elephants—so man and his action is constantly "in God" and "through God." God does not come into ethics only at the end, but is always present. The question is only *how* He is present, and how this presence becomes effective.

66. I will return to this topic in I.4, and in V.2.c.

At what point in human moral action God "appears," so to speak, is very hard to say. At the most it can be reconstructed. This is because we already know about God before we begin to analyze human behavior and practice ethics. The knowledge of God is not an achievement of practical reason. Rather, as a rule we have already taken our first steps as moral subjects on the basis of some form of insight into the existence of God and then we interpret the work of practical reason accordingly. Of course, the ideas of "practical reasoning" and "morality" lead to an awareness of God. Nevertheless, this is not a practical knowing but a form of *theoria* that discovers in the phenomenon of the moral the traces of that cause "which everyone calls God."[67] But the "hanging" of morality and human autonomy upon "God as ultimate justification" is thereby exposed as self-deception, and often only a convenient escape, in order to bring back at the end as an "ultimate justification" what one was not able to justify beforehand.[68]

But what is the place of philosophy in the context of that whole to which faith is directed and which forms the subject matter of moral theology? Many solutions to this have been offered in the past, and they are still very unsatisfying. Most of all, it was understood that philosophy was supposed to "limit itself" to the "natural goal" of man and what was required to reach this. Theology, finally, would then treat human existence insofar as it was ordered to a "supernatural goal." This made philosophical ethics into a kind of "narrow-gauge" moral theology, a moral theology with exclusions, an ethics at a lower level, or even a purely hypothetical discussion about a *natura pura,* a "mere nature" concerned with a kind of human being that does not exist in reality. This had the paradoxical consequence that in theological terms the "natural" would have to be relativized as a mere "leftover" concept [*Restbegriff*].[69]

New reflection is needed about the boundaries of philosophical ethics. My intention is to show that Thomas Aquinas gives us the decisive starting points for doing so. In any case, we will see that this defining must arise from the fundamental analysis of action-theory. Instead of beginning with the definition as such, we will justify it afterward, after we have already proceeded a certain way in our exposition. This may seem strange at first, but it will prove to be advantageous in due course.

Philosophical ethics, in the form presented here—a virtue ethics that is rational in its foundation—is understood as an ethics that can be constituted

67. This is the formula that concludes each proof of God's existence in Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae;* cf. Prima Pars, Quaestio 2, articulus 3 (hereafter = I, Q. 2, a. 3).

68. That is the tendency of numerous contributions in A. Hertz, W. Korff, T. Rendtorff, and H. Ringeling, eds., *Handbuch der Christlichen Ethik* (Feiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1978); cf., e.g., 1.75 and 146.

69. So K. Rahner, "Über das Verhältnis von Natur und Gnade," in *Schriften zur Theologie* (Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1956), 1.323–45, esp. 340.

as *philosophical* even under the conditions of Christian faith. To this extent it is *not* a Christian ethics, even though it fully recognizes, and holds in due respect, the existence of a specifically Christian morality that is founded on revelation and already embraces the whole of life. Only in the latter sense is it a "Christian philosophy." But it is *not* a Christian philosophy when it comes to its methods and its contents. As philosophical ethics, it should be strictly adequate to the demands of a purely philosophical method, a method that can be recognized by believers as well as unbelievers. It understands itself as a free-standing discipline that *can* be integrated into moral theology, but also has a validity within its own realm, independently of theology: a validity that *moral theology too must respect and not limit or relativize.* If the "perspective of morality" as developed in a purely philosophical ethics does not comprehend the whole, it is still—even as an incomplete and partial view—an indispensable component of the truth of the whole.

In other words, I am writing in the conviction that philosophical ethics is something different from theological ethics or moral theology, even for the believing Christian. They are different—apart from the question of content—above all in their starting points and architecture, and in the structure of their arguments. In this matter I believe that I am suggesting some new paths in several respects. Consequently the overall structure of the book and the order of steps in the argument are of primary importance.

7. The Structural Peculiarities of Classical Virtue Ethics and the Order of the Argument in This Book

Julia Annas has very helpfully explained[70] that classical virtue ethics has several differences in methodology from modern moral philosophy. Annas tells us that according to a widespread current understanding, an ethical theory must have two characteristics: hierarchical structure and completeness. "Hierarchical" means that some concepts in an ethical theory are basic and all the others are understood to be derived from these or as reducible to them. Thus for consequentialism the basic element is the circumstances and states of affairs produced by the foreseeable consequences of actions, from which is derived that which we are obliged to do in our actions—namely, the production of the best possible circumstances and states of affairs. What it is to be a good or just human being or what would be called a "virtue" are questions that are answered by determining to what degree such a "virtue" can produce the optimal circumstances or states of affairs. In other words, "virtue" or "justice" are reduced to

70. *The Morality of Happiness,* 7ff. (see note 1 above).

the concept of a disposition to bring about actions that would have optimal consequences. If a theory is "complete," on the other hand, this would mean that its basic concepts and all the secondary concepts derived from them are capable of explaining the sum total of moral phenomena. A consequentialist would not allow for any judgment that would *not* be based on judging a disposition or an action on the basis of the consequences that follow from it. Accordingly, he would maintain that cowardice is to be judged as cowardice because bad consequences flow from it, which naturally leads to the position that it is the same thing to say that someone has done a misdeed from cowardice as from injustice. Both come to the same thing, since moral evaluation is made on the basis of the consequences that are produced by the action. Courage is then the disposition always to do the right thing (i.e., that which produces the best consequences), and the same goes for justice and temperance. Finally, all moral elements, especially the various concepts of the virtues, become so many different names for designating the same thing: namely, the consequentialist rationality of optimizing consequences. Such ethical theories are reductionist because they reduce everything to a single moral principle.

Classical virtue ethics is conceived neither as having a hierarchical structure nor as being "complete" in the sense just mentioned. The same can be said about a Thomas Aquinas–oriented rational virtue ethics belonging to the same tradition, with one qualification soon to be clarified. Classical virtue ethics does not begin with basic notions from which everything else is derived or to which everything is reduced. Instead, it begins with *primary* notions such as the ultimate goal of the acting person, the striving (or appetition) toward happiness (as an ultimate goal of appetition, willed for its own sake), and the concept of virtue itself (as an excellence of someone who attains what really is good in all his choosing and acting). The concept of "right" or "good" action is not derived from these notions, however, nor is reducible to them. Thus, for example, all classical virtue ethics from antiquity understand virtue as a disposition to do what is morally right; nevertheless the "morally right" is not defined as that which is suited for producing or favoring a virtuous disposition of the subject. Actions that are done virtuously do not have their moral value from being useful for the acquisition of virtues, but rather because they make it possible to choose what is morally right in each case; the virtues are the habitual disposition to do just that. The purpose of virtue is not to be a virtuous subject with good motivations, but to be a subject who acts rightly. The point of being a good, just, courageous, or temperate human being consists in being someone who likes what is just, courageous, or rightly measured, and also does it. For this very reason the question is quite important, what kind of a man or woman we make ourselves, when we choose or do this or that. A

"just action" would therefore not be defined as an action through which someone becomes a just man (although naturally every virtue ethics holds that we become just persons through just actions). What is morally right must nevertheless be understood independently of this, because we become just men or women through the choosing and doing of just actions, that is, through choosing what is right according to the requirements of justice. Only in this way do we understand what makes a disposition to action or an affective state of the subject into a *virtue* at all: that is, into a *moral* disposition, which is a disposition of doing the morally right, and not just *any* disposition that someone could call admirable or excellent, but which may not have anything to do with morality.[71]

Classical virtue ethics does indeed have primary concepts like happiness or virtue, since there are primary and secondary things in our moral experience, but there is no hierarchical line of derivation from one to the other. Neither "happiness" nor "virtue" are moral principles. This becomes clear in the relationship between the concepts of "happiness," on the one hand, and "right" or "good" action, on the other. Even though the concept of happiness is the concept of the highest good, the right and good, through which we can reach that happiness, are not "derived" from that. The concept of the highest good or happiness is likewise not a standard on the basis of which actions can be evaluated (on this, see below, III.1). This is why a "hierarchical" structuring of ethics (in Annas's sense) is impossible. Now a lack of hierarchical structure leads to a lack of the "completeness" that would correspond to the hierarchy. Virtue ethics cannot explain everything in terms of virtue. This is why virtue ethics needs, for example, the supplementation of an institution ethics that is not reducible to virtue ethics concepts (whereas consequentialists do in fact ground institutional ethics statements with consequentialist logic). A virtue ethics also fully recognizes consequence-oriented arguments and can see a limited application for the discourse-ethics principle of consensus, especially when it widens into a political ethics. In general, virtue ethics is open in a pluralistic way to a whole variety of rational modes of argumentation. And this is an Aristotelian and fully non-Cartesian principle: the method must submit to the subject matter, and not the subject matter to the method. A virtue ethics likewise does not pretend to offer a solution for every case. "Borderline cases," "tricky moral problems," "quandaries," and "dilemmas" do not necessarily receive a clear "solution" (whereas for consequentialists there is always

71. J. Annas, *The Morality of Happiness,* 9. On this very point modern virtue ethics theories are problematic. M. Slote, *From Morality to Virtue* (see note 38 above), 90, holds that the "aretaic" qualities characteristic of virtues are not to be taken as *moral* qualities, but rather as "admirable" or "excellent" or "praiseworthy" characteristics. In Slote's virtue ethics, "virtue" is not a moral disposition.

a precise solution to be reached, namely, the one that brings the best foreseeable consequences). Nonetheless, the virtue ethics perspective can theoretically explain *why* such moral problems cannot be finally judged with absolute exactitude.

If someone is skeptical about virtue ethics, he often has come to this position by judging virtue ethics from the perspective of modern moral philosophy, through applying the typical requirements of hierarchical structure and completeness. As one critic has it, virtue ethics likewise "beginning with a root conception of the morally good person, proceeds to introduce a different set of secondary concepts which are defined in terms of their relationship to the primitive element."[72] In this way virtue ethics would only be another strategy for building a hierarchically structured and complete ethical system. This misunderstanding then leads directly to a discounting of the usefulness of the concept of virtue, since it is obvious that not much can be made out of a "core-concept of the morally good man" that must be defined as "the original element" in relation to everything else, and ultimately refers us back to a normative discourse that alone can ground what is meant as "good." Virtue ethics, then, so the criticism proceeds, is chaotic, unclear, and incapable of solving concrete moral problems or of giving an answer to casuistic questions. Now, in general, there is a certain amount of truth in this criticism. But it misses the really significant point. The criticism is justified when virtue ethicists make the concept of virtue into a fundamental concept out of which they derive everything else or to which they try to reduce everything else. Virtue, in this case, has become an all-determining concept, and virtue ethics is pursued in the spirit of modern moral philosophy. Such a modern "virtue ethics" which attempts to understand the rightness of actions through the motivations from which they arise naturally forgets the ancient wisdom that we can do what is right from poor motives and can also sometimes do what is wrong from good motives. In other words, we do not simply judge actions on the basis of the motives by which they are accomplished.

But we would not expect the virtue ethics represented by Thomas Aquinas to preserve the characteristics of classical virtue ethics as we have so far identified them. The conjunction of the classical and especially the Aristotelian tradition of ethics with the Christian law-ethics seems calculated to permit the concept of virtue to become a merely derivative concept, such as "a disposition to obey the moral law." If G. E. M. Anscombe was correct in her 1958 article (see note 39 above), then "virtue" and "moral law" are mutually exclu-

72. R. B. Louden, "On Some Vices of Virtue Ethics," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 21 (1984): 227–36; reprinted in Crisp and Slote, eds., *Virtue Ethics* (see note 38 above), 201–16, at 204.

sive ethical categories. But this is not necessarily so, and Thomas Aquinas is the proof that it is not. His interpretation of the "natural moral law" as a doctrine of principles supplementing a classical virtue ethics shows this, and also takes the classical tradition of Aristotelian virtue ethics to a level that is by no means un-Aristotelian, but can be called, as already mentioned, a kind of "broadened Aristotelian position."[73] A doctrine of principles of the practical reason is in fact a hierarchical element because it allows an actual discourse for the justification of norms. But it still remains faithful to the nonhierarchical logic of ancient/classical virtue ethics. This is because nothing concrete for praxis can be derived from the principles. Above all, practical principles are hierarchically structured only to the extent that some of them are higher and more important than others, but not in the sense that they are derivable from each other (for then they would not be principles). And because they are multiple, they rule out all claims to completeness in the sense discussed above.

But this means that there can really be an actual virtue-ethical discourse of justification as a display of practical principles. In this book, this will be done especially in chapter V, and it is significant that it is situated at the end and not at the beginning. The grounding of *ethics* as carried out in what follows is exactly for this reason not hierarchical in the sense we have indicated. However, the foundation of *morality* itself is "hierarchical" because the principles (in a sense not yet explained) are the "primary thing," grounding all morality and constituting the human being as a moral subject. But this "primary" of morality is not primary for ethics or moral philosophy. Like all philosophy and science, ethics does not arise from principles or causes, but is rather a way of *discovering* causes and principles. The ethical discourse about practical principles stands at the conclusion of the argument and is, in a way, its result—only then does it become a justification or foundation.

The following systematic exposition and "foundation" should not be misunderstood as a discourse of derivation.[74] This does not mean that the single chapters and sections do not follow a logical order. The opposite is true. But

73. I tried to show this in *Praktische Vernunft und Vernünftigkeit der Praxis* also against the opposite thesis, that Thomas created a Christian-theological reinterpretation and counterfeit of the essentially pagan-philosophical Aristotle. This position was maintained not only by R. A. Gauthier (see above) but also, and above all, by H. Jaffa, *Thomism and Aristotelianism: A Study of the Commentary by Thomas Aquinas on the Nicomachean Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952). Even though Jaffa's interpretation can today be held as definitively superseded, in many circles it still enjoys almost canonical authority.

74. In this way it is not liable to one of the three alternatives of H. Albert's "Münchhausen's Trilemma" which are valid for deductive methods of arguing. Cf. H. Albert, *Traktat über kritische Vernunft,* 5th ed. (Tübingen: Mohr, 1991), 13ff. In this sense, Aristotle was already aware that there can be no ultimate justification, since what is ultimate—which is at the same time the principle—cannot be established but can only be shown, precisely because it is the principle. And yet there is *a way to* the principles, and this is how principles acquire the function of an ultimate justification of what went before.

the reader will notice that every chapter, in a way, makes a fresh start. There will be reference to what has already been said, but also to other things, which will have to be introduced, but are still foundational. The argumentation is a kind of "circling around" the same subject matter: the human being as an acting, rational being that strives for fulfillment. The circling follows a certain logic of argumentation that can now be briefly sketched.

Chapter I. "Ethics in the Context of the Philosophical Disciplines"—this part treats preliminary clarifications about subject matter, method, and terminology.

Chapter II. "Human Action and the Question about Happiness"—this part clarifies, in terms of action theory, the origin of the basic question: the question about happiness and the really successful life. Two classical answers to the questions are sketched out and explained. These answers in both their Aristotelian and Thomistic versions are many-sided and rather like quandaries, but they still do help in leading to an abundance of fundamental action-theoretical insights. They also lead to a more precise delimitation of the various themes that are proper to a pure philosophical ethics.

Chapter III. "Moral Actions and Practical Reason"—this part works out the foundations in action theory and anthropology of philosophical ethics as a rational virtue ethics in which the concept of intentional action is especially developed. An understanding of the practical reason in its various anthropological dimensions is central here, since without it the intentional character of human action would remain incomprehensible.

Chapter IV. "The Moral Virtues"—this is a systematic treatment of the concept of moral virtue, built on the foregoing action-theoretical foundations. Although "virtue" is a primary concept, it must now be more precisely grasped in the context of the anthropological and action-theoretical analyses. The Thomistic reception of the Aristotelian definition of virtue will stand in the foreground, as well as the closely associated analysis of the dual (affective/cognitive) and anthropological function of the moral virtues, and the importance of the interconnectedness of the single virtues, making an "organism" of the virtues.

Chapter V. "Structures of Rationality"—this part contains what ethicists consider most important: the *normative* part of ethics in the proper sense. As explained, the questions about the moral norm or about the establishment of moral norms, the moral law, practical principles, and the like, are not left to this concluding position by chance. This is in fact the concluding discourse-of-justification for a eudaimonistic virtue ethics. Before this as a background, the last part ends with a critique of so-called teleological ethics (consequentialism, proportionalism). The reader may find it helpful to read part 4a of

chapter V before anything else ("The Unity of the Practical Reason and the Perspective of Morality"). That section orients the overall course of argumentation and the position that results from it.

Finally, the epilogue, "From the Philosophical to the Christian Perspective of Morality," will show how in fact the inner *incompleteness* of the purely philosophical perspective justifies Christian morality, which again finally shows itself as a "rescue" and justification of philosophical reason, while at the same time staying true to the logic of a eudaimonistic virtue ethics.

Many themes that have received only an outline treatment on the following pages have been treated by the author at fuller length elsewhere, to which reference will be made at appropriate places in the footnotes and bibliography. In general, reference to scholarship has been limited to only the most essential. And yet it seems important to me to set forth my own thinking through precise historical references and the extensive support of primary texts. To this extent the book may also offer, as a kind of by-product, a certain stimulus for research in the history of philosophy. I believe that I have profited greatly from the debate with the exponents of analytical action-theory, and this applies particularly to the fundamental concept of intentional action. This explains the references, but also the critical stances, toward certain assertions of analytical philosophers.

This book attempts an introductory presentation, and—for the sake of completeness—cannot avoid, at times, the manner of a textbook. Many things must be treated with a view to comprehensiveness that cannot receive the development and differentiation they deserve. But for the most part, the book is designed to present an argument. It is not simply exposition, but also analysis, reflection, and the step-by-step, argumentative unfolding of a unified concept. I have striven for clarity and readability; the philosophical notion has constantly to be explicated through concrete illustration. The passages in smaller font comprise supplements and refinements of the main text, but at times they offer examples or short excurses. They form a part of the whole argument complex, but can be skipped over without any loss to the connection of thought.

It is my hope that this book will be useful not only as a self-standing contribution to philosophy, but at the same time as a philosophical preparatory course for moral theology. The latter purpose is responsible for certain emphases that result from my concern to develop specific and independently valid philosophical methods, lines of enquiry, and styles of argument for problems that have been posed with theological interests in view.