



# FAITH & REASON

THE JOURNAL OF CHRISTENDOM COLLEGE

1997-1998 | Vol. XXIII, Nos. 3 & 4

---

## THE GOOD, THE GREAT, AND THE SMALL

*Michael Platt*

---

“THE GOOD IS TO BE DONE AND FOLLOWED, AND EVIL SHUNNED,” READS A SENTENCE in Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa Theologiae*.<sup>1</sup>

This is true. He who thinks it knows that there is good and there is evil, that there is ever a choice between them, that our choices establish our character, and that our character then determines the whole of our life, but he who thinks this sentence understands more as well: how hard it is for good persons to follow the good, let alone to behold it, and how hard it some times is, even for those who follow the good, to do good.<sup>2</sup> In truth, this simple sentence of Thomas is rich, noble, and deep. It is so because it springs from truth.

I. Getting right with the good is not easy. Our relation to it is not single, but double. We are to do the good and we are to follow it. It is both something that we know well enough to do right away, and yet something that we do not know any better than to follow as best we can; it is, then, something right in front of us, commanding us, like a law or a parent or a duty, saying “Do it,” and yet it is also something way up ahead of us, above us, urging us “Be noble,” exhorting us “Be ye perfect,” and calling us, “Follow me,” “Be like me,” and “Live in me.”

Thomas sees these two, doing and following, going together. After all, doing a good must surely be a step on the path to the good. Likewise, in following the good one must surely do the good on the way. After all, the journey includes the path, the destination the steps. Nevertheless, what is distinct enough to be seen as two, may become separated, so that there may seem to be a choice between them. Thus, upon arising in the morning, one might find oneself asking “Shall I do good today, or shall I follow it?”

The question is genuine. A student might ask whether he should study mathematics or help his brother with his math. A scholar might ask whether he should spend the day in the library or in the classroom. Another might ask whether he should continue writing or found a college. A philosopher might ask whether he should continue his inquiries or agree to rule. A statesman might ask, “Should I secure by compromise a decade of peace, or should I insist on a principle that may either induce a new birth of freedom or visit ruin upon the country for a century?” And a treasurer might ask whether a windfall should reduce a big debt or give a small relief to many. The questions are genuine because the good is complex. And where the good is complex, good men will not always agree.

Thomas knows that if possibilities are distinct enough to be discerned, they not only can be separated for choice but might be opposed to each other in conflict. Following the good and doing the good can even be set at war, making the best the enemy of the good. Thus, some persons ignore the good in front of them because they follow a scheme of the good; such is the engrossed inventor or entrepreneur who forgets to pay his help even as he forgets to pay himself. Thomas’ thought also includes persons who refuse to do the good because they have eyes only for a vision of it, such as the young scholar who will not begin a family because he has not yet written the book he dreams of. And this thought of Thomas knows what such an idealist will do if given scope, how if made dean he would not much mind wrecking a merely good college since it does not equal the one he went to, or wished he had, or sees himself founding.

Such persons may be charlatans, but they are not frauds; they really do try to follow the good as they see it, and they do see part of it. That does not make them scoundrels, and yet the destruction they achieve is often greater, for their virtues attract others; the “innocence” in their visage disarms many, seduces some, and by doing so helps them deceive themselves, which makes their faces glow more innocently and attract even more of the undiscerning. It is sad to see the far-sighted leading the near-sighted into the ditch. We do not like to see good itself made the cause of evil.

Such youthful misleaders of age show how wise Thomas is to put doing the good before following the good in his sentence. Experience in doing good is indispensable to following it. Young humans can excel in mathematics but not in ethics. Dressing yourself, making your bed, cleaning your room, waiting on table, having a summer job, failing at something and recognizing your responsibility for it: these come before leading a hike, running a restaurant, or heading a department. We humans get to discover the good through action, through chosen action, and before that, through habitual good action, and as children even through merely obedient good actions without much choice or initial understanding. Practice brings knowledge and knowledge improves practice. By doing the good, in front of us, right now, today, day after day, our soul’s eye is gradually prepared to focus upon the good far away and high above, the good we are to follow.

And by following that good more and more, we get to see more and more of the good. Practice, you come to see, increases insight. Beholding the good is the highest, following the good is higher than choosing it, and choosing higher than doing, but the ladder starts with doing. Every human child starts at the lowest rung and climbs slowly. And yet one must acknowledge that the child beholds the good too. After all, the first words child Thomas uttered were: What is God?

And the rest of the man’s life was spent seeking the answer to that child’s question.

Thomas also puts doing the good and following it together lest someone put them apart in another direction, by making doing good the enemy of following it, saying “Because I have done good, I need not follow it.” Such persons think that if they do all the medium size things, the big ones will go away. They are worthy, but not ardent. They are competent, but not inspired. They are steady, but they do not dance. When they march, they do not sing. Sometimes they are contented, but never joyous. They can be counted on, but only to carry out instructions, not to act on maxims, let alone lead or teach others.

The disciples, before Christ’s death, provide one sort of example, for they are not up to the friendship Christ calls them to. The Pharisees provide another example. They do have works, but neither faith nor love. They have some works, but not great ones. The old seem more prone to this defect than the young. Whatever they say, the young seldom feel “I have done enough.”

Then Thomas adds “and evil is to be shunned.” Apparently it would not suffice to do good and follow it; it is also a part of the first precept of law and of the natural law to shun evil in addition.

Why did Thomas need to add “and evil is to be shunned” at all? Did he do it just so the primary orientation towards the good is absolutely clear? That is, “look to the good first, not the evils.” No, the first precept of the natural law would really be incomplete without it. Where there are humans there are temptations, even for the good. Even the untempted do well to shun near occasions of evil. And for the sake of others, they must also shun the appearance of evil, for appearances can mislead the young and the weak.



Watching out for the weak requires the strong to do even more, too. Aristotle calls us the political animal, and Christ calls us to be the loving creature; both make us responsible for others. True, we are responsible for ourselves, but more often for others, for the emphasis of justice is on others. So, too, the virtue of love. Thus, sometimes we are virtuous by following good, often by doing it, but also often by shunning evils, especially for others, that is, by anticipating them, destroying them in the shell, or heading them off, dodging them, tripping them up as they go by, and if avoiding them is not possible, then by checking them, or slowing them down, or at least diminishing their consequences. Probably the statesman spends more time shunning evils than securing goods for anyone. His best days will often be ones where he, having foreseen an evil, succeeds in destroying it before it touches others, and even before anyone save he realized there was danger, in which case, he will not even have the pleasure of pointing to his success, since it might undo it. Even then, when his foresight has triumphed, it will have been only today, in this place, in this time, not longer. There is something merely temporary in most evil and thus something fleeting in the satisfaction of shunning it.

It is important to notice the order in Thomas' wonderful sentence. The good comes first and second. Our primary orientation is to it. We should spend most of our time doing and following good. When troubled then, we will get the best guidance from asking, "What good is there to do and to follow?" Reverse the order and you get, "What evils can I shun?" Make that a habit, and you will become the person whose relation to good comes through evil, who comes in fear, not love. Such a person may not come to the good at all. He or she may spend the day shunning a thousand evils, but at day's end, not have done much good, let alone followed the good at all. Paul, when he was Saul, seems to have ended many a day feeling he had avoided many evils and done some goods, but still not followed the good at all.

II. Can evils always be shunned? Could Lincoln have subdued the South without Sherman's march? Could Churchill have secured alliance with America without bombing the French fleet at Oran? Was Truman right to drop the A-bomb on Hiroshima? Could David have not eaten the show-bread? Things otherwise forbidden, wrong, and even terrible seem to be justified by the greater good they secure, or are likely to. Some think the founding of all civil polities such a special case, virtue

sprung from vice, peace built on war, morality on high crime. Such a man was gleeful Machiavelli, teacher of evil, promoter of the exception over the rule, and hater of God.<sup>3</sup> Still it is a wise constitution that sanctions the suspension of rights, such as habeas corpus, in time of insurrection and tumult, knowing that the end, the preservation of free government, does at such a time justify the employment of means otherwise unfree.\* *Salus publica, suprema lex.* Nevertheless, statesmen must live with the conscientious whisper "Lesser evil is still evil," with the austere voice that says "Never do evil," and anticipate the pangs of regret. After all, one day you may recognize the even greater good you would have achieved, if you had been really smart, and had prevented the occurrence of even those evils called "lesser."<sup>4</sup>

We want it to be true that following the good always includes doing the good and shunning evil, so that the great follower of good never does evil and never fails to do good. Alas, our desire seems to be frustrated, in some measure, by the nature of good itself, with its three parts, to which Thomas' maxim conforms and responds. Experience shows us that the great followers of good have not always done good or even shunned evils. Thus it ought to have been possible for David not to dance naked before his wife, not to have acted on the passion the sight of Bathsheba aroused in him, and not to have placed Uriah, her husband, in the thick of the battle, where he would surely perish. Yet despite these mistakes, faults, and truly evil deeds, David is a follower of the good. The bravery and beauty of his soul, apparent from the first, to Goliath and to Saul, never disappear. In weeping for his dying child and in arising blithe after his death, David is still great. True, God does not permit him to build the Temple, but throughout all his days, he is "beloved" of God.



Many have felt that by shunning evils they would surely be doing good. Often they misunderstand evil. Instead of identifying cupidity as evil they identify what it lusts after, wealth, as evil. Or they mistake power for the injustice that uses power to please itself. Violent in opinion, they are violent in action too. Thus they fast as if food were an evil. Go in rags as if clothes were evil. Embrace filth as if beauty were evil. Christians have often been accused of such excesses, many are no doubt

guilty, but it is a Gnostic and Manichean teaching to deny that Creation comes from God the Good. Moderation is surely one of the hardest virtues to practice, in part because it is hardest to love. The best degree of self-mastery a violent man can manage is continence. Towards the temperate soul such a man may feel envy. "What I struggle for and just barely achieve, and only most of the time, he does with ease always." That a man may be wealthy, powerful, and honored and yet very good indeed is well shown by Alessandro Manzoni's account of Cardinal Frederigo Borromeo, in his novel *The Betrothed*. In all his life, Borromeo takes what wealth, power, and honor come to him, asks what purpose God would have him put them to, and acts. Very few have achieved what Manzoni does, to show how intelligent, how deep, and how utterly attractive the union of goodness and power can be.

Does shunning "evils" make you good? Great hearted Tolstoy tortured himself and those who loved him by chasing that phantom, innocence. Give up property, give up wealth, give up home, give up wife-he tried to, all in order to regain the greenstick innocence he had as a child. And thus, he who always sensed something sinister in trains and watched his beloved Anna cast her despairing self under one, ended by taking a train and far from home dying in a train station. Of all Shakespeare, Tolstoy disliked *Lear* the most, for in it *Lear* does everything Tolstoy thought ought to make a man happy, only to find himself powerless to stay the hands that strangle his beloved Cordelia. There is a proper warning in Acton's "All power corrupts" but also in Burke's "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing."<sup>5</sup> Yes, there are sins of commission, but also ones of omission.<sup>6</sup>

Just as deliberately, T. E. Lawrence shunned power. In a thousand sallies, feints, and explosions, he united all Arabia, led his band of nomadic brothers to Damascus, and scattered the Ottoman Empire to the winds forever. Had the Great War continued, Lawrence might have united all Muslims from the sands of the Sahara to the snows of the Caucuses, from Kabul to Constantinople. That was not to be, but so ascendant was his star that he might early in the ensuing years of the peace have held high Ministerial office. Why, when all the youth were on fire with him, did Lawrence seek obscurity, punishment, and irresponsibility? Was he driven by his inability to secure what he had promised his desert brethren? Or was it that he preferred to suffer injustice rather than partici-

pate in it, as one will in any but the supreme position? Or was he waiting for another gigantic adversary, equal to his powers? Churchill thought so.<sup>7</sup> We will never know. He swerved, killed himself, rather than two boys. And that day Hitler had reason to breathe easier.

Certainly it is hard to decide when to withdraw from power, saving yourself for the right return, and hard, too, meanwhile to occupy yourself fully with good things. Christ-with his offer of the Kingdom, its rejection, His withdrawal, and His patient readiness-is the archetype of this perfection. In the world, no one has timed his entrances, exits, and re-entrances better than Charles DeGaulle. Sometimes avoiding responsibility, saying little in public, and writing your memoirs, is the best way of preparing to do the good.

III. Here we might ask whether there is a diabolical obverse of Thomas' sentence? Is evil symmetrical with good, so that the Devil might croon, "Evil is to be done and followed, and good shunned." It seems so. There really is a difference between doing evil and following evil. There are persons who do evil but are not followers of evil. Of course, doing one evil may arouse an appetite for more, and evil repeated may well become a habit, habit continuing may have to up his dose, and from addiction may spring the motiveless passion for evil itself, which we see in dull Iago. "Appetite does" indeed "grow with what it feeds on" and finally it chokes itself. Yet, doing an evil, even a terrible one, is not the same as becoming evil. That takes continued weakness, habit, resignation, despair, and sometimes resolution, as we see in Macbeth. When he dares damnation, Macbeth follows evil. However, if Raskolnikov, who began with a deed of metaphysical evil, could repent, so could Macbeth. The primacy of the good means no one can truly become evil.

There are also persons who follow evil without doing much evil. Many of those in modern times called "intellectuals" have been guilty of such following. Thus, in recent times, many teachers have recommended evil without doing much themselves. They say "There is no truth," but they cultivate some part of knowledge; they maintain "Everything is relative" but think they deserve more respect and a higher salary; and they teach "Everything should be liberated," but they pay their bills, show up on time, and think about providing for their children. Although what they teach does injure the souls of those who heed them, who then may injure others,

either by teaching or acting out the consequences, still, these teachers really would be surprised by a student who treated them as they teach one should, and feel very hurt if the student added “You taught me.”

Of course, as the consequences indicate, such following of evil, however playful, is a doing of evil. In France, 1968, students began playing hooky. It was spring, the air was light, the game sportive, and the players gentle, no blood.<sup>8</sup> The teachers applauded and joined. Yet it is always dangerous to celebrate nothing. If the Communists had not been too suspicious of fun to appreciate how destructive it could be, if they had joined the students, it would have overthrown the Fifth Republic. General DeGaulle rang the bell, the French went back to school, but the intellectuals had tasted a vintage that turned some from intelligent scholars, such as Derrida, to turgid sophists, and, transported across the Atlantic and combined with native rage, has deconstructed American Academe and may deconstruct America. What the freely-speaking Enlightenment intellectuals said generations before in their quips, letters, discourses, treatises, and dictionaries, the next generation acted out as the Terror.

However, Thomas’ emphasis is all on the good. The logical distinction between doing evil and following evil, he leaves unexplicit, unnoticed. Thomas surely knew the deleterious effect of thinking evil very interesting. Truly, as Simone Weil maintained, only good is interesting. Evil is just ... to be shunned.

IV. Thomas’ wonderful insight into the good and our relation to it also has the power to characterize us. Our lives are an exhibition of the relation to the good we choose. We are that relation. And we are the proportion we choose. There is a scale in Thomas’ aphorism. It runs from the great-souled to the small-souled.

Thus, the great-souled man or woman is someone who follows the good, aspires to it, loves it wholly, measures her failures by it, and is hard on herself for them. Her days begin accordingly. She awakes with joy, happy for another day in which to do good in the light shed by that true sun, the good to be followed. For her, morning is always breaking with sunshine and blackbirds. In the light of the great goals she is following, all duties

to do the good are clearly ordered, and from doing such goods the shunning of evils follows as a matter of course. If she keeps a list, it will be of the day’s tasks; a list of evils to be shunned would be distracting; and no list of goals is needed, for great good, though its deeds be done in a thousand twinklings, is a thing of long views, of ever following the good, and one does not need to keep lists of such things. Thus, at the beginning of the day, she will have asked, “By sundown or sleep what will I have done following the good?” And at the end of the day, she may recall achievements, or steps toward them, or patient endeavors in their direction. Faith in the morning will become charity in the day, and by evening hope. Alyosha in Dostoyevsky is a good example.

  
*“Our lives are an exhibition  
of the relation to the good we  
choose.”*  


Thus, descending a bit, what we might call the well-souled man will hearken to the good, listen to its commands, stand ready to obey them, and when he does not, will be nagged with guilt and sometimes stricken with chagrin. Such contentment as the well-souled man enjoys comes from the daily consciousness that he has done well, that he has served the good, and thus stands in a right relation to all others. In doing so, he stands well towards himself and towards God. If he keeps lists, the things on them are, when completed, marked with a check mark, not struck-through, for really they are only done for this day. They will be there to do again tomorrow. Prince Andrei in Tolstoy is a good example; when he stops following the false good that Napoleon is, he does a great deal of good on his estates; all Pierre’s fervent good wishes result in very little; Andrei’s more sober designs frequently work out, among other things because he sticks with them, attends to detail, and perseveres, even after frustration; alas, Andrei is not able to follow the true good of Natasha, who despite her terrible fall remains good; nor to our sorrow, later, when she is for him all that Christ meant by the Life, is Andrei able to follow her and live.

V. In turning to those who primarily shun evils, one should begin by remarking that they are best understood as deficient in relation to the good. Here we are not speaking of the puny, the air-heads, the fools, of persons whose days are spent gossiping, collecting matchbooks, watching television, filling in all the O’s in the words in the newspaper, or weighing their clothes carefully five times a day. One can hardly say they have any relation to

the good.

The small-souled do have a relation to the good but, in shunning evils, they lose a firm grasp of the good. If a perfectionist, the small-souled may say “I shall be faultless” and concentrate on minor or miniature things. A. E. Housman seems an example, in his scholarship and perhaps even in his perfect lyrics; that he is wan, even when sweet, may show he was meant for greater hearted things. There is a shyness which is the decent protection of the good, a refusal to exhibit pearls before swine, and there is also a shyness that is base. Miss Shy is just too conscious of herself, how others view her, to think of the good of others or to pursue her own. “If only I do all the little things, the big ones will take care of themselves” she hopes. All great callings, mighty plans, heroic deeds, and magnificent achievements, and even whatever in literature or history might make her think of them, she shuns. So doing, she becomes “All basket and no lamp.”

Some small-souled men and woman shut their eyes to splendor and may even be deaf to duty, but with others things are mixed. Often the small-souled is aware of greater things, but so filled with fears that he fixes on avoiding evils rather than doing good. Spend the day avoiding evils, and you will never escape them. Every day you will finish more aware of what you haven’t shunned than what you have. Fear is good at discerning evils, but not at fighting them. Often it adds to them, sometimes turns friend into foe, and always saps your strength. Expending their energy on defense, the fearful have nothing left for offense. On the dark path home a boy who sees a bear in every bush takes smaller steps, smaller and heavier. Men who fear what they must face in the morning get up from bed wearier than they went down. Don Abbondio in Manzoni’s *The Betrothed* is a most vivid portrait of the thousand deaths a weak man anticipating the next day suffers. Also vividly portrayed are the consequences that anyone who depends on him will suffer.

Fear is at work in other vices. The man who fears someone will make a big profit on the junk in his barn, lives with more and more junk, all dead weight, all fat, all his, and all so obstructive he can’t find a hammer because he has nine, “somewhere around here.” The woman who fears the future puts away too many provisions; half spoil before they can be eaten. Her spice shelf is always stocked, but always stale. She takes, as Thoreau says, “A thousand stitches to save nine.” On the contrary, as Cato the Elder says, “Buy not what you can use, but only

what you cannot do without. What you do not need is dear at any price.”<sup>9</sup> Fear can never be safe enough. It makes some persons into misers and others into big spenders, some into both by turns, and some into both at once. All are graspers. All believe there is not enough good to go around.

“Never consult your fears,” said Stonewall Jackson. He did not say have none, or be unaware of them, just never consult them. Let one fear splash over the gunnels, and you will soon feel others, wave on wave, breaking over you. “Prudent men tend to be confident,” says Aristotle. Thus, they are not bowled over by the first contact with difficulty. It is not necessarily that they see the solution right off, but that their confidence gives their intelligence time to work. Facing some difficulty, they feel “I think I can handle it.” Facing a sea of troubles, they feel as Odysseus did; lost in the wine-dark sea, he feels his heart beating, remembers he came through suffering before, and knows he may once again.

In a pagan, inordinate fear is a sign of weakness; in a philosopher, a lack of wonder; in a Christian, a lack of faith; and in all, a deficiency in gratitude.

In seeking comfort, security, and innocence, the smallsouled may murmur, “I want to be blameless.” That is harder than it seems. Often enough in doing the little things, she forgets the purpose that makes them good. In doing the letter, she ignores the spirit. And often in shunning one evil, she runs into another. That she can say “My intentions were good” does not make her less responsible. “Folly is more often cruel in the consequence than malice can be in the intent,” as Halifax observes, and Jane Austen shows over and over and over.

Nor is the claim, “At least I am not as bad as this-a-one, or that-a-one,” more than an evasion, even if it is true. Comparative evil is still evil. And the person who defends it is already on a slope slipping. Such small-souledness may soon pass into baseness. The lowering of standards an uneasy college president covers by firing a few teachers who see what she is doing, is not less reprehensible when covered with the claim “At least I balanced the budget, unlike my predecessors.” Some self-defenses make the self-defender worse. The murders Henry VIII worked to please his lecherous eye were evil, but the murder of Thomas More because his silence made Henry feel watched means Henry was base as well as evil. Likewise, the person who says “I killed less than

six million, I'm no Hitler"—although less abhorrent, he is no less guilty than Hitler. However, baseness is not the same as small-souledness. To get right, the base would have to change their direction. To improve, the small-souled would merely have to grow more attached to the good, through insight, ardor, strength.

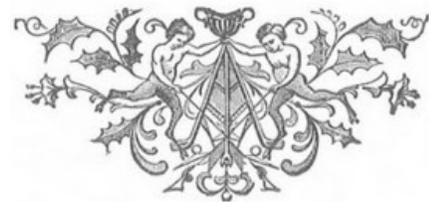
If the small-souled keeps a list, it will consist mainly of errands, and at the end of the day, instead of ticking them off, she strikes through them, for they are done, and can be forgotten. Her error is not in the list—it may be better to have small things neatly on paper than loose in the mind—but in allowing the list to become her whole relation to the good. Sometimes we need to pare things down to a size we can handle, but we need not forget what we have pared down from. Like the eye, the soul must squint at a thread and gaze at the mountains, spot motes and behold the heavens. Its stretching love must comprehend Being and number the hairs on a head.

VI. Of course, moral life is very daily. It consists of little acts, considerations, courtesies, and manners, as well as deeds and projects. Many of these little acts spring from prohibitions, designed to shun evils. Children especially need the firm outlines that rules give, among other things because obedience is the first moral virtue, the gate through which others are reached, and with children, also the first protection, since not all dangers can be explained as rapidly as they arise or as rapidly as you should get out of their way. Prohibitions are like the sides of a road. In the darkness without headlights, it is hearing the sound of the gravel under our wheels, now on this side, now the other, that helps us to keep on the tar. And in childhood staying on the road is often much the same as getting somewhere. However, children are not meant to remain children forever. They need more than rules; they also need stories and living examples for a vivid sense of the virtues that lie above the rules, which the rules are meant to habituate one into, and that make evident the difference between mere good behavior and glorious achievement. In the daylight, it is sight of the destination far away, in the distant mountains, far across the plains, that gets one on to Oregon, or on to heaven. “Love, love, love is the soul of genius,” says Mozart. It is the soul of the soul. It is also the soul of daily life. Thus children need smiles, pats, and hugs as well as maxims, models, and rules. The only person fit to punish a child is one who loves him.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, we are not to underrate shunning

evil. In Shakespeare's *Othello*, Emilia is corrupt enough to say she would sleep with a big-shot to advance her husband Iago's career, and she is imperceptive enough to have lived long with him without suspecting what evil lurks in his heart; nevertheless, Emilia is not insensitive to the good; she esteems Desdemona, and there is at least one evil she will shun upon an instant; a lie she will not countenance, and that, surprising as it is to Iago, who has lived with her for years, undoes him utterly. Yes, shunning evil is good.

Moreover, sometimes it might happen that merely by shunning a single evil and remaining resolute, a small-souled person might become large. Consider the persons who hid Jews hunted by Hitler. Most of these rescuers deny they were heroes. We may disagree, but also believe them when they say, “I just could not do otherwise.” Some one appeared at their door asking for shelter. They said yes. That single refusal to see evil done to someone sent them down a path that soon required heroism. Discovery meant death for every one in their home. Daily life became heroic. The number of milk bottles delivered might betray you to the Gestapo. Yet it could have been otherwise. To the suppliant at the door, they could have said “no.” Many others did, without becoming evil. Perhaps these rescuers had barely enough virtue to say “yes.” Yet saying it and persisting on that path transformed them, so that perhaps they gained the virtue that goes out of its way to do good, having only begun with enough to say “no” to evil.<sup>11</sup> Start by shunning evil, even one evil, and you may find yourself doing good; then do good day after day, and you may one day find yourself following the good as well.



VII. Our three-fold relation to the good characterizes peoples as well as persons. There have been societies that primarily followed the good. “Be courageous,” said resolute Sparta. “Be beautiful and be noble,” said Athens and “Be both, be splendid,” said Florence, although they also whispered “Be cunning, too.” “Be honorable,” said feudal Europe. There have also been societies that considered the good as something primarily to be done. “Obey the Torah” said the children of Moses. “Obey the Twelve Tablets” said the old Romans. “Honor thy oath”

said the Germans. And ‘Govern thyself’ said America.

So, too, there have been peoples who primarily shunned evils. “Avoid all impurity” say all caste-led societies, whether Nazi, Hindu, or Southern. “Just be sure to obey all regulations” says every bureaucratic state. Reverse the order in Thomas’ precept and ask: “What is the greatest evil to be shunned?” and you get guidance from the greatest evil, from the *summum malum*, as Thomas Hobbes proposed.

To Hobbes, the greatest evil was violent death; to his teacher Lord Bacon, it was natural death; and to their circumspect pupil, Dr. John Locke, it was poverty, discomfort, and even inconvenience as well. All modernity follows from Hobbes’ counsel of promised stability and actual lowness and its Machiavellian basis, the distrust of the good. “Best safety lies in fear,” as time-server Polonius advises. Here we are on the way to shunning good itself, as in the maxim of socialism, “Let nothing unequal exist.” Carried out militantly, as in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, this envy becomes hatred of the good itself, “Let nothing superior exist, neither a good man, nor the good God.” Starting with self-hatred, this regime comes to hate all and to set about destroying it. Stalin is Stavrogin in power.

On the contrary, it is always better to look at low things in the light of the high, and the order of parts in Thomas’ sentence does exactly this.

Regimes, too, seem to have dispositions toward the good. Kingships and aristocracies, at their best, might be said to follow some good; oligarchies and republics to do some good; and democracies to shun some evils. The bad forms of the same regimes would seem to be obverse deficiencies: tyrannies following evil; oligarchies and aristocracies doing evils; and democracies shunning the good.

The degradation of a regime would seem to take a path down from the good: first substituting something less demanding for its high purpose, then forgetting both substitute and original. “Aristocracies go,” said Chateaubriand, “from thinking of their duties, to thinking of their privileges, to thinking finally only of their vanities.” Perhaps kings go from thinking of their virtues, to their burdens, to their pleasures. Such changes are revolutions. Watch out. When you hear men calling what was once a duty a virtue, you know it has become rare, and may

soon disappear. Bobby Jones once hit a golf ball into the woods and, though unobserved, gave himself the proper demerit. When a reporter hidden behind a tree celebrated that as noble, Jones explained, “No, only just.” Thus, what a politician before an election calls “my promise,” after becomes “my plan,” and a little later “our goal.” When it becomes “our wish,” don’t be surprised if you never hear of it again. And when all the laws become “guidelines” (sic: guylines), expect that soon everything will be permitted.

We see the same degeneration in institutions, too. Be they churches or colleges, armies or businesses, they start and grow strong because everyone is asking “What is best to do?” Gradually some begin to ask “What is my duty?” and then others may shrink to “What is my job?” Soon many are thinking “How do I stay out of trouble?” And finally, many are planning, “I’ll get them before they get me.” Thus, virtues pass into duties, duties decline into jobs, jobs expire into motions, and motions change to malices. People complain of stress or lack of meaning without realizing that their own craving for security is the cause. Then the situation is ripe for some wily mover to take over. In democracies, things begin with a constitution, proceed to laws, and end in regulations; and then there are nets of regulations everywhere, everywhere smaller and smaller fish, none worth catching. In business, things decline from the founding inventor or entrepreneur, to the managers, to the final stage, when everything depends on advertising outside and on policing inside; Public Relations swells, and Personnel hovers *fiber alles*. Everyone feels watched, suspected, and hindered, without seeing how their own anxiety and envy has made their enslavement easy. In the beginning, while some high purpose rules, people feel, “If I do my best, it will be recognized and rewarded.” In the end they feel, “The best I can do is avoid being recognized and ruined.”<sup>12</sup> At this point, they begin to find that cardboard boxes are accumulating in their closets.

VIII. A similar decline may appear in teaching. The teacher starts out ever aware in class of “a silent student who is your superior in heart and mind.” He teaches in the ardent expectation that some student will one day surpass him. Albert surely looked upon his student, Thomas, this way, singled him out, and rebuked the other students for calling him an ox. Was that wrong? There are hard choices in a teacher’s life. The wish to edify others, to provide milk to some and meat to others, to do the good to others with the good one has sought and

received, is laudable, but may also be a temptation, especially for the most gifted mind. “He who is a teacher through and through takes everything seriously only in relation to his students—even himself,” warns Nietzsche.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps whatever Thomas saw during Mass on 6 December 1272 constitutes such a warning. This temptation arises in the life of the teacher simply because there is a tension between following truth and encouraging the search for it among others. Gratitude for the first, so naturally expressed in giving to others what one has so happily received, may hinder reception of more. This, however, is not decline, just a hard choice between desirable things that are hard to harmonize well, namely following the truth, and giving it to others. Few are elementary and profound.<sup>14</sup>

Decline only sets in when the teacher begins to rest upon the accumulation of his previous insights, settles into repeating old lectures, begins to substitute himself, his interpretations and his own views, for the greater minds he used to study, and expects students to do the same. All this decline then hardens the ambition to found a school of thought. And then corruption it self may not be far off, for the desire to found a school or movement is usually blind to the self-love implicit in it, and if that blind self-love meet with the free will of a most excellent student, may rather punish him, for a failure of gratitude, than welcome him as a messenger of superior insight. It is not a good sign if a teacher welcomes students adding to her or his name an “-ite,” “-ean,” or “-ist.” In Thomas one will not find the will-to Thomists. On the contrary, according to him, only God is truly the teacher.<sup>15</sup>

And what about the relation of others to a great teacher? Great teachers always suffer from their fellow teachers, especially during their life. Few men are willing to look up to a contemporary. Thus, Thomas suffered during his life from the ecclesiastical condemnation of 1270, and after his death even more from the 1277 condemnation, so that his teaching of being (esse) was lost. After his canonization and with each revival of his

thoughts, however, he suffered another way, unintentionally from his revering students, a more poignant thing. Consider some of Thomas’ most recent revivers. From some of them, this very maxim of Thomas has suffered a diminution. Regularly one finds Thomas’ profound and noble maxim, *quod bonum est faciendum et prosequendum, et malum vitandum*, rendered banally: “Do good and avoid evil.”<sup>16</sup> So reduced, Thomas’ maxim merits the curt dismissal of Kant, as “*principium vagum*” and “*principium tautologicum*.”<sup>17</sup> And sometimes the interpreter of the reduced maxim then gets things backwards, as if prohibition of evil were the thrust and punishment the ruling motive,<sup>18</sup> as if Thomas wrote “avoid evil, and do good.”<sup>19</sup>



*“The Triumph of St. Thomas Aquinas over Averroes” by Benozzo Gozzoli*

the precept as Thomas does makes sure we understand that the obligations flow from the insight. Seeing good, man sees it is to be done and followed, and that evil, its opposite, is to be shunned.

Surely Thomas should be read with something of the attentive, respectful, and loving care with which he read whatever he thought he would find truth in. With the remarkable examples of how to read that his commentaries on the Gospels and on Aristotle give us, we cannot say we have no model.

Perhaps some of our difficulty in the area of natural law comes from translating Thomas’ *lex* as “law.” In our age, as our recognition of nature dims and we come

to conceive of all law as positive, such a translation is likely to obscure Thomas. Perhaps it would be more faithful to his thought to speak of “bond” than “law.” Thomas himself may authorize this when he writes, “I respond that: law is a rule and measure (*regula ... et mensura*) of acts, whereby man is induced to act or is restrained from acting: for *lex* (law) is derived from *ligare* (to bind), because it binds one to act. Now the rule and measure of human acts is reason (*ratio*) . . . “ (I-II, Q 90, art. 1) Might it be better, then, for us to translate natural law as natural bond, or bond of nature (*lex naturalis*)? True, the natural “law” has God for its lawmaker, its bond-maker, but the bond’s natural character—its capacity to be discovered by the unaided human reason, its self-evidence to the faculty of *synderesis* at work in every human being—all make it something that is in things themselves, to be apprehended by insight, insight that unites or binds the apprehender to it.<sup>21</sup> Binds or unites, for reason both measures and rules. Reason is in the good and reason is in the man seeing the good. That is the starting point; a high one, too.<sup>22</sup>

IX. The threefold relation to the good—which Thomas sees ascending all the way from merely shunning evil to positively doing good, and above even that, to following the good—reminds us of the ancients’ disposition towards the good, their elevated apprehension of the range of the virtues, including justice or natural right, and also the corresponding span between the great-souled and the small-souled, characteristic of their aristocratic outlook on life.

In Homer, we find the difference between high-hearted Achilles and spiteful Thersites. It is true that, in the end, heman Achilles discovers he too is human, mortal, needing to eat, akin to old Priam, but that does not mean there is no difference between he-men heroes and mere human, all too human, humans, such as Thersites. Likewise, the fact that Odysseus rejects the life of an immortal god, with immortal goddesses, preferring Penelope to Calypso, bread to ambrosia, mortality to immortality, does not mean there is no difference between him and the noble Eumaios, and no big difference between him and the suitors and sluts. All are human, but only Odysseus enduringly heroic. In Plato, the line is variously drawn: there is the difference between Socrates and even Alcibiades, on the one hand, and on the other, the multitude who condemn both; there is also the line between the philosopher and everyone else. Finally, in Aristotle, especially in the *Ethics*, we have descriptions of the great-souled man and his petty opposite.<sup>23</sup>

Among the ancients, the distinction between the great and the small-souled man is severe. The small are nearly always contemned as base and ignoble. Most Ancients were not democrats. One has the impression that for Thomas, the small-souled is less contemptible than for the Ancients. Thomas seems not as hard on them. Biblical teaching seems to make the difference.

Man was created in the image of God. Thus, every human being is an image of God. The Fatherhood of God creates the family of man. To this family even Cain belongs for he too is a child of God. There is more. Every person is loved by God. Every person is, as Newman’s wonderful prayer reveals, brought into being to fulfill a specific divine purpose. Christ is the greatest, nay the unique example, for He fulfilled His father’s purpose utterly. Every human being is to love all others as he has been loved by Christ. In doing so every human being loves God, who created each in his own image. Herein lies the basis of the inexorable destruction of slavery and the progress of democracy, which Tocqueville discerned in modernity, traced to the Gospels, found in the Christian teachings driving abolition and democracy forward, especially those of the Puritans, and saw at work even among those who set themselves against it. Even the skeptical and amused Montaigne—who prayed for the dragon as well as St. George, seldom thought of heaven, and preferred to die unprepared—thinks every man bears the form of the human condition and, in so doing, is indebted to the Biblical idea of Creation and the Christian command to love each as Christ does.

There is, of course, an important difference between the “image of God” and the “human condition.” The former challenges a man to lift himself up and treat others accordingly; the latter may at first tell a man to relax and eventually whisper “Let others go hang.” The former demands a great deal of charity to others; the latter stops at compassion, soon meddles everywhere, and may eventually sacrifice everyone to a utopian design. The students of Montaigne and Machiavelli: Bacon, Descartes, Hobbes, Spinoza, Bayle, Locke, and Hume, just wanted to be human. They wanted to stop angels watching them, get heroes off their backs, and priests out of their hair. They achieved a certain civility and won an ease for man, but not for long. They claimed to be realists, but were idealists, although low ones. Placing their faith in progress, rather than their effort in virtue, they underrated the persistence of vice as well as the power of virtue.

The Gulag is both the contradiction of Progress and its result. In the West, the progressive sons of Mill blinded themselves to what the progressive sons of Marx in the East were doing, and to what the regressive, but equally historicist, illegitimate sons of Nietzsche were doing in Germany. Having seen so much evil, enough to give even the blind sight, this the darkest of centuries seems most grateful when it escapes evils and most pleased by small goods, unfortunately more out of resignation or relief, I am afraid, than gratitude and charity. Thus, when a great souled witness such as Solzhenitsyn criticizes the “divertissement” of the West, as Pascal might, he is first ridiculed and then ignored.

Again and again in this century, democracies have won great victories and yet, almost at the same time, become smaller and smaller, measured man by man, woman by woman, child by child. Before the Second World War, parents had children; after the war, the negligent parents of America brought forth a new kind of human being, the Teenager; and now these soft barbarians are everywhere.<sup>24</sup> The victory of the democracies over Soviet Totalitarianism, or rather the collapse of the latter, has blinded the West to its own creeping totalitarianism. Although the democracies say they abhor the Gulag system, their colleges legitimize anonymous hearsay as “evaluations” and turn students into informers; although their doctors criticize Nazi experiments, they clamor for fetal tissue; and although their politicians revile Nazi racism, they institute “affirmative” actions that require racial courts and reward and punish by race. What can you say in defense of the West when, as Mother Teresa has noted, it tells its mothers it is okay to kill your own child in the safety of your womb? Convenience is certainly the smallest god that has ever demanded human sacrifice.<sup>25</sup>

X. Aristotle and the ancients would not go easy on such small-souledness.<sup>26</sup> And Christ, we may be fairly sure, is not pleased. In the Gospels, He is quite as hard on the small-souled as were the ancients. Again and again, Our Lord instructs us “Be good, be greatly good.” His highest praise, His special esteem, and His most implacable calling is to the great-souled-to all of us, potentially-to become great-hearted. Again and again, He calls us to receive the Kingdom, to give our souls wholly and high-

heartedly to Him, to love one another not only as we love ourselves, as had been taught in the Old Testament, but as “I have loved you.” In short, to do something exceedingly difficult: to become Christians. Thus, He seems to have His eye out for souls capable of giving all, in whatever station of life they are to be found, whatever their gifts, or their wealth. The soul of a widow giving a mite may be great.

Thus, Christ seems to find more attentive souls among those who have done evil than those who have succeeded in avoiding it. The history of Christianity, from the time of Christ’s first meetings in the Gospels, through the stoning sanctioned by Saul later become Paul, through the massive conversions that spread Christ’s flock with miraculous speed, on through the sainted centuries, to our day, shows many of the best Christians made from the worst sinners. Among the lost sheep, He has found some of His best shepherds. Consider Augustine, Tolstoy, and Dostoyevsky. Perhaps Pascal, too. Of course, the opposite kind also exists, as we see in Thomas, in Thomas More, and in Newman. In them, greatness seems to have been preceded by no great evil.

*“Many of the best  
Christians [are] made from  
the worst sinners. Among  
the lost sheep, He has found  
some of His best shepherds.”*

Christ is even hard on those of the good who seem satisfied, knowing that they do good and not thinking they need to follow the good. Thus, He continually exhorts those who obey the Law, even the moral Law and not just the ceremonial Law, that they must do more. They must have faith, heart, greatsouledness, as well as works. Thus, with Thomas More and Newman, whose combinations of virtue and charm seemed to destine them for immediate spacious success, we find trial, tribulation, and suffering. Their virtue could have been so much more consequential for those who lived with them on earth at the same time if they had not been hindered, slandered, reviled, hated, imprisoned, and executed. Like Christ, they had to feed and feed and feed mouths that were biting them. And even Thomas, with his wonderful sentence, was given a vision that made him sigh, “All that I have written seems like straw.” What could make a writer suffer more? Or, at the same time, please a seeker more-”All that I have written seems to me like straw compared to what has now been revealed to me.”

Naturally, Christ is very hard on the small-souled. In the Parable of the Talents, the man who buries what is entrusted to him, who wants to make sure nothing is lost, and who succeeds, is found wanting. More, he is scourged with criticism. “Thou wicked and slothful servant” he is called, put into outer darkness, and “there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth,” says Christ, who is telling this story (Matthew 25: 14-30). All this is said to the small-souled servant despite the fact that his fear that “thou art a hard man, reaping where thou hast not sown, and gathering where thou hast not strewed” is true of the Lord. Indeed, the Lord affirms this in his sentence: “Thou wicked and slothful servant, thou knewest that I reap where I sowed not, and gather where I have not strewed: (27) thou oughtest therefore to have put my money to the exchangers, and then at my coming I should have received mine own with usury.” Christ would not approve the person who out of fear, even fear based on rational expectation and even fear based on knowledge, fails to do and to seek good. The man or woman with a one-talent singing voice, who will not hymn the “Glory of the Lord,” He would not approve of. Nor the frail boy who will not run, nor the unsure man who will not speak up, nor the man who closes shop because he has enough to retire on now. Retirement is the innovation of a weak age. Neither among the Jews, nor among the Ancients are there retirees. Nor do Christians retire. That Florida is one of Screwtape’s most tempting real-for-soul-estate deals Christ surely knows.

Nevertheless, Christ does not regard all those not following the good as evil themselves. Not all of those not utterly for us are against us. The difference between Mary and Martha is the difference between following the good, on the one hand, and on the other, doing good and shunning evils. Mary looks up to Our Lord, Martha attends to domestic order, provides good food and gets rid of dirt. In doing so, Martha is not fussy, not fretful, nor prissy, nor pinched; what she does is important, necessary, a support of the good.

Yet, considering the correction she receives in Luke 10, one may wonder if she will be saved. If in order to be saved it is necessary to transcend the Law, to say “no” to mother and father, to lay down your nets the very minute you are called, then it is doubtful if she, who will not lay down her dust cloth, can be saved. To accept the gift of the Kingdom, which Christ brings, offers, and is, one must not attend very much to what He was the first to call “the world.”<sup>27</sup> Perhaps Martha should have

joined Mary in adoration of the Lord. Will He judge her according to His severe words or according to His mild deeds? We hope He is as easy to please as He is hard to satisfy (in C. S. Lewis’ phrase), but He may not be. At least in the case of Martha, if we consider John 11-12, it seems He may be.\*

XI. The right disposition towards the good would include all three relations to it, in the right proportion. That is, the human being perfectly related to the good, would always be rightly oriented to the good to be followed, the good to be done, and the evils to be shunned, and as a consequence of this comprehensive disposition, always in each instance choose the proportion that is called for and do what is good. That is an enormous task. It means coordinating one’s salvation and one’s life, doing so in all the parts of that life, and making sure to avoid a thousand and one errors. It means being true to your church, your family, and your country. It means harmonizing the calls of eternity, immortality, and life. Within life it means combining the longest and the shortest views and all in between; so that the plan for the whole includes the plan for the parts, which includes the next ten years, five, one, the months, weeks, and days, all smoothly, purposely, happily, so that at any time, one might leave life blessing it.



Getting all parts of the good right is something like writing a perfect book, with 100,000 words, each in the right place; so that disturbing one word would disturb the others; so that all levels are right, from the punctuation, to the sentences, to the chapters, to the whole and its purpose. Of course, the task of the good in life differs. This book of our life is already begun before we discover we are its chief figure; we do not become the chooser of the deeds in it for a while; and by the time we know enough to begin writing it, a lot of it is written; and then our task is to make the ending both fit the beginning and better it.

It is no wonder that in men such as statesmen, who succeed in some measure in being providence on earth, we see an enormous capacity to think long and short, big and small, globally and locally, and to move from one dimension to another swiftly, without distr-

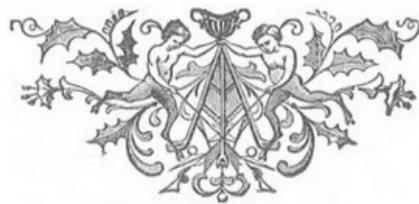
action, without agitation, and with the least fatigue. Nor is it a wonder why men are right to consider character so important. Character is what makes you do what you do just because you are you, so that you don't have to think about every decision as if the principles in it are new. Character is both the consequence of all your previous relations with the good and, if those have been good, an important cause of getting things right once again, and again, and again.

We know how rare this is: how often following the good sacrifices doing the good, how often doing the good sacrifices shunning errors, and how often those who shun errors do no good and follow none. Sometimes it even seems that doing good must necessarily mean ignoring some evil, or even embracing some, or that following the good must mean doing an evil. Tragedies teach this; they show us high-hearted men and women who, even in the midst of grave errors, follow the good or who, while committing great crimes, show the evidence of their great virtue. Consider Othello, whose crime is terrible, and yet who has gifts whose daily beauty laments of only enough to hate; Desdemona was right to love Othello and perhaps right to love him rather than any Venetian lad. By showing crime and virtue coinciding, these tragedies suggest to some that the best humans are not capable of a right relation to the good and even that the fabric of the whole is not well made. The Greeks and Shakespeare exhibit these painful enigmas, and Nietzsche, Pascal, and others discourse of them. Aristotle denies them, thinking no philosopher would ever make the mistake of a tragic hero, but the Gospels and especially Paul know that only those who acknowledge mis-

takes as sin will seek redemption and Grace.

Yet the pain of purgatory may be precisely this: to be shown how we could have shunned evils and done goods as well as followed the good. Or how we could have followed the good as well as done it. Can a man who truly follows the good fail to do the good and fail to shun evil? Can't we be perfect? That is hard to answer and surely vain to ask before trying. The powers of the soul can only be discovered by exercising the soul. And shouldn't we be measured by perfection? By the standard of the one who always does the good, follows the good, and shuns evils?

As each morning breaks, we are to ask "Where is the good today?" This question points primarily to the good to be done, but of course all recognition of a good to be done supposes an understanding of the idea of the good, the good that is above us, that we are following. Of it we know enough to do good, if not enough to be good. Can we ever be Good? Of Natasha at her first ball, Tolstoy says, she was so happy she could not sin. Certainly our desires point to such happiness, for it makes us happy just to think of such a happiness as Natasha's. Thus, by asking in the morning "Where is the good to be followed today?" it is most likely that by noon many "goods to be done" will have been done, and that by evening many "evils" will have been "shunned" so that at the end of the day, we may justly say, "Blessed be this day, for the good therein, the good I have followed, the good I have done, and the good given to me, so that I might be so happy. His yoke was light, His burthen was easy. Hal lei lu jah."



## NOTES

1Hoc est ergo primum praeceptum legis, bonum est faciendum et prosequendum, et malum vitandum, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, Q 94, a2, c. According to Thomas it is the first precept of law and of the natural law; his account of law, one of the external aids to virtue and happiness, appears in that section of this summa which later readers have called "The Treatise on Law." In the texts and commentaries I have been able to consult I have never found a source for this insight supplied, and therefore I conclude, provisionally, that the sentence is a discovery of Thomas'. To be sure, just above it Thomas adopts the remark of Aristotle (from *Ethics* I,1; 1094a3) that good is what all things seek after, but that insight says nothing about evil (as generally the ancients say little about it) and lacks the twofold relation to good that Thomas' maxim sees. Of course, the range of our relation to the good is known to the great ancient thinkers, originating in Socrates, and to the Christian thinkers, originating in Christ; still apparently none had seen it

all together in such a sentence. Is this an event in the history of truth? While this truth must, as Thomas maintains, be known to all humans at all times and everywhere, is not its explicit discovery by Thomas and his seeing it in a chain, or at least a bracelet, of truths, called the *Summa Theologiae*, at least an event in man's understanding of it, and thus its presentation to readers a sort of promulgation, too?

2 Thanks to the Thomistic Institute at the University of St. Thomas (Houston) particularly my host, Terry Hall, and also the University of Louisiana, especially my host, Bill Campbell, for the opportunity to deliver this account, and to the Intercollegiate Studies Institute for its support. Many thanks also to Douglas Kries, Martin Yaffe, Fr. James Lehrberger, John Senior, and Ron McArthur for comments. And for an illuminating letter, on the sonata form, discerned in this composition, my astonished thanks to David Corey.

3 See Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Univ. of Chicago: Chicago, 1953), Chapter IV, and also his *Thoughts on Machiavelli*. A notable further investigation, along this path (though not citing Strauss), is Ernest Fortin's "Augustine, Aquinas, and the Problem of Natural Law," in *Collected Essays, Vol. II: Classical Christianity and the Political Order* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996), 199-222. Both Strauss and Fortin seem to attribute little scope for prudence in Thomas' account of natural law (or maybe if more scope than esoterically taught?), but neither notes the two-fold relation to the good in the first precept, and although Fortin appears to note the absence of command and punishment in the first precept, he rests in puzzlement. On this absence, see Fr. Lehrberger, below.

\* Editor's note: In our judgment, the author does not intend to endorse consequentialism here, or any other theory of justifiable dispensation from exceptionless moral norms. He is, rather, referring to the carefully nuanced natural law "principle of double effect," and the tragic character of its frequent necessity in social life.

4 As Auden says, "You hope, yes, your books will excuse you, save you from hell: nevertheless, without looking sad, without in any way seeming to blame ... God may reduce you on Judgment Day to tears of shame, reciting by heart the poems you would have written, had your life been good." From "The Cave of Making," in *About the House* (New York: Random House, 1965), 13; these lines are used as the epigram of Hannah Arendt's essay on Bertolt Brecht.

5 I am told, by my friend Will Morrisey, that no one has ever found this Burkean quotation in Burke.

6 Acton adds that absolute power corrupts absolutely, which might mean that God, the most absolute power, must be corrupt. It seems to me that Acton's warning against absolute power, for a human, is prudent, but his suspicion of all power imprudent.

7 See his account of Lawrence in *Great Contemporaries*.

8 No sooner had Raymond Aron returned to France, but the phone rang, and Kojève said, "This is no revolution. No one has been killed." (Aron to the author, in conversation, in spring of '83). Hooky and the bell come from Aron's account, *The Elusive Revolution*.

9 *Emas, non quod opus est, sed quod necesse est: quod non opus est, asse carum est.* *De Agri Cultura*, quoted by Seneca, *Epistulae*, XCIV, 28. Trouble in this area? I recommend Don Aslett's *Clutter's Last Stand* (Writer's Digest Books: Cincinnati, 1984). In the beginning, it's hilarious, soon it's penetrating, too, and if you read to the end, it may be cleansing.

10 This good maxim comes from Marlene Dietrich.

11 For some remarkable stories of such, see *The Rescuers* ed. Gay Block and Malka Drucker (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1992).

12 Legislation can have the same spirit. The first codes, such as the Roman, are simple and harsh. In a few words they cover everything. Later codes, such as Moses', Justinian's, or Napoleon's, are more comprehensive but still principled and clear. About the spirit of English legislation, Tocqueville wrote, "[it] is an incomprehensible mixture of the spirits of innovation and of routine, which perfects the details of laws without noticing the principles; which always goes ahead in a straight line, taking step after step in the direction it happens to be in, without looking to right or to left to make connections between the different roads it is following; active and contemplative; sometimes wide awake to notice the slightest abuse, and sometimes sound asleep amid the most monstrous ones; which exhausts its skill in mending, and does not create except, so to say, without it and by chance; the most restless for improvement and the well-being of society, but the least systematic seeker for these things; the most impatient and the most patient; the most clear-sighted and the blindest; the most powerful in some things, and the weakest and most embarrassed in some others; which keeps eighty million people under its obedience three thousand leagues away, and does not know

how to get out of the smallest administrative difficulties; which excels at taking advantage of the present, but does not know how to foresee the future. Who can find a word to explain all these anomalies?" *Journeys to England and Ireland* trans. G. Lawrence & K. P. Mayer, ed. J. P. Mayer (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1988), 82-83.

13 *Jenseits von Gut und Bose*, No. 63.

14 The most genial harmony of seeking the truth of Thomas and giving it to others is to be found in the works of Josef Pieper. The most vivacious harmony is Chesterton's *Saint Thomas Aquinas*. A good recent introduction to natural law, aware of its connections to politics, and good on Thomas, is J. Budziszewski's *Written on the Heart: The Case for Natural Law* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1997).

15 *De Veritate*, Vol. II, Question XI; this has been trans. by James V. McGlynn, S. J. *Truth*, Vol. II (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1954/1994).

16 A notable example is John Courtney Murray, in his influential *We Hold These Truths* (Sheed & Ward: New York, 1960), 320 to end, especially 332 where Murray builds up to this precept as the climax of his book, then misquotes it. Leaving out "the good to be followed" from Thomas' account of natural law is almost like leaving God out of Thomas altogether; Murray presents himself as one who can reconcile God and America, but without nature's God shining down from their beautiful spacious skies, so Americans can look up sometimes, the plains below will not to be fruited for long, certainly not when natural law and natural rights are confused, or when everything is blurred as "values." Another misquoter is Jacques Maritain, *Man and the State* (University of Chicago: Chicago, 1951), 90 and context. But while Maritain is explaining what Thomas really meant, or should have, or would have if he lived today, he at least quotes Thomas in Latin. Although a bit condescending, the fact that Maritain struggles with Thomas might encourage a reader to go read Thomas. Notable in precision is Germain Grisez, "The First Principle of Practical Reason: A commentary on the *Summa Theologiae*, 1-2, Q. 94, A. 2," *10 Natural Law Forum* (1965), 168-196; in translating Thomas faithfully and asking what he means, Grisez does the good toward Thomas. (Later in his essay Grisez decides that to follow the good he must differ from Thomas.)

17 *Lectures on Ethics*, trans. Peter Heath, ed. Heath & J. B. Schneewind (Cambridge U P: Cambridge, 1997) 27:264, 57; Kant was responding to the same misquotation, which he found in Baumgarten instead of "daring to know" Thomas by reading him.

18 As Fr. James Lehrberger, O. Cist. observes, "Nowhere, in fact, does this definition of law even hint at force, coercion, punishment, or sanctions," in his "Crime without Punishment: Thomistic Natural Law and the Problem of Sanctions," in *Law and Philosophy: The Practice of Theory* ed. W. Braithwaite, J. Murley, & R. Stone, (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University / Swallow Press, 1992), Vol. I, 240.

19 The subsequent response to Grisez's reading, mentioned above, of Vernon Bourke, "The Synderesis Rule and Right Reason," *The Monist*, LXVI, 1, (1983) 71-82 and the overlapping, "The Background of Aquinas' Synderesis Principle," in *Graceful Reason* ed. Lloyd P. Gerson (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1983), 345-360, is on this point unconvincing; that elsewhere, especially in the Old Testament, maxims and exhortations resembling the first precept are simpler (do good, avoid evil) and also often reverse the order (avoid evil, do good) is impertinent; Thomas knew those passages; surely he wrote what he wrote deliberately; and the difference between his precept and what Bourke cites may well mean that Thomas thinks the first precept accords with the New Testament not the Old; see Su. Th. I-II. Q 100. a6, esp. ad2, where Thomas explains that the negative order is the order of execution and the positive order is the order of intellect. In reforming ourselves, we start by working on our vices. But to distinguish virtues and vices, we must first know the virtues. Nevertheless, it is better to do good than avoid evils, Thomas tells us, in II-II. Q 125, al, ad1. Moreover, in the Sermon on the Mount, Thomas sees that Christ distinguishes in man two motions: the willing of what has to be done, namely the diverse precepts of the Law, and the intending of the end (fine), namely Beatitude. In the examples in his replies, Thomas shows how the Scribes and Pharisees fixed on doing what a law commanded but neglected whether the doer intended the end: I-II, Q 108, a3. In terms of the first precept of law, they commanded doing the good but failed to counsel following it, as Christ does.

20 An imprecision in translation with a similar bent is the common rendering of Thomas' habitual "Respondeo dicendum quod" as "I answer that" instead of "I respond that it is to be said that."

21 The same insight is at work in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, where "nature" and "bond" are so often invoked. The usage is also present in the American tradition; thus the Declaration gives reasons for dissolving the "political bands" that unite one people to another; and thus, to preserve the Union, Lincoln appealed to "our bonds of affec-

tion” and the “mystic chords of memory.”

22 In the vicinity of the first precept, we find fitting remarks about degrees of goodness (I-II, Q 98, a1), a distinction between imperfect and perfect instances of a virtue (I-II, Q 98, a2), and discussion of dispensations (or exceptions) to laws (I-II Q 96, a6 and Q 97, a4). Of course, the whole account of law and grace, the external aids, is surrounded by the very thorough account of the virtues, natural and supernatural, a topic wonderfully illumined by Josef Pieper’s work. If this maxim of Thomas is as rich as I have tried to show it, then how it fits into Thomas’ whole account of the whole, illumining and illuminated by it, calls for further examination. A glance, while awaiting publication of this essay, at Daniel Mark Nelson’s *The Priority of Prudence* (Penn State U. P. , 1992) suggests it will be helpful, for its argument for the superiority of prudence would seem to fit with the richness of the first precept.

23See especially *Ethics* 1122 a34-1125 a35. The word for great-Souled (megalopsychia) became in Latin magnanimitas, and then in English magnanimity. However, as we read on in the *Ethics*, we realize that the great-souled man is hardly the highest; above him stretches a long ladder, some of whose rungs are the magnificent man, the friend, and the philosopher. For more on this ascent, see the early parts of my “Shakespearean Wisdom?” in *Shakespeare as Political Thinker*, eds. John Alvis & Thomas G. West (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 1981), 257-276; to be reprinted in 1999 by the Intercollegiate Studies Institute.

24See my “The Myth of the Teenager,” *Practical Home-Schooling* ed. Mary Pride Vol. I, No. 2 (Summer, 1993), 19-21, reprinted in an appendix to *Mary Pride’s Big Book of Home Learning* (1999) and my little book, *The Teenager and the West* (whenever it comes out).

25Something can be said for the West: that, still being self-governing, it is possible for an awakened citizenry to reverse its moral and political decline. Ah, there’s the rub. The moral sloth of the many as much as the vigorous evil of the few.

26 I am aware that Aristotle does go easy on the practice of abortion and infanticide, but his excuse is at least not small-souled; for more see the pertinent remarks in my “Only Christianity,” in *Saints, Sovereigns, & Scholars: Essays Presented to Frederick D. Wilhelmsen* ed. Fr. James Lehrberger, Robert Herrera, & Mel Bradford (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 211-230.

27As Leopardi points out in *Pensieri*, No. 134.

\* Editor’s note: In the case of Martha, the judgment is clear. The Church honors her as a saint, and celebrates her feast on July 29.