

## Chapter Four

# “The Same as to Knowledge”

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Considering that natural law is *natural*, it is amazing how it scandalizes people—even some scholars of natural law. We are continually told that some offensive part of the theory must be “bracketed” because it is too much to take. For example, we are urged to bracket theology and say nothing about God; or to bracket philosophy so that natural law is *just* theology and has nothing to say to nonbelievers; or to bracket natural teleology so that natural law is hardly natural; or to bracket conscience so that natural law is hardly law.

The classical tradition insisted on keeping all those things in. The problem with natural law is not that it speaks too implausibly but that it speaks all too plausibly, telling us more than we want to hear. Our actual inclinations are at war with our natural inclinations; our hearts are riddled with desires that oppose their deepest longings; we demand to have happiness on terms that make happiness impossible.

One article cannot take on all of the protests, but I do want to defend what the classical tradition says about conscience.<sup>1</sup>

In the *Summa theologiae*, St. Thomas Aquinas—asking whether the natural moral law is the same for all men—makes the very strong claim that “the natural law, as to general principles, is the same for all, both as to rectitude and as to knowledge.”<sup>2</sup> Let’s unpack this statement to see why it is so astonishing.

To say that the general principles of the natural law are the same “as to rectitude” means that they are *right* for everyone. For example, just as it would be wrong for me to murder, so it would be wrong for you to murder. This claim is already quite strong, and a good many people in our time consider it pretty dubious. We hear every day that “what’s right for you may

not be right for me,” and that this is why we must not “judge” anyone else’s acts by our own standards.

But St. Thomas makes this already-strong claim stronger still. For to say that the general principles are the same for all “as to knowledge” means that everyone *knows* them. For example, not only is it the case that theft is wrong for everyone, but *everyone knows* that theft is wrong, even thieves. I take this to mean not only that everyone knows that theft is wrong for him, but that everyone knows that theft is wrong for everyone. Of course we are not speaking of persons incapable of reason: “all men” means everyone with an undamaged adult mind. Nor are we speaking of the remote, detailed implications of the general principles: I may understand the wrong of theft in general, yet be confused about whether it would always be theft to refuse to return property entrusted to me at the time it is demanded. Notice, too, that we are speaking of knowledge of the natural law itself, not the knowledge of the *theory* of natural law. For example, people in general may not know that “do not steal” is a natural law; they may not even know that there is such a thing as natural law. They may, in fact, steal. *Nevertheless, they know that they ought not steal.* This is the claim.

If St. Thomas is correct, then no matter which kind of denier we are speaking of—whether the universal denier, who denies that there are any true moral universals, or the particular denier, who denies particular true moral universals such as the wrong of adultery or murder—the denier *knows better*. Though he may give seemingly rational accounts of his objections, he is unreasonably resistant to solutions, because the obstacles that prevent him from acknowledging true moral universals lie less in the realm of the intellect than in the realm of the will. He may even desire to concoct intellectual obstacles, because they give him a pretext for refusing to admit to himself that he knows what he does, in some sense, know.

And if this in turn is true, then we have an enormous problem. It implies that a good portion of contemporary ethical and metaethical debate is not carried on in good faith.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. Here I am worrying about the implications of the proposition that persons who deny true moral universals know better, when I have not even presented any reasons to think that they do, in fact, know better. Some people would say that I am even further ahead of myself than that, because I have not established that St. Thomas really means what I say he means when he *states* that the general principles of the natural law are the same for all as to knowledge.

Here then is what I propose. First I will reply to possible arguments against my interpretation of St. Thomas’s claim; then I will present objections to his view and offer replies; then a more general argument for thinking that he is right; then why it is so important that he is right. Finally I will return to the question of what to do about all of this.

## IS THIS REALLY WHAT ST. THOMAS MEANS?

Does St. Thomas really mean what I say he means? Someone might suggest that when he says that the general principles of the natural law are the same *for all* as to knowledge, he really means the same for *almost* all. As C. S. Lewis suggested, those thinkers who said that everyone knew the natural law “did not mean, of course, that you might not find an odd individual here and there who did not know it, just as you find a few people who are color-blind or have no ear for a tune. But taking the race as a whole, they thought that the human idea of decent behavior was obvious to everyone.”<sup>3</sup> And no doubt some natural law thinkers did think this way about the race as a whole. But St. Thomas didn’t. In the following passage he clearly distinguishes between principles that are the same for all in every case, and principles that are the same for all with rare exceptions:

Consequently we must say that the natural law, as to general principles, is the same for all, both as to rectitude and as to knowledge. But as to certain matters of detail, which are conclusions, as it were, of those general principles, it is the same for all in the majority of cases, both as to rectitude and as to knowledge; and yet in some few cases it may fail, both as to rectitude, by reason of certain obstacles (just as natures subject to generation and corruption fail in some few cases on account of some obstacle), and as to knowledge, since in some the reason is perverted by passion, or evil habit, or an evil disposition of nature.  
...<sup>4</sup>

So although St. Thomas agreed that you might find an odd individual here and there who does not know one of the detailed precepts of the natural law, he really did believe that everyone knows the general principles of the natural law.

Someone might also propose that when St. Thomas says the general principles of the natural law are the same for all as to knowledge, he is speaking only of the first, indemonstrable principle of practical reason. In its ontological form, this may be expressed, “Good is that which all things seek after.” In its preceptive form, it may be expressed, “Good is to be done and pursued, and evil is to be avoided.” So the only thing that is the same for all as to knowledge—the only thing that each of us really knows—is that he ought, in fact, to pursue those things which are such as to draw his pursuit, and avoid those things which are such as to repel it. The knowledge of what these things are is *not* the same for all as to knowledge, so I am entirely mistaken in thinking that it includes such details as “Honor thy father and thy mother,” “Thou shalt not kill,” and “Thou shalt not steal.”

The difficulty with this interpretation is that St. Thomas explicitly contradicts it. For in a later section of the *Summa*, where he is explaining the relation between the natural law and the moral precepts of Old Testament

law, he remarks, “there are certain things which the natural reason of every man, of its own accord and at once, judges to be done or not to be done: e.g. ‘Honor thy father and thy mother,’ and ‘Thou shalt not kill,’ ‘Thou shalt not steal’: and these belong to the law of nature absolutely.”<sup>5</sup> He makes much the same point in his commentary on Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, where he remarks that “in practical matters there are some principles naturally known as it were, indemonstrable principles and truths related to them, as evil is to be avoided, no one is to be unjustly injured, *theft must not be committed and so on*.”<sup>6</sup> St. Thomas speaks here of first indemonstrable principles of practical reason in the plural—there are more than one. He says that the things naturally known include not only such first indemonstrable principles, but also truths related to them—this probably means proximately derived from them—such as “Theft must not be committed.” Although he is explaining a point in Aristotle about the meaning of the natural just, the illustration about theft is his own, not Aristotle’s. The upshot is that yes, he does think we all know we must not steal.

Am I being hasty? For someone might suggest that St. Thomas explicitly contradicts my own interpretation too. In a later article in the same question, he writes that “some precepts are more detailed, the reason of which even an uneducated man can easily grasp; *and yet they need to be promulgated, because human judgment, in a few instances, happens to be led astray concerning them: these are the precepts of the decalogue*.”<sup>7</sup> If the possibility of being “led astray” concerning these precepts means that from time to time a person might be altogether ignorant of their truth, then St. Thomas is admitting that they are *not* the same for all as to knowledge. And at first it seems that this conclusion must be right, for back in question 94, article 4, following the Dominican Fathers translation of the *Summa*, widely accepted as the gold standard, St. Thomas famously remarks that “theft, although it is expressly contrary to the natural law, was not considered wrong among the Germans.”<sup>8</sup>

This time the problem with the objector’s interpretation is that it seems to make St. Thomas contradict himself. In dealing with a thinker of St. Thomas’s stature, we should always investigate whether an apparent inconsistency can be resolved. This one can be, for there it is far from obvious that the expression “led astray” refers to moral ignorance, and as to that troubling passage about the Germans, the translation has slipped badly. Read properly, St. Thomas is not in any way suggesting that the Germans were ignorant of the wrong of theft.

What do I mean by the proper reading? Here is what St. Thomas actually says: “Thus formerly, *latrocinium*, although it is expressly contrary to the natural law, was not considered wrong among the Germans.” Although the Dominican Fathers translation renders *latrocinium* as “theft,” actually the term *latrocinium* does not refer to theft. St. Thomas carefully distinguishes *f*

*urtum* (theft), which is unjustly taking another’s property by stealth, from *rapina* (robbery), which is unjustly taking another’s property by coercion or violence.<sup>9</sup> It turns out that *latrocinium* is neither theft in general, nor robbery in general, nor even a particular kind of theft, but a particular kind of robbery. The term is best translated “banditry” or “piracy.” A *latro*, in Roman law, was an armed bandit or raider.

If we turn to St. Thomas’s source, the sixth book of Julius Caesar’s *Commentaries on the Gallic Wars*, we find right away that the Germans were very much aware of the wrong of both *furtum* and *latrocinium*. In fact, Julius remarks that the Germans considered such crimes as theft and banditry so detestable that on those occasions when they burned victims to propitiate their gods, they preferred to burn the perpetrators of such crimes: as he put it, “they consider that the oblation of such as have been taken in *furto*, or in *latrocinio*, or any other offence, is more acceptable to the immortal gods.”<sup>10</sup>

But if the Germans did know the wrong of *latrocinium*, then what can St. Thomas be thinking? We don’t have to look far for the answer. When he claims Julian authority for the statement that *latrocinium* “was not considered wrong among the Germans,” what he doubtless has in mind is a somewhat later passage in the *Commentaries*, where Julius explains that the Germans approved not of banditry as such, but only of a particular kind of banditry, raiding *against other tribes*. Here is what Julius says:

*Latrocinia* which are committed beyond the boundaries of each state bear no infamy, and they [the Germans] avow that these are committed for the purpose of disciplining their youth and of preventing sloth. And when any of their chiefs has said in an assembly “that he will be their leader, let those who are willing to follow, give in their names;” they who approve of both the enterprise and the man arise and promise their assistance and are applauded by the people; such of them as have not followed him are accounted in the number of deserters and traitors, and confidence in all matters is afterward refused them.<sup>11</sup>

The manner in which the judgment of these barbarians was “led astray,” then, was not that they were ignorant of the wrong of theft, or the wrong of robbery, or even of the wrong of banditry, but that they refused to draw one of the detailed corollaries of these precepts. They knew the wrong of plundering their neighbors, but they failed to acknowledge the members of other tribes as neighbors. Consequently they classified raiding them not as banditry, but as something like justified war. It is as though they said, “I know people who commit banditry deserve to be burned, but come on, raiding doesn’t count as banditry.” We do much the same thing. “I know theft is wrong, but come on, inflating the currency to finance expenditures the government can’t pay for doesn’t count as theft.”

## OBJECTIONS AND REPLIES

Even if one concedes that St. Thomas means what I say he means, it might be argued that his claim is simply wrong. Let us consider a few of the most likely objections.

### *Objection 1*

*Perhaps in a manner of speaking everyone does “know” general moral principles such as “Don’t murder,” but these principles are mere tautologies. For example, murder means merely “wrongful killing,” so “Don’t murder” means merely, “Killing is wrong when it is wrong to kill.” All that we are really being told is that it is wrong to do what it is wrong to do. Concerning when it is wrong to do it, there is not even an approximate agreement.*<sup>12</sup>

I suggest that the premise is untrue: there *is* an approximate agreement. People of widely diverse cultures more or less agree that the prohibition of murder is about the avoidance of deliberately taking innocent human life. This is the central tendency, to which the codes of particular cultures are better or worse approximations. Probably not even the cannibal thinks it is all right to deliberately take innocent human life. It is much more likely that he concedes the point but denies that the people in the other tribe are human (or perhaps that they are innocent).

The objector might now claim that I have merely substituted an elaborate tautology for a simple one. He might say that *human* means merely, “a being who is such that deliberately taking his life, when he is innocent, is wrong.” Therefore, my so-called agreement means no more than “it is wrong to deliberately take the lives of innocent beings whose lives, when they are innocent, it is wrong to take.” Yet this is not the case, for we also share implicit understandings about what counts as human. If we did not, then it would be impossible to argue with cannibals that their moral codes are defective. Yet experience shows that we can: various cannibal tribes have yielded to the persuasion of missionaries and other outsiders and given up their cannibalism. Consider, too, that unless the cannibal knows deep down that the people in the other tribe are human, it is difficult to explain why he performs rituals for the expiation of guilt before taking their lives. Yet he does.

### *Objection 2*

*If it were really true that everyone knows the general precepts of the moral law, then they would be more faithfully observed. Consider the Holocaust. Surely the Nazis did not know the wrong of deliberately taking innocent human life.*

I would address the objector directly: Haven’t you ever had the experience of doing something wrong even though you knew it was wrong? The

monstrosity of the Nazis is not that they didn't know the wrong of deliberately taking innocent human life, but that they knew it and rationalized it anyway. Nazi propaganda went to great lengths to depict Jews as bestial (not human) and criminal (not innocent). And even here the Nazis knew better. Robert Jay Lifton reports on an interview with a former Wehrmacht neuro-psychiatrist who had treated large numbers of death camp soldiers for psychological disorders. Their symptoms were much like those of combat troops, but they were worse and lasted longer. The men had the hardest time shooting women and children, especially children, and many of them had nightmares of punishment or retribution.<sup>13</sup> In our own country we find similar symptoms among people who practice our own “final solution,” the abortion trade.

*Objection 3*

*If it were really true that everyone knows the general precepts of the moral law, then everyone who violated them would feel the pangs of conscience. But psychologists report that sociopaths and psychopaths have no conscience. To much the same effect, anthropologists commonly distinguish between guilt cultures, shame cultures, and fear cultures. Remorseful feelings are prominent only in guilt cultures.*

Psychologists who hold that sociopaths and psychopaths lack conscience are confusing the *judgment* of conscience, an intellectual event, with the *feeling* of remorse, an emotional event. Again I would address the objector: Have you never had the experience of doing something you knew to be wrong, *but not feeling bad about it*? Sociopaths and psychopaths are not people who do not know their acts are wrong, but people who *never* feel bad about it. Even without guilty feelings, by the way, they do show signs of guilty knowledge. One young murderer who had been described by police as having no conscience confirmed to a reporter that he didn't feel bad for what he had done. But after a moment he added, “There must be something wrong with me, don't you think? Because I should.”

The same point applies to the distinction between so-called “shame” and “fear” cultures. There may be a great deal of cultural variation in the emotional reaction to guilty knowledge. We are not discussing whether everyone feels the same when he violates a known moral law, but whether everyone knows the moral law.

*Objection 4*

*If St. Thomas is right, then anyone who denies knowledge of the general principles of the natural law must be self-deceived. But the notion of self-deception is incoherent, because it conceives of a single person as two persons, one of whom knows something, though the other is in the dark. It is as though I were to say that I am thinking about something, and at the same time that I am not thinking about it.*

Yes, the suggestion that one and the same mind can both know and not know something in the same sense at the same time is incoherent. However, the hypothesis that the denier really does know what he claims not to know can be developed without this dubious notion. St. Thomas would suggest,

“Don’t say that you are both thinking and yet not thinking about something, or thinking about it in what both is and yet is not your real mind. Rather say that you have *one* mind, but its operations are subtle and complex. Even when you are not actually thinking about something, you may be apt to think of it at any moment. To put it differently, even when the knowledge is not actualized in present awareness, you may possess it habitually. In the meantime, your mind may continue to be dispositionally influenced by it.”

If this analysis is correct, then the distinction between unconscious and conscious knowledge which is so common today is perhaps best viewed as an unsuccessful attempt to get at something that St. Thomas’s own distinction, between habitual and actualized knowledge, gets at more successfully. Expressions like *self-deception* are best used in a figurative rather than in a literal sense. To be self-deceived does not mean that there are two of me. It means that although I have a dispositional tendency to be aware of something—a “natural habit,” as St. Thomas says—I am resisting it; I am trying not to think about this something.

Trying not to think about something is rather difficult. If that my aim, then I must school myself in the arts of self-distraction. In fact, in order to avoid thinking about one thing, I must regiment myself not to think of a large number of things which act as triggers for thinking about it. And let us not forget that the ever-increasing effort required to *resist* my dispositional tendency has dispositional consequences of its own—a point to which we will return.

#### *Objection 5*

*Even if we do all know the general moral principles, the only reason we all know them is that we are all taught them. If you could find someone who had not been taught them, you would find that he didn’t know them either.*

There is a grain of truth in this objection, for teaching the moral rules helps. Yet isn’t it curious that the world over, the young are taught pretty much the same ones? It isn’t as though in Canada they are taught the good of gratitude, but in France they are taught the good of ingratitude. It is also curious how often even adulterers admit the wrong of adultery, thieves the wrong of theft, and murderers the wrong of murder. The murderer does not usually excuse himself by claiming that it is right to deliberate take innocent human life, but by claiming that he couldn’t help it (so it wasn’t deliberate), that the victim would have died anyway (so it wasn’t taking), that he de-



served it (he wasn't innocent), that he was garbage (he wasn't human), or that he “didn't have a life.”

The reason for these facts should be plain for consider how teaching works. At a certain stage of mental development, when the teacher says, “Johnnie, two plus two is four,” Johnnie can see for himself that two plus two is four; otherwise the words would be meaningless to him. At a certain stage of development, when Mother says, “Johnnie! Stop pulling your sister's hair! How would you like it if someone pulled your hair?” Johnnie can see for himself that he should not treat another person as he would not wish to be treated himself; otherwise the command would seem arbitrary to him. Such knowledge can't be simply *pumped in*. There has to be soil, or the seed cannot take root.

### WHAT DOES ST. THOMAS'S CLAIM EXPLAIN?

But why, in the end, should we *believe* that everyone really knows the general moral principles? I suggest an argument to the best explanation. If the hypothesis of moral denial provides a better explanation of how people at odds with moral basics act than the alternative hypothesis of moral ignorance provides, then the hypothesis of moral denial is probably true, and we are justified in accepting it.

I think denial does provide a better explanation than moral ignorance. I rest this judgment on the observation that people who are at odds with the moral basics tend to “act guilty.” So strong is this tendency that many guilty people expend enormous energy in the effort *not* to act guilty. Although some guilty people are better at this than others are, the strain shows.

Please notice what I am *not* suggesting. I am not suggesting that the guilty person is necessarily thinking to himself “I am guilty.” But according to St. Thomas he does have a natural dispositional tendency to be aware of the first principles of natural law and their proximate, general corollaries, and I am suggesting that he also has a natural dispositional tendency to judge his behavior as wrong when it obviously violates these principles. He can resist these dispositional tendencies—for example, he can try not to think of certain subjects, or try to find ways of viewing the obvious as not obvious—but if he does, then he is also going to have to fight the dispositional tendency to be aware that he is resisting. Three sets of intellectual “habits” are therefore in conflict: first, all those associated with the natural *habitus* of the knowledge of the general principles of the natural law; second, all those associated with what I consider a natural *habitus* of knowing when I have violated them; and third, all those associated with the acquired *habitus* to resist the actualization of this knowledge.

Second, I am not suggesting that a dispositional tendency to act guilty proves that the person manifesting it must really be guilty of something; it only proves that he has a dispositional tendency to believe that he is guilty. Such belief may be unwarranted and false. For example, I may blame myself because I survived an automobile crash that killed everyone else, even though I was not driving and was not at fault. *However*, when my belief in my guilt is warranted and true, it is knowledge. So consider a person who has murdered, who claims to believe that murder is no big deal, and yet who acts guilty. I say that although he claims not to view murder as wrong, he knows better.

Third, when I speak of acting guilty I am not suggesting that it is always easy to tell precisely what guilty knowledge is being betrayed. To be sure, sometimes it is easy to tell, for example, when a person displays a compulsion to tell everyone about what he did even though he insists that his behavior was innocent. But sometimes it isn't at all easy to tell: a person may engage in behavior strongly which is suggestive of self-punishment, but which does not advertise what he is punishing himself for.

Fourth, I am not suggesting that people who are at odds with the general principles of natural law always *feel* guilty. Guilty feelings—sorrowful pangs of remorse—are probably the least reliable sign of guilty knowledge. No one always feels remorse for doing wrong; some people never do. Yet even when remorse is absent, guilty knowledge generates other telltales.

I believe that the reason guilty knowledge leaves telltales is that the violation of the conscience of a moral being generates certain objective needs, including confession, reconciliation, atonement, and justification. These are the greater sisters of remorse; elsewhere, borrowing from Greek mythology, I have called them the Furies. Now if I straightforwardly repent of my deed, then I make an honest effort to satisfy these avengers of guilt. I respond to the need for confession by admitting that I have done wrong; I respond to the need for reconciliation by repairing broken bonds with those whom I have hurt or betrayed; I respond to the need for atonement by paying the price of a contrite and broken heart; and I respond to the need for justification by getting back into justice. But what happens if I am in denial? The Furies do not go away just because I want them to. What happens is that I try to pay them off in counterfeit coin. I try to pay off the need for confession by compulsively admitting every sordid detail of my disreputable deed except that it was wrong; I try to pay off the need for reconciliation by seeking substitute companions who are as guilty as I am; I try to pay off the need for atonement by paying pain after pain, price after price, all except the one price demanded; and I try to pay off the need for justification by diverting enormous energy into rationalizing my unjust deeds as just.

Such behaviors are matters of everyday observation. To be sure, they are difficult to study systematically. Even so, much of the data about the psycho-

logical effects of abortion, from both law and the social sciences, are strongly suggestive, though of course, as one would expect in such a case, they are disputed.<sup>14</sup>

Someone might suggest that all these supposed telltales are imaginary, that the behavior I call “acting guilty” is more naturally explained in other ways. If I think my behavior has been blameless, why *not* talk about it? There is no need to think that I am engaging in some sort of displaced confessional urge. If my friends unreasonably subject me to moral criticism, why *shouldn't* I drop them and make new ones? There is no need to think that I am trying to find a substitute for supposedly having hurt them. If I am doing things that aren't good for me, why *shouldn't* we write my behavior as bad judgment? There is no need to think that I am punishing myself. If some people view my behavior as wrong, but I disagree with them, why *shouldn't* I defend myself? If you say that I'm making excuses, your argument is circular: it assumes what it sets out to prove.

But when I speak of displaced confession, reconciliation, atonement, and justification, I have in mind cases in which these other explanations seem to fall short—cases like the following. All of them are drawn from the annals of a single hot button issue in our culture, abortion, which is rather obviously the deliberate taking of innocent human life, but which many claim to view as entirely blameless.

- The pro-life young woman who gets pregnant, has an abortion, suddenly reverses her views and becomes pro-abortion, looks for opportunities to tell everyone how her abortion solved her problems, but falls into depression around the time the baby would have been born.<sup>15</sup>
- The abortion clinic operator and head nurse who write an article about the psychological burdens of doing such work in an article revealingly titled, “What About Us?”<sup>16</sup>
- The clinic workers mentioned in the article who have dreams of vomiting up fetuses.<sup>17</sup>
- The ones who report suffering from an obsessive need to talk about their experience.<sup>18</sup>
- The ones who refuse to look at the fetus.<sup>19</sup>
- The one who reports increasing resentment because some of the clients don't seem to feel as bad as she does.<sup>20</sup>
- The women in the clinical trials of the abortion pill who seem glad to submit to the protracted bleeding and cramping of this method of abortion because it makes them feel that they are accepting punishment for what they are doing.<sup>21</sup>
- Other women in the trial, as well as some members of the clinical staff, who refuse to use the term *abortion* and call what is happening a “miscarriage.”<sup>22</sup>

- The proabortion counselor, quoted by a proabortion journalist, who is frustrated by clients who have had abortions and subsequently feel guilty *about not feeling guilty*.<sup>23</sup>
- The abortion clinic operator who publishes the bizarre proposal that pregnancy be socially redefined as an “illness” which “may be treated by evacuation of the uterine contents”—a suggestion one finds hard not to view as desperate.<sup>24</sup>
- The proabortion activist who insists that the act is not wrong and yet proposes that feminists “hold candlelight vigils at abortion clinics, standing shoulder to shoulder with the doctors who work there, commemorating and saying goodbye to the dead.”<sup>25</sup>

Do such phenomena provide airtight proof that everyone who claims to consider abortion blameless knows better? No. However, I think most reasonable persons would agree that the hypothesis of moral denial explains them much better than the hypothesis of moral ignorance does.

Worth noting is the fact that many proabortion writers come very close to agreeing with me. One proabortion journalist quotes a proabortion counselor as commenting, “I am not confident even now, with abortion so widely used, that women feel it’s OK to want an abortion without feeling guilty. They say, ‘Am I some sort of monster that I feel all right about this?’” The counselor’s statement is very revealing. Plainly, if a woman has guilty feelings for *not* having guilty feelings about deliberately taking innocent human life, sheer moral ignorance is not a good explanation.

In fact, the phenomenon of moral denial is taken for granted even by many people who commerce in abortion. However—chillingly—they regard denial as *good*. One of the physicians involved in the clinical trials of the abortion pill remarked, “I think there are people who want to be in denial about whether it’s really an abortion or not. I think that’s fine. . . . For some people that’s a very useful denial and more power to them if they have to use that not to have an unwanted child.” The authors of the article, who are strongly proabortion, seem to agree: “Indeed, denial may be considered a form of agency,” they write, “in that it enables women who are troubled about abortion to get through the experience more easily.”<sup>26</sup>

Needless to say, even if everyone really does know that deliberately taking innocent human life is wrong, it does not follow that everyone knows the rest of the general moral principles as well. So I do not claim to have *proven* St. Thomas’s claim that the general moral principles are all “the same for all as to knowledge.” But I think I have made it plausible.

## WHY IS THE MATTER SO GRAVE?

Why is moral denial such a serious matter? Right at the beginning of the essay I mentioned one reason: it vitiates moral conversation and degrades the practice of philosophy. But there is another reason too.

Consider the driver of an automobile. Ordinarily, the threat of civil punishments like traffic fines and the deprivation of license discourage people from driving recklessly. But they only have this effect up to a certain point of corruption in the will. For consider someone who drives recklessly anyway. After a certain number of punishments, his license is taken away. After a certain number of punishments for driving without a license, his vehicle is in danger of impoundment. The risk of losing his vehicle may excite a person like this to drive even faster and more recklessly than before, just to keep the policeman from catching him. Paradoxically, the threatened penalty crosses the line from inhibiting violation to encouraging it.

I suggest that something like this happens with the penalties of conscience too. You would think that the terror of having to live with oneself afterward would deter everyone from involvement in abortion. But one who will not face conscience as a teacher must face it as an accuser, and in this way it urges him to yet further wrong. Consider the woman who told her counselor, "I couldn't be a good parent," amended her remark to "I don't deserve to have any children," and still later revealingly added, "If it hadn't been for my last abortion, I don't think I'd be pregnant now."<sup>27</sup> The hieroglyph is not hard to decipher. When she says she could not be a good mother, what she means is that good mothers do not kill their children. She keeps getting pregnant to replace the children she has killed; but she keeps having abortions to punish herself for having killed them. With each abortion the cams of guilt make another revolution, setting her up to have another. She can never stop until she admits what is going on.

What this shows is that if we do not authentically repent and carry out the movements of confession, reconciliation, atonement, and justification in good faith, we may actually be driven to plunge deeper into wrongdoing instead of backing off from it. The examples I have just given arise from trying to atone the wrong way, but the same dreadful dynamism operates when we confess, seek reconciliation, or try to justify ourselves the wrong way. Confessing the wrong way becomes a strategy for recruiting to the Movement. Reconciling the wrong way means that instead of giving up the wrongdoing that separates me from man and God, I demand that man and God approve of it. Justifying myself the wrong way drives me toward new evils that it was no part of my original intention to excuse—if in order to make abortion seem right I must commit myself to premises which also justify infanticide, then so be it! In such ways, not only does moral conversa-

tion become dishonest, but the whole society may be thrust out of moral equilibrium.

### WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

If Thomas Aquinas is right in thinking that the most general moral principles are the same for all as to knowledge, then whenever one does deny them, *he knows better*. This fact makes it crucial to distinguish between honest objections and smokescreens. Honest objections are brought by persons who are in real perplexity and want to get out of it; smokescreens by persons who are in fictitious perplexity, and in whom the essential ordering of the human being toward knowing the truth is at sword's point with the accidental motive not to know it.

The hypothesis that those who deny general moral principles are self-deceived makes many people who take philosophy seriously deeply uncomfortable, for it seems to them to spell an end to philosophy. After all, even if the statement "You are self-deceived" is true, it does not refute the proposition "There are no true moral universals." So what do you do with someone who is in denial? And how do you make sure that you yourself are not in denial? It sounds like a problem not for a philosopher but for a psychological therapist. Unfortunately, therapists are even more helpless here than the rest of us. In the first place, a therapist can treat a person only if the person recognizes that he has a problem and submits himself for treatment. The persons we are talking about don't; no one says, "Help me, doctor, I'm a selective relativist."

Curiously, such persons often do say, "Help me, doctor, my life has no meaning," but although they complain of meaninglessness in general, when it comes to meaninglessness in morals they are more likely to boast than to complain. Besides, the theories of psychological therapy prevalent in our day tend to be just as deeply immersed in nonjudgmentalism and the rejection of moral universals as the rest of the culture is, if not even more. So I think the ball is in our court.

If it is really true that the obstacles that prevent intelligent persons from recognizing true moral universals lie not mainly in the realm of the intellect, but mainly in the realm of the will, how can such persons be reached? Perhaps by a mode of conversation that addresses not just their intellects but also their wills; say, by conversational moves that somehow help them to become aware that they are, in fact, in denial. But does that kind of conversation even belong to philosophy?

It certainly belongs to the teaching of philosophy. A student said to me once, "Morality is all relative anyway. How do we even know that murder is wrong?" Once upon a time I would have tried to convince him that murder is

wrong, but one cannot convince someone of something he already knows. So I asked, "Are you at this moment in real doubt about murder being wrong for everyone?" After a long pause and a little hemming and hawing, he said, "No, I guess I'm not." I replied, "Then you aren't really perplexed about whether morality is relative after all; you only thought you were. Can you suggest something you are perplexed about?"

On another occasion, I remarked to a student, "Did you realize that you've just taken an incoherent position? You say truth can't be known, all the while supposing that you know it to be true that you can't." "I guess I am being incoherent," he replied. After thinking for a moment, he added, "But that's all right, because the universe is incoherent, and I don't need to have meaning in my life." I thought he knew better than that. So I said, "I don't believe you. You know as well as I do that the longing for meaning and coherency is deep-set in every mind. So the real question is this: What is it that is so important to you that you are willing to give up even meaning and coherency to have it?"

If such conversations are part of the teaching of philosophy, why shouldn't they be part of philosophy? Socrates, the ancestor of all philosophers, thought they were. If we strip out the dialogue from his dialogues, boiling away the spiritual combat and leaving only a dusty residue of syllogisms, then we miss much of their point. Figuring out what their point is requires a philosophical analysis of something we might have preferred not to consider a philosophical problem at all. We find this to be true of some of the conversations in the New Testament as well, such as the dialogue between Christ and the woman at the well in the fourth chapter of the Gospel of John. On the surface it seems like a series of non sequiturs, but really it is a duel of feints, thrusts, and ripostes.

Such conversations are likely to be full of paradoxes. For example, getting through to the denier will sometimes require a great deal more than presenting a sound argument to him. But on the other hand, sometimes it may require presenting *less*. The mere tender of arguments to someone who is determined to remain self-deceived is more likely to provoke him to cleverness than to stir him to wisdom. Just because he is still talking, we may think we are getting somewhere, but he is merely generating objections for their own sake. For him, the conversation is not so much a means of attaining truth as a sophisticated means of avoiding it.

One thing this suggests is that what might be called the purely professional way of doing philosophy is a mistake. By the purely professional way, I mean the attitude which separates the intellectual from the moral virtues, which separates what I am doing from what kind of person I am. Philosophy is only accidentally a profession. It is essentially a vocation. Characteristic of any vocation is that in order to pursue it I must do more than acquire a certain set of abilities; I must try to become a certain kind of person. If I do not

practice the moral virtues, then I acquire an interest in justifying myself without being just. This is a disincentive to discovering the truth. So I must either try to be a better man, or stop pretending that I want to know the truth.

The hypothesis of moral denial also underscores the importance to *both* sides—both deniers and anti-deniers—of reaching the young first. Virtue has a reason for reaching them first because if they develop vicious dispositions, they will probably become deniers themselves. But vice has a reason for reaching them first because it *cannot have* them thinking straight. For the denier has an interest in converting others into deniers. If he allowed the new generation to think straight, they might join his unmaskers. His troubled conscience therefore defends itself against exposure by surrounding itself with a ring of recruits.

And what of my own conscience? It is one thing to have such a conversation with a self-deceived student. It is harder to have it with a self-deceived colleague. More difficult still is to have it with a self-deceived public, with whom one must carry it out in sound bites. The most difficult thing of all—ah, that it were not—is to have such a conversation with myself.

To know truth, I must be converted into truth. I think this is what Socrates had in mind. But alas, I resist.

## NOTES

1. For years, beginning with “The Revenge of Conscience,” *First Things* 84 (June/July 1998): 21–27, I have written about various aspects of this theme. In this article, however, I try to pull all the diverse parts of the analysis into one piece. I have adapted, and augmented, some of my previous comments about the Furies in *What We Can't Not Know: A Guide* (San Francisco: Ignatius Publisher, 2011) and about the ancient German tribes in *The Line Through the Heart: Natural Law as Fact, Theory, and Sign of Contradiction* (Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2009) and in *Commentary on Thomas Aquinas's Treatise on Law* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014). Gratitude to these publishers is rendered gladly.

2. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, trans. Fathers of the Dominican Province, 2nd rev. ed. (1920; public domain), 2.1.94.4.

3. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, rev. ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 1982), 5.

4. Aquinas, *Sth* 2.1.94.4. I have omitted the final clause from this quotation, but only in order to return to it later.

5. Aquinas, *Sth* 2.1.100.1. Cf. art. 8, *ad* 3, where St. Thomas explains that although exceptions may be made to “determinations” adapted to particular circumstances, “as to the essence of justice they contain” the precepts of the Decalogue are unchanging.

6. Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. C. J. Litzinger, OP, rev. ed. (Notre Dame, Indiana: Dumb Ox Books, 1993), 5.12, 325 (emphasis added).

7. Aquinas, *Sth* 2.1.100.11.

8. Aquinas, *Sth* 2.1.94.4.

9. Aquinas, *Sth* 2.1.66.3–4.

10. Julius Caesar, *The War in Gaul*, trans. W. A. MacDevitt, in “*De Bellico Gallico*” and *Other Commentaries of Caius Julius Caesar*, 6.16, <http://classics.mit.edu/Caesar/gallic.html> (public domain). For *furto* and *latrocinio*, MacDevitt has “theft” and “robbery.” Though Julius does not mention other, more routine Germanic penalties for theft, such as compensation, these double the proof that they knew theft was wrong.



“The Same as to Knowledge”

11. Caesar, *War* 6.23.
12. See, e.g., the argument of Richard A. Posner in “The Problematics of Moral and Legal Theory,” *Harvard Law Review* 111 (1998): 1637–709.
13. Robert Jay Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 1986), 15.
14. As to the law, see for example *Sandra Cano v. Thurbert E. Baker, Attorney General of Georgia, et al., on Petition for Writ of Certiorari to the United States Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit*, brief of Amicus Curiae J. Budziszewski in Support of Petitioner, sec. 6, “The Affidavits of Post-Abortive Woman Submitted to the District Court in This Case Confirm that the Violation of Conscience Has Destructive Consequences.” (This was in support of a petition for reconsideration of *Roe v. Wade* and *Doe v. Bolton*.) As to the social sciences, see, e.g., David M. Fergusson, L. John Horwood, and Joseph M. Boden, “Abortion and Mental Health Disorders: Evidence from a 30-year Longitudinal Study,” *British Journal of Psychiatry* 193 (2008): 444–51.
15. Anecdote passed on by the young woman’s college chaplain.
16. Warren M. Hern, MD, MPH, and Billie Corrigan, RN, MS, “What About Us? Staff Reactions to D & E,” *Advances in Planned Parenthood* 15, no. 1 (1980): 3–8.
17. Hern and Corrigan, “What About Us?”
18. Hern and Corrigan, “What About Us?”
19. Hern and Corrigan, “What About Us?”
20. Hern and Corrigan, “What About Us?”
21. Wendy Simonds et al., “Abortion, Revised: Participants in the U.S. Clinical Trials Evaluate Mifepristone,” *Social Science and Medicine* 46, no. 10 (1998): 1316.
22. Simonds et al., “Abortion, Revised.”
23. Nicci Gerrard, with Kim Bunce and Kirsty Buttfeld, “Damned If You Do . . .,” *The Observer* (Apr. 22, 2001), <http://www.observer.co.uk/review/story/0,6903,476313,00.html>.
24. Hern, “Is Pregnancy Really Normal?” *Family Planning Perspectives* 3, no. 1 (Jan. 1971): 9.
25. Naomi Wolf, “Our Bodies, Our Souls,” *The New Republic* 233, no. 16 (Oct. 16, 1995): 26–35.
26. Simonds et al., “Abortion, Revised,” 1318–19.
27. Other anecdotes passed on to me by crisis pregnancy counselors follow much the same pattern.

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