Conscience as Primordial Moral Awareness in

Gaudium et Spes and Veritatis Splendor

Tom Ryan, SM

Abstract: Theological discussion on conscience in the light of recent Church documents has tended to focus predominantly on its relationship to the truth and specifically as moral judgment in a particular situation. However, conscience has a more foundational sense. I argue that, in Gaudium et Spes and Veritatis Splendor, conscience understood as primordial moral awareness is presented in the setting of four epistemological processes which mediate the intuitive and affective appreciation of value, namely through a) participation in a divine-human dialogical relationship of love, b) participation as recognition of the true self, c) participation as collaboration in divine providence and wisdom and d) through a specific form of participative knowing, namely affective connaturality. The discussion will attempt to identify some of the key theological tributaries flowing into the treatment of the topic in these documents. In particular, recourse to Aquinas’ understanding of practical reason, evaluative knowing and affective connaturality is a valuable interpretative tool in this process. Critical evaluation suggests possibilities for further exploration.

Key Words: conscience; affectivity; connaturality; evaluative knowledge; Christian ethics; participation; wisdom

The experience of being summoned by a moral claim is common to everyone and it emerges from “prescientific insight and experience,” notes Klaus Demmer.1 In simple terms, he is referring to the awareness (real even if diffuse) of right and wrong, of somehow being personally responsible, of having a conscience.

Conscience is pivotal in the Catholic tradition. This is reflected in documents such as Gaudium et Spes and Veritatis Splendor, despite the differences in contexts and concerns. Theological discussion on conscience has tended to focus predominantly on its relationship to the truth and specifically as moral judgment in a particular situation. Here, I aim to investigate conscience in its more foundational sense—as primordial moral awareness without which we couldn’t be moral (and even human) beings. In probing the nature of this “prescientific insight and experience,” the investigation will be guided by this question: what is the role of evaluative knowing and human affectivity in basic moral consciousness in Gaudium et Spes (GS) and Veritatis Splendor (VS)?

After clarifying language, I argue that, in these two documents, conscience understood as primordial moral awareness is presented in the setting of four

1 Klaus Demmer, Shaping the Moral Life: An Approach to Moral Theology (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2000), 2. The author is grateful for helpful comments from one referee about the structure of this article.
epistemological processes which mediate the intuitive and affective appreciation of value. These processes are a) a participatory responsiveness within a dialogical relationship with God that is embodied in love (found in both GS and VS). Then specifically, in VS, there is evidence of b) participation as recognition (anamnesis) of the truest self; c) participation as collaboration in divine providence and wisdom and d) a specific form of participative knowing, namely affective connaturality. Recourse to Aquinas' understanding of evaluative knowing and affective connaturality will help clarify content, particularly of the relevant passages in VS and their underlying sources. Some critical evaluation and final comments will close the article.

**CLARIFYING OUR LANGUAGE**

Firstly, some clarification of terminology is needed from moral theology.

"Practical reason" describes knowledge of something true precisely from the aspect of "truth as good, truth as valuable" and hence to be pursued, promoted and performed. This description is based on a distinction between "speculative" and "evaluative" knowledge (respectively cognitio speculativa and cognitio aestimativa). The first denotes information or understanding that, considered in itself, does not carry a deeply felt significance (although it may do so for a particular individual). Evaluative knowledge, alternatively, involves an estimation or appreciation of something true as involving some value which a person appropriates as being personally significant. It is this that guides our decision and actions.

Lewis notes the two levels of conscience found in the Bible and later in, for instance, the work of Aquinas. Conscience, in its proper sense, is "situational" as denoting the judgment about the morality of a particular act (syneidesis). Conscience understood as "foundational" (synderesis) is "the habitual and ineradicable grasp of fundamental moral principles" (love and do good, shun evil, seek truth) that is natural and innate and which judgment needs as a benchmark and a guide. Lewis suggests that foundational conscience is "somewhat akin to the sense of moral value." Foundational conscience seems to be, for Lewis, as for Aquinas, the developed, habituated form of this sense of moral value or of what we refer to above as "primordial moral awareness."

---

2 For Jans, the image of God in *Veritatis Splendor* is captured in the two themes of participation and subordination which helps explain the document's unresolved tensions. See Jan Jans "Participation-Subordination (The Image of God) in *Veritatis Splendor*," in Joseph A Selling & Jan Jans, *The Splendor of Accuracy: An Examination of the Assertions made by Veritatis Splendor* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 152-168.


5 Lewis, *The Primacy*, 300.

6 Ibid, 300.

7 Compare O'Connell's threefold distinction comprising synderesis, moral science and particular judgment (syneidesis). See Timothy E. O'Connell, *Principles for a Catholic Morality*, rev. ed. (Harper San Francisco, 1990), 109-113. O'Neill and Black speak of the four "moments" of conscience. The foundational level is "conscience as desiring and knowing the good" followed by conscience as discerning the particular good, as a judgment for
CHURCH TEACHING

We turn now to Church teaching as reflected in *Gaudium et Spes* 14 -17,8 *Veritatis Splendor* (Ch.2, Section 2 “Conscience and Truth”).9 As noted earlier, we will trace the presence in these texts of the four levels of participation that mediate primordial moral awareness—the first level being in both documents, the other three confined to *VS*

1. *Gaudium et Spes*

The starting point is the lapidary statement of the dignity of moral conscience found in *GS* 16 (its first paragraph is repeated in *VS* 54).10 After a brief comment on its context, I will examine its epistemological setting and intentionality followed by how and to what extent foundational conscience is a form of evaluative or appreciative knowing.

In the depths of his conscience, man detects a law which he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him to obedience. Always summoning him to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience can when necessary speak to his heart more specifically: do this, shun that. For man has in his heart a law written by God. To obey it is the very dignity of man; according to it he will be judged (Rom 2:15-16).

Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, whose voice echoes in his depths. In a wonderful manner conscience reveals that law which is fulfilled by love of God and neighbour. In fidelity to conscience, Christians are joined with the rest of men in the search for the truth."

This statement’s significance can only appreciated in relation to the first chapter of *GS*. “The Dignity of the Human Person” is manifest first in “authentic freedom” in that it is “an exceptional sign of the divine image.” Moeller points out that this approach, rather than one based on natural law, was preferred by the Council Fathers for biblical and ecumenical reasons.11 Secondly, human dignity reflecting the divine image is specified further. It is the divine will that the human person is left “in the hand of his own counsel” to know and choose what is true and good freely.12 The foundation for this is more fully elaborated in the decree on religious freedom (*Dignitatis Humanae*) which, as Klaus Demmer notes, is classically referred to as a "turning point" or, in epistemological terms, a "paradigm shift" in the Catholic tradition.13 This brings us to the first form of primordial moral awareness.

---

9 *Veritatis Splendor* (Homebush, NSW: St. Pauls, 1993).
10 In the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (Homebush, NSW: St. Pauls, 1994), n. o. 1776; this paragraph is found under the heading “Moral Conscience” without any comment.
12 *GS* 17, emphasis added.
13 Demmer, *Shaping the Moral Life*, 4-5.
Primordial Moral Awareness through Participation in Divine-Human Relationship

For Gaffney and Ratzinger, the thought and language of this text of GS draws on John Henry Newman. Traces of Aquinas are evident but within a framework of interiority. In this text, foundational moral consciousness emerges not primarily by way of interaction with the outer world but by attentiveness to the inner world through self-reflexivity. Earlier (GS 14), modern insights into interiority ("interior qualities" or interioritas) are acknowledged. This form of unique self-awareness, while couched in affective language, in fact connotes the deepest core of the reflexive self. Interioritas is the “distinctively human capacity” enabling the human person to outstrip “the whole sum of mere things.”

Ratzinger comments that GS 14 is influenced by two aspects of an Augustinian synthesis of a more historically-oriented biblical anthropology with a modified metaphysical conception. First, the distinction between “homo interior” and “exterior” (rather than body/soul) sees the person in historical and dynamic terms and “introduces a greater element of personal responsibility and decision regarding the direction of life.” Second, for Augustine, the biblical understanding of the heart “expresses the unity of interior life and corporeality.”

Concerning GS 16, Lewis notes that, in the freedom and interiority of the person where one is a distinctive yet mysterious reality, there is a “vital and dynamic overture towards God, the Supreme Good and Ultimate End of all human striving.” Alternatively, this is equivalent to O’Neil and Black’s view of conscience “desiring and knowing the good.” Further, in Lonergan’s terms, the desire to search for what is true and good is driven by affectivity, or as one author expresses it, is “grounded in the pure desire to know.” This desire highlights one dimension of affectivity in primordial conscience.

Lewis suggests this personalist view is at the heart of GS 16. He also notes that the human person’s capacity to outstrip “the whole sum of mere things” points to the capacity for self-transcendence, Again, on entering the heart, one finds God waiting to draw one into a meeting and a dialogue between persons. This intimate exchange develops in the “experience of the moral ‘tug’, the sense of obligation,” not just to law, or to this or that action, but to be a certain kind of person, namely, “a loving, relating person.” This underscores the second aspect of affectivity in primordial conscience—an orientation towards loving actions and relationships.

---

15 The correlation of the wording of some of this section with Aquinas’ Summa Theologiae 1.2, 94.6 (henceforth ST) cannot be a coincidence. The question of the ST article is “Can the Law of Nature be abolished from the Heart of Man” and cites Rom 2:14 in the first sentence.
16 GS, footnote 31, 212.
17 Ratzinger, “Introductory Article and Chapter I,” 128.
18 Lewis, The Primacy, 301.
19 See note 7 above.
21 Lewis, The Primacy, 301.
22 Lewis, The Primacy, 302.
Interestingly, in this passage, law as "detected" or "revealed" is not presented in terms of the Word of God embodied in Jesus Christ but of the divine wisdom present in the created order that is mediated through conscience. Its primary focus appears to be more theistic than specifically Christian. Hence, it notes that the "law revealed by conscience" finds its fulfilment in the call to love God and neighbour (citing Matt 22:37-40 and Gal 5:14). Or, as Ratzinger sums it up, "natural law is identified with the Golden Rule and thereby equated with the kernel of the Gospel."23 This theistic emphasis appears to be confirmed in the final sentence where Christians are called to "join" with the rest of humanity in searching for truth "in fidelity to conscience." Conscience is presented as the experience of the primordial moral awareness of our common humanity.24 Only at the end of Ch. 1 of GS, as a type of climax, does the Council speak of the fullness of humanity revealed and realized in "the mystery of the incarnate Word" and of the paschal mystery at work in an "unseen way" in the hearts of "all men (sic) of good will" (22).

Again, one gains a richer appreciation of GS 16 ("Dignity of Moral Conscience") in the light of the preceding section namely "Dignity of the Mind" where its search for truth, as Ratzinger notes, is influenced by Augustine and his metaphysics of light (later picked up in VS). The Council appeals to the dynamism of desire, in the gentle attraction of wisdom in the quest and love of what is true and good. Humans are drawn beyond scientific knowledge, to a grasp of reality "beyond the visible" and into contact with realities that are "unseen." This finds its fulfilment in the gift of the Holy Spirit in faith that brings an "appreciation of the divine plan." The search for wisdom provides the broader epistemological setting within which conscience exercises its dignity. This anticipates the discussion of participative knowledge later in this paper.

So far, then GS 16, reveals the epistemological character of primordial moral awareness as a form of wisdom under the impulse of desire, of a dialogical relationship with God mediated through conscience, whose intentionality (its trajectory and object) is directed towards the transcendent and is embodied in love. This brings us to VS.

2. Veritatis Splendor

In the section "Conscience and Truth," John Paul II, as expected, sees conscience as practical reason since it concerns what is truly good to be done. Generally, the Pope's language is not couched in terms of syllogism but equivalent phrases indicate its presence in his thought and his dependence on sources from within the theological tradition.

Pope John Paul notes that a moral judgment is made in terms of a criterion, which is the rational conviction (rationalem persuasionem) that one must love and do good and avoid evil. This first principle of practical reason is part of the natural law; indeed it constitutes the very foundation of the natural law, inasmuch as it expresses the primordial insight (lucem illam primum geniam) about good and evil, that reflection (repercussionem) of God's creative wisdom which, like an imperishable spark (scintilla animae), shines in the heart of every man. (VS 59).

---

23 Ratzinger, "Introductory Article and Chapter I," 135.
24 "Conscience is presented as the meeting point and common ground of Christians and non-Christians and consequently as the real hinge on which dialogue turns." Ratzinger, “Introductory Article and Chapter I,” 136.
When this passage is related with VS 54, 58 and other concepts in the encyclical, it is possible to detect three epistemological strands that have influenced its development.

The first strand, in common with GS 16 and our discussion above, is a recovery from Augustine and the Franciscan school where conscience is the centre of a person, the locus of a participatory relationship taking the form of a loving dialogue between God and the human being (the spark or “peak” of the soul). It is more than reason, will or feeling but is “the depth of human existence, the innermost core of the person in his directedness towards God and in his ultimate sustenance by him.”  

However, significant here is John Paul II’s more explicitly developed view of foundational moral awareness as grounded in the experience of horizontal relationships and of embodiment. The dignity of the person is revealed in “the primordial requirement (primigenia necessitas) of loving and respecting the person as an end and never as a mere means” (VS 48). Again, as the values that cluster around self-transcendence are those towards which “the person is naturally inclined,” practical reason (assisted by virtue) can “discover in the body the anticipatory signs, the expression and the promise of the gift of the self, in conformity with the wise plan of the Creator” (48). Participation in relationship is as much an expression of embodiment and responsiveness in interpersonal relationships as it is of the divine-human relationship. But there is more that can be said here.

**Primordial Moral Awareness: Participation as Recognition.**

There is discernible in VS 59 two further strands of participation suggested by Ratzinger in his discussion on conscience. There is not only a Stoic background but especially the Platonic notion of anamnesis (with its biblical overtones) in a moment of recognition of the truest self. This is a key influence on the word synderesis (and its connotations). The Platonic (and biblical) notion of anamnesis is captured in the

![Image](image_url)

This process is an affective awareness of the deepest part of the self. Ratzinger refers to this as the “ontological level of the phenomenon conscience” through which the human person at the level of ones being “resonates with some things and clashes with others” or, for Aquinas, is an “inner repugnance to evil and an attraction to the good.”

**Primordial Moral Awareness as Participative Collaboration**

Again, a third form of participation emerges in relation to VS 59 by probing Ratzinger’s comment about the “Stoic background.” The reference is to the Stoic notion of

---


the microcosm participating in the Logos. An ordered cosmos expresses the wisdom of its creator. Humans, as the microcosmic expression of this macrocosmic order, find their purpose and harmony by accepting and observing the intrinsic laws that inhabit nature through the universal reason (logos). Moral obligation arises from the purpose-directed reason inhabiting nature.

This finds later expression in Aquinas where law is an ordering of reason for the common good. All law participates in the divine law in so far as it is oriented to what is good. The emphasis is not voluntaristic such as in Divine Command theory of ethics. It is rather on reason as intelligibility in which truth is the bearer of value. Natural Law, then, is from God the creator for achieving the good, for realizing the purpose of the created order and thus expresses God’s governance and providence over all things. John Paul II writes of humanity’s call to “share in God’s dominion” and to its responsible exercise “over the world” (VS 38).

This converges with Aquinas for whom humankind is called to share actively in divine providence through the virtue of prudence. This is another way of speaking of the “spark,” the “reflection” of divine “creative wisdom” shining the human heart—the basic orientation to what is true and good. From Ratzinger’s knowing through recognition of the truest self, we have moved to an epistemology of participation leading to collaboration.

Again, John Paul II is tapping into the sapienial tradition. For Aquinas, creation is the work of the divine craftsman, who gives intelligible form to his art in which humankind shares in divine wisdom and is called to be perfected in wisdom (its proper perfection) by participating in the Word of God. A contemporary approach sees divine Wisdom in the scriptures as “the self-communication of God in and through creation” and, for Roland Murphy, as “the divine summons in and through creation, sounding through the vast realm of the created world, and heard on the level of human experience.”

PRIMORDIAL MORAL AWARENESS: PARTICIPATION, AFFECTIVE CONNATURALITY AND AQUINAS

The discussion of VS brings us now to the fourth participative epistemological process that is suggested as mediating primordial moral awareness. This becomes evident when the Pope advances from the “heart” as the locus of primary moral consciousness (“knowledge of God’s law in general”) which is necessary but not sufficient. There is also needed the “heart” converted to the Lord, to love of “what is good and is really the source of true judgments of conscience” (64). Citing Aquinas, this is expressed as a “sort of connaturality between man and the true good” (64) by following “the way” of Jesus and participating in his virtues. Given the significance of this shift in emphasis and the role of Aquinas in its development, a separate section will be devoted to the topic.

---

28 ST 1.2.94.2 where Aquinas says that the human being is sibi ipsis et aliis providens. See also 1.103.6 and 8.
29 ST 3. 23. 3. All law and the different ways God acting in history cares for the world “have their origin and goal in the eternal, wise and loving counsel whereby God predestines men and women ‘to be conformed to the image of his Son.’ [Rom. 8:1 9]” (VS 45)
31 ST: 2.2.45.2.
Aquinas’ approach is built on three dimensions of connatural—"the ontological, the habitual and, bridging the two, the epistemological. For Aquinas, suggests Tallon, living beings are drawn to respond to the surrounding world. It is connaturality that makes our “faculties” operate with spontaneity, responsive to what is akin to them, befitting them. Our eyes do not need to know that light, colour and harmonious form are good for them, but in the presence of the visible they naturally act and experience fulfillment (complacentia). This is ontological connaturality. For sentient and animal creatures, it has an incipiently rational expression in emotions and instinct. Its fuller expression is in humans where the cognitive, affective, volitional operations of rational consciousness respond to their proper objects (being as true and good) because of their “cor-respond-ence with their proper objects.” This is the epistemological form of an experienced befittingness, belongingness, affinity, attunement.

A helpful tool to investigate this further is John Paul II’s use of the term “inclinations” in relation the realization of authentic humanity. Underlying this is an Aristotelian/Thomistic teleology and ontology, specified here as “every agent acts on account of an end and to be an end carries the meaning to be good.” Reason can discern some universal moral goods which, if denied, would defy what it means to be a rational agent. Ward asks whether there are states at which all rational agents would aim. He suggests “it seems plausible to say that pleasure would be chosen over pain, knowledge over ignorance, beauty over ugliness, and freedom over slavery.” Our common humanity brings us a general awareness of acts as right or wrong in so far as they lead to states that are “universally desirable or undesirable.” Ward, with Ratzinger, notes that these moral principles take the compressed form of, for instance, the Golden rule. Again, this is epistemological connaturality. As a task of moral reason, it is directed to the habitual aspect, after specifying content, to bring these inclinations to perfection. This needs further comment.

The reference to Aquinas and to true judgments of conscience having their source in a “sort of connaturality between man and the true good” taps into a rich vein in the tradition, specifically concerning the gift of wisdom. For Aquinas, connaturality, as a virtue, is described as a “taste” for what is truly good and is a kind of “discerning” love. It is variously described as experiential or appreciative knowing and characterized by congeniality or attunement. It is a participative knowledge arising from a felt attraction to, a love for, an appreciation of what is good that is personally appropriated. Significant

---

33 Tallon, Head and Heart, 235.
34 He speaks of “the moral value of certain goods to which the person is naturally inclined” (VS 48). Further, natural inclinations take on moral relevance “only in so far as they refer to the human person and his authentic fulfillment” VS 50.
35 ST 1.2.94.2
36 For Aquinas, the distinguishing “inclinations” for humankind are survival, procreation, life in community, to seek and find the truth and to know God.
38 “Love is said to discern because it moves the reason to discern” ST 2.2.47.1 ad 1. Also ST 2.2.45.2.
39 Aquinas calls connatural knowledge “judgment by inclination” (per modum inclinationis, ST 1.16 ad 3); “affective cognition” (cognitio affectiva, ST 1.64.1; 2.2.162) and “experiential cognition” (cognitio experimentalis, ST 2.2.97.2).
here (and implied in the Pope’s statement above), is that this form of evaluative (or appreciative) knowledge is not confined to “second nature,” namely the activation and habituation of our “first nature” (its inclinations) through virtue. For Aquinas, connaturality, properly speaking, connotes “first nature” whereby a person has a natural affinity between powers and their proper objects. As has been noted, in contrast with habitual connaturality (second nature), there is, to adapt Ratzinger’s phrase used earlier, an “ontological” connaturality appropriate to rationality, namely a receptiveness and aptness for right judgment to be actualized.

How does this receptiveness in the rational human being take the form of an epistemological connaturality? Alternatively, how does Aquinas approach the foundational moral experience, the first principle of practical reason, “the rational conviction that one must love and do good and avoid evil” (VS 59)? Aquinas’ terminology is interesting here. For practical reason, he normally uses the phrase ratio practica. However, Maguire notes that, twice in the treatise De Malo, Aquinas, in the one context, uses the phrase “practical or affective reason.” In other words, it is a form of affective knowing.

For Aquinas, one is not capable of moral virtue without an awareness of primary moral principles. In his treatment of this, while he uses the metaphor of the “heart” as the site of this knowledge, there is no explicit use of the phrase “connatural knowledge” or its equivalents noted above. This foundational awareness is not one of ratio or discursive, reasoned knowing but of intellectus, which is both non-discursive insight “from within” and an initial form of loving knowledge with the immediacy that accompanies contemplation. This takes habitual form (foundational conscience) but its initial expression as primordial moral awareness (or Lewis’ “basic sense of moral value”) is innate and universal and it is from this the virtue emerges. It is traceable to understanding or immediate, intuitive insight (intellectus) that is embedded “within the very structure of human moral cognition (i.e., synderesis or anamnesis).”

Intuitive insight, then, is a form of cognition that involves an immediate grasp of what is true which, in its habitual form (epitomized in the gift of understanding) denotes “a certain excellence of knowledge that penetrates into the heart of things.” Here it is an intuitive appreciation of the truth precisely as a good that is fitting and congenial to being authentically human. It is the epistemological expression of ontological connaturality.

In saying that this knowledge is innate and universal, Aquinas points to the capacity in every human person for this form of awareness, a condition of possibility for human existence. It is another way of speaking of the natural “fittingness” for the good, or connaturality. Aquinas is continually qualifying his position here. On one hand, he holds that this habit of basic moral awareness arises naturally in the mind so spontaneously that

---

40 See ST 1.13.1 ad 3; 1.2.23.1.
42 In ST 1.2.94 especially article 6.
43 De Veritate, q. 16, a. 1, resp.; q.1, a.2.c; ST 2.2.180.4.
44 Billy, “Christ’s Redemptive Journey,” 146. Also, ST 1.2.94.2 ad 2 where Aquinas speaks of insight or understanding as synderesis or “lex intellectus.”
45 ST: 2.2 8.1 ad 3.
no person "can be entirely bereft of it" but it needs to be cultivated so as to develop appropriately. 46

Elsewhere, however, Aquinas denies that the habit of foundational conscience is
given with our nature at birth. 47 The capacity for moral awareness and accountability is
activated through experience. Intuitive insight requires other operations of knowing:
some prior reflection on data from the senses (if only minimal as in "the whole is greater
than the part") so that certain judgments arises naturally, easily, without deliberation. 48 It
needs to be complemented by conceptual analysis, by inductive reasoning and especially
the consolidation by habits without which affective knowing or intuitive insight "would
remain feeble in its penetration and clarity." 49 Thus it is subject to development, to varying
degrees and to limits and qualification. 50 Basic principles may be only partially known,
inadequately appreciated and even distorted or obstructed by culture or upbringing
(factors whose implications are not really developed by Aquinas).

Maritain concurs with Aquinas' view that these basic insights of morality come into
human consciousness through a form of affective or connatural intuition. He advances it
further in terms of the proper way things should be used by using the example of a
strunged instrument and by appealing to a phenomenology of the human subject. Anything
in nature has within it its own "natural law," the "normality of its function," in how it
should act "to achieve fullness of being in its growth and in its behaviour." 51 This
knowledge of natural law (basic moral sense) has increased slowly as the moral
conscience of humanity developed. The knowledge is not "clear" through concepts and
conceptual judgments. Maritain continues

it is obscure, unsystematic, vital knowledge by connaturality or congeniality, in which
the intellect, in order to bear judgment, consults and listens to the inner melody that
the vibrating strings of abiding tendencies make present in the subject. 52

Primordial moral awareness, then, rests on the sense of certain perceived realities
as good, as "in tune with" the deepest self, if only in a groping and non-thematic way. To
capture awareness of a resonance at the level of one's being, perhaps "affective
connaturality" is a better term than "evaluative knowledge." The awareness from
connaturality converges with the notion of anamnesis and ontological conscience
described earlier by Ratzinger. It is openness to the ground of one's being. Snell suggests
that for connaturality, since it is in the realm of affection, we could borrow from Heidegger

46 Gregory M. Reichberg, "The Intellectual Virtues (Ia Iiae, qqs. 57-58)," in The Ethics of Aquinas, ed. Stephen J.
47 ST. 1.2.51.1.
48 Reichberg, "The Intellectual Virtues," 146 note 34 commenting on ST.1.2.51.1.
49 Reichberg, "The Intellectual Virtues," 137.
50 See ST. 1.2. 94.1 ad 3; ST. 1.2. 94.4; ST. 1.2. 94. 6. It is interesting that while Aquinas sees all law as
participating in the Eternal Law, this is muted in Q. 94 on Natural Law. Also, his direct, simple vocabulary
reflects an approach to conscience (and here foundational conscience) more as a natural or secular reality
than, as in Newman, a religious one.
51 Jacques Maritain, "Natural Law in Aquinas," in Charles E. Curran & Richard A. McCormick, SJ, (Eds), Readings
in Moral Theology, No. 7 (Mahwah: NJ, 1991), 114-123, at 115.
52 Ibid., 119. This quote indicates a certain ambiguity in Maritain noted by Tallon. Affective connaturality
seems to be at the service of discursive reason and its judgment rather than being recognized as a mode of
"judgment without concepts" that is valid in its own right. See Tallon, Head and Heart, 222, 226, 229.
and use the equivalent *Befindlichkeit* or *Stimmung* which denotes mood or attunement to Being itself and, in the context of faith, is understood as attunement toward the Divine.\(^{53}\)

Neither Aquinas (nor Maritain), considers that this foundational moral sense is a cluster of innate ideas, a form of Augustinian illuminationism. With Aristotle, all knowledge ultimately comes through the senses. Just as “being” is found only in individual “things” presented by sense experience, the same is true of what is “good” or valuable. The formula “do good and avoid evil” distils in general terms what has its roots in individual instances of what is perceived as “good” or “evil.” One can ask whether this is sufficient to the human person as an embodied and relational being?

**EVALUATIVE KNOWLEDGE AND THE HEART**

From the discussion so far, basic moral awareness is associated with four affective aspects: with the human desire to know, with the epistemological intentionality of what is known (“love and do good and avoid evil”), with the existential intentionality of loving God and neighbour and, most importantly, with an incipient form of “loving knowledge” that is a four-dimensional participation in divine wisdom. Nevertheless, these Church texts must be carefully understood when they refer to the cognition involved in foundational conscience as knowledge the “heart.”

It would appear, *prima facie*, from *GS* 16, that the building blocks of this “foundational” awareness (conscience) are affective (law written by God in the heart). In VS, this is confirmed when Pope John Paul II writes that the “relationship of man’s freedom and God’s law” is not only grounded in the “heart” but “is most deeply lived out in the “heart” of the person, in his moral conscience.”\(^{54}\)

We must beware of interpreting the use of “heart” as indicating a contemporary understanding of the word, namely as the centre of a person’s affective life. In *GS* 16 (as cited above) the reference to a law written in the human heart by God “by which he shall be judged” carries as a note Rom 2:15-16. In *GS* 14 where it says “God, who probes the heart,” there is a footnote reference to I Kgs 16:6 and Jer 17:10. Two points can be made concerning “law” and the “heart.”

Firstly, as noted earlier, Ratzinger argues that *anamnesis* (rather than *synderesis* with its Stoic resonances) captures precisely the meaning of Rom 2:14f. \(^{55}\) Paul here speaks of Gentiles who do not have the Law (from a revealed source) yet do by nature or reason (instinctively observe) what the Law prescribes. They have *physis* (nature or “the regular material order or of things”\(^{56}\)) as a guide for their conduct, one that is beyond the relative and psychological and is absolute and objective.\(^{57}\) Ratzinger sees it as a moment of

---


\(^{54}\) *Veritatis Splendor*, 54.


\(^{57}\) Ibid., 837.
recognition, of disclosure where “[Someone] sees: that’s it! That is what my nature points to and seeks.”

Secondly, to see this type of primordial or foundational awareness as affective in character (in the modern sense of the term) because of the use the “heart” language in GS 14 and 16 and VS 54 would distort the meaning of the texts. It does have affective connotations insofar as it is appreciative and also because of its association with other aspects of the person. The usage here approximates the “heart” as a symbol of the whole person found in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures in that it connotes the “inside” of a person and “embraces feelings, memories, ideas, plans, decisions.” In the inclusive and concrete anthropology of the Bible, the heart is the principle of morality, the centre of one’s freedom, of decisive choices and the place where one enters to be in dialogue with oneself and where one opens oneself or closes oneself to God.

Overall, these Church texts with the repeated link between “moral conscience” and the metaphor of the heart, do suggest a mode of knowing of good and evil that is intuitive and evaluative, arising from insight in the immediacy of self-awareness and within a relationship. However, without some critical assessment, there is a risk of falling into Ratzinger’s “epistemological optimism” noted below. This is the next task.

ASSESSMENT AND REFLECTIONS

In his commentary on GS 16, Ratzinger makes the point that in this conciliar text “[C]onscience is made the principle of objectivity, in the conviction that careful attention to its claim discloses the fundamental common values of human existence.” He notes the “epistemological optimism” underlying this view, even though qualified in that conscience can be dulled and practically blinded by “negligence in the search for the values of truth and goodness and the habit of sin.”

While a guarded optimism characterizes Christian anthropology within the Catholic tradition, in reality, moral awareness is subject to obscurity, distortions and fragmentation. Aquinas is conscious of this in a general way. VS appears more critical of contemporary culture and currents of thought compared with GS. Generally, we cannot ignore the impact of prejudice, bias, evil, destructive tendencies in the human heart and behaviour (whether personal, communal or structural) and how these can be transmitted across generations. Conscience, particularly as evaluative and personally involved knowledge, is inherently linked with emotions and personal affectivity. Hence, it is particularly susceptible to conditions and variables (cultural, anthropological and social)

58 Note 26. Fitzmyer shares Ratzinger’s hesitations about foundational conscience viewed as synedrisis when he remarks about Paul “[A]nd so it is difficult to be certain about his view of the “natural law,” an idea more at home in Gk. Philosophy. Perhaps the most that should be admitted is that the idea should be regarded as the sensus plenior of Paul’s teaching (in view of the patristic tradition about it).” In Joseph A. Fitzmyer, “Pauline Theology,” in Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, & Roland E. Murphy, eds., The New Jerome Biblical Commentary (Geoffrey Chapman, 1990), 1382-1416, at 1414.
60 Ibid, 228.
61 Ratzinger, “Introductory Article and Chapter I,” 135.
62 Ratzinger, “Introductory Article and Chapter I,” 135.
that influence the unconscious, deeper biases and motivations.\textsuperscript{63} Nor can we overlook psychological factors such as low self-esteem and deficit of affect (e.g., defective empathetic response) whereby perceptions and appreciations of what is truly good or evil can be distorted, even nullified. The limit case of this is the sociopath.

Our considerations remind us that the shared content of primordial moral consciousness is basic and minimal. Further, any philosophical framework used to undergird it or cultural settings in which it is experienced need to be addressed critically against the benchmark of “authentic” and integral personhood. Selling reminds us of those, within and outside the Church who, from a sense of our shared humanity, seek other routes for establishing the basic criteria of right and wrong. For instance, there are efforts to ground a natural law ethic on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights or, as with Robert Gascoigne, to use such a resource to investigate an “ontology of the human.”\textsuperscript{64}

Ultimately, primordial moral awareness is never found in a pure state. We may get occasional glimpses of it, for instance, when there is a spontaneous sense of public outrage at an action that is abhorrent and degrading even though, at times, it may be difficult to explain or justify our instinctive response. Or it may be revealed in the courage and dignity with which an individual confronts evil and suffering that prompts a moment of self-transcendence—for the person and for the observer. We admire and are inspired. This is a shared experience of moral beauty that points to our common bonds in responding to those in whom authentic humanity is revealed at its very best.

**CONCLUSION**

Our investigation has shown that, in GS and VS, primordial conscience is understood as affective knowing or an appreciative grasp of basic moral values. In this task, the theme of “participation” has been a helpful hermeneutical lens and investigative tool and Aquinas a valuable resource. These documents reflect the general confidence within the Catholic theological and magisterial tradition of a basic unity in humankind’s moral consciousness underpinning the capacity for moral judgment. Nevertheless, we must not forget the controlling metaphor of *Veritatis Splendor*, namely the call of the young man to respond in love to a personal call from Jesus. Basic moral awareness is fully realized in following “The Way” by an increasing participation in the virtues of Jesus.

Some limits and difficulties have been noted. In reality, we see mirrored in these texts the “typology of positions” of Vatican II and its subsequent reception—the Augustinian and Thomist—that did arrive at a “common agreed vision of the Church.”\textsuperscript{65} However, one wonders how successful is the effort to integrate, within the theme of participation, a metaphysical conception (from Stoic, Neo-Platonic, Thomistic sources)

\textsuperscript{63} Selling reminds us that insights of contemporary psychology and sociology give us a better appreciation that, for many people, “natural inclinations” are “nothing more than learned reflexes supported by a social-political-economic structure that has little to do with nature and a great deal to do with cultural history.” He offers examples such as accumulating possessions beyond ones needs; to destroy or at least neutralizes enemies; allow market forces to control our lives; seeing some racial groups as superior to others. See Joseph A Selling, “Context and Arguments,” in Selling & Jans (eds), *The Splendor of Accuracy*, 68.


with one more personal, interior and historically conscious (from Augustine and Newman). While the intentionality of the epistemological process is clearly relational, its personal expression, particularly in GS, is couched mainly in terms of the individual person and God or of the self’s interiority.

Again, are universal and abstract statements (e.g., “do good and avoid evil,” “respect life,” “seek truth”) the immediate object of the primordial moral sense? Or are they induced from more concrete life-experiences? True, conscience and the divine call to moral responsibility are deeply personal. However, they can also be mediated in the pattern of interactive responsiveness that constitutes human life at the familial, social, environmental and cultural levels—an approach, centred on the worth of the person, anticipated in VS by John Paul II. This points to a future task, namely, the need to explore further how primordial moral awareness is anchored in, and shaped by, the experience of embodiment and participation in horizontal forms of relationality.

---

**Author:** Tom Ryan is a Marist priest who lives in Brisbane. He is an Honorary Fellow of the Australian Catholic University. He is also involved with University of Notre Dame, Australia and Good Shepherd Theological College, Auckland, New Zealand.

**Email:** tryansom@bigpond.net.au

---

66 The use of “participation” in this investigation appears, generally speaking, to be congruent with Rush’s concern to incorporate the best of these two “positions” through a theological anthropology that rests on God’s loving self-communication in Christ. A participation in the life of the Trinity entails an active and creative share in the work of divine providence through the guidance of the Spirit so that we “understand, interpret and apply the Gospel anew in a thousand new situations.” See Still Interpreting Vatican II, 77.