

Natural Law, the Understanding of Principles, and Universal Good

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A LA recherche d'une éthique universelle is a rich and profound reflection on the doctrine of natural law.¹ As one would expect from a group of professional theologians, it is a very scholarly document. But its motive is quite practical. The aim is to find a “common ethical language,” a moral discourse that can express universally recognized goals and principles, so as to foster worldwide collaboration in the causes of peace, justice, and human flourishing.

The title speaks of a *recherche*—a search, an investigation. Fortunately, however, the document is not a detective story, in which everything is supposed to become clear at the end. I say this because its Conclusion, especially in the first paragraph, is really rather misleading.

... We call natural law the foundation of a universal ethic that we seek to gather from the observation of and reflection on our common human condition. It is the moral law inscribed in the heart of men and of which humanity becomes more and more aware as it advances in history. *This law has nothing static in its expression. It does not consist in a list of definitive and immutable precepts.* It is an ever-flowing source of inspiration in the search for an objective foundation of a universal ethic. (*A la recherche*, §113; my emphasis)

¹ International Theological Commission, *A la recherche d'une éthique universelle: nouveau regard sur la loi naturelle* (2009); hereafter *A la recherche*. For the English I have used Joseph Bolin's translation, with some changes (<http://www.path-soflove.com/universal-ethics-natural-law.html>). Translations of St. Thomas herein are mine. I thank Kevin Flannery, S.J., Steven Jensen, and Christopher Malloy for very helpful remarks on the paper.

The italicized sentences cannot, I think, be squared with the rest of the document. It is quite explicit about the fact that natural law consists in a set of definitive, immutable precepts.² Granted, the set is not closed.³ Being very general, the precepts are apt to be supplemented by more particular norms and judgments. But they cannot be abrogated, and the primary ones admit of no exceptions. In this sense, natural law certainly is “static.” It stands still.

Nevertheless it is also “dynamic,” in the sense that it is “powerful,” an origin or principle of action and change. Change and action always depend on relatively unchanging things. To walk on a treadmill is to go nowhere. Natural law functions as a principle of action and change by directing us toward the end that constitutes the fulfillment of our nature; that is, *our* fulfillment, the end we are “cut out for” by the very fact of being human. This does not change, because human nature, in the sense of what is strictly essential to being human, does not change.⁴ Whatever §113 means, the document as a whole is very clear about all this.

It is true of course that natural law is “inscribed in the heart of men.” Also true is that it is not written there as a “list,” as though one could simply look inside oneself and read off its precepts. Their typical way of coming to mind is in the course of thinking about matters they concern—now one, now another—and with a view to the conditions of their fulfillment in this or that situation. That is, the normal way of considering them is a practical way. To pull them out from particular practical issues and treat them together, as a sort of list, would pertain to the theoretical reflection proper to the philosopher or the theologian.

But if natural law is not written in the heart of men as an abstract list, exactly how is it written there? The document gives prominence to this question, dedicating to it the whole of Chapter 2, under the heading “The perception of common moral values.” The question is fundamental, because it is bound up with the very idea of a “natural” law. This means a law that human nature itself brings us to know, through a kind of spontaneous development of our minds—as opposed to what we may know through special training or investigation or study. This is why the knowledge of it would be so universal or common. As natural, it is apt to be known by everyone, whether wise or simple, erudite or unlettered, virtuous or even vicious.

Near the beginning of Chapter 2 special importance is assigned to Thomas Aquinas’s teaching on natural law (§37). The chapter draws

² See, for example, §9, §52.

³ See §11, §27, §59.

⁴ See §64.

extensively upon him. In this essay what I mainly want to consider is Thomas's understanding of that precept of natural law which he holds to be the very first to enter the human mind: "the good is to be done and pursued, and the bad is to be avoided."⁵ Chapter 2 does discuss this precept briefly (2.2, §39–43), and I think that what it says about it agrees well with Thomas. But it seems to me that the first precept deserves a good deal more attention, both with respect to its own content and with respect to its relation to the other primary precepts of natural law.⁶ Regarding these others, which I shall call the "lower" precepts, the chapter's rather lengthy treatment of them does seem to have Thomas's teaching in view. But it begins with a passage that I find not to sit easily with his teaching, and I think that this can be traced, at least in part, to a failure to consider exactly how these precepts are related to the first precept. I shall begin with this passage and work back to the first precept. My overall aim is to underscore the genuinely intellectual character of the common knowledge of natural law and the highly universal scope of its dominant concept, that of the good.

I. Natural Law, Concepts, and Knowledge of Human Nature

The document's discussion of the "lower" precepts of natural law begins as follows:

Once we posit the basic affirmation that introduces us to the moral order—"One must do the good and avoid the bad"—we see how there arises in the subject the recognition of the fundamental laws that should govern human action. Such recognition does not consist in an abstract consideration of human nature, nor in the effort of conceptualization that would be proper to philosophical and theological theorization. The perception of the fundamental moral goods is immediate, vital, based on the mind's connaturality with values and engaging affectivity as well as intellect, the heart as well as the mind. It is an often imperfect grasp, still obscure and dim, but which has the depth of immediacy. It is a matter of the simplest and most common givens of experience that are implicit in the concrete action of persons. (§44)

This passage seems to reflect the position on the common knowledge of natural law proposed half a century ago by Jacques Maritain. The document does not cite Maritain, and indeed I think that in part the resemblance is only apparent. But it may still be a source of confusion.

⁵ *Summa theologiae* (hereafter *ST*), I–II, q. 94, a. 2 (hereafter 94.2).

⁶ Thomas calls "primary" those general precepts that are naturally understood by all. He also posits "secondary" natural law precepts, which are more specific and like conclusions from the primary; see *ST* I–II, q. 94, aa. 4–6.

Maritain develops his view with reference to 94.2. On his reading, the way in which the lower precepts of natural law are naturally and commonly known must be what Thomas elsewhere calls knowledge “by connaturality” or “through inclination.” According to 94.2, all of these precepts regard goods that are objects of natural human inclinations. According to Maritain, reason’s natural apprehension of these goods as good would be a very direct effect of the inclinations. It is not that reason consciously reflects on the inclinations and then goes on to judge their objects good. Nor does reason start from a consideration of the various dimensions of human nature to which the inclinations correspond. Rather, the very presence of the inclinations casts a kind of light upon the things that are their objects, and reason spontaneously judges the things in this light, seeing them as desirable—as good. Maritain holds that such judgments involve no rational formulation or conceptualization. The common apprehension of the precepts of natural law would be, in his metaphorical language, an apprehension “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 to the subject.”⁷

Section 44 of *A la recherche* does seem to propose a similar view. It speaks of the perception of the fundamental moral goods as based on the “the mind’s connaturality with values.” It also denies that this consists in an “abstract consideration of human nature” or in the “effort of conceptualization” that is proper to philosophical and theological theorizing.

Now, I do not think that *A la recherche* really means to present the common knowledge of natural law as an entirely non-conceptual affair, or even as involving no concept of human nature. Other places in the document show this clearly enough. In the rest of this section I shall look at some of these, and I shall also consider Thomas’s view on these points. In the next section I shall consider whether the knowledge consists in judgment by connaturality.

One very strong indication that the document views the common knowledge of natural law as somehow conceptual is its repeatedly speaking of this knowledge as a matter of “formulation”—the formulation of precepts.⁸ It is very difficult to imagine how the mind could formulate precepts without employing concepts. The document also indicates that the concepts involved in this knowledge are universal, and so in some sense

⁷ Jacques Maritain, *Man and the State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 92. See also his “On Knowledge through Connaturality,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 4 (June 1951): 473–81 (esp. 477–80); and “Du savoir moral,” *Revue Thomiste* 82 (1982): 533–49.

⁸ See the very next section (§45); also §11, §52.

abstract. It describes the precepts themselves as very “general” (§46, §47). Moreover, if it denies that the common knowledge of natural law involves “theoretical conceptualization,” it also denies this of the expressions of moral wisdom that have been passed down in the various cultural traditions (§12). And yet it is obvious that the document’s examples of such expressions involve universal concepts (§12–17). One of them even refers directly to man’s “essence”; that is, to human nature (§13). So the exclusion of theoretical conceptualization from the common knowledge of the precepts need not be taken as an exclusion of universal concepts altogether.

There can be no doubt that for Thomas the common knowledge of natural law involves universal concepts. Natural law, as naturally known, is a law in the proper sense of the term (*ST I–II*, q. 91, a. 2, ad 3). Law consists of precepts, which he describes as “universal propositions of practical reason ordered to actions.”⁹ A proposition is a combination of the concepts of the subject and the predicate. Thomas also characterizes the knowledge of the precepts of natural law as knowledge of truths (*ST I–II*, q. 93, a. 2, corp. & ad 3). The act by which the mind apprehends truth is judgment, or what he calls “composition and division.” This, he says, results from comparing some thing (the subject) with some concept (the predicate) that is proposed about it (*ST I*, q. 16, a. 2; *I*, q. 85, a. 2, ad 3). And he says quite generally that whatever the mind understands, it forms a concept of (*ST I*, q. 27, a. 1). To say that the knowledge of natural law involves concepts is simply to say that it is genuinely rational or intellectual knowledge.

Does it involve a concept of human nature? §44 of *A la recherche* says that the common knowledge of natural law is not the result of an “abstract consideration of human nature.” Whatever this means, I do not think it can be that the common knowledge of natural law includes no understanding or no concept of human nature at all. The document certainly presents human nature as something “to be fulfilled,” and natural law as directing toward this fulfillment.¹⁰ And it speaks of the common knowledge of natural law in these same terms, as knowledge of what is in conformity with human nature, as such.¹¹

That for Thomas the common knowledge of natural law involves knowledge of human nature is implicit in the very way in which he introduces the “lower” precepts of natural law in 94.2: “all those things to be done or avoided that practical reason naturally apprehends to be HUMAN goods pertain to the precepts of the law of nature.” Apprehending something to be human means apprehending it to be connected with

⁹ *ST I–II*, q. 90, a. 1, ad 2; on natural law in relation to this, see *I*, q. 94, a. 1.

¹⁰ See §36, §40.

¹¹ See the immediately preceding section (§43); also §9, together with §64.

man; that is, with what has human nature. Any intellectual apprehension of man involves some grasp of man's nature. The intellect's very object, the feature according to which anything is intelligible, is "what the thing is," the nature of the thing understood.¹² It may be grasped more or less perfectly. But to have no understanding of a thing's nature is to have no understanding of the thing at all.

In order to understand the goods that Thomas connects with the lower precepts in 94.2, clearly one must know the corresponding dimensions of human nature.¹³ We could not understand that it is good for man to preserve his being according to his kind if we had no grasp of what it is to be a subject of being of some kind (though it may take a philosopher to assign an expression to this, such as "*hoc aliquid*" or "substance"). We could not understand the good of the generative act or of nurturing offspring if we had no concept of animal. If we had no concept of reason, we could not understand the good of knowing the truth about God, or that of life in society (fundamental for which is *speech*); and we certainly could not know the good of acting according to reason, which is also the basis of a primary precept (94.3). In fact, as we shall see, some grasp of reason and of its practical operation is involved in the sheer grasp of the good, which is the basis of the very first precept of natural law.¹⁴

When §44 of *A la recherche* excludes the "abstract consideration of human nature" from the common knowledge of natural law, I think that this is just another way of saying that the knowledge does not depend on "theoretical conceptualization" about human nature. It is not the result of what Thomas calls the "speculative mode" of considering a thing. This mode consists in "defining and dividing and considering its universal predicates," or in other words, "resolving into universal formal principles"

¹² See, e.g., *ST* I, q. 17, a. 3, ad 1; I, q. 85, a. 6.

¹³ In 94.2 Thomas says that to one who is ignorant of what man is, the proposition "man is rational" is not *per se nota*. However, he does not say that this proposition is not *per se nota omnibus* or that the concepts involved in it are not "known to all." They could be, even if some people do not know them. For in this context, "known to all" does not mean known by absolutely everyone. If it did, then there would be nothing of this sort, since our minds begin as *tabulae rasae*. It means something that everyone is naturally apt to know, requiring no special training or study or reasoning. See section III below.

¹⁴ See below, at n. 38. It has been argued that the common knowledge of natural law cannot rest on knowledge of human nature, because (a) human nature includes practical reason, (b) knowing something requires seeing it operate, and (c) if one's practical reason is operating, one already knows natural law, since it consists of practical reason's first principles. But if some grasp of practical reason's operation is involved in the very grasp of the good, then all the knowledge of the principles themselves actually presupposes it.

(*ST I*, q. 14, a. 16). Thomas contrasts this with the “practical” mode, which consists in the “application of form to matter.”¹⁵ It is clear that both of these modes presuppose some knowledge of the thing. The speculative mode takes the thing known and analyzes it into its formal principles; the practical mode applies the thing’s form to matter. Both modes, in fact, presuppose knowledge of the thing’s form, “what it is.” And in a way, even the practical mode starts from “abstract” knowledge of the thing, in the sense of universal knowledge. For it proceeds *toward* the concrete, applying the form to matter.

What the practical mode does not presuppose is an analysis of the thing into its “formal principles.” These would be the parts of its definition. The practical mode requires only a “confused” conception of the thing. Even the confused conception, however, involves some grasp of the parts of the definition. These are just what the “confusion,” the blend, is a blend of. They must be known first, because they are simpler and more universal than the thing defined. The more universal is known prior to the less universal (*ST I*, q. 85, a. 3). First the parts of the definition are known, in themselves; then the thing itself is known, confusedly; and finally the parts of the definition are *distinguished*, seen as parts of the definition.

The defining terms, considered absolutely, are known before the thing defined; otherwise the thing defined would not be made known by them. But insofar as they are parts of the definition, they are known afterwards; for we know man by a certain confused cognition before we know how to distinguish all the things that belong to the concept of man. (*ST I*, q. 85, a. 3, ad 3)

It is the last step that is proper to the speculative mode: formulating the definition, resolving into an orderly “list” the defining parts of what has already been grasped confusedly as an intelligible whole. We may say that knowing natural law does not require a *scientific* grasp of man. But it does require an “abstract” grasp, in the sense of a universal one, and one that does somehow contain the parts of man’s definition, the various dimensions of his nature.

It might be objected that human nature is a purely speculative matter. It is not something devised or constructed by human reason, as practical things are. The knowledge of natural law is practical knowledge. So even if the confused grasp of human nature does not depend on the speculative

¹⁵ *ST I*, q. 14, a. 6. Evidently “matter” here is to be taken very broadly, for whatever the particular subject is to which the form is applied. The thought is that whereas a form considered by itself or absolutely is something common or universal, actions and their effects are in singulars; see *ST II–II*, q. 47, a. 3.

mode of considering the nature, how can that grasp pertain to the knowledge of natural law?

Clearly Thomas's distinction between speculative and practical *modes* does not strictly line up with the distinction between speculative and practical *matters*. Both modes can apply to the same thing, for instance *house* (*ST I*, q. 14, a. 16). Of course *house* is a practical matter. But he also indicates that things that one cannot effect can enter into one's practical consideration, insofar as they have a bearing on what one can effect.¹⁶ Our reason does not produce its effects out of nothing. In its practical work it "uses" natural things. (To use a thing is "to apply it to some operation": *ST I–II*, q. 16, a. 4.) It even uses human nature.

Just as a man exists by nature, so do all of his *per se* attributes, such as being capable of laughter and capable of mental discipline. If then some cause does not make a man absolutely, but rather makes a man such, it will not belong to that cause to constitute the things that are a man's *per se* attributes, but only to use them. Thus the statesman makes a man civil; but he does not make him capable of mental discipline, but rather uses this property of a man so that he become civil.¹⁷

II. Natural Inclination, Synderesis, and Knowing the Goods As Good

So it seems clear that *A la recherche* is not adopting Maritain's view that the common knowledge of the precepts of natural law does not involve a conception of human nature or any other conceptual knowledge. This however does not rule out the possibility that it is treating the common understanding as a case of judgment "by connaturality." Nor does what we have seen so far about Thomas rule it out of his view. For *pace* Maritain, Thomas never says that judgment by connaturality is a non-conceptual mode of knowing. What he says is that it does not involve a "perfect use of reason" (*ST II–II*, q. 45, a. 2). By this he seems to mean that it does not require scientific consideration of the matter being judged. And it seems clear that for him the common knowledge of natural law does not require scientific consideration.

¹⁶ See *ST I*, q. 14, a. 16, end of the corpus, on God's practical consideration of evils; also *ST I–II*, q. 14, a. 6.

¹⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *In XII libros Metaphysicorum expositio*, ed. M. R. Cathala and R. M. Spiazzi (Marietti: Turin, 1950), Lib. VI, lect. 3, §1219. In a way, *A la recherche* is aiming at this very thing, the application of people's natural aptitude for mental discipline to a "civilizing" process—one that would be worldwide. Part of this aptitude is a natural understanding of principles, and part of this is the common knowledge of natural law.

On this question I find it difficult to determine the document's position. The mere use of the word 'connaturality' in §44 does not decide the question. As we shall see, at least in Thomas the word does not always refer to judgment by inclination. Some passages in *A la recherche* do suggest that it is treating the knowledge of natural law as a case of judgment by connaturality. For example, the paragraph immediately after §44 echoes Maritain's metaphor of listening to the inner melody of abiding tendencies.

In his search for the moral good, the human person sets himself to listening to what he is and becomes aware of the fundamental inclinations of his nature, which are quite different from simple blind impulses of desire. Perceiving that the goods to which he tends by nature are necessary for his moral fulfillment, he formulates to himself, under the form of practical injunctions, the moral duty of carrying them out in his own life. He expresses to himself a certain number of very general precepts that he shares with all human beings and that constitute the content of that which we call natural law. (§45)¹⁸

Here some role is certainly being assigned to the natural inclinations. However, it also says that these inclinations are not at all "mere blind impulses of desire." This suggests that perhaps the inclinations are to be seen as rooted in the understanding of the goodness of the things that are their objects. That understanding would not itself depend on the inclinations.

This, I believe, is definitely Thomas's view. Elsewhere I have called attention to the fact that not only Maritain, but also several other recent interpreters of 94.2, simply assume that the natural inclinations to which the precepts of natural law correspond are pre-rational. That is, they would exist independently of, and prior to, the intellect's apprehension of their objects as good, and that apprehension would somehow depend upon them.¹⁹ I have argued that 94.2 does not justify this assumption, and that it is quite incompatible with many other things that Thomas says about natural law. The natural inclinations that Thomas has in mind in 94.2 are inclinations of the will—the rational appetite. The will's movement always follows some rational apprehension of its object as good. Even the inclinations cited in 94.2 that are toward goods which are according to natures that man shares with irrational creatures should be seen as inclinations of the will. For this community in the objects of

¹⁸ Other passages suggesting that it is knowledge by connaturality are §46, §52, and perhaps most strongly, §63.

¹⁹ See my "Natural Inclination and the Intelligibility of the Good in Thomistic Natural Law," *Vera Lex* 6.1–2 (Winter 2005): 57–78 (hereafter "Natural Inclination . . .").

inclination does not exclude diversity in its modes.²⁰ Man's inclination toward these goods is in the rational or intellectual mode. Consider, for example, what Thomas says earlier in the *Summa* about the inclination common to all substances toward their conservation in being:

[E]ach thing naturally desires to be *in its own way*. Now in things that have cognition, desire follows apprehension. But the senses do not apprehend being except under the aspect of here and now, whereas intellect apprehends being absolutely and according to all time. Hence every possessor of intellect naturally desires to be forever. (*ST* I, q. 75, a. 6; my emphasis)

I will not repeat here all of my earlier arguments for this way of reading 94.2. But one that I did not previously take up can be drawn from the very mode of knowing that Thomas associates with the precepts of natural law. This is the mode characteristic of the type of intellectual virtue that he calls *intellectus principiorum*, the understanding of principles.

Following Aristotle, Thomas distinguishes five groups of virtues by which the intellect attains truth in a sure and stable way (*ST* I–II, q. 57). Two of these are practical. They regard the truth about things that are in our power to bring about, which are always particular and contingent things. Art regards products, and prudence regards actions. The other three groups regard the truth about universal and necessary matters. Such matters are not in our power, and the virtues in these groups are called speculative virtues. This is so even though two of them, *scientia* and *intellectus principiorum*, include virtues that regard the practical domain: *scientia* includes moral science, and *intellectus principiorum* includes *synderesis*, which is the habit of the precepts of natural law. For even practical matters have necessary features that can be considered in a universal way and that are not, as such, in our power.

Moreover, unlike prudence, neither moral science nor *synderesis* presupposes right appetite. The truth of prudence, like all truth, consists in conformity with the matter being judged, the “*res*” (*ST* I–II, q. 64, a. 3). But in addition to this, the truth of prudence also entails conformity with right appetite. This is because the *res* of prudence is a particular action, judged as to its choiceworthiness. An action's choiceworthiness is judged in light of the end, and right appetite is needed for the right apprehension of the “particular end,” the end as existing under the conditions of the concrete situation (*ST* I–II, q. 57, a. 5, corp. & ad 3). But

²⁰ See *ST* I, q. 60, a. 1, together with aa. 3–5. Of course I do not mean to deny that our pre-rational inclinations have “moral significance” (see *A la recherche*, §79–80).

synderesis does not presuppose right appetite, because it apprehends the end universally. This apprehension is the very source of the appetite's *first* rectitude, which is the rectitude of the will's natural inclination.²¹ The truth of *synderesis*, like that which regards speculative matters, is simply its conformity with its *res*.

So although the truths pertaining to *synderesis* regard the practical domain, its way of knowing them is the same as that of any other *intellectus principiorum*. This way, Thomas says, is by a kind of "immediate perception."²² Its immediacy consists in the fact that truths fall under it insofar as they are apt to be considered as *per se notae*, known by dint of themselves. Thomas makes no distinction between what *per se nota* means in the case of truth about speculative things and what it means in the case of truth about practical things.

One of his fullest accounts of its meaning is found precisely in 94.2. As usual, the account is in terms of propositions and their components. A proposition is *per se nota* insofar as its predicate belongs to its subject's very *ratio* or concept. Insofar as this is so, the perception of the proposition's truth follows immediately upon its formation. Now, this does not mean that the truth of such a proposition is perceived by everyone. For perhaps not everyone grasps the concepts involved. Some concepts are grasped only by "the wise," those whose minds have received special cultivation. But many concepts are acquired spontaneously, through ordinary experience, without any special instruction or study. The truths that rest on these concepts are known "naturally" and "to all." The knowledge of them is not innate, but the sufficient aptitude for knowing them is. Even the most uncultivated people are apt to know them, and if their faculties are not stunted, they will know them. The precepts of natural law are known in this way, through the natural habit of *synderesis*.

In calling this mode of knowing truth a "perception," as it were a sort of seeing, Thomas is not making it something entirely passive. For the light by which the mind sees these truths is primarily the mind's own. It is the light of the "agent intellect," which is the soul's power to abstract the intelligible forms of things from the matter represented in their sensible images. The abstracted forms themselves also "illuminate"; it is through them that the mind discerns the truth about the things that they are the forms of.²³ But it is only by the agent intellect's abstracting the forms from matter that the illuminating power of the forms is actualized. And

²¹ See *ST* I-II, q. 62, a. 3, quoted below, at n. 25.

²² *ST* I-II, q. 57, a. 2. Notice that §44 of *A la recherche* also speaks in terms of "perception" and "immediacy."

²³ See *ST* I, q. 84, a. 5, together with I-II, q. 3, a. 6.

so Thomas says, “From the very nature of the intellectual soul, it belongs to man that, having grasped what a whole is and what a part is, he immediately grasps that every whole is greater than its part; and likewise with the others.”²⁴ He is saying that all the truths pertaining to the natural *intellectus principiorum* are known in this way.

Thomas insists that the agent intellect is a power of the human soul. In the article of the *Summa* in which he argues for this, he cites the fourth Psalm: “The light of Thy countenance, O Lord, is signed upon us” (*ST I*, q. 79, a. 4). It is worth recalling that later, in the place where he argues for the existence of natural law, Thomas cites this same Psalm, this time glossing it:

[T]he Psalmist, after saying, “Offer up the sacrifice of justice,” adds, “Many say, Who showeth us good things?,” as though someone had asked what the works of justice are; in answer to which question he says, “The light of Thy countenance, O Lord, is signed upon us”; as though to say that the light of natural reason, whereby we discern what is good and what is bad, which pertains to natural law, is nothing else than an imprint on us of the divine light. (*ST I-II*, q. 91, a. 2)

Thomas does say that the practical principles are in a way “more” connatural to man than the speculative ones (*ST II-II*, q. 47, a. 15). But he is not there talking about “judgment by connaturality.” He is talking about the fact that the practical life is more common, more typically human, than the speculative. Both sets of principles are known in the same way: by the natural light of the agent intellect, which brings out the intelligibilities of sensible things and displays their truth.

Now, *A la recherche* does allude to the mode of knowing that characterizes *intellectus principiorum*, at the beginning of its discussion of the very first precept of natural law.

Every human being who reaches conscience and responsibility experiences an interior call to do good. He discovers that he is fundamentally a moral being, capable of perceiving and expressing the call that, as we saw, is found within all cultures: “One must do the good and avoid the bad.” On this precept are based all the other precepts of natural law. This first precept is known naturally, immediately, by practical reason, just as the principle of non-contradiction (the intellect cannot simultaneously and in the same respect affirm and deny the same thing of a subject), which is at the basis of all speculative reasoning, is grasped intuitively,

²⁴ *ST I-II*, q. 51, a. 1. The “others” are the other truths pertaining to the *intellectus principiorum*, whether speculative or practical. In this article he refers to the latter as “principles of common justice.”

naturally, by theoretical reason, as soon as the subject grasps the meaning of the terms used. Traditionally this knowledge of the first principle of the moral life is attributed to an innate intellectual disposition called *synderesis*. (§39)

I have quoted the passage in full because I shall want to return to it later. But for the moment what is of interest is the fourth sentence, where the first precept of natural law is likened to the principle of non-contradiction, just as it is in 94.2. Both are understood naturally and immediately, being *per se notae* truths resting on concepts that we naturally acquire.

What is not so clear in *A la recherche*, however, is that according to 94.2, *all* the primary precepts of natural law are understood in this way. They are all “naturally known.” The first precept, which rests on the concept of the good, says that the good is to be done and sought, and the bad avoided. The other precepts rest on concepts of certain particular good things. As goods, these things share in the truth of the first precept. They are things to be done or sought, and their contraries are bad and to be avoided. And the precepts regarding these things are naturally known and pertain to natural law, because our mind naturally understands them and their goodness. “All those things to be done or avoided that practical reason naturally apprehends to be human goods pertain to the precepts of the law of nature” (94.2).

After making this assertion, Thomas goes on to lay out the order in which these goods and the precepts regarding them fall into the human intellect. It is here that he associates the goods with man’s natural inclinations: “all the things to which man is naturally inclined, reason naturally apprehends as good.” However, he does not actually say that the natural inclinations to these things are the source of the apprehension of their goodness. In 94.2 he does not really say anything about the apprehension’s source, except that it is “natural.” But after all, 94.2 is not a stand-alone treatise. In 91.2 he had been very clear that the source is the natural light of reason. Through this, the rational creature—unlike others—shares in the eternal *ratio*, “*by which* he is naturally inclined to his due act and end.” The only inclination that 91.2 connects with natural law is that of the will, its desire of the last end (ad 2).

But perhaps even clearer than 91.2 is an earlier passage in the *Prima secundae*. The topic is the theological virtues, which order us to a supernatural end. Thomas draws a comparison with our order toward our “connatural” end, which is through a certain “natural inclination.”

But this [inclination] comes about in function of two factors. First, in function of reason or intellect, insofar as it [intellect] contains first

universal principles known to us by the natural light of the intellect, from which reason proceeds both in speculable and in practical matters. Second, through the rectitude of the will naturally tending toward the good of reason.²⁵

Here it is very definitely the understanding of principles that is the source of the inclination to the end, not the other way round. The end itself is “connatural,” but the understanding is not at all “judgment by connaturality.” It is an understanding of *per se notae* truths, wherein the predicate pertains to the very concept of the subject. Practical reason’s natural apprehension of certain things as human goods does not depend on the voice of inclination persuading it to combine subject and predicate. Once rendered intelligible by the mind’s light, subject and predicate combine themselves. We can really *see* that these things are human goods.²⁶

Or at least, there can be little doubt that this is Thomas’s view. In the next two sections I shall raise and try to resolve two issues about it. In the course of this it should become clear why I say that *A la recherche* could have given more attention to the very first precept.

III. The Good Is What All Desire

The first issue concerns the origin of the very concept of the good. In 91.2 Thomas traces natural law to the light by which we discern what the good is and what the bad is, and in 94.2 he makes the very first precept to be founded on the concept of the good, the *ratio boni*. His formulation of it is that of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, I.1, 1094a3: “the good is what all desire.”

The concept of the good, then, is inseparable from the concept of desire. But where do we get this concept? Must it not be drawn from some experience of desire? And if so, must not pre-rational desire or inclination play a role after all in the genesis of the knowledge of natural law? From very early in our development, we all do experience pre-rational desires, those of the sense-appetite. Even if the natural inclinations that Thomas has in mind in 94.2 belong to the will, and follow upon reason’s apprehension of their objects as good, must not reason’s very grasp of the concept of the good originate in the experience of sense-desire?

On the other hand, although for Thomas the concept of the good is inseparable from the concept of desire, he certainly does not think that

²⁵ *ST I–II*, q. 62, a. 3; cf. *De veritate*, q. 14, a. 2, c. (from *Nihil autem potest . . .* through the next sentence).

²⁶ The “seeing” is not merely being “certain” of them. Faith too is certain. Yet “faith implies only assent to what is proposed. But understanding implies a certain perception of truth”: *ST I–II*, q. 8, a. 5, ad 3.

what we primarily mean by ‘good’ is what the sense-appetite desires. To be sure, this is one meaning of ‘good’: the *delectabile*. But it is not the primary meaning. The primary meaning refers to what is “good in itself,” what “has in itself that whence it is desired” (*ST I*, q. 5, a. 6)—what is intrinsically fit to be desired. What the sense-appetite desires is not always of this sort. It does not always even seem to be of this sort. “What is desired according to concupiscence seems good because it is desired. For concupiscence perverts the judgment of reason, such that what is pleasant seems good to it. But what is desired with intellectual appetite is desired because it seems good in itself.”²⁷ So sense-desire does not seem to be a sufficient basis for forming the concept of the good.

Before seeking for the origin of a concept, we need to make sure that we are clear about its content. What does “desire” mean? My dictionary calls it a type of “feeling.” Perhaps that does not quite fit the kind of desire called “will.” Nevertheless it is probably right that by “desire” we usually mean some type of “psychological” act or disposition, something that only beings with “inner awareness” have. Descartes calls all desires “thoughts”; Hume calls even will an “impression.” But taken generally, this is not at all what Thomas means by desire—*desiderium* or *appetitus*. The very formula of the good that he uses in 94.2 is an indication of this. *Bonum est quod omnia appetunt*. The good is what *all* desire. As is clear both from the neuter *omnia* and from other passages, what Thomas means by “all” in this formula is not just all men. Nor is it just all animals. It is all beings.²⁸ Not all beings have will or sense-desire, or any sort of “psychological” activity at all. But all do have desire. If for us this word inevitably conveys something psychological, then we can speak instead of “inclination.” We are supposed to see this as an inseparable feature of absolutely everything.

For Thomas, desire or inclination is simply a certain sort of tendency, or effective order, toward something. Not every tendency is an inclination. Some tendencies are merely imposed upon a thing by something else and are incidental or even contrary to the thing’s inclination. An inclination is a tendency rooted in the thing itself—ultimately in its nature, in what it is. It is somehow the thing’s “own.” This is not found only in animals. Plants are inclined to grow, to reproduce, and so on. Inanimate things have inclinations toward their proper activities. Thomas ascribes inclination or desire even to prime matter (*ST I*, q. 5, a. 3, ad 3).

Of course Thomas’s views of the constitution of these beings differ in many ways from those of modern natural science. Has modern science entirely dispensed with the notion of inclination? I doubt it. But for our

²⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *In XII libros Metaphysicorum expositio*, Lib. XII, lect. vii, §2522.

²⁸ See *ST I*, q. 5, a. 1.

purposes, the question is incidental. We are not talking about the scientific account of things, but about the common experience from which the common concept of the good originates. Our experience is of a world made up of things that all have inclinations—toward states, activities, and movements of various sorts. We find ourselves quite surrounded by desire. And we *observe* it in things. We do so all the time. It would be silly to say that you see a dog chasing a rabbit, but that you cannot tell whether the dog desires the rabbit—that only the dog can tell this (and he keeps it to himself). Of course desire is not observable in the way that, say, color or sound is. It is “underneath” the sensible objects. But then, so are many kinds of action, such as “chasing.” It is the very business of intellect to get underneath the sensible objects, to understand them.²⁹ If we cannot see a dog desiring a rabbit, then neither can we see a dog chasing a rabbit. We cannot even see *a dog*.

And to call something a dog, or even a tree or a rock, is already to attribute a host of inclinations to it. It is mostly in light of their regular activities and movements that we form our conceptions of what the things around us are. What they are, and what they are inclined to be and to do, enter our minds together. This is “a nature”: an inner principle of both the existence and the activity of a thing. Even if, as with “a substance” (a subject of existence and activity), it takes a philosopher to formulate the general definition of “a nature,” some confused concept of what a nature is comes quite naturally to us.³⁰

It is desire understood in this very broad sense, then, that for Thomas goes hand in hand with the notion of the good. Rather than with feelings, what we should associate desire with is movement and action. A desire is a tendency toward something, toward *really possessing* something, and so it is typically a tendency toward bringing the thing about, or conserving it, or in some other way acting to promote its real existence. This association of desire with action is just what the first precept of natural law expresses: the good, as “what all desire,” is “to be done and sought.” And its contrary, the bad, which would be “what all shun,” is “to be avoided.” Desire pertains to the very concept of the good, and action and movement pertain to the very concept of desire. This is why the first precept is a *per se nota* proposition.

Sense-desire, we said, does not seem to be a sufficient basis for the concept of the good. Its object does not always even seem truly fit for us to desire. It might explain the concept of “the desired,” but it does not explain the concept of “the desirable.” By contrast, in Thomas’s view

²⁹ See *ST* I, q. 18, a. 2; II-II, q. 8, a. 1.

³⁰ See *A la recherche*, §64–65.

there is indeed a sense in which “what all desire” can be identified with the intrinsically desirable. For even if some desires are disordered, it is common to all things to desire their proper perfection. This for Thomas is the “nature” of the good, what desirability primarily “consists” in: perfection.³¹ Of course, like desire itself, perfection comes in many different forms or modes. And one thing’s perfection is not another’s.³² Nevertheless Thomas sees it as a genuine nature that is common to all perfect things, just as he sees “being” as a nature that is common to all beings. In fact they are almost the same nature. For an unqualifiedly “perfect” thing is a thing that is fully “in act,” and this is a thing that has “fullness of being” (*ST I*, q. 5, a. 1; I–II, q. 18, a. 1).

This notion of “fullness of being” is also closely associated with that of action. “Every agent effects its like,” Thomas is fond of saying. To act is somehow to “influence” things, to “pour” one’s being into them. What acts, to the extent that it acts, is “full” of being, so full as to be apt to “overflow.” The notion of “fullness of being” is thus readily conveyed to us by the actions of things. And so is the fact that they desire this fullness. For as a general rule, to the extent that a thing is fully in act and can act, can pour forth its being, it will do so. “Each thing, insofar as it is in act, acts, and tends toward what suits it according to its form” (*ST I*, q. 5, a. 5). Quite generally, things are disposed to promote their being and their perfection. They are inclined to it, desire its continuance and its diffusion. And everyone knows this.

We also see here a close connection between the notion of the good and that of the nature or the form of a thing, “what it is.” Likeness is communication in form. What acts causes something to be like it, to have something of its own being, the being that is according to its own form. Its “fullness” of being is the completeness of the being that is proportioned to its form.³³ It is measured by the form, as the fullness of a bottle is measured by its inner shape.

The order toward perfection is what makes desire intelligible. Perfection is desirable *per se*. If we observe a desire for something—say, a desire for food, perhaps our own desire for it—but we do not see how the object desired perfects the desirer, we wonder why the desire exists. But when we see that the object enhances or favors the desirer’s own being,

³¹ See *ST I*, q. 5, a. 1; *Summa contra gentiles*, Lib. I, c. 37 (“*Amplius. Communicatio . . .*”).

³² Thomas says that “the good is what all desire” does not mean that what all desire is one single thing; it means that all objects of desire share somehow in the nature of the good: *ST I*, q. 6, a. 2, ad 2. And clearly, as with being, they do not all share in it equally or in the same mode. It is not said of them univocally, but analogically.

³³ *ST I*, q. 5, a. 5. On likeness as communication in form, see *ST I*, q. 4, a. 3.

we no longer wonder. We do not ask: why does it desire to enhance its being—what good is that? Rather, now its desire makes sense. We have traced the desire to something desirable *per se*.

So in a way it is right to say that our concept of the good presupposes the experience of “pre-rational” desire. But this is not solely or even primarily our own sense-desire. It is the desire, the inclination to perfection, that we see commonly in the things around us.³⁴

It should be noticed that the thought is not that the notion of the good is “implied” in that of perfection, or fullness of being, or “conformity with nature,” as though it were “derivable” from these by some kind of conceptual analysis. Rather, these notions are included in that of the good.³⁵ The notion of the good does add something new to them. It adds the relation to desire. This is a causal relation. Desire is the *effect* of goodness.³⁶ To understand the good is to understand a form of explanation; that is, a kind of cause, the final cause. The goodness of a thing explains the desire of it and the movement toward it that the desire is apt to give rise to. That perfection makes a thing intrinsically apt to be desired, and that it is actually desired because it is apt to be, are shown by the very fact that for the most part, this is what things do desire. On the whole, desire presents itself as a function of perfection.

Regarding the origin of the concept of the good, however, this is not for Thomas the whole story. In understanding that perfection or fullness of being is desirable, we are not merely seeing that it makes sense for a thing to desire its perfection. We find this, the existence of a perfect thing, to be something that is fit to desire, not just for the thing itself, but absolutely, without qualification. We see perfection as something simply to be approved of, something that simply ought to be. And this consideration gives rise to a desire of its own. Thomas does after all make the

³⁴ Really even our sense-desire is normally for things that do somehow perfect us, according to some dimension of our nature. If these things are not always (nor always even seem) unqualifiedly “good in themselves,” it is because they may be repugnant to our last end. This end pertains primarily to our rational nature. A sign of this is that our primary desire, the one that controls our action, is the desire of the will, the rational appetite. For the most part, sense-desire does not induce us to act without the consent of the will. On the need to regulate the “pre-rational” desires of our various “parts,” including that of reason itself, in view of the last end, see below, n. 60.

³⁵ See my “Natural Inclination . . .,” 71–73. I develop this point more fully in “The Primacy of the Common Good and the Foundations of Natural Law in St. Thomas,” in *Ressourcement Thomism*, ed. Reinhard Hüter and Matthew Levering (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 241–50.

³⁶ “Just as the causality of the efficient cause is taken according to influence, the causality of the end is taken according to appetite”: *ST I-II*, q. 2, a. 5, ad 3.

general concept of the good (still taken as “what all desire”) go hand in hand with the apprehension of a “psychological” desire—not sensual, however, but intellectual. First, he says, the intellect understands “a being” (*ens*); then it apprehends itself understanding a being, which goes with the apprehension of “a true”; and then it—intellect—apprehends itself desiring a being, this apprehension being inseparable from apprehension of “a good.”³⁷ Even if the desire “in the things themselves” is what first leads us to see the connection between desire and perfection, in seeing perfection to be intrinsically desirable we are also calling for desire of it, as it were issuing a directive that it be desired.³⁸ And we are naturally so constituted as to respond to such a directive. That is, we have the natural capacity and aptitude to desire what the intellect judges desirable, the power of will.

This is why, in explaining the good—the universal good, the good as “what all desire”—Thomas sometimes relates it to no desire other than that of the intellectual appetite.³⁹ In a way the good as “what all desire” and the good as “what the will desires” are the same. For the intellectual soul in a way *is* “all things,” and it has a special affinity or “connaturality” with the whole of reality.⁴⁰ In a way its desire reflects the desires of all things.

But only in a way. It is not that the mind simply mimics the desires that it observes.⁴¹ The desires in non-rational things are for particular, limited modes of the good, and the desires themselves are limited, conditioned. But from the experience of particular modes of being, the mind

³⁷ *ST I*, q. 16, a. 4. The corpus of the article reminds us that on the side of “reality,” the apprehension of something as “good” requires the apprehension of it not only as “a being” but also as “perfect.”

³⁸ On this see my “Natural Inclination . . .,” 68–70. This apprehension of the intellect’s own desire—the desire of the will—is a practical apprehension, one that directs toward and causes that desire. The intellect grasps the will’s act, not only by the act’s intelligible presence, but also and even first of all by grasping itself as the act’s principle (see *ST I*, q. 87, a. 4, ad 3). Thus some apprehension of practical intellect’s operation is present in the very grasp of the good, and so at the very root of the knowledge of natural law; see above, n. 14.

³⁹ See, for example, *De veritate*, q. 1, a. 1.

⁴⁰ See *Summa contra gentiles*, Lib. III, c. 112 (“*Praeterea. Manifestum est . . .*”). I say “special” because there is an affinity with all things that is common to every being; “a being, as a being, does not have the character of something repugnant, but rather of something agreeable, because all agree in being”: *ST I–II*, q. 29, a. 1, ad 1.

⁴¹ Still, Thomas stresses the idea that practical reason somehow “imitates” nature. See, e.g., *In Politicorum, proem.*; *ST I*, q. 60, a. 5; *I–II*, q. 87, a. 1; *II–II*, q. 31, a. 3; q. 50, a. 4; q. 130, a. 1. *A la recherche* speaks of “a universal ethical message immanent in nature . . . which men are capable of deciphering” (§11; see §69–70, §78).

forms a universal conception of being, not contracted to any particular mode—the sheer “form” of being, taken absolutely. And it does the same with the perfect and the good. It conceives *goodness*, as a sort of nature or form, the form by which good things are good. This conception is what enables us to appreciate and to be moved by the good in all its universality, as pertaining to all things. It serves as principle of a desire that relates to the good, not merely in a determinate or particular mode, but absolutely—a desire that responds and inclines toward good things just insofar as they are good.⁴² In a way, the very “abstractness” of the mind’s grasp of the good makes this grasp the principle of the most perfect form of appetite, the fullest “engagement of affectivity” (§44).⁴³ Think of the difference we saw between the way in which rational beings desire existence and the way other beings do.

In all of this, we are talking about the mind’s *natural* understanding of the nature of the good, the understanding that is common to all. To be sure, it is a highly “confused” understanding. It belongs to the metaphysician to resolve this understanding back into the simpler “formal principles” that it presupposes and implies: “a being,” “a perfect,” “a true,” etc. And the understanding is “abstract” also in the sense in which this signifies an imperfection: it is “sketchy,” needs “filling in.” The natural understanding of the good does not express the myriad modes that pertain to the good as it is found in reality. But it is by no means so abstract as to be utterly empty.

This special relation to the good that the mind’s universal apprehension generates is the root of our freedom.⁴⁴ It is bound up with our very status as persons. I would say that its special character is itself something

⁴² See *ST* I, q. 59, a. 1.

⁴³ On appetites as more or less “perfect,” see *ST* I, q. 80, a. 1. On intellect as “more noble” than will, absolutely speaking, because its object is “more abstract,” see *ST* I, q. 82, a. 3.

⁴⁴ See, e.g., Thomas Aquinas, *Sententia libri Ethicorum Aristotelis*, Lib. III, lect. 13 (Marietti §517–518): “something can seem good to someone in two ways. In one way, taken universally, as by a certain speculative consideration. And this sort of judgment of a good does not follow any particular disposition, but the universal power of reason syllogizing in matters of action just as in the things that are by nature. But because matters of action are contingent, reason is not bound to assent to this or that, as happens in matters of demonstration; but a man has it in his power to assent to one part or the other of a contradiction; as happens in all opinionable matters, and especially about matters of action in which many aspects are considered, according to any of which something can be judged good or not good.” (The other way is “as though by a practical consideration, with a view to action”: *ibid.*, §519. It is here that the person’s appetitive dispositions play a crucial role—though not quite a necessitating one; see *ST* I, q. 83, a. 1, ad 5.)

we naturally perceive. For even if everything good can be loved in some way, it takes no special training to understand that only rational beings can be loved as *friends*. In a way this is just what Thomas is saying in 94.2, when he makes “life in society” a good that pertains to the nature proper to man, the nature of reason. It is a good that we naturally apprehend, and naturally apprehend *as* proper to reason.

Thomas also offers the metaphysical analysis of this. To love someone with love of friendship, Thomas observes, involves wishing him well, wanting him to “have” the good.

But we cannot, properly speaking, wish the good for an irrational creature, because it is not properly capable of having the good, this being proper to the rational creature, which, through free choice, is master of its disposal of the good that it has. Hence the Philosopher says in Book 2 of the *Physics* that we do not speak of good or bad befalling such things, except by a likeness.⁴⁵

But however special our relation to the good is, it is still a relation to *universal* good. There is goodness in irrational things.⁴⁶ And our own desire naturally extends to that too. According to Thomas, even charity in a way extends to irrational things. We might call this Thomas the conservationist: “irrational creatures can be loved out of charity, as good things that we wish for others; insofar, to wit, as we want them to be conserved for God’s honor and man’s use” (*ST* II–II, q. 25, a. 3). Irrational creatures serve the honor of God because they are His effects, and they are good—good in themselves, perfect, full of being. As for their utility to men, we saw that this is not only bodily but also spiritual. They furnish us with “intelligible light,” light that neither speculative nor practical intellect can do without.

What I am stressing is the universality of the form or nature that serves as the foundation of the first precept of natural law. Goodness, as we naturally understand it, is not something that belongs only to man, let alone only to human action. It is by no means confined to the “human” good.

⁴⁵ *ST* II–II, q. 25, a. 3. In *Physics* II.6, 197a36–b22, Aristotle says that things like happiness and good fortune and their opposites are properly ascribed only to beings endowed with choice, beings that deliberately adopt “practical proposals,” such that it makes sense to say that things may “turn out well” (or badly) for them. We do not say that things are going well or badly for a tree or a horse, but only for a person. The connection of the first precept of natural law with happiness will be central in the next section.

⁴⁶ It is right there in *Physics* II (see previous note) that Aristotle argues at greatest length for the existence of final causality, the causality of the good, in nature.

I shall return to this point in the final section. But first I want to address another problem, which has more to do with the specifically human good.

IV. Particular Human Goods and the Whole Human Good

The problem centers on the relation between the notion of the good and the “lower” precepts of natural law. These all regard things that “practical reason naturally apprehends to be human goods.” I argued that for Thomas, this apprehension does not consist in judgment “by connaturality” or “by inclination,” but rather in a knowledge of truths as *per se notae*. These are propositions in which the predicate pertains to the very concept of the subject. The problem is that this seems to mean that the notion of “human good” enters into the concepts of the things that the lower precepts concern: the conservation of our existence according to our kind, basic familial and social relationships, knowledge of the truth about God, etc. Each of these, it seems, would have “human good” somehow written into its concept, and that would be why its being a human good is a naturally understood *per se nota* truth. Yet this seems to run afoul of Hume’s argument (invoked by several recent writers on natural law) that “ought” cannot be derived from “is.” And in the previous section we suggested that for Thomas himself, the notion of the good adds something to the notions of being, nature, perfection, etc.⁴⁷ They are contained in its concept, not it in theirs. The goodness of a thing cannot be gathered from the mere analysis of what the thing is.

Now, this objection rests on the supposition that in the propositions in question, “human good” plays the role of the predicate. I would like to suggest that this is not the case, and that instead, what plays the role of the subject is “human good.” What is *per se nota* would not be, for example, “the conservation of human life is a human good.” (I am not saying that this proposition is not true, but that the predicate does not pertain to the very concept of the subject.) It would rather be “the human good includes the conservation of human life.” If we want a proposition with the copula, we can say “the human good is in part the conservation of human life.” Taken as a unit, the human good is a certain whole. The goods that the lower precepts regard are parts of it. They are parts whose belonging to it is immediately evident. They belong to its very concept or definition.⁴⁸ It is like the way in which it is evident that a line is part

⁴⁷ *A la recherche* says the precepts are not “deduced” from the definition of man; that is “rationalism” (§33).

⁴⁸ Not all human goods do. There are other things that are parts of the human good but do not belong to its very concept; say, some vitamin D in one’s diet. “The human good includes vitamin D” is true, but it is not *per se nota*.

of a triangle. Being part of a triangle does not belong to the definition of a line. But as Thomas says, having parts that are lines does belong to the definition of a triangle.⁴⁹

This claim makes sense, of course, only if the human good, taken as a certain whole, has already been somehow apprehended—at least in some confused way—even prior to the understanding of the lower precepts of natural law. The apprehension of it must somehow enter into the understanding of the very first precept. I wish to argue that this is indeed so.

We may be tempted to see the first precept as empty or vacuous, providing no genuine practical direction. What it tells us to do and to seek is just the good, without specification. This may seem too general or indefinite to guide action. The good, after all, is “convertible with being.” There is nothing that does not have some goodness in it. If a thing had no goodness at all—no perfection, no being—it would be nothing. It would not even be bad.

But the answer to this is right here, in the fact that there *are* bad things. The first precept is founded on the concept of the good, but it does not

⁴⁹ “The first way of saying *per se* is when that which is attributed to something pertains to its form. And since the definition signifies the form and essence of the thing, the first mode of *per se* is when the definition or something placed in the definition is predicated of something, . . . whether it be placed directly or obliquely. As in the definition of *triangle* is placed *line*, whence *line* belongs *per se* to triangle; and likewise in the definition of *line* is placed *point*, whence *point* belongs *per se* to line. And he goes on to give the reason why these are placed in the definition, saying that the substance, i.e., the essence, which the definition of them—i.e., of triangle and line—signifies, is made from these, i.e., from line and points. . . . And he says this so as to exclude those things that are parts of the matter and not of the species, which are not placed in the definition, as *semicircle* is not placed in the definition of *circle*, nor *finger* in the definition of *man*, as is said in *Metaphysics VII*: *Expositio libri Posteriorum analyticorum*, ed. R. M. Spiazzi (Marietti: Turin, 1955), Lib. 1, lect. 10, §84 (on *Post. an.* I.4, 73a35–37; the *Metaphysics* reference is to VII.10–11, 1034b20 ff.). The phrase “whether it be placed directly or obliquely” is referring to the fact that some parts of a thing’s definition are said directly of the thing, because they express what the whole thing is, e.g., “man is an animal”; while other parts of the definition are said of the thing by way of an “oblique case” or a preposition or some other expression. This would be how those parts of the definition that are also parts of the thing itself would be said of the thing. Although we cannot say “a triangle is a line,” line does belong to the definition of triangle, and we can say “a triangle is made from a line.” And although we cannot say simply that the human good is the conservation of human life, we can say that the human good is *in part* the conservation of human life. As for the examples of *semicircle* and *finger*, they would be like the example of vitamin D in note 48; they are parts of the thing, but not parts of its definition.

speaking only of the good. If we reduced the first precept to “the good is to be done and sought,” cutting out what it says about the bad, then indeed it would provide no direction for action; just as if we took the principle of non-contradiction, which is founded on the concept of a being, and cut out what it says about non-being, it would provide no direction for thought. It would be no principle at all.

To understand a thing is also to understand its proper opposite. The principle that is founded on the concept of a being refers not only to being but also to its intelligible opposite, non-being. And similarly the principle founded on the concept of the good also refers to the bad. Hence what the principle means by “the good” cannot be merely whatever has some goodness in it. For even the bad has some goodness in it, and yet the very same principle says that the bad is to be avoided. The principle can hardly be saying that some of what is to be done and sought is to be avoided. What “the good” refers to, in the first precept of natural law, is not whatever has some goodness in it. It is what is *unqualifiedly* good. Thus,

each thing has as much of good as it has of being, for good and being are convertible. . . . But only God has the entire fullness of His being through something one and simple. Every other thing has the fullness of being suited to it through diverse factors. Hence in some things it happens that they have being up to a point, and yet they lack something of the fullness of being due to them. . . . So however much it has of being, it has that much of good, while insofar as it lacks something of the fullness of being, to that extent it lacks goodness, and is called bad. . . . But because fullness of being itself pertains to the concept of the good, if a thing lacks something of its due fullness of being, it will not be called good unqualifiedly, but only in some respect, insofar as it is a being.⁵⁰

This is what all desire: not just some perfection or some being, but their total perfection, their fullness of being. Whatever is repugnant to that, even if it has some perfection and goodness in it, is to be shunned and avoided. So the first precept does provide genuine direction. And the very concept of what it directs toward is that of a kind of whole, something complete and “full.” It is a whole with many really distinct parts, many “diverse factors.”⁵¹

⁵⁰ *ST* I–II, q. 18, a. 1. See *ST* I, q. 5, a. 1, ad 1.

⁵¹ By contrast, God’s “fullness of being” is an utterly simple reality. Nevertheless it is something that others can “take part in” to a greater or lesser degree, according to some likeness. Even His goodness has to be understood in the manner of a whole, as “wholly” in act and as “containing” all perfections. See *ST* I, q. 4, aa. 1 & 2; q. 6, aa. 1 & 2.

Now, as Thomas formulates it, the first precept of natural law does not explicitly refer to the *human* good. It speaks of the good absolutely, as what all desire. And indeed it is not only the human good that is to be done and sought, or only the human bad that is to be avoided. For anything whatsoever, it is true that it ought to do and seek its good and to avoid its bad. In this sense, the first precept, considered simply as a certain truth, seems to apply to absolutely everything. I shall return to this point in the last section. But in 94.2 Thomas is considering the first precept as something practical, the very first principle of practical reason. It is the truth by which human reason first offers any direction to action. So considered, it can only refer to human good; that is, the good that can be done or sought by human action. For the only action that reason can direct is human action. This I think is why, after setting out the first precept, Thomas can say at once that all other precepts of natural law are founded upon it, “such that all those things to be done or avoided that practical reason naturally apprehends to be HUMAN goods pertain to the precepts of natural law.”

As the first practical principle, then, the first precept is referring to and directing toward the specifically human good. But it is directing toward the human good as a whole. For it is also directing away from whatever detracts from the human good or renders it defective, whatever is a human bad. To be sure, the precept presents this whole in a quite unarticulated and confused way. But then, that is what one would expect in the merely natural knowledge of it, the knowledge that is common to all—just as the common knowledge of human nature is a confused knowledge, acquired prior to any analysis of it into its various dimensions.

Yet, as we saw, even the common knowledge of human nature does somehow include knowledge of its various dimensions. These pertain to its very concept, albeit confusedly. And in the same way, there are particular goods, fulfillments of the various dimensions of human nature, that pertain to the very concept of the human good. For each, its belonging to the human good is a truth that is *per se nota omnibus*. Each is naturally apprehended to be a human good. This apprehension does not present the goods in an abstract list. But it is such that when any of them is considered, by *practical* reason, it is immediately understood as a human good and as something for man to do or pursue, and anything seen to be repugnant to it is immediately understood as bad and as something to be avoided. For practical reason always has the whole human good somehow in view and sees everything else in relation to it. This is because the first precept is its very first principle, always included in its consideration.

Of course a particular, concrete instance of one of these goods can also be considered in other respects, and according to these, one might judge

it not to be done or pursued. And a particular instance of something repugnant to one of the goods, and so to the human good as a whole, might be judged not to be avoided. This only means that it is after all possible to judge, and to choose and act, contrary to our better judgment and contrary to natural law.⁵²

In effect, I am saying that what the first precept of natural law directs us toward is our last end, happiness.⁵³ In 91.2 Thomas calls natural law “the first direction of our acts to the last end.”⁵⁴ In 94.2 the main thesis is that although its precepts are many, there is one precept in which the others are rooted and to which they are referred. The others regard particular or partial goods. Surely then the first precept must regard the last end itself, man’s whole perfection and good, which excludes all defect, all that is bad. The other precepts belong to natural law because they regard things that are naturally understood to be parts of this whole.

Obviously the first precept presents this whole only in a very “sketchy” way. It does not express exactly what our happiness consists in. Nor of course does it simply prescribe happiness. As Aristotle says, even if being happy depends chiefly on what we do, it also depends on good fortune, which cannot be prescribed. But if someone’s conduct complied fully with the first precept, and if his conduct succeeded fully in achieving its aim—in fully accomplishing and attaining the good, and in fully avoiding the bad—then indeed he or she would be happy. What the first precept sets before us is a goal of complete possession of the good and complete deliverance from the bad. It answers perfectly to what Thomas

⁵² *A la recherche* is surely right to speak of the first precept as a “moral” principle (§39). However, it might give the impression that what the first precept means by “good” is solely the “moral” good, the goodness inherent in morally good acts. For the document’s formulation of the precept is “one must do the good and avoid the bad” (§44); it leaves out “pursue.” It sounds as though the good is entirely something we “do” or effect, not also something we receive or share in (partly through what we do). The last end, happiness, involves both. The moral rule is the rule directing to the last end: see *ST I–II*, q. 21, a. 1, ad 2, together with a. 2, ad 2 (. . . “the common end of human life”). The properly moral good is only part of the whole human good, and the dictate pertaining to it—the dictate to “act according to reason”—is a “lower” precept (*ST I–II*, q. 94, a. 3).

⁵³ Despite the possible confusion signaled in n. 52, *A la recherche* does associate the first precept with happiness (see §41). On the first precept as ordering to happiness and as moral, see Giuseppe Butera, “The Moral Status of the First Principle of Practical Reason in Thomas’s Natural-Law Theory,” *The Thomist* 71 (2007): 609–31.

⁵⁴ *ST I–II*, q. 91, a. 2, ad 2. Pertinent is what he had said earlier about law in general: “the first principle in matters of action, which practical reason concerns, is the last end. Now the last end of human life is happiness or beatitude. Hence law must regard most of all the order that is toward beatitude”: *ST I–II*, q. 90, a. 2.

calls the “common concept” of happiness: “a perfect overall good” (*bonum commune perfectum*).⁵⁵

A passage from the discussion of happiness in the *Prima secundae* offers confirmation of this reading. In this passage Thomas is trying to show that it is not possible for someone to have more than one last end at the same time. One of his arguments is this:

[S]ince voluntary actions take their species from the end . . . it must be from the last end, which is common, that they take the nature of their genus; just as natural things are placed in a genus according to some common formal nature. So, since all the desirable objects of the will, as such, are of one genus, the last end must be one. And [this is clear] above all because in any genus there is one first principle, and the last end has the nature of a first principle. (*ST I–II*, q. 1, a. 5)

When we call the things that the lower precepts concern “human goods,” we are seeing them as “desirable objects of the human will.” We are treating “human good” as a sort of genus to which they all belong.⁵⁶ Things are placed in a common genus insofar as they are somehow referred to a common first principle, as natural substances are placed in the genus “body” because they have the same first intrinsic principle, bodily matter. The principle by reference to which things are placed in the genus of human goods is man’s last end. This is the chief human good—“the” human good, taken unqualifiedly. “Human good” is said of things *per prius et posterius*, and what it is first said of is the last end. It is said of anything else by reference to that. To be “a” human good, a member of this genus, is either to be the last end itself, or else to contribute somehow to the last end. This is what “a human good” *means*.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ “It is the common notion of beatitude that it be a perfect overall good; and this [Boethius] signified when he said that it is ‘a state that is perfect in the gathering of all goods,’ by which is signified nothing other than that the blessed person is in the state of perfect good”: *ST I–II*, q. 3, a. 2, ad 2. Notice that whereas Boethius’s formulation speaks of a “gathering of goods,” Thomas’s gloss presents happiness as more of a genuine unity, “perfect good.” We do not start from various specific “basic goods” and only subsequently see the need to “integrate” them. We start from the good as a whole, although we immediately see that it has various parts.

⁵⁶ Here “genus” is taken in the broad sense of something predicated commonly of different kinds of things. It need not be univocal. Nor need it enter into the essential definitions of the things that belong to it. Human life, for example, is a human good, but its definition does not include its goodness.

⁵⁷ It is no objection that the last end itself is a human good, whereas matter is not a body but only potency for one. This only shows that “human good” is not univocal in the way that “body” is.

To be sure, as the same article indicates, “last end” can itself be said in many ways. For instance, it may mean that in which man’s last end truly consists, the vision of God. Not all are seeking this. Or it may mean the end that a given individual is seeking. This may differ from what others are seeking, and even from what he seeks at another time. But we can also speak of the last end as naturally understood, its “common notion.” This is the same for all, “because all desire to fulfill their perfection.”⁵⁸ And there are some perfections that we naturally understand to be included in the last end. These are the particular goods that pertain to natural law. They are intrinsic to the last end, not just instrumental to it. But they need to be seen in subordination to it.⁵⁹ And this is how practical reason naturally does see them.

Returning to the theme of inclination, this way of understanding the first precept of natural law and its relation to the other precepts makes 94.2 line up closely with the account of the will’s natural inclination in *ST I-II*, q. 10, a. 1. The inclination reflects the precepts.

... [T]he principles of intellectual cognition are naturally known. And likewise the principle of voluntary movements must be something naturally willed. Now this is the good in general, to which the will naturally tends, as indeed any power tends to its object; and also the last end itself, which stands to appetible things as the first principles of demonstration stand to intelligible things; and universally all the things that suit the willing subject according to his nature. For by the will we desire not only those things that pertain to the power of the will, but also those things that pertain to each of the powers and to the whole man. Hence man naturally wants not only the object of the will, but also other things suited to other powers, such as the knowledge of the true, which suits the intellect; and being and life and other such things that regard natural continuance; all of which are comprehended under the object of the will, as certain particular goods.

First he cites the existence of naturally known principles of intellectual cognition, arguing that there must likewise be something naturally willed that serves as principle of voluntary movements. Then he considers what this is, distinguishing three aspects of it. I think we can see a correlation between these and what he says about the knowledge of natural law in 94.2.

⁵⁸ “We can speak of the last end in two ways: in one way, according to the very notion of last end; in the other, according to that in which the notion of the last end is found. And so with respect to the notion of the last end, all agree in the desire of the last end, because all desire to fulfill their perfection, which is the notion of the last end, as has been said”: *ST I-II*, q. 1, a. 7 (the reference is to a. 5).

⁵⁹ See *A la recherche*, §79.

The first aspect is the good in general, which is the will's proper object. This means that whatever the will wills is willed under the concept of good. To this corresponds the fact that the first precept of natural law, and hence natural law as a whole, is founded on the concept of the good. Everything in the law has to do with the good. Of course not everything that the will can will fits the law; even the bad has some good in it, and as such it may be willed. The law, after all, is supposed to *direct* the will. The second aspect is the last end, the complete or perfect good. Its place among appetibles is like that of the first principles of demonstration among intelligibles. The last end is the will's primary object, the primary good. To this, I have suggested, corresponds the first precept of natural law. Finally come all the things that suit the will's subject according to his nature, taken universally. These are particular goods falling under the will's object, goods to which our will naturally tends, not simply because it is will, but because it is *human* will. These "fill in" the common concept of the last end as the perfect good. To them would correspond the lower primary precepts of natural law.⁶⁰

Thomas calls all of these—the good in general, the last end, and the things that suit man's nature—"something naturally willed." He is seeing them as a package. Any desire for a good *as* good, under the universal *ratio boni*, implies desire of the last end, the whole or perfect good. And the desire for the whole good is a desire for whatever particular goods are immediately understood to be essential parts of it. Even though a man's particular choice can run contrary to these goods, he cannot altogether lose the desire for them, taken universally.

V. The Universal Good and Wisdom

Earlier we noted that Thomas's formulation of the first precept of natural law does not speak explicitly of the human good, but simply of the

⁶⁰ He says that these goods include both what suits man's various powers and what suits the whole man. The goods cited in the corpus of 94.2 as pertaining to the lower precepts all seem to regard the whole man, according to the various dimensions of his whole nature. It is the whole man that is a substance, an animal, and rational. The "parts" of human nature, such as the sense-appetites, are mentioned in the second objection and reply. The inclinations of these parts, he says, pertain to natural law insofar as they are ruled by reason. Actually even reason's own innate inclination to truth in general has to be regulated and ordered to the last end (see *ST* II-II, q. 167, a. 1, ad 1, on the vice of *curiositas*)—though it would be reason itself that does the regulating. Reason is man's dominant part, and to it belongs the work of ordering toward the good of man as a whole. This suggests again that the inclinations cited in the corpus of 94.2, pertaining to man as a whole, proceed from reason itself.

good, which he had formulated as what all desire. I suggested that insofar as the first precept is apprehended by practical reason, the good that it regards is the human good. But taken simply as a truth, its scope is broader. It applies to all beings. For each thing, it is true that it ought to do and pursue the good and to avoid the bad, in the way proper to it. Natural law, we should recall, is “a certain irradiation and participation of the eternal law, which is the immutable truth” (*ST I–II*, q. 93, a. 2). The eternal law is the law “by which it is just that *all things* be perfectly ordered.”⁶¹ All true order is toward the good and away from the bad. That all things fall under the order expressed in the first precept is shown by the very fact that all things do tend to do and pursue their good and to avoid their bad, each in its own way.⁶²

The obvious objection to this is that it blurs the distinction between speculative and practical principles. But now, we have already seen that knowledge of speculative matters, such as human nature, can play a role in practical reasoning. In 94.2, Thomas says that being is what falls first into our apprehension “absolutely,” and that it is included in everything whatsoever that one understands. So it is included in practical understanding too.⁶³ Certainly practical thought has to respect the principle of non-contradiction. The other common principles that Thomas cites in 94.2 also play obvious roles in practical thought. That “the whole is greater than the part” is implicit in the understanding that the common good is a greater good than the private. And that “things that are equal to one same thing are equal to each other” has application in matters of justice; the equal distribution of goods is often achieved by measuring them against a single measure.

If only some principles are called practical, it must be because only they are intrinsically apt to direct action. They alone are rules of action,

⁶¹ *ST I–II*, q. 93, a. 2, obj. 2; cf. *ST I–II*, q. 93, aa. 4 & 5.

⁶² I think a similar point holds for those “lower” precepts that regard goods pertaining to the natures that man has in common with other things. The orders to these goods are naturally seen as common. We see that all substances tend to preserve their being according to their kind. We see the order between male and female, parents and offspring, as something that “nature has taught all animals” (94.2). (We also see the order to the goods proper to man as just that, proper *to man*; that is, common to all men.) As for the first precept, I think it can be said to regard the inclination pertaining to the nature that we share, and see that we share, with *all beings*: the inclination to the good. Of course, unlike natural law, the participation in the eternal law that belongs to irrational things is not properly called “law” (*ST I–II*, q. 91, a. 2, ad 3).

⁶³ *A la recherche* only sees the principle of non-contradiction “at the base of all speculative reasoning” (§39, my emphasis).

precepts. But must their truth be confined to the sphere of human action? If so, how can Thomas see fit to correlate many of them with inclinations that man shares with non-human things? It may be that the precepts do not serve as *principles*, for *reasoning* about such things, because we do not reason about such things practically. We all see that reasoning practically about things not in our power is otiose. So perhaps the first precept of natural law serves as a principle only for practical thought. But I would still suggest that the concept upon which it is based, the universal concept of the good, is at work from the very start in the understanding of both speculative and practical matters.⁶⁴

Thomas says that the good is the first thing to fall in the apprehension of practical reason. He does not say, however, that what the good first falls into is the apprehension of practical reason. Reason first becomes practical through the apprehension of the good; through this it immediately becomes practical, because as we saw, right then it begins to know and to direct the will.⁶⁵ But this does not entail that the apprehension of the good is only practical, not also speculative. We saw too that the apprehension of the good involves the perception of desires and actions that do not arise from our knowledge, those of the things around us. Taken on the whole, as “what all desire,” the good is a speculative notion. Thomas says that the “rule of human reason”—natural law—is “gathered from the created things that man naturally knows” (*ST I–II*, q. 74, a. 7). He says this quite generally. He certainly does not except the first precept.

Of course I do not mean that we naturally understand the good in the speculative “mode” that we discussed early on. The natural understanding of it does not consist in “defining and dividing and considering its universal predicates.” That would be the metaphysician’s job. Most people reason about the good only in a practical way. But such reasoning

⁶⁴ Here I am correcting something I said in “Natural Inclination . . .”: that “our original apprehension of the good is practical, not speculative” (74). In part, I was simply assuming that it could not be both. But I had no good reason for this assumption. I was also thinking that we are not originally in a position to judge whether the generation of an *entire species* proceeds from some inclination toward the species’ good. But this is incidental. We do, quite naturally, explain the typical activities of the members of a species as functions of the species’ good. We see the members as belonging to the species “by nature,” according to what they essentially are, and as having genuine inclination to the good of the species. We see this good as *defining* their inclination, as its “formal principle,” and we see their very existence as depending on this inclination. That we may subsequently call this view into question, as Empedocles did and more recent thinkers have done, is also quite incidental.

⁶⁵ What moves the will is practical reason: *ST I–II*, q. 9, a. 1, ad 2.

supposes at least a confused grasp of what the good is. And on the other hand, neither do I mean only that some of the things that we naturally understand to be good are speculative things, while others are practical things. I am talking about the good itself, this universal intelligible “form,” according to which whatever has it is “apt to be desired.” As we naturally grasp it, this form functions both in a practical way, as that by which our own understanding gives rise to certain things, and in a speculative way, as a principle for explaining certain things that we merely observe. What it gives rise to is our own desire and, through that, our own action. What it explains are the desires in the natural things around us, together with the effects of these desires—the movements and actions of these things, and even their very existence, insofar as this too is an effect of natural movement, action, and desire. A tree that is growing is doing what is good for it, doing what it ought to do. And since for the most part what trees do is what is good for them, we are naturally led to judge that they do it *because* it is good for them, that it constitutes a true object and cause—a *formal principle*—of their inclination.⁶⁶

In both cases—in both the speculative and the practical function of the concept of the good—what is at work is the good *as* good; that is, as a form of causality, final causality. Final causality has this double function. We speak of an end as a “cause” in the sense of that on account of which something observed is done, that which it is done for; and we also speak of an end as a “cause” in the sense of that which something is to be done about—a “cause to pursue,” a “cause for rejoicing,” etc. *A la recherche* is aimed at promoting the “causes” of peace, justice, and so forth. The intellectual grasp of the good as what all desire is at once an explanation of what we observe and the origin of the intellect’s own desire, that of the will.

I think it is far from otiose to consider that we naturally understand our own good, and the order of action regarding it, in light of the universal good. This has practical importance. We see the good generally as a nature whose sway extends to all things. We see the good of any particular thing, including our own, as a “participation” in this nature. We also see that for each thing, what its perfect good consists in depends not only on the thing’s own nature, but also on the natures of other things. What the healthy activity of a tree consists in, for example, depends not only on what the tree is, but also on what many other things are—the earth, the air, the sun, and so forth. Now, a tree is so constituted as to act spontaneously in a way that is for the most part well-coordinated with the other

⁶⁶ It requires further consideration, though perhaps not a great deal, to reach the judgment that some *mind* is at the origin of this inclination—the sort of consideration that Thomas lays out in his Fifth Way (*ST I*, q. 2, a. 3).

factors. But we are not. In order to attain our end, and even in order to know what our end is with sufficient precision to move ourselves toward it, it is not enough to have grasped the general concept of the good.⁶⁷ Nor is it enough to have grasped also the essential dimensions of our own nature. We need to know about the rest of reality too—a good deal more about it than what we “naturally” know. This fact too is something we naturally grasp. We all see the need to learn the “facts of life.”

To put it another way, we naturally want to share in the good as much as we can.⁶⁸ But what we naturally or immediately know about the good as a whole is very sketchy. The concept of the good as “what all desire” is some sort of grasp of the nature of the good, but it is very imperfect. It does not present this nature in light of its own first principles. What our end is, and what the due order to it is, depend ultimately on our relation to these. But since the good extends to everything, the inquiry into its first principles is in effect an inquiry into the first principles of all reality. And in 94.2 itself Thomas indicates that this is something that we naturally perceive. Cited first among the goods to which man is naturally inclined according to the nature proper to him, the nature of reason, is “to know the truth about God.”

Regarding this, we should also recall a famous article appearing just prior to the Treatise on Law in the *Summa theologiae*.⁶⁹ Here we are shown the urgency with which the question of the end naturally presents itself. The article is about whether a person can have venial sin together with only original sin, without mortal sin. This is not possible, it says, because until reaching the use of reason, he can have only original sin; and upon reaching it, he is faced at once with a grave choice. It is a choice about the very use of his reason. For “the first thing that then occurs to a man to ponder is to deliberate about himself.” This means to inquire into his end. If he takes the inquiry seriously, ordering himself as best he can to his “due end,” he will “turn to God,” obtain grace and be quit of original sin. If not, he sins mortally.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ The question would be what the “common concept” of the end is “found in”: *ST I-II*, q. 1, a. 7; cf. q. 5, a. 8.

⁶⁸ Only that which is a “*bonum universale*” can fully satisfy the will: see *ST I-II*, q. 2, aa. 7 & 8; q. 5, a. 1.

⁶⁹ *ST I-II*, q. 89, a. 6. See also *In II Sent.*, d. 42, q. 1, a. 5, ad 7; *De malo*, q. 5, a. 2, ad 8, and q. 7, a. 10, ad 8 and ad 9.

⁷⁰ “I am going to ask you a question, my dear brethren. . . . It is this:—‘Why were you sent into the world?’ . . . There are those who recollect the first time, as it would seem, when it came home to them. They were but little children, and they were by themselves, and they spontaneously asked themselves, or rather God spake in them, ‘Why am I here? How came I here? Who brought me here? What am I to

Grace of course belongs to the supernatural order. But Thomas is also talking about how reason naturally functions. In what he says I think we can see three things. The first is the absolute primacy of the last end. This is what first occurs to a person to think about when he reaches the use of reason—the full capacity for deliberation and moral action. The second is that our natural understanding of the last end is not only sketchy, but also something whose sketchiness we naturally perceive. That is why we at once see the need to deliberate about it, to bring it into better focus. The third is that we naturally understand that what our true last end consists in somehow calls into play our relation to the whole world.⁷¹ Otherwise why would serious inquiry into it necessarily lead to God? If one gives full due priority to his own perfect good, then the very nature of the situation, as he naturally perceives it, is such that his thought and his desire will be oriented toward the source of all good, which is the source of all being.

A la recherche does have important things to say about the relation between God and natural law. It calls attention to traditions of wisdom that assert the existence of a divine order of goodness in things (§12ff.). Against Grotius, it insists that in the doctrine of natural law, reference to God is not an “option” (§32). It also says that “only taking into account the metaphysics of the real can give to natural law its full and entire philosophical justification” (§62). These points, however, only concern God’s place in teachings *about* natural law. The document does not say much about how God is involved in natural law as “naturally known.” It does speak of a natural inclination “to know God,” but only after citing the inclination to live in society, and entirely in the context of man’s general need for “personal relationships.”

The person’s relational character also expresses itself in the tendency to live in communion with God or the Absolute. It shows itself in the religious sentiment and in the desire to know God. Certainly it can be denied by those who refuse to admit the existence of a personal God, but it remains no less implicitly present in the search for truth and meaning that dwells in every human being. To these tendencies specific to man corresponds the need perceived by reason to realize in the concrete this life of relations and to construct life in society on just bases that correspond to natural right. (§50–51)

do here?’ Perhaps it was the first act of reason, the beginning of their real responsibility, the commencement of their trial; perhaps from that day they may date their capacity, their awful power, of choosing between good and evil, and of committing mortal sin”: John Henry Newman, “God’s Will the End of Life,” *Discourses Addressed to Mixed Congregations* (London: Burns & Oates, 1881), 104.

⁷¹ Very pertinent here is *A la recherche*, §12.

There is no further mention of a natural inclination regarding God. Nor is there any mention of God's being inevitably "on the horizon" at the moment of reaching the use of reason.⁷²

In 94.2, Thomas cites the inclination to know the truth about God prior to the inclination to live in society. I do not think he is suggesting that men naturally locate their end chiefly in this very knowledge. We saw that he judges the active life "more connatural" to man than the speculative. Not many are prone to be philosophers. But he is definitely presenting the philosopher's goal—wisdom—as something that everyone naturally sees a strong need for. Wisdom is the chief intellectual virtue, the one that "considers the highest cause, which is God" (*ST I-II*, q. 66, a. 5). To know about the universal good "pertains to wisdom"; the good is a feature of "universal being," which is "a proper effect of the highest cause, namely God" (*ibid.*, ad 4). Even simply grasping the universal concepts of good and being is already the basis for an "immediate order to the universal principle of being" (*ST II-II*, q. 2, a. 3).

If people quite generally see the need to know the truth about God, is it not because they see that without it they are very much more in the dark about where life is headed, about what they can and cannot hope for, and about how to pursue their hope? Surely it is not just part of a generic need for personal relations (much less a "sentiment," which sounds "pre-rational"). Its bearing on our desire for "fullness of being" is really quite global. Consider the desire for conservation in being. With respect to it, the question of God is in a way even more pressing than the need for society. Society is a powerful factor in our survival, but not even the best social order can abolish death. "Every being with intellect naturally desires to be forever" (*ST I*, q. 75, a. 6). We all want to know the truth about death, and we know that it is tied to the truth about God. Atheists too can see that the question of God's existence is a grave one. And I strongly doubt whether Thomas would agree that some *desire* for a God—understood as a *supreme good*—can ever be truly denied, even by someone who denies that a God exists.

I am stressing the *question* about God and its universal practical import. It is bound up with the question of our true end, which is the absolutely first practical question. Natural law is what first directs us toward our end, and as Thomas seems to see it, the first effect of this direction is to raise these very questions. If this is right, then it signals some rather large issues for the project that *A la recherche* has in view. For instance, would a "universal ethical language" not require general agreement that there is such a thing as

⁷² It does say that upon reaching the use of reason, one experiences "a call to accomplish the good" (§39).

mankind's common end? To what extent would it require agreement about what that end is? Might it even require a "universal language of the divine"? What we have seen does suggest that from Thomas's perspective, it would at least require a universal language of "the natural." **N·V**