

“Am I My Brother’s Keeper?” The Role of Conscience in John Paul II’s Moral Philosophy

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FREEDOM AND THE CONDITIONS of freedom play a central role in the writings of Pope John Paul II. Paradoxically, it may seem, he is both a stalwart champion of freedom and a stern crusader against freedom as it is interpreted in the West (at least in the academy). Most are familiar with his insistence that freedom must be joined to truth, and truth to love. *Evangelium Vitae* links these three together in one succinct paragraph:

Cain’s answer to the Lord’s question: “Where is Abel your brother?” can be interpreted: “I do not know, *am I my brother’s keeper?*” (Gen. 4:9). Yes, every man is his “brother’s keeper,” because God entrusts us to one another. And it is also in view of this entrusting that God gives everyone freedom, a freedom which possesses an *inherently relational dimension*. This is a great gift of the Creator, placed as it is at the service of the person and of his fulfillment through the gift of self and openness to others; but when freedom is made absolute in an individualistic way, it is emptied of its original content, and its very meaning and dignity are contradicted.¹

Freedom withers and dies when cut off from the atmosphere of truth. Freedom has intrinsic and necessary connections to two truths about persons.² First, *freedom fulfills persons only when placed at the service of love* in giving oneself to others. This link is established by the Creator and written into human nature; no finite power can overturn it. Second, *freedom that refuses to serve others inevitably uses them*, treating them as objects rather than as subjects. *Unrestricted autonomy* cannot acknowledge another’s inviolability, since that would of course be a *restriction*. Pope John Paul II concludes that to allow humans absolute power over others is *the death of true freedom*, and the key factor leading to a culture of

death.³ While previous philosophers have highlighted the second truth about persons, that they must always be treated as ends in themselves, Pope John Paul II's moral theory develops the further claim that persons find fulfillment and happiness only through loving actions toward others.

One way to challenge the culture of death, then, is to bring these truths about human persons back onto the intellectual landscape. The recognition of these truths, even their recognition as live options, makes a right conception of freedom possible. As anyone who has tried can testify, however, promoting the inviolability of persons in today's academic climate is about as popular as challenging the tenure system. The prevailing winds blow against the culture of life on this matter, in part because, to quote Pope John Paul II, "when the sense of God is lost, the sense of man is also threatened and poisoned."⁴ We live in an aggressively secular culture, and secularism and anti-personalism are inextricably bound together. It is difficult to bestow intrinsic value and inviolability on a mere chunk of living matter produced from blind physical forces. It is even more difficult to claim that fulfillment for a purely material organism comes only through self-giving love. Survival and pleasure and whatever fosters these are the only recognizable goods within naturalism. Any so-called "value" that interferes with satisfying one's desires is not just irrelevant but pernicious—a kind of "anti-value."

This diagnosis of the moral malaise of our times can be disheartening. It seems that the road back to health (literally, "saneness") requires two monumentally difficult tasks: convincing a significant number of people of (a) *the existence of God* and (b) *the immateriality of the soul*. Without these ontological supports, a personalist ethic finds no foothold. Even if the task is re-described as *offering evidence* for (a) and (b), or *building a case* for them perhaps, the prospects remain dim. The reason is not that sound arguments for (a) and (b) are lacking. Rather, the culture is set against these claims at such a deep level that any case in favor of them is generally simply ignored. For many of our contemporaries, naturalism is not one world-view among many; it is an *a priori* truth. Propositions that

conflict with naturalism (or with its obvious corollaries) are comparable to claims that three is greater than four, that the earth is really flat, or that the moon is made of cheese. The problem is not so much a logical as a pragmatic one; where might truths about God and man find a rational foothold in today's intellectual climate, a datum that is generally accepted even by nonbelievers? Three solutions come to mind, though the list is not meant to be exhaustive.

BASIC BELIEF IN GOD

One proposal is to treat the existence of God as a properly basic belief that arrives complete with its own epistemic credentials. Professor Alvin Plantinga crafts a careful and complex version of this view in his three-volume treatise on epistemology, culminating in *Warranted Christian Belief*. As the title suggests, Plantinga argues not only that *theism* can be a properly basic belief but also that *the divine inspiration of the Christian Scriptures* can be properly basic: "It is the instigation of the Holy Spirit, on this model, that gets us to see and believe that the propositions proposed for our belief in Scripture really *are* a word from the Lord."⁵ Plantinga thus endorses John Calvin's claim that "faith is a really special case of *knowledge*.... Faith is not to be *contrasted* with knowledge."⁶

In this Calvinist model, then, it is rationally acceptable (perhaps even rationally obligatory for some) to hold (a) and (b) as basic beliefs (or as self-evidently entailed by basic beliefs). There is no need for elaborate efforts to find *other* forms of rational support for them, and this is no small consolation given the intellectual climate described above. On the other hand, whoever fails to arrive at Christian or even theistic claims as properly basic beliefs remains without a reason to hold them or even to take them seriously, apart from the fact that other apparently sane people do accept them. The relevant conditions for acquiring these as basic beliefs seem to include at least some kind of openness to God, but beyond that minimum there are no clear conditions or circumstances that are within one's power and that always (or almost always) lead to Christian or theistic belief. To John Macquarrie's objection that this makes Calvinist epistemology seem rather arrogant, Plantinga replies

that “there isn’t any arrogance involved as such in recognizing that God has given you something he hasn’t (or hasn’t yet) given everyone.”⁷ Fair enough, but one might still be led to wonder why such important beliefs are bestowed on some and not on others, though this might lead into theological disputes.

While the Reformed Epistemology approach has shown surprising stamina on the philosophical battlefield, some continue to find it unsatisfying. Rather than offering “a reason for the hope within,” this view bypasses reasons or evidence and goes straight to the hope. For anyone still on the journey, for our contemporaries who seek the truth but have not found it, this seems an inadequate response. Calvin might claim that it is the only response we have, but other theologians and philosophers disagree. In any event, the view that belief in God is simply produced in one by means of a “mechanism” of which one is largely unaware and over which one has no control is troubling in itself. As Linda Zagzebski points out, “[t]he value of the truth obtained by a reliable process in the absence of any conscious awareness of a connection between the behavior [or motives] of the agent and the truth he thereby acquires is no better than the value of the lucky guess.”⁸ How do those who simply “find themselves with these beliefs” have any reasonable confidence that their beliefs are true?

STANDARD ARGUMENTS FOR GOD

The long and venerable tradition of *natural theology* undertakes the wider project of seeking publicly available rational and evidential grounds for theism. While allowing that theism might be a properly basic belief for some, this tradition claims that one can properly arrive at belief in God through various ordinary (natural) cognitive mechanisms. Traditionally, natural theology focuses on arguments for the existence of God, whether deductive or inductive. This project shows recent signs of new life, especially in the work of Richard Swinburne and John Haldane. Natural theology plays a valuable role in showing that there are rational grounds for belief in God, even if these grounds do not compel assent from every rational person.

On the other hand, the project of natural theology suffers a

limitation that is the flip side of its strength: in appealing to premises accessible to all, it abstracts from the individual and from his or her interior life, from what is merely private or unobservable. Even if the premises seem irrefutable and the arguments unassailable, few are converted from naturalism to theism by natural theology. Perhaps they don't want to be converted and so are reacting out of irrational sources. But it could be that the unwillingness to acknowledge the soundness of the arguments comes from a more legitimate source—the desire not to be coerced, intellectually or otherwise, into a relationship with God. After all, to acknowledge that there is a God is automatically to be in some sort of relationship to God; one can no longer operate in good conscience as if God did not exist. The obstacles to belief in our time may be due more to the will than to the intellect. When J. J. C. Smart considers the evidence from fine-tuning in favor of an intelligent designer of the universe, he acknowledges that there is much to be said in its favor but, by his own admission, he would believe any natural explanation of the facts, no matter how improbable, over any theistic explanation.⁹ Theism strikes him as intrinsically implausible—an obvious instance of a superstition.

THE APPEAL TO CONSCIENCE

This impasse may be part of the motivation behind Pope John Paul II's appeal to conscience as the cognitive faculty most likely to lead modern minds toward the truth about God and ourselves. After a brief explication of the concept of conscience operative in recent papal works, I will consider its possibilities for supporting the foundations of a prolife ethic.

NATURE OF CONSCIENCE

For Pope John Paul II, conscience is primarily a cognitive faculty, not a set of emotional or dispositional states. While judgments of conscience often result in various feelings and desires, these are not to be identified with conscience. Conscience makes judgments regarding human actions, about what ought to be done. This

understanding of conscience follows that of St. Thomas, who defines conscience as “an act of a person’s intelligence, the function of which is to apply the universal knowledge of the good in a specific situation and thus to express a judgment about the right conduct to be chosen here and now.”¹⁰ This judgment about the particular case assumes that conscience has a further dimension as well; it is the rational faculty that grasps the natural law and recognizes its binding force. On this view, knowledge of the moral law is connatural to us—we experience it from the inside, as it were, and it is given to us along with our very nature. The experience of conscience then is both universal and interior. It offers a kind of existential starting point for reflection about ourselves as persons.

Conscience provides us with a keen sense of what is just or unjust, what friendship and loyalty demand, what we owe to others who are persons like ourselves. Conscience makes “a *moral judgment about man and his actions*, a judgment either of acquittal or of condemnation, according as human acts are in conformity or not with the law of God written on the heart.”¹¹ Conscience is thus a call to obedience. It is “the sacred place where God speaks to man.”¹² Given the universal human awareness of its judgments, conscience has the potential to open a person’s eyes to the connection between human freedom and objective moral truth. *Veritatis Splendor* urges that “[c]onsequently, in the practical judgment of conscience, which imposes on the person the obligation to perform a given act, *the link between freedom and truth is made manifest*.”¹³ The text goes on to acknowledge the possibility of an erroneous conscience and to urge the proper formation of conscience, but these points fall outside the present discussion.

CONSCIENCE IN THE CAUSE OF LIFE

An appeal to conscience, then, has several advantages. (1) Whatever one may make of the origins of conscience, its existence and basic phenomenological features cannot be denied. (2) Taken at face value, conscience witnesses to the transcendence of the person—it approves or condemns, thus presupposing freedom. (3) Conscience recognizes other persons as a boundary of one’s freedom—here is one like myself.

(4) Personhood calls for an appropriate response, the same response we naturally seek from others—kindness, benevolence, love. (5) The moral imperative arising from conscience is experienced as internal but as arising from an external source; we naturally speak of conscience as a “voice” distinct from our own voice. (6) Unless deliberately silenced, conscience recognizes that life, especially innocent life, must be protected. Given these features, it is no surprise that Pope John Paul II looks to conscience as a point of entry for proclaiming the gospel of life.

CONVERSION

As one example of the power of conscience in shaping and even reshaping our moral attitudes, consider the following autobiographical account from a woman experiencing her first pregnancy. The author is the well-known feminist scholar Naomi Wolf, a political liberal who considered herself deeply committed to “choice” and had few qualms about reproductive technologies. Then she became pregnant (unexpectedly as she tells us) after several years of marriage. In a few weeks she was scheduled for a routine ultrasound and found herself completely unprepared for the feelings surging up within her as she saw her baby for the first time—an arm, a leg, a sweet baby face. “As I saw that hand and that foot,” she says, “something irrational happened: a lifetime’s orientation toward maternal rights over fetal rights lurched out of kilter. Some voice from the most primitive core of my brain—the voice of the species? [Well, no; but it’s a start!—said: *You must protect that little hand at all costs; no harm can come to it or its owner. That little hand, that small human signature, is more important now than you are.* The message was unambivalent.”¹⁴

When a conservative commentator came to Wolf’s house to do an interview, he noted the ultrasound picture of the baby tacked onto the refrigerator and asked, “Is that not a baby?” Wolf found herself saying “Of course, it’s a baby.” Then, to recover her equilibrium, she said that if for some reason she were forced to end the pregnancy, that would be a decision between her and God. The chapter of Wolf’s book entitled “Baby Values” records discussions with many other women about their pregnancies, including one who was carrying

triplets conceived by artificial techniques and was being pressured to choose a “pregnancy reduction” so that the remaining children would have a better chance of survival. The ideal of the “perfect child” is a recurring theme in these discussions, and Wolf finds herself increasingly appalled by this treatment of babies as commodities. She concludes: “What was lost in the culture in which I was pregnant was, I feared, something profound: a sense of the sacred otherness of the child. Is there any other relationship in which we have to love not for ourselves or the return on our investment, but for love’s own sake?”¹⁵

One could argue that Wolf’s new outlook was more a result of her experience of pregnancy and motherhood than of the effectiveness of conscience, but it seems to have been rather a combination of the two. Motherhood, even seeing the baby on the ultrasound monitor, was the occasion, but conscience was the voice whose message, Wolf says, was unambivalent. Since conscience finds its home in the concrete, practical decisions of our lives, in the existential realm, it seems that conscience is best awakened by examples of heroism, sacrifice, and service. In fact, Wolf tells us that during her pregnancy she took a walk with a woman friend who was carrying her newborn across her stomach in a kind of pouch. At an uneven part of the sidewalk, the mother tripped and lurched forward, but to avoid falling on the baby she bent her knees and managed to catch herself, painfully but successfully, on hands and knees. The baby did not even wake up. Wolf found this amazing, that motherhood should be able to transform one’s very reactions, instinctively placing one’s baby ahead of oneself. She both admired this selflessness and also feared that she might not be capable of it when the time came.

The power of a life, of deeds, to activate the conscience is well-known.¹⁶ No doubt this is why Pope John Paul II repeatedly places before our eyes the example of Jesus’s suffering and death: “Contemplation of Jesus Crucified is thus the highroad which the Church must tread every day if she wishes to understand the full meaning of freedom: the gift of self in service to God and one’s brethren.”¹⁷ We might think first here of the saints and martyrs, and the example of their lives and deeds is indeed an eloquent testimony to the truth. But our own lives and deeds can have the same power,

when animated by the same spirit. Many who observe our lives are unlikely to read the lives of the saints.

Further, some life experiences carry within them the power to draw us out of ourselves, to impress on us, sometimes even against our will, deep moral truths. Pregnancy is one such experience, but there are many others. In *Evangelium Vitae* Pope John Paul II implores women especially to “bear witness to the meaning of genuine love.”¹⁸ Consider his words in the context of Naomi Wolf’s experience: “A mother welcomes and carries in herself another human being, enabling it to grow inside her, giving it room, respecting its otherness. Women first learn and then teach others that human relations are authentic if they are open to accepting the other person: a person who is recognized and loved because of the dignity which comes from being a person and not from other considerations, such as usefulness, strength, intelligence, beauty or health. This is the fundamental contribution which the Church and humanity expect from women” and “I address to women this urgent appeal: ‘*Reconcile people with life*’.” Armed with a new awareness of the pricelessness of human life, Naomi Wolf found herself at odds with the opinions of some of her friends. They told her she was being judgmental. Her response was that in a sense they were right; she was judging, and making different judgments than in the past. All because of little Rosa. As long as the voice of conscience can rise above the voice of the culture, the voice of our friends, the voice of our own selfishness, surely there is hope for the cause of life.

NOTES

1. *Evangelium Vitae* 19, hereafter abbreviated as EV.

2. The necessity here is a natural or physical necessity, not a logical one. At least I would not be prepared to defend the stronger claim.

3. EV 20.

4. EV 21.

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5. Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000), p. 252.
 6. *Ibid.*, p. 256.
 7. *Ibid.*, p. 254. Macquarrie's objection occurs in his *Principles of Christian Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1966, 1977), p. 50.
 8. Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996), p. 304. A similar criticism applies to Plantinga's notion of proper function, where a cognitive faculty is functioning properly if operating *as it is designed* to operate, and in the *kind of environment* in which it is designed to operate. George Mavrodes offers an example of a girl who wakes up every morning believing the first thing that pops into her head, and it happens that (unbeknownst to her) God is the direct cause of her having these beliefs first thing in the morning. Her cognitive faculties are functioning properly and as designed, and they produce true beliefs (infallibly, in fact), but it is counterintuitive to say that she has *knowledge* in these cases.
 9. J. J. C. Smart and J. J. Haldane, *Atheism and Theism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996). To take one example, Smart claims that "We do not need a detailed theory of [the origin of life] to prefer a naturalistic explanation (thin and as yet speculative as it may be) to a supernaturalist explanation.... A philosopher who *antecedently* finds supernaturalism plausible can reasonably jump the other way" (p. 170).
 10. *Veritatis Splendor* 32, hereafter abbreviated as VS.
 11. VS 59.
 12. VS 58. Pope John Paul II cites here a passage from his General Audience of August 17, 1983, 2; *Insegnamenti*, VI, 2 (1983), 256.
 13. VS 61.
 14. Naomi Wolf, *Misconceptions: Truth, Lies and the Unexpected on the Journey to Motherhood* (New York: Anchor Books, 2001, 2003), p. 28.
 15. *Ibid.*, p.56.
 16. Note, for example, John Henry Newman's *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1979 [originally published 1870]), p. 89: "The heart is commonly reached, not through the reason, but through the imagination, by means of direct impressions, by the testimony of facts and events, by history, by description. Persons influence us, voices melt us, looks subdue us, deeds inflame us. Many a man will live and die

upon a dogma: no man will be a martyr for a conclusion.”

17. VS 87.

18. EV 99.