
Natural law: A legacy of *Veritatis Splendor*

MARÍA SOLEDAD PALADINO*

Universidad Austral - Facultad de Ciencias Biomédicas
(Instituto de Filosofía)

spaladino@austral.edu.ar

Recibido 11.06.2024/ Aprobado 20.07.2024

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5640-734X>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46553/teo.61.145.2024.p195-224>

ABSTRACT

The encyclical of Saint John Paul II constitutes a milestone in the history of the Church: it is the first time that the Magisterium dedicated a document to address the doctrinal foundations of moral theology. The central teaching of *Veritatis Splendor* focuses on moral autonomy, whose metaphysical-theological foundation is natural law. While *Veritatis Splendor* provides a profound explanation of these foundations, it leaves room for further theological reflection on the role natural law plays in moral knowledge, that is, how humans can discern the demands of natural law in the pursuit of moral goodness.

This article outlines the key points of the metaphysical and theological foundation of natural law as participated theonomy, within the context of the controversy surrounding autonomous morality. It also delves deeper into understanding how natural law relates to moral knowledge, particularly by demonstrating the extent of participated theonomy.

Keywords: *Veritatis Splendor*; Natural Law; Practical Reason; Theonomy

La ley natural: el legado de *Veritatis Splendor*

RESUMEN

La encíclica de San Juan Pablo II constituye un hito en la historia de la Iglesia: es la primera vez que el Magisterio dedica un documento a abordar los fundamentos doc-

* La autora de esta contribución es Doctora en Teología por la Pontificia Universidad de la Santa Cruz (Roma). Es profesora adjunto en la Facultad de Ciencias Biomédicas de la Universidad Austral, e investigadora asociada del Instituto de Filosofía de la Universidad Austral. Actualmente realiza estudios sobre las cuestiones éticas relacionadas al uso de la Inteligencia Artificial en Medicina.

trinales de la teología moral. El núcleo de la enseñanza de *Veritatis Splendor* es la autonomía moral, concepto clave cuyo alcance se comprende a la luz de su fundamento metafísico-teológico, esto es, la ley natural. Aunque *Veritatis Splendor* proporciona una profunda explicación de tal fundamento, deja espacio para la reflexión teológica sobre el papel que juega la ley natural en el conocimiento moral, es decir, cómo el hombre puede discernir las demandas de la ley natural en la búsqueda del bien moral.

En el contexto de la controversia con la Moral Autónoma, este artículo ilustra las claves del fundamento metafísico-teológico de la ley natural como teonomía participada a la luz de *Veritatis Splendor*, y muestra el alcance de la teonomía participada reflexionando cómo la ley natural se relaciona con el conocimiento moral.

Palabras clave: *Veritatis Splendor*; Ley natural; Razón práctica; Teonomía

1. Natural Law in Contemporary Magisterium

Faced with the difficulty of finding in today's world a common denominator of moral principles shared by all individuals and responding to a request from Saint John Paul II to the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Cardinal Ratzinger convened various catholic universities in November 2004 to collaborate in the study of the essential contents of natural moral law. Shortly after the beginning of his pontificate, Benedict XVI addressed the International Theological Commission highlighting the importance of natural law for understanding the foundation of rights rooted in the nature of the person and, as such, derived from the very will of God the creator.¹

Benedict XVI insisted on several occasions on the urgency of deepening our understanding of natural law in coherence with one of the main themes of his pontificate, namely, the need to expand the limits of human reason by surpassing «the self-imposed limitation of reason to the empirically falsifiable».² Indeed, only a metaphysical reason capable of addressing the questions of religion and ethics will allow us to recognize that «recognition and respect for natural law represents the foundation for a dialogue between

1 Pope Benedict XVI, *Speech to the Members of the International Theological Commission*, December 1, 2005.

2 Pope Benedict XVI, *Speech at the University of Regensburg*, September 12, 2006.

the followers of the different religions and between believers and non-believers.»³ In the Catholic tradition, natural law emerges as a fundamental prerequisite «to justify and describe the foundations of a universal ethic that is part of the great patrimony of human knowledge.»⁴ The International Theological Commission echoed Benedict XVI's call and, in 2009, published the document *In Search of a Universal Ethics: A New Look at the Natural Law*⁵.

In Caritas in Veritate, Benedict XVI also centers the theme: natural law is the ethical wisdom of humanity, a solid foundation for all cultural, religious, and political dialogue. Adherence to this law written in the hearts is the basis for all constructive social collaboration.⁶ In 2010, acknowledging the work done and urging its development to continue, Benedict XVI once again referred to natural law in his annual address to the International Theological Commission.⁷

Advocating for the recovery of natural law is nothing other than placing practical rationality at the center of reflection. Hence the perennial relevance of *Veritatis Splendor* thirty years after its publication. Indeed, as I will argue in this paper, the core that explains the internal unity, conceptual articulation, and doctrinal scope of the teaching of *Veritatis Splendor* is moral autonomy, which directly refers to practical rationality, whose metaphysical-theological foundation is natural law.

2. Veritatis Splendor and Moral Autonomy

Veritatis Splendor acknowledges that some positive demands in positions claiming moral autonomy belong to the best tradition

3 Pope Benedict XVI, *Message for the Celebration of the 40th World Day of Peace*, January 1, 2007.

4 Pope Benedict XVI, *Speech to the Participants of the Plenary Session of the International Theological Commission*, October 5, 2007.

5 International Theological Commission, *In Search of a Universal Ethics: A New Look at the Natural Law*, 2009.

6 Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, June 29, 2009, 59.

7 Pope Benedict XVI, *Speech to the participants of the plenary session of the International Theological Commission*, December 3, 2010.

of catholic thought. On the one hand, the rational, universally understandable, and communicable character of the moral norms corresponding to the realm of natural moral law, and on the other hand, reaffirming the internal character of the ethical demands that derive from that same law (no. 36). However, the theme of natural law is not simple. As a moral theory, natural law developed on two intimately related levels. There is the metaphysical-dogmatic level, in which natural law underpins the normative role of practical reason (or, the ultimate metaphysical foundation of moral autonomy), and there is the mode of interpreting the exercise of practical reason: how the subject can discern the moral value of their actions; namely, how natural law manifests in moral knowledge.

As the encyclical shows, moral autonomy was not always understood to be following Catholic doctrine. This explains the peculiarity of *Veritatis Splendor* in harmonizing a propositional dimension – in which it seeks to expose the theological justification of the fundamental elements of Christian morality – with a discerning consideration regarding some theological currents whose interpretations of Christian morality are not compatible with sound doctrine. This is the case with Autonomous Morality.

Autonomous morality is an ethical-theological way of thinking that emerged in the context of controversies surrounding the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*. This approach, which has been highly influential since the Second Vatican Council particularly in German-language moral theology, arose as a new way to communicate Christian morality to a secularized world, emphasizing the internal and rational nature of moral norms. Franz Böckle and Alfons Auer are key figures in this movement.⁸ While Auer⁹ is recognized as the founding father of autonomous morality in a Christian context,

8 For a detailed analysis of Auer's and Böckle's positions, we refer the reader to María Soledad Paladino, *Autonomía teónoma y teonomía participada. Hacia una comprensión de la justa autonomía moral a partir de Veritatis Splendor* (Roma: Edusc, 2019).

9 Cf. Alfons Auer, *Autonome Moral und christlicher Glaube* (Düsseldorf: Patmos Verlag, 1984²).

Böckle¹⁰ has attempted a profound theological legitimization from the perspective of Karl Rahner's transcendentalism, leading to a thorough revision of moral foundations.

Starting from the premise that morality has value, moral autonomy theorizes 'autonomous rationality' as a conceptual instrument capable of supporting an ethics binding for all individuals. This conceptual instrument is grounded in one of Aquinas' fundamental insights: the recognition of natural law as the law of reason. However, the philosophical and theological presuppositions of autonomous rationality, namely, the Kantian tradition and Karl Rahner's transcendental anthropology, lead to an understanding of practical reason opposed to Saint Thomas's. As some critics of this position affirm¹¹, the problem with autonomous morality does not lie in that there is 'too much' reason in it, but in that there is a deformed reason. This deformity manifests primarily in its understanding as 'creative reason' and 'norm-establishing' human capacity, in which there is nothing naturally good for individuals since practical reason is axiologically undifferentiated. Furthermore, the interpretation of Aquinas' doctrine on practical reason inspired by Kantian principles, fails to integrate nature and reason. According to this position «the natural inclinations, and with them also the bodily dimension of the human person, are only empirically limiting conditions for reason's norm-creating activity».¹²

The aim of this article is to highlight the key aspects of autonomous morality, as developed by Auer and Böckle, on which *Veritatis Splendor* offers a nuanced discernment.¹³ In fact, *Veritatis Splendor*

10 Cf. Franz Böckle, *Fundamentalmoral* (München: Kösel, 1977).

11 Ángel Rodríguez Luño, «La novedad de la fe como criterio de interpretación y actuación para la existencia moral» en Carlos Scarponi ed., *La verdad os hará libres. Congreso internacional sobre la encíclica Veritatis splendor*, Pontificia Universidad Católica Argentina (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Paulinas, 2005), 239.

12 Martin Rhonheimer, «Natural Law as 'Participated Theonomy': Retrieving a Christian Tradition for the Renewal of Moral Theology», *Josephinum Journal of Theology* 20/2 (2013), 260. As Rhonheimer asserts correctly, «these inclinations do not bear in themselves properly ethical constraints or orientations towards the good».

13 Some authors who were key figures in the debate on moral autonomy prior to *Veritatis Splendor* have not changed their moral epistemology. For example: Sergio Bastani, *Coscienza, onestà, fede cristiana. Corso fondamentale di etica teologica* (Trapani: Il Pozzo di Giacobbe,

argues that the foundational presuppositions of practical rationality theorized by autonomous morality contradict the doctrinal heritage of the Church, giving rise to an 'erroneous concept of autonomy' (no. 37). In fact, the theme of moral autonomy is the backbone of *Veritatis Splendor*. The centrality of this theme is articulated in the freedom-truth relationship. The assertions of *Veritatis Splendor* are set against a precise way of conceiving this relationship, namely, that truth depends on freedom. This premise is an important element of discernment to the point of recognizing that at the root of positions that deviate from the moral heritage «is the more or less obvious influence of currents of thought which end by detaching human freedom from its essential and constitutive relationship to truth» (no. 4). This statement suggests that there is a way of understanding freedom that denies or weakens its dependence on truth. In positive terms, *Veritatis Splendor* suggests that freedom can only be authentic when it is recognized that its inner measure lies in 'truth'. But what 'truth' is this referring to?

Fundamentally, *Veritatis Splendor* centers on understanding truth as found in human beings by their rational nature. In other words, it is the truth that individuals can come to know through natural law –which is the law of their reason– through which they discern good from evil. However, this active role recognized in reason's discernment of truth does not have its ultimate foundation in individuals, as advocated by autonomous morality in the footsteps of Kant. On the contrary, for *Veritatis Splendor*, the active role is grounded in God, in the eternal law as the foundation of the capacity to discern good from evil. In contrast, theological positions based on an 'erroneous concept of autonomy' lead to a 'complete autonomy of reason', in which the eternal law is not related to moral discernment. This results in the precedence of freedom over truth.

2018). More recent authors have reached more balanced positions, maintaining the framework of autonomous morality while generally avoiding the excesses against which *Veritatis Splendor* warns. For example: José Román Flecha Andrés, *Teología moral fundamental* (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 2019); Tony Mifsud, *Moral fundamental. Libres para amar* (Santiago de Chile: San Pablo, 2002⁶); Giannino Piana, *In novità di vita, 1: Morale fondamentale e generale* (Assisi: Cittadella, 2012). Julio Luis Martínez – Xosé Manuel Caamaño, *Moral Fundamental. Bases teológicas del discernimiento ético* (Santander: Sal Terrae, 2014).

Veritatis Splendor defines such imbalance as the claim of ‘complete autonomy of reason in the realm of moral norms’ (no. 36).

However, to understand why it is possible to maintain such a ‘complete autonomy of reason’, it is necessary to delve into the foundation of the legislative authority of reason. *Veritatis Splendor* (no. 40) expresses this as follows:

The teaching of the Council emphasizes, on the one hand, the role of human reason in discovering and applying the moral law: the moral life calls for that creativity and originality typical of the person, the source and cause of his deliberate acts. On the other hand, reason draws its truth and authority from the eternal law, which is none other than divine wisdom itself.

As Martin Rhonheimer points out, the question of the foundation of moral autonomy involves reconciling two terms: firstly, the autonomy of the subject, that is, the recognition of the active role of reason in discerning good and evil, and secondly, the dependence on God as the ultimate foundation of this legislative capacity.¹⁴ In this scenario, the concept of natural law allows reconciling both terms through a theory of practical reason.¹⁵ With this, it is clearer that the central aspect of discernment in *Veritatis Splendor* revolves around two key points of practical reason. On one hand, the metaphysical-dogmatic foundation of the normative role of practical reason, and intimately related, to how this role is interpreted considering the principles of this doctrine. Within these two considerations, *Veritatis Splendor* frames the understanding of what it defines as ‘rightful moral autonomy’.

3. *Veritatis Splendor* on the Foundation of Normative Practical Reason

Grounded in the transcendentalism of K. Rahner, Böckle describes the theological attempt to legitimize reason’s normative au-

¹⁴ Martin Rhonheimer, «Autonomía y teonomía moral según la encíclica *Veritatis Splendor*» en Gerardo Del Pozo Abejón ed., *Comentarios a la Veritatis Splendor* (Madrid: BAC, 1994), 543-578.

¹⁵ In our study we will closely follow the research conducted in this field by Martin Rhonheimer. We consider that this author’s position meets the requirements of an ethical-philosophical propaedeutic that allows for an opening to a theological-moral discourse.

thority as 'theonomous autonomy'.¹⁶ For Böckle, the normative activity of reason presupposes the conceptual 'theonomic rationality', a category through which he interprets the ontological foundation of the ought demand, i.e., where reason derives the basis of its obligatoriness. Böckle posits the theonomic foundation to the non-contradictory nature of rationality.¹⁷ According to Böckle, the metaphysical approach to the natural capacity for human action as a rational being does not consider the historical development of this capacity, which is exclusively the task of autonomous reason. Therefore, reason is understood as a 'creative reason' that expresses natural law understood as the natural inclination of practical reason to establish norms for the perfection that humans must achieve.

This creative activity of reason, grounded in a theonomous autonomy that expresses human autonomy created and willed by God, considers that eternal law is indifferent to the axiological structure of reason. Theonomous autonomy maintains a particular understanding of human participation in the *divine ratio* as an image and reflection, which leads to postulating an ontological autonomy of human reason concerning divine reason. This implies affirming that natural law has no further relationship with eternal law than in terms of its origin. Conversely, regarding its function, that is, the material content of moral norms, eternal law has no connection with natural law. This is precisely a fundamental point of disagreement with *Veritatis Splendor* (no. 36). Indeed, «the eternal law for Böckle only determines us to be free and to autonomously and responsibly administer this freedom according to what is dictated by a reason autonomously detached from natural inclinations and any material content prefigured in the Eternal Law».¹⁸

16 Franz Böckle, *Fundamentalmoral*; Franz Böckle, «Theonomie und Autonomie der Vernunft» en Willi Oelmüller ed., *Fortschritt wohin? Zur Problem der Normenfindung in der pluralen Gesellschaft* (Düsseldorf: Patmos-Verlag, 1972), 63-68.

17 Franz Böckle, «Theonomie Rationalität als Prinzip der Normbegründung bei Thomas von Aquin und Gabriel Vázquez» en *Atti del Congresso Internazionale (Roma- Napoli 17-24 aprile 1974) Tommaso d'Aquino nel suo settimo centenario*, Vol. V: L'agire morale (Napoli: Edizioni Domenicane Italiane, 1977), 213-227.

18 Martin Rhonheimer, «Natural Law and Moral Reasoning: At the Roots of Aquina's Moral Epistemology», *Josephinum Journal of Theology* 17/2 (2010), 356. This necessarily leads to the

In this sense, «such norms would constitute the boundaries for a merely ‘human’ morality; they would be the expression of a law which man in an autonomous manner lays down for himself and which has its source exclusively in human reason» (no. 36). One of the main consequences of this approach identified by *Veritatis Splendor* is that

«an autonomy conceived in this way also involves the denial of a specific doctrinal competence on the part of the Church and her Magisterium concerning particular moral norms which deal with the so-called ‘human good’. Such norms would not be part of the proper content of Revelation and would not in themselves be relevant for salvation (no. 37)».

As Rodríguez Luño asserts,

«if this point were not considered, one could think that autonomous morality is simply a new way of explaining the traditional notion of natural law. However, there is an essential difference between the traditional conception and autonomous morality. Indeed, the doctrine of natural law affirms that human intellect is naturally competent to formulate the demands that relate to the realm of worldly action in principle, but it by no means asserts that this competence is exclusive and excluding, while the exclusion of Faith and the Magisterium in matters of natural law is precisely the essential novelty of autonomous morality. Therefore, the object of discernment is not the capacity of the intellect to actively formulate moral demands, but rather the way of conceiving the nature and foundation of this capacity, which the Autonomous Morality conceives as exclusive of any other competence».¹⁹

In fact, one of the most salient features of autonomous morality is the mutual exclusion of reason and faith in moral knowledge. Consequently, Revelation does not introduce new moral norms beyond those already developed by human reason. For Auer²⁰, the distinctive feature of Jesus’ ethos lies in the new horizon of historical-salvific meaning that Jesus himself has opened in his own Person, becoming effective as motivation for moral action. The ethos

question of how individuals can know how to behave in every situation, given that the ‘ought’ they feel required by God is purely formal, lacking specific content. Consequently, there is a need to develop a normative theory to establish moral norms.

19 Ángel Rodríguez Luño, «El significado de la *Veritatis splendor* para la teología moral», *Scripta Theologica* 55/1 (2023), 108. The translation is ours.

20 Cf. Alfons Auer, *Autonome Moral und christlicher Glaube*.

of Jesus is defined as the ethos of discipleship, understood as a response to the proclamation of the Kingdom. For Böckle²¹, Jesus' preaching does not represent a positively developed ethics of the Kingdom of God. Although the reign of God is already present in Jesus, until God brings it to fulfillment, people must shape the intramundane ethos by orienting it toward the Kingdom of God. In this context, Jesus' words present indispensable value perspectives but do not provide immediate practical directives. Auer²² arrives at a similar conclusion: according to Aquinas, the moral life of a Christian cannot be materially distinguished from the moral life of others. What is specifically Christian lies in a new horizon of meaning and a new intentionality in moral action.

Veritatis Splendor takes a further step by deepening the relationship between human reason and divine reason, recognizing the need for Revelation for moral knowledge even regarding truths of a natural order. With this, *Veritatis Splendor* is saying two things. On the one hand, taking as a premise that the human condition is fallen in nature, Revelation and grace are necessary to help individuals on their path to truth, that is, to make natural law effective. On the other hand, it reminds us that Revelation has a noetic content that is not indifferent to moral action.

In summary: the audacity of *Veritatis Splendor's* discernment is not the active role of reason as a moral authority but the ultimate foundation of this role, which, in turn, determines its understanding and scope. The ultimate foundation of that role is natural law, whose theological foundation *Veritatis Splendor* calls 'participated theonomy'. While theonomous autonomy, by denying the participation of natural law in the eternal law, postulates an ontological moral autonomy of moral reason, participated theonomy underpins the cognitive autonomy of practical reason.

21 Cf. Franz Böckle, *Fundamentalmoral*.

22 Cf. Alfons Auer, *L'autonomia della morale secondo Tommaso d'Aquino. Fede cristiana e agire morale* (Assisi: Cittadella Editrice, 1980), 32-61.

3.1. *Participated Theonomy in the Catholic Tradition*

The consideration of human beings created in the image of God is the metaphysical-dogmatic background in which *Veritatis Splendor* theorizes the recognition of rightful moral autonomy of individuals (no. 38). Drawing from the Christian tradition, *Veritatis Splendor* acknowledges that individuals have been entrusted with their care and responsibility. As rational creatures, they possess the ability to freely attain the perfection to which they are called (no. 39). The claim that human autonomy represents the genuine ability of individuals to self-determine as responsible agents of their actions to pursue their fulfillment is situated within the framework of the created order. This pertains to the inherent ontological dependence on God. *Veritatis Splendor* highlights the concept of participated theonomy, where human reason and will participate in God's wisdom and providence, also known as the eternal law. God's command not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil signifies that humans do not inherently possess such knowledge; they only participate in it through natural reason and Divine Revelation (no. 41).

The understanding of the intrinsic relationship between natural law and eternal law in the thought of Saint Thomas that inspires *Veritatis Splendor* requires situating oneself in the metaphysical perspective of participated being. The metaphysical condition of the creature entails a fundamental relationship to God –the First Cause– which is of origin, dependence in being, and intrinsic finalization. As Aquinas explains, along with being, the creature receives the *bonum ordinis* understood as the intrinsic ordering by which it tends towards its end, which is characterized as good. But this ordering of creatures, rooted in the deepest and most intimate part of their being, is found prior in God, that is, in the plan of divine wisdom –*ratio ordinatorum in finem*– commanded by his will, to lead all things to their end, which is God's very self.²³ Applying the definition of law in general,²⁴ Saint

²³ ST I, q. 22, a.1.

²⁴ ST I-II, q. 90, a. 4.

Thomas conceives this divine governance as a law. Therefore, for Aquinas law is seen as an expression of divine wisdom, and by obeying the law, freedom aligns with the truth of creation.

All creatures participate in the eternal law.²⁵ This means that all creatures are regulated and measured by God's creative Reason because they possess an *impressio* of the eternal law in their being, which is externalized in natural inclinations towards their acts and ends.²⁶ Just as there are degrees of being and perfection in creatures, there are also different ways of participating in the ordering to the end of eternal law according to each nature. Now among all others, the rational creature is subject to Divine providence in the most excellent way, in so far as it partakes of a share of providence, by being provident both for itself and for others. Wherefore it has a share of the eternal reason, whereby it has a natural inclination to its proper act and end; and this participation of the eternal law in the rational creature is called the natural law. Hence the Psalmist, after saying (Ps. 4:6): «Offer up the sacrifice of justice», as though someone asked what the works of justice are, adds: «Many say, Who showed us good things?». In answer to this question, he says: «The light of Thy countenance, O Lord, is signed upon us»: thus implying that the light of natural reason, whereby we discern what is good and what is evil, is the function of the natural law, is nothing else than an imprint on us of the Divine light. It is therefore evident that the natural law is nothing else than the rational creature's participation of the eternal law.²⁷

We are faced with the definitive formulation of the notion of natural law based on the notion of participation, which, as such, is not found in any of his previous works.²⁸ A first statement of great

25 ST I-II, q. 91, a. 2.

26 St. Thomas Aquinas calls natural inclination or natural appetite the intrinsic ordering that created nature possesses toward its own perfection. It is the appetitive foundation based on the mode of being, that is, on essence.

27 ST I-II, q. 91, a. 2.

28 In the *Summa Theologica*, St. Thomas Aquinas refines ideas from earlier writings. However, it is beyond the scope of this work to delve into the consideration of the antecedents that underpin the notion of natural law in the *Summa Theologica*. For a detailed analysis, further reference can be made to Patrick Farrell, «Sources of St. Thomas' Concept of Natural Law», *The Thomist* 20/3 (1957): 237-294; May William, «The Meaning and Nature of the Natural Law in

importance is that for Aquinas, natural law is not something different from eternal law, but it is how the rational creature participates in it, that is, through the light of natural reason. Hence, in *ad* 3 of this same article, he affirms that the participation of eternal law in the rational creature is properly called law because law is something of reason.²⁹ Therefore, in man, there is the promulgation of a law by reason through which the guiding principle of human acts is impressed.³⁰ In other terms, man possesses a natural inclination to proper act and end that allows him to achieve the *actus debitus*, that is, moral good as his good, and not simply an act of natural convenience like irrational creatures. Such natural inclination has its origin in the *ratio naturalis* which, as an active and cognitive ordering principle, is a participation and image of divine Reason.³¹

According to I-II, q. 91, a. 2, the key point of the participation of eternal law in the rational creature lies in the *ratio naturalis* which Saint Thomas defines as a light that allows discerning good from evil and illustrates through the citation of Psalm 4:6. It is, therefore, the intellect agent. For Saint Thomas, «the participation in the light of the divine intelligence is realized through an *impressio* in the being of man, a power that works as a *causa secunda*, which man possesses as a *lumen intellectuale*».³² In this way, human action is regulated by eternal law, which not only constitutes human reason as a rule for the will's goodness but also regulates good and evil in human action, although not immediately, but through a participation of that cognitive light in man. It is important to bear in mind that when Aquinas thinks of participation in divine light, he never considers the infusion of innate ideas into human reason. Rather, as Rhonheimer points out, the double way in which Thomas conceives

Thomas Aquinas», *American Journal of Jurisprudence* 22/1 (1977): 168-189; Martin Rhonheimer, «Natural Law and Moral Reasoning: At the Roots of Aquinas's Moral Epistemology», *Josephinum Journal of Theology* 17/2 (2010): 341-381.

29 ST I-II, q. 91, a. 2.

30 ST I-II, q. 93, a. 5.

31 Martin Rhonheimer, *Natural Law and Practical Reason. A Thomist View of Moral Autonomy* (Oxford: Fordham University Press, 2000), 68.

32 *Ibid.*, 287.

participation in divine truth is expressed in *lumen intellectuale* and *quantum ad prima principia naturaliter notae*.³³ Human intellect, starting from these naturally apprehended principles and unfolding as reason, 'discovers' truth according to the inherent dynamism of its nature.³⁴ And if we consider that it is practical reason –reason directed to action– we say that it 'discovers' practical truth, although there is the possibility that it may not succeed. Here precisely lies the decisive question of the rational foundation of ethics. Although it must be explained how practical truth takes place through the exercise of reason, we can affirm that such exercise does not consist in unfolding a capacity to read a pre-established divine order. In the realm of practical reason, it is not about 'discovering' or 'reading' something that is already finished outside of us, but rather about establishing an appropriate order for our behavior. Now, if we add to this assertion an epistemological objection –that is, the consideration that eternal law is irrelevant to the question of how man can know what he must do since it is inaccessible–, we may ask what the thesis of participated theonomy contributes.

As Rhonheimer points out, the assertion that natural law is participation in eternal law stems from a type of reasoning that starts from a finite reality to conclude in its ultimate foundation. This conclusion «therefore presupposes the experience of a natural order of practical reason that tends towards man's good, to explain it subsequently as participation in divine wisdom. (...) The 'eternal law' is the concept of the cause inferred from a phenomenon already known to

33 *Quaestiones Quodlibetales* X, q. 4, a. 1; VIII, q. 2, a. 2. See: Martin Rhonheimer, «Ragione pratica e verità della soggettività: l'autoesperienza del soggetto morale alle radici della metafisica e dell'antropologia» en *Ripensare la metafisica. La filosofia primera tra teologia e altri saperi* (Roma: Armando, 2005), 73-104.

34 Based on the double use of intellectual power, St. Thomas Aquinas often distinguishes between *intellectus* and *ratio*, although they refer to the same faculty (Cf. ST I, q. 79, a. 8; II-II, q. 49, a. 5). It is called intellect when it apprehends self-evident truths without argument (*per se nota*). Conversely, when it discovers truths that are not immediately knowable through reasoning, it is called *ratio*. The concept of *ratio naturalis* refers to the intellectual aspect of rationality, in which there is no possibility of error in the knowledge of first principles. Juan Cruz Cruz, *Intelecto y razón. Las coordenadas del pensamiento clásico* (Pamplona: Euns, 1998²).

us: moral law in us».³⁵ Consequently, it is eternal law that accounts for the existence of the axiological structure of human reason, that is, the ability to discern truthfully between good and evil. The origin of true human autonomy is, therefore, that God, creating humanity in the Divine image, has made us participants in His law by giving us the reason.³⁶ Just as the goodness of all creation is justified by knowing that ontologically it depends entirely on the Creator, «likewise the authority of human reason finds its foundation and support only when it is shown that, properly and ultimately, it is the same reason of its Creator, being a manifestation of it».³⁷ Hence it can be affirmed that human autonomy is ‘communication of theonomy’³⁸ where the immanence of God’s wisdom in human moral knowledge is verified.³⁹ Although the eternal law is unknown to us according as it is in the Divine Mind, «nevertheless, it becomes known to us somewhat, either by natural reason which is derived therefrom as its proper image; or by some sort of additional revelation».⁴⁰ The theological concept of eternal law thus underpins the normative character of human reason⁴¹, which does not constitutively depend on human self-legislation. Instead, it is up to individuals to make it effective through the exercise of their practical reason.

35 Martin Rhonheimer, *Autonomía y teonomía moral según la encíclica Veritatis splendor*, 556-557.

36 Cf. *Veritatis Splendor*, 12.

37 Martin Rhonheimer, *Autonomía y teonomía moral según la encíclica Veritatis splendor*, 553.

38 Martin Rhonheimer, *Natural Law and Practical Reason*, 321. «When it is unhindered in its operation as reason, it expresses the deepest claims of human existence, participating effectively and formally in the nomothetic function of the divine reason. Our autonomy is the expression in us of an ontology, known to metaphysical reflection as theonomy».

39 Martin Rhonheimer, *Autonomía y teonomía moral según la encíclica Veritatis splendor*, 560.

40 ST I-II, q. 19, a. 4.

41 This is precisely where it is evident that for Aquinas, strictly speaking, and considering the definition of law, self-legislation is not possible. «This means that, in essence, the law is an extrinsic principle of action, that is a reason or measure of the behavior of a subject different from the subject who conceives of and dictates that measure». Alfredo Cruz Prados, «Natural Law and Practical Philosophy: The Presence of a Theological Concept in Moral Knowledge» en A. M. González ed., *Contemporary Perspectives on Natural Law* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2008), 162.

3.2. *Unfolding to Natural Law Through Practical Reason*

The definition of natural law as a limiting concept⁴² is accurate: it is law –an extrinsic principle–, but it is natural insofar as it is an intrinsic principle that belongs to individuals. As we mentioned, it is not that individuals know an external law and then adopt it to apply it to specific actions. Instead, natural law is constituted by reason (*aliquid per rationem constitutum*)⁴³: individuals themselves promulgate it as the product of their reasoning based on certain naturally known first principles (*naturaliter notae*)⁴⁴. Natural law represents the fundamental moral knowledge that provides the first direction towards the end, the human good.⁴⁵ Therefore, natural law is an anthropological reality because it has an essentially cognitive character with principles that are naturally known, allowing human beings intellectual openness to moral good. It is important, thus, to differentiate this anthropological reality from the doctrine of natural law. The latter is subsequent in that it reflects the original moral experience of practical reason.

Following Rhonheimer, it can be affirmed that natural law is the only possible basis for the construction of universal ethics precisely because it is a cognitive reality that develops through the first and spontaneous judgments of practical reason. Natural law is primarily a topic of moral epistemology. However, if natural law is the natural mode of practical knowledge of human good, the problem arises as to how such knowledge is carried out. In this line of thought, *Veritatis Splendor* provides fundamental guidelines for moral

42 Ana Marta González, «Natural Law as a Limiting Concept: A Reading of Thomas Aquinas» en Ana Marta González ed., *Contemporary Perspectives on Natural Law* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2008), 11-25.

43 ST I-II, q. 94, a. 1.

44 This entails recognizing the axiological structure of practical reason as the ultimate truth criterion of moral discernment, or rather, recognizing the nature of reason. Participated theonomy accounts for the metaphysical foundation of the normative character of reason, while also acknowledging the consistency (ontological) of reason as a secondary cause. The fundamental problem of moral reason theorized by autonomous morality is that it lacks foundational axiological principles of practical truth. Thus, the transition from asserting the epistemological autonomy of moral reason to an ontological autonomy is inevitable.

45 ST I-II, q. 91, a. 2.

theologians that serve as an impetus for the study of moral knowledge, such as the relationship with nature (understood as natural inclinations), the complexity of moral experience, the relationship with moral virtues, and the relationship with faith.

3.2.1 *The relationship with natural inclinations*

The relationship between natural law and natural inclinations is the hinge of the relationship between nature and reason. The document of the International Theological Commission describes well the dualism that with different nuances has permeated, and currently permeates, some contemporary ethical currents.⁴⁶ The classical conception of practical reason is distinguished precisely from modern practical reason –whether Kantian or utilitarian– by its connection with nature. Inserted into the appetitive dynamics of the subject, practical reason has its starting point in the *appetibile*: the good is correlated with a tendency. This means that there can be no absolute grasp of the good independent of all inclination.

The scope of understanding the doctrine of participated theonomy requires highlighting the double participation in the eternal law that occurs in human beings: *per modum cognitionis* and *per modum actionis et passionis*.⁴⁷ According to Aquinas, Rhonheimer explains that

«all natural inclinations belong to the natural law; as such, however, they still do not have the character of a law. Instead, they form the natural basis upon which the law is constituted. The law, which becomes established as an *ordo ad debitum actum et finem* in the acts of the will, in sensitive urges, and in external behavior, is not just a ‘measurer’ (*mensurans*) but is at the same time a ‘measure’ (*mensura*): it is not just something that ‘scans’ or ‘reads off’ or ‘apply’ a measure that is there in nature but is itself the measure and rule».⁴⁸

⁴⁶ International Theological Commission, *In Search of a Universal Ethics*, no. 71.

⁴⁷ ST I-II, q. 93, a. 6.

⁴⁸ Martin Rhonheimer, *Natural Law and Practical Reason*, 70.

However, it is a rule and measure that belongs to human nature. This means that the natural inclination of reason cannot be the creator of order as if nothing were presupposed for its action. Although, indeed, the order that reason must impose on natural inclinations does not exist *a natura*, in the sense that this order is not the exclusive fruit of 'nature' understood in a physicalist key, it certainly is constituted *secundum naturam*, so it is not the creation of pure freedom.

The *ratio naturalis* –participated intellective light– can naturally apprehend a series of goods as conducive or perfective of human nature and, following them, formulate universal positive or negative precepts. These precepts are what Aquinas refers to as the three kinds of natural inclinations⁴⁹. Furthermore, for Aquinas, reason itself is not practical unless it is by reference to inclinations, and because it is not identical with the will, it cannot be said that its first principle is 'the ought'.⁵⁰ Hence the *ordinatio rationis* towards the *finis debitus*

«can never 'emancipate' itself from its moving principle, the *actus proprius* of the natural inclinations. The *ordinatio rationis* of the natural law is not a law that has these natural inclinations at its disposal, but is rather an ordering in the natural inclinations, since they are an expression of the plan of divine providence, at the level of the very structure of our being. They participate in the 'directive power' (*vis directiva*) of the eternal law. What is in man by nature (a natura) –the *praesupposita*– is not only participation of the eternal law, but also belongs indispensably to the natural law, even though it is not law as such».⁵¹

The *ratio naturalis* manifests the *ordinatio rationis* of natural inclinations which indicates the human mode of realization. This means that reason interprets natural inclination: only to the extent that it is interpreted and ordered by reason does it become the con-

49 ST I-II, q. 94, a. 2.

50 Note here an essential difference with Kant, who shares autonomous morality. For the German philosopher, reason aims to be practical apart from inclinations, which can only happen at the cost of identifying practical reason with will.

51 Martin Rhonheimer, *Natural Law and Practical Reason*, 250.

tent of a *praeceptum* and a *prosequendum* and belong to natural law, and therefore, be morally normative. Human nature reveals its normative significance precisely because human good is essentially a *bonum rationis*: a good of reason formulated by reason. Therefore, alongside biological ends, individuals have specific proper ends (*debitus*) of their nature that are nothing more than the rational regulation of their attainment since reason discovers a meaning beyond the mere functionality of the tendency. Hence, what is 'natural' in individuals is never equal to what is 'pre-rational'.⁵²

The difficulty in recognizing the double participation in eternal law by Autonomous morality lies in the understanding of 'human nature' mediated by the transcendental method, so that 'nature' is no longer considered as the dynamic principle of human essence from which normative indications for the same moral conduct are derived. In this context, *Veritatis Splendor* recalls the assertion that is often misinterpreted by Autonomous Morality and is fundamental for understanding the true meaning of natural law: the affirmation of the substantial unity of the human being in the duality of body and soul (no. 48). As the encyclical rightly declares, the 'creative reason' is the reason of a freedom that is opposed to 'nature' by considering it situated outside the realm of freedom (no. 46). Conversely,

«an autonomy that is conscious of being 'participated theonomy' has no problem with the idea that the elements of nature can also indicate their direction to human autonomy. Of course, the 'naturalness' of any data is never an argument in favor of their moral relevance. But such autonomy will treat 'the natural', in the ethical argument, in a completely different way than a reason that conceives itself as 'creative', as abandoned by God to the independence of a normative activity».⁵³

52 For Rhonheimer, this is a crucial point in the conceptualization of natural law. It is precisely on this issue that he presents significant differences with other natural law theorists, such as Jean Porter. Cf. Martin Rhonheimer, «The Moral Significance of Pre-Rational Nature in Aquinas: A Reply to Jean Porter (and Staley Hauerwas)», *The American Journal of Jurisprudence* 48 (2003): 253-280.

53 Martin Rhonheimer, *Autonomía y teonomía moral según la encíclica Veritatis splendor*, 568. See also: *Veritatis Splendor*, 47-50.

Understanding the double participation of eternal law in man allows for the reconstruction of an adequate concept of 'human nature' as rational nature, avoiding both a spiritualistic and a rationalistic view that does not do justice to human reality.

3.2.2 *The complexity of moral experience*

Natural law consists of the judgments of practical reason that contain what is reasonable by nature. However, these judgments are characterized by a certain complexity. Some are immediately evident and spontaneous (first principles⁵⁴); others derive from them because of a logical process and not as pure deduction. For this reason, the document of the International Theological Commission⁵⁵ advises prudence when invoking the evidence of the precepts of natural law.

Recognizing the universality of the precepts of natural law is not incompatible with moral pluralism within certain margins. This is explained by the cultural mediation through which these principles are known.⁵⁶ Both the surrounding ethos in which human life unfolds and the experiences it undergoes exert significant influence on the effectiveness of natural law. Indeed, the principles of natural law unfold from the universal level to be concretized in more imme-

54 Unlike some proponents of the New Natural Law Theory, Rhonheimer acknowledges that the first practical principle is also the first principle of morality, expressing the subject's constitution as both a practical and moral agent. This dual function is also shared by subsequent principles formulated by practical reason, such that they cannot be regarded as pre-moral principles. Cf. Martin Rhonheimer, «Ragione pratica e verità della soggettività», 85. A similar position in Alfredo Cruz Prados, *Deseo y verificación. La estructura fundamental de la ética* (Pamplona: Eunsá, 2015). For an overview of the main points of divergence between Rhonheimer and Jensen on the nature of practical principles: cf. Martin Rhonheimer, «The Perspective of Morality Revisited: A Response to Steven J. Jensen», *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 87/1 (2013): 165-196.

55 International Theological Commission, *In Search of a Universal Ethics*, no. 52.

56 «It is quite possible that, in various cognitive contexts—each one being culturally mediated and provided with a corresponding ethos—the identical practical principles can lead to different socially recognized norms of behavior. (...) In fact, the morality of specific ethnicities and groups can provide examples of how identical moral principles such as the golden rule, the prohibition of murder, formation of solidarity between generations, respect for property, and the like can find an expression at the level of the concrete ethos that vary and in part contradict each other». Martin Rhonheimer, *The Perspective of Morality: Philosophical Foundations of Thomistic Virtue Ethics* (Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 338.

diate principles of operation through a process (*inventio*) that is not a direct linear derivation from the universal principle. Instead, it is a reflective circular process in which natural reason deepens its understanding of the principle based on the experience of particulars and, through *reditio*, can discover the internal cognitive connection between a concrete good and the principles. Therefore, this process takes on the character of a narrative structure in which the human person develops as a moral subject over time.⁵⁷ And it is precisely in the unfolding of this process that some obstacles to the full effectiveness of natural law may be encountered.

In this line, what Rodríguez Luño proposes is interesting:

«What is decisive in determining whether a moral assertion is of natural law is not so much the immediate or mediate character of its evidence, but the fact that it has a necessary connection with first principles (or virtues). If that necessary connection exists, even if it takes time for men to discover it, we are dealing with a precept of natural law».⁵⁸

The pursuit of universal ethics should therefore spare no effort to demonstrate the connection between secondary (and tertiary) precepts of natural law with the first ones. In this context, it is interesting to note that Aquinas admits three possibilities for the discursive actualization of natural reason: *notitia per seipsum* (through the participation of natural reason in eternal law); instruction (doctrine), and Revelation.⁵⁹ However, in all these modalities, it is a discursive actualization of the natural reason of what is potentially contained in the first principles, so they only differ in the way such actualization is carried out: while *notitia per seipsum* takes place by the subject himself, both in instruction and in Revelation, such actualization takes place through the assistance of external aid, by which there is a genuine process of knowledge. The understanding

57 Cf. Martin Rhonheimer, *Natural Law and Practical Reason*, 268-273. See also Pamela Hall, *Narrative and the Natural Law. An interpretation of Thomistic Ethics* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1994); Giuseppe Abbà, *Le virtù per la felicità* (Roma: LAS, 2018).

58 Ángel Rodríguez Luño, *Ética General* (Pamplona: Eunsas, 2001), 257. The translation is ours.

59 ST I, q. 60, a. 2; ST II-II, q. 47, a. 15.

of the nature of practical reason, and its need for discursive actualization, show that neither instruction nor Revelation imply a heteronomy that threatens cognitive autonomy.

Veritatis Splendor acknowledges that the dechristianization that weighs on humanity necessarily entails a darkening of moral sense due to the eclipse of moral principles (no. 106). Consequently, in the current historical-salvific regime,

«man is able to recognize good and evil thanks to that discernment of good from evil which he himself carries out by his reason, in particular by his reason enlightened by Divine Revelation and by faith, through the law which God gave to the Chosen People, beginning with the commandments on Sinai (no. 44)».

With this, it is worth recognizing that in the context of the development of secondary principles, faith plays a fundamental role in aiding the full intelligibility of natural law. Faith –understood in its cognitive dimension– can fully participate in the inventive process of practical reason in the form of doctrine, thereby contributing to the explication of conclusions potentially contained within the principles of synderesis, that is, the common principles.

3.3.3 *Natural law in the context of virtue ethics*

Conceiving natural law with Aquinas as the set of natural principles of practical reason opens the way to understanding the intimate relationship between the precepts of natural law and moral virtues. Man has a ‘natural inclination to act according to reason’, that is, to live according to virtue, whose acts are imposed by natural law.⁶⁰ Indeed, moral virtues are a type of *ordinatio rationis*: as habits, they are the order of reason ‘impressed’ on the concupiscible, irascible, and rational appetite. But while natural law accounts for the intellectual possession of such ends, it is the moral virtue that guarantees the effectiveness of those ends, that is, that they are

60 ST I-II, q. 94, a. 3.

stably principles of praxis, since it is the desire for a virtuous end that constitutes a particular practical principle from which the deliberative process of practical reason departs. The ‘truth of subjectivity’ –of which natural law is the foundation at the level of principles– is guaranteed by the possession of moral virtues, which give full efficacy to natural law. Precisely because natural law is a cognitive reality –the most basic part of moral knowledge– its efficacy in influencing and guiding moral reasoning depends on all those factors that can interfere with the correct process of reason, particularly the inner dispositions of the subject. In this context, we can affirm that only the virtuous person is fully reasonable.

It is necessary to insist on this idea: natural law is not an object of moral knowledge but a certain type of moral knowledge (practical, preceptive), whose integrity is negatively affected by sin, vice, and disordered passions. It is precisely the intelligence of *natural law as the law of reason* that can explain why natural law fails. It is then understood why Thomas admits the possibility of the abolition of natural law.⁶¹

Recognizing the intrinsic relationship between natural law and moral virtues opens the perspective of an ethics that can –paradoxically at the same time– reasonably claim to be accepted by any person of good judgment (intellectual dimension of virtues: principles of practical reason) and explain why it is not –or may not be– accepted by some people (due to their inner dispositions or cultural causes).⁶² An ethics of natural law is universal because it corresponds to the logos of human nature. However, it will remain questioned and controversial due to the fallen nature of human beings, which explains the loss of the perfections that guarantee the functioning of practical reason. It is the task of theology to show how the redemption and grace of Christ save practical reason and allow it to recover full rationality and, with it, the effectiveness of natural law.

61 ST I-II, q. 94, a. 6.

62 Martin Rhonheimer, «Natural Law as a «Work of Reason»: Understanding the Metaphysics of Participated Theonomy», *American Journal of Jurisprudence* 55/1 (2010): 41-77.

3.2.4 *Natural law as a bridge for dialogue with Moral Theology*

It is the state of fallen nature that explains the relative cognitive autonomy of natural law. Indeed, natural law needs the complement of Christian Revelation and faith to acquire all its directive force. In this context, *Veritatis Splendor* acknowledges the distance between what reason –in principle– can justify as morally normative, and what seems reasonable considering real human possibilities (no. 102-105). This means that it is necessary to distinguish between the possibilities of practical reason as an intellectual power that promulgates natural law and the situation of the concrete person in which natural law unfolds until it becomes fully effective in moral virtue. In the context of this difference, it is possible to understand the scope of Christian faith in shaping moral life. The difference between a Christian and one who is not accounts for the different ways in which the law of *fomes peccati* dominates the human person and is capable, therefore, of obscuring the light of the intellect by perverting the judgment of reason and making natural law ineffective.⁶³ In this context, *Veritatis Splendor*'s affirmation is unequivocal: «Only in the mystery of Christ's Redemption do we discover the concrete possibilities of man» (no. 103).

In the process of moral perception, it is possible to distinguish between two intimately related levels. On the one hand, the level of natural law, the apprehension of human goods as such, and on the other hand, judgment about the practical possibilities of achieving good, which depends on personal experience. It is precisely at this second level that man encounters other experiences that conflict with the natural knowledge of human good. Certainly, the human experience is characterized by instances of dysfunction that conflict with the basic understanding of what it means to be human.

63 Martin Rhonheimer, «L'azione umana e Dio: autonomia e teonomia morale in san Tommaso d'Aquino. Sulla legge naturale, segno dell'immagine di Dio nell'uomo» en Juan José Pérez Soba y Eleonora Stefanyan eds., *L'azione, fonte di novità. Teoria dell'azione e compimento nella persona: ermeneutiche a confronto* (Siena: Cantagalli, 2010), 224.

Examples of such experiences are the law of *fomes peccati*, the reality of death, the experience of having to suffer injustices, illness, pain, conflicts, powerlessness in the face of the power of evil, and misery. Consequently, the good and ‘the ought’ presented by natural law, and expressed (reflectively) in the moral norm, can appear as an achievable ideal rather than as a morally binding imperative or as a moral absolute, since «human good as practical good can only exercise its function as a normative foundation of action in the horizon of knowledge of the basic possibility of attainment and realization of those goods. No ‘ought’ allow knowledge of something that exceeds rational expectations about human capacity».⁶⁴ In this context, faith plays a decisive role, both for the perception of human good and for its realization. Indeed, «although it is true that this human element possesses for all men the same content and that this content possesses in principle a rationality independent of faith, can this content, with its own rationality, be objectified and accessible in the same way to the believer and the unbeliever? »⁶⁵ We agree that the answer can only be negative.

The status of Moral Theology is twofold: on the one hand, it accepts and investigates Revelation, and on the other hand, it responds to the demands of human reason. That is, it is moral knowledge, and it is Theology: the principle and end of moral behavior is Christ. However, the way of conceiving practical reason must make possible the harmonious continuity between human ethics and Christian faith. When *Veritatis Splendor* refers to ‘rightful moral autonomy,’ it is precisely addressing this point. This implies that not every interpretation of practical reason is valid. Indeed, autonomous rationality and modern practical reason — frequently referenced by Benedict XVI— pose challenges to the Christological foundation of morality. It is the role of Theology to resolve the epistemological

64 Martin Rhonheimer, «Moral cristiana y desarrollo humano. Sobre la existencia de una moral de lo humano específicamente cristiana» en A. Sarmiento, T. Rincón, J.M. Yanguas et al. eds. *La misión del laico en la Iglesia y en el mundo. VIII Simposio Internacional de Teología de la Universidad de Navarra* (Pamplona: Euns, 1987), 927.

65 Martin Rhonheimer, *Moral cristiana y desarrollo humano*, 929.

issue of integrating the rational dimension appropriately within the Christological perspective. This requires an ethical mediation that is both well-grounded in practical reason and aligned with the Christological framework. As Bellocq asserts, «the differences in the foundations of contemporary moral theology appear to stem from a deeper cause: the underlying issue driving this lack of unity in direction is the search for a sound theory of our moral rationality».⁶⁶

Understanding practical rationality from the perspective of virtue ethics, which recognizes virtues as the principles of practical reason and as determining elements for both the perception and realization of human good, allows for a harmonious integration with the principles of the Christian life. It is precisely these principles that are integrated into a theological context and, consequently, are renewed. The New Law consists mainly of infused habits—new virtuous principles—and the gifts of the Holy Spirit, which inform the Christian's actions by integrating into the natural dynamism of action. By assuming and elevating it according to the measure of the supernatural order, they enable man to be ordered toward the ultimate supernatural end and regulate his conduct accordingly.⁶⁷ Far from compromising moral autonomy, this approach highlights the value of 'rightful moral autonomy'.

Conclusion

Thirty years after its publication, *Veritatis Splendor* remains a key reference for Moral Theology. Although the positions of proponents of Autonomous Morality have softened, it is still possible to find theses aligned with this theological current.

In light of the encyclical's teaching on natural law, this article has highlighted the close relationship between moral autonomy

⁶⁶ Arturo Bellocq, *Desiderare e agire. La razionalità pratica alla base della Teologia Morale* (Roma:Edusc, 2020), 14. The translation is ours.

⁶⁷ Cf. María Soledad Paladino, «Hacia la inteligencia de la vida moral cristiana», *Espiritu* LXXII (166) (2023): 363-382.

and practical reason. The articulation of the ontological dimension of natural law (participated theonomy) and its epistemological dimension (virtues) provides a necessary propaedeutic for the Christological foundation of morality.

Bibliography

- Abbà, Giuseppe. *Le virtù per la felicità*. Roma: LAS, 2018.
- Auer, Alfons. *Autonome Moral und christlicher Glaube*. Düsseldorf: Patmos Verlag, 1984².
- . «L'autonomia della morale secondo Tommaso d'Aquino». En *Fede cristiana e agire morale*. Assisi: Cittadella Editrice, 1980: 32-61.
- Bellocq, Arturo e Inza, Francisco. *Avviamento alla Teologia Morale. Natura, metodo, storia*. Roma: Edusc 2024².
- Bellocq, Arturo. *Desiderare e agire. La razionalità pratica alla base della Teología Morale*. Roma: Edusc, 2020.
- Böckle, Franz. *Fundamentalmoral*. München: Kösel 1977.
- . «Theonomie und Autonomie der Vernunft». En *Fortschritt wohin? Zur Problem der Normenfindung in der pluralen Gesellschaft*. Oelmüller, Willi ed. Düsseldorf: Patmos-Verlag, 1972.
- . «Theonome Rationalität als Prinzip der Normbegründung bei Thomas von Aquin und Gabriel Vázquez». En *Atti del Congresso Internazionale (Roma- Napoli 17-24 aprile 1974) Tommaso d'Aquino nel suo settimo centenario, Vol. V: L'agire morale*. Napoli: Edizioni Domenicane Italiane, 1977.
- Cruz Cruz, Juan. *Intelecto y razón. Las coordenadas del pensamiento clásico*. Pamplona: Eunsa, 1998².
- Cruz Prados, Alfredo. *Deseo y verificación. La estructura fundamental de la ética*. Pamplona: Eunsa, 2015.
- . «Natural Law and Practical Philosophy: The Presence of a Theological Concept in Moral Knowledge». En *Contemporary*

- Perspectives on Natural Law*. González, Ana Marta ed. Hampshire: Ashgate, 2008.
- González, Ana Marta. «Natural Law as a Limiting Concept: A Reading of Thomas Aquinas». En *Contemporary Perspectives on Natural Law*. González Ana Marta ed. Hampshire: Ashgate, 2008.
- Hall, Pamela. *Narrative and the Natural Law. An interpretation of Thomistic Ethics*. Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1994.
- International Theological Commission. *In Search of a Universal Ethics: A New Look at the Natural Law*, 2009.
- Paladino, María Soledad. «Hacia la inteligencia de la vida moral cristiana». *Espíritu* LXXII (166) (2023): 363-382.
- . *Autonomía teónoma y teonomía participada. Hacia una comprensión de la justa autonomía moral a partir de Veritatis Splendor*. Roma: Edusc, 2019.
- Pope John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, August 6, 1993.
- Pope Benedict XVI. Speech to the Members of the International Theological Commission, December 1, 2005.
- . Speech at the University of Regensburg, September 12, 2006.
- . Message for the Celebration of the 40th World Day of Peace, January 1, 2007.
- . Speech to the Participants of the Plenary Session of the International Theological Commission, October 5, 2007.
- . *Caritas in Veritate*, June 29, 2009.
- . Speech to the participants of the plenary session of the International Theological Commission, December 3, 2010.
- Rhonheimer, Martin. «Natural Law as ‘Participated Theonomy’: Retrieving a Christian Tradition for the Renewal of Moral Theology». *Josephinum Journal of Theology* 20(2) (2013): 258-268.
- . «The Perspective of Morality Revisited: A Response to Steven J. Jensen». *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 87(1) (2013): 165-196.

- . *The Perspective of Morality: Philosophical Foundations of Thomistic Virtue Ethics*. Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2011.
- . «Natural Law and Moral Reasoning: At the Roots of Aquina's Moral Epistemology». *Josephinum Journal of Theology* 17(2) (2010): 341-381.
- . «Natural Law as a "Work of Reason". Understanding the Metaphysics of Participated Theonomy». *American Journal of Jurisprudence* 55(1) (2010): 41-77.
- . «L'azione umana e Dio: autonomia e teonomia morale in san Tommaso d'Aquino. Sulla legge naturale, segno dell'immagine di Dio nell'uomo». En *L'azione, fonte di novità. Teoria dell'azione e compimento nella persona: ermeneutiche a confronto*. Pérez Soba, Juan José y Stefanyan, Eleonora eds. Siena: Cantagalli, 2010.
- . «Ragione pratica e verità della soggettività: l'autoesperienza del soggetto morale alle radici della metafisica e dell'antropologia». En *Ripensare la metafisica. La filosofia primera tra teologia e altri saperi*. Romera, Luis ed. Roma: Armando, 2005.
- . «The Moral Significance of Pre-Rational Nature in Aquinas: A Reply to Jean Porter (and Staley Hauerwas)». *The American Journal of Jurisprudence* 48 (2003): 253-280.
- . *Natural Law and Practical Reason. A Thomist View of Moral Autonomy*. Oxford: Fordham University Press, 2000.
- . «Autonomía y teonomía moral según la encíclica Veritatis Splendor». En *Comentarios a la Veritatis Splendor*. Del Pozo Abejón, Gerardo ed. Madrid: BAC, 1994.
- . «Moral cristiana y desarrollo humano. Sobre la existencia de una moral de lo humano específicamente cristiana». En *La misión del laico en la Iglesia y en el mundo. VIII Simposio Internacional de Teología de la Universidad de Navarra*. Sarmiento, Augusto, Rincón, Tomás, Yanguas José María et al. eds. Pamplona: Eunsa, 1987.

Rodríguez Luño, Ángel. «El significado de la *Veritatis splendor* para la teología moral». *Scripta Theologica* 55(1) (2023): 101-126.

———. «La novedad de la fe como criterio de interpretación y actuación para la existencia moral». En *La verdad os hará libres. Congreso internacional sobre la encíclica Veritatis splendor*. Scarponi, Carlos ed. Pontificia Universidad Católica Argentina. Buenos Aires: Ediciones Paulinas, 2005.

———. *Ética General*, Pamplona: Eunsa, 2001.

S. Thomae Aquinatis, *Opera omnia ut sunt in Indice Thomistico additis 61 scriptis ex alii Medii Aevi auctoribus*, R., Busa (ed.), Stuttgart – Bad Cannstadt, Frommann – Holzboog 1980, vol. 2 *Summa contra Gentiles, Autographi Deleta, Summa Theologiae*; vol. 3 *Quaestiones Disputate, Quaestiones Quodlibetales, Opuscula*.

Trigo, Tomás. *El debate sobre la especificidad de la moral cristiana*. Pamplona: Eunsa, 2003.