Conscience and the Person

WILLIAM NORRIS CLARKE
FORDHAM UNIVERSITY
U.S.A.

Conscience and the person fit together inseparably. There is no ma-
ture person without the voice of conscience, and no conscience save
in a person. Conscience is also perhaps the most distinctive expression
of what it means to be a person, in the two main aspects of the person;
that is to say, it is the most distinctive expression of what it means to be
human, and of what it means to be me. Let us see how this is the case.

What Is Conscience?

Understanding what is called “conscience” is clearly at the heart of
any adequate theory of morality.¹ Yet, as one author has put it: “‘Con-
science is another word like ‘sin’—often used but little understood. Try-
ing to explain conscience is like trying to nail jello to the wall; just when
you think you have it pinned down, part of it begins to slip away.” To
explain exactly how conscience works is indeed difficult. But the main
lines of what conscience is and of the role it plays in our moral lives
seem to me to be clear enough, and accessible to all—fortunately so,
since “Follow your conscience” is one of the fundamental principles of
the moral life.

¹ For good introductions, see the three articles on “Conscience” in New Catholic
Theology, by Sean Fagan, S.M. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1987), 226-30; Encyclo-
pedia of Theology: The Concise Sacramentum Mundi, ed. by K. Rahner (NY, Seabury,
1975), 283-88, by Rudolf Hoffman; also Conscience: Its Freedom and Implications
(Fordham Univ. Press, 1971), ed. by William Bier, S.J.; Walter Conn, Conscience; De-
velopment and Self-Transcendence (Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1981);
For what is specific to Christian morality, I have found very useful and insightful the
book of Richard Gula, S., Reason Informed by Faith: Foundations of Catholic Morali-
ty (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1989).
Let us first pin down what we are talking about in our experience when we speak of "my conscience." This refers to that "inner voice" that advises me and commands me in the presence of a moral decision as to how to act in a given concrete situation: "This action is good; you ought to do it, you should do it"; or "This action is evil; you should not do it." That "inner voice" does not just declare what is good to do or evil to avoid; it declares as well an obligation to do the good, speaking to us with a certain authority, and coming to us from some higher source. This is what we all experience when our individual moral conscience begins to manifest itself clearly enough from around the age of six or seven on. I am talking here about the actual experience—the phenomenology, if you will—of conscience that the vast majority of mature human beings have, however, they may describe or explain it. I am not talking of the various explanatory theories of philosophers and professional psychologists, many of whom, of course, have denied or tried to explain away the validity and authority of conscience as the authentic voice of reason (e.g., Freud, various materialist reductionists, etc.)

But just what is this "inner voice" we call "conscience"? Where does it come from and what is its role in my personal life? We must first distinguish it from the "superego"—a term first coined by Freud—which seems like it in many ways and is often confused with it by immature people. The superego is an inner censor of our actions, telling us what to do or not to do, using the potent threat of guilt if we do not obey. It is superimposed on our own consciousness, not as our authentic inner voice, but as the voice of some human authority outside of us (parents, teachers, society, etc.), that we listen to, not as expressing the values we ourselves understand and accept as such, but because we fear losing the love and approval of these outside authority figures and being rejected by them. Children start off this way, but are supposed to grow out of it to develop their own authentic voice of conscience; some adults, however, never quite grow out of it, remaining like moral children all or most of their lives.

The voice of authentic moral conscience, on the other hand, speaks to us as our own inner voice, commanding us in the name of our own better selves, in terms of values which we ourselves understand and have internalized as our own, as though our own better selves were guiding us, at the same time that they were expressing the voice of some higher, more ultimate authority.
What, then, is the nature of this authentically personal moral conscience, this inner judge of which we speak metaphorically in terms of a "voice"? I shall be following here the main lines of St. Thomas' theory of conscience, because it seems to me to be the most satisfactory. When St. Thomas first introduced it in the 13th century, in the midst of intense discussion and conflicting opinions on the subject, it seemed uncomfortably novel to many, even dangerous with regard to his firm teaching on the obligation to follow even an erroneous conscience—which many at the time explicitly rejected. But the powerful clarity and coherent unity of his doctrine gradually won out and the doctrine itself went on to become what now is the most widely accepted tradition among Catholic thinkers.²

Conscience is not constituted by a feeling or emotion, although it can be accompanied by strong emotions when we resonate emotionally positively or negatively with the values or disvalues that shine forth to us when we are making a judgment of conscience. It is not a special faculty or power of the soul distinct from both intellect and will. It is not an act of the will or a combination of intellect and will, like the free will decision. According to St. Thomas, it is a strictly cognitive act, a judgment of our reason, which applies the basic innate orientation of the human spirit toward the total human good, our final end, to the particular situation confronting us and calling for decision here and now. This basic orientation toward the total good that is our final end St. Thomas calls "the natural law imprinted in our hearts by God," (synderesis as the medievals called it after Aristotle), a participation in the divine law in God's intellect which is his plan for our happiness and final destiny. The latter by itself, however, remains very general, including the intuitive grasp of the first principle of practical intelligence, "Do good and avoid evil," and of a small number of basic general goods to be pursued and evils avoided. But our actual moral life is lived out in the day to day particular moral judgments called for by the particular situations here and now confronting us as our life unfolds. We need some power to mediate between this general orientation toward the good and the particular instances of moral good and evil confronting

²Cf. the article by Leo Elders mentioned in f.n. 1, and St. Thomas, De Veritate, q. 17; Summa Theol., I-II, q. 19.
us in the existential order, or if you will, to apply the general to the particular in the order of moral action. This is precisely the role of conscience: nourished by this deep natural ordination toward the good, to judge just how to apply it to the particular situation now facing me and declare that this is the good act I ought to do or the evil I should avoid here and now.

St. Thomas insists—insightfully, I think—that the voice of conscience is a judgment of my reason alone addressed to my whole person declaring, “This is the good you ought to do, [or] the evil you ought to avoid.” Conscience, in that sense, is both a declaration of fact and the authoritative imposition of an obligation to act this way or that, which has in it the nature of a command, a “moral imperative,” as it is called: “Do this, avoid that.” But an ought, a moral obligation, is not a compulsion. It is still up to me to decide freely with my whole person—in tellect, will, emotions all working together—just how I am in fact going to act, either following the moral command of my reason, ignoring it or rejecting it.

This voice of conscience operates both antecedently, before my free decision, either as guiding me through warning or command, and consequentially, after the decision, by praise or blame. It is thus an expression of one of the fundamental roles of reason in a rational being: to impose order on the multiplicity of our experience by discerning the priority of values and the relation of means to ends, and to guide the will—or, more correctly, the whole person—in choosing wisely between the finite goods offered me, in view of moving effectively toward the final end inscribed in our natures. Note the profound difference between this classical conception of reason as the wise guide of all our other faculties, counseling us as to the ends and means we choose to fulfill our innate destiny, and the conception of reason of not a few later thinkers for whom, because reason can no longer attain truth, can no longer be the guide of our actions, becoming merely the skilled instrument for helping us to attain what we desire, to get what we want, the servant of will rather than its master. One thinks in this regard of the revealing statement of Madonna: “I hate the Catholic Church because it is always trying to keep me from doing what I want to do”—notice, not “what is good to do,” but what I want to do.

Because the “voice of conscience” manifests itself not just as giving advice but as commanding us, laying an obligation upon us, in the mode
of a judge—which we are free to follow or reject but not to abolish or change at will—it has taken on, almost universally, in all the past cultures we know, the aspect of "the voice of God," or of some higher power guiding us toward the authentic good for which we are destined, or at the very least, of "the voice of our inner (or higher, better, authentic) self," which we should respect and listen to if it is our wish to become truly good persons, deserving of the respect of others. Or perhaps, more accurately, it has taken on the aspect of the voice of my inner true self, which is inspired by and echoes the voice of the higher power that made me and holds me responsible for my actions. Thus an ancient Egyptian text tells us, "The heart [by which is meant the living wisdom of the whole person as a unity of mind, heart, and emotions] is an excellent witness. One must stand in fear of departing from its guidance." Immanuel Kant describes it as "the consciousness of an interior court of justice in man," the Second Vatican Council: as "man's most secret core and sanctuary." The Vatican II declaration continues: "Deep within his conscience man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey" (Vat. II, G.S. 16). But the most eloquent description I know of is also one of the oldest, that of the Roman philosopher Seneca in a letter to his young friend Lucilius:

God is near you, he is with you, he is within you. Thus do I say, Lucilius: a sacred and august spirit resides within us, and takes stock of our good and evil actions, and is the guardian and avenger of our deeds (Letter 41.1).

St. Thomas explains why it is appropriate for us to call the voice of conscience "the voice of God." Since it lays on us or binds us with a moral obligation that is unconditional, a "categorical imperative," as Kant later put it, it is not possible for human reason on its own to bind the person owning it, to bind its own self authoritatively and unconditionally. That can only derive from some higher authority that has power over us, that ultimately is God speaking through the innate necessary orientation toward the ultimate good imprinted in our hearts by the Creator of our nature as the natural law, which is a participation in the divine law in the mind of God exercising providence over us. Yet, since this voice of conscience is not directly and immediately the voice of God speaking within us, but only as mediated though our own imperfect human reason, marked by its own history, it can be fallible and, in certain cases, even erroneous. But we must still follow it, until corrected, as our im-
mediate guide to moral action, for, as Aquinas says, "Every human being must act according to reason, the reason that he himself has from God, whether natural or infused." (De Ver., 17, 5)

How Does It Operate?

The practical judgment of conscience is not arrived at by some abstract argument or logical deduction from some more general set of moral principles, requiring special intellectual training or skills, or high theoretical intellectual development. It is not really a philosophical type of activity at all. Most of the time, i.e., when the moral values at stake emerge clearly enough, it manifests itself as a spontaneous, quasi-intuitive judgment that sizes up the whole concrete situation which confronts me in a moral decision, together with its relation to me and how it resonates with my own basic moral commitment to the good in my journey towards my ultimate fulfillment. That is, it sees in a kind of intuitive insight how it all fits together—it lights up to the mind, so to speak, in a kind of flash—then immediately speaks to me in a command, "This is the good demanding your response here, do it!" or "This is evil, a violation of your moral commitment to be a good person, a denial of your authentic self, don't do it!" St. Thomas Aquinas sometimes speaks of it as a kind of "knowledge by connaturality," a knowledge not by abstract concepts or purely intellectual reasoning, but by a certain existential affinity and resonance of your whole person—mind, will, heart all working together—with the moral goodness involved, or by dissonance and repulsion in the presence of evil. The judgment is strictly concrete and existential, focused on the situation here and now before me, although the general principle or value involved can shine forth, so to speak, as applying here and now. Thus a well-developed, sensitive conscience does not at all require that one be an educated person, or possess a highly developed speculative intelligence. Luckily so—for otherwise either the process would work too slowly to meet the often urgent needs of

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action or else only the well-educated could develop a mature conscience—neither of which is the case, as we know from experience.

The *mature conscience* does require (1) a certain *self-possession* through self-consciousness and the ability to *reflect* on one’s actions; and (2) a basic *commitment* of oneself as a person to the moral good, to live as a good person, which is the conscious taking possession and ratification of the deep innate drive of our nature as finalized towards its ultimate good, put in us by our Creator before our conscious moral life begins; this makes us *want* to discern the authentic moral good in the present situation; and (3) a certain fund of *practical life experience* from which we have learned to recognize the most probable consequences of certain types of actions, expressed by the maxim, “Actions have consequences.” (That, by the way, is why the best way train to train young people, or help anyone, to make good moral decisions is not to tell them what to do, but to help them see the *consequences* of their possible choices and face up to them, “do you really want these consequences to happen?” “Can you live at peace with them?” This moment of reflection allows the values involved to shine forth, so to speak, in their relation to me in this situation, or to be grasped by my practical life-oriented intelligence, which in turn responds spontaneously, if I do not block it, in such a way as to enable it to carry out its natural role of ordering my life and commanding my will as a rational being); and (4) The *personalization* of this voice is conscience, so that I am at least implicitly aware that this is genuinely my own judgment, proceeding from insight into the values which I have personally internalized and expressing my own authentic self and/or the voice of a higher authority (recognized as such—not just the voice of some other human person received passively from outside, such as parents, the society in which I live, my peer group, etc., to which I bow from fear of unpleasant consequences) speaking within me. A certain level of honest self-knowledge is required for this.

In St. Thomas’ explanation of the underlying structure of moral action he posits as a necessary *presupposition* of the above phenomenological description the innate positive *dynamism of the whole person*, intellect and will, *toward the final good* which defines our nature—the so-called natural law imprinted in our hearts by God our Creator—i.e., the natural orientation of the intellect toward recognizing being as truly good, plus the natural orientation of the will toward union with the
authentic good fulfilling our nature—which in fact can only be the Infinite Good. It is this deep pre-conscious dynamism of the whole person, as consciously recognized and ratified by the mature conscience—which is the inner dynamo or source of psychic energy impelling the practical intelligence to spontaneously discern the appropriate or morally good action in the situation by which I am confronted, and then to carry it out, yet another step in the direction of my authentic final fulfillment rather than an obstacle. I am not obliged to follow this command of conscience, of course, since it does not force my freedom but only lays a claim of moral obligation upon me. But without this a priori natural orientation toward the good, there would be no spontaneous impulse on the part of practical reason to discern and command us to choose the good and avoid the evil in this particular case. As Rudolf Hoffman comments insightfully in his fine article on conscience in Karl Rahner's Encyclopedia of Theology:

As with every genuine appreciation of value, an attitude of reverence and love [for the good] is an essential pre-condition both for the development and for the activity of conscience. (285 A).

It is worthy of note that in late medieval thought (notably Scotus, Ockham, the Nominalists, a number of post-Thomistic scholastics), and in much of modern and contemporary Western thought (Freud, Sartre etc.), this innate orientation of the will toward the good, its inclination to follow the guidance of reason, is submerged or denied, with the result that the will has become a radically autonomous faculty, independent of the intellect, and indifferent or neutral in itself toward any good, even the profound pull of the Infinite Good, so that free choice proceeds from a radically free, intellectually unmoored will. This is the well-known tradition known as voluntarism, manifest in the insistence of Scotus, and especially Ockham, that no other reason can be given why the will is free than that it is in fact free, for such is its nature, and that any attempt to ground it more deeply in intelligence leads to determinism and undermines its absolute freedom toward all goods, including the Infinite Good. This is the inspiration behind the political philosophy of the absolute power of the monarch (king, emperor, etc.), who can declare, when asked for some justification of his commands: “Let my will stand in place of any reason” (Stet pro ratione voluntas.). In such a tradition, moral goodness is profoundly transformed: it is no longer
obedience to the voice of conscience as speaking for my own reason's insight into the good, nor a participation in the divine wisdom, but obedience, rather, to a divine command simply because it is commanded, willed by God. And this will of God is so inscrutable to our reason that God, in fact, if he had wanted to, could have turned all the Ten Commandments, except the first, upside down so as to command the opposite. We would, as such, be morally obliged to "commit adultery, steal, lie, murder, etc.," and not be in a position to question the reason for our being so obliged. "In fact, God has not commanded thus, but he could have." This is the so-called "divine command ethics," which seems to have been the position of the original Calvinists and Lutherans, who were opposed to philosophical or purely rational attempts to justify morality or solve moral problems. This is clearly quite a different explanation of the structure of conscience from the Thomistic one, which we have been drawing upon here. We will not argue this point further.

The Limitations of Conscience

1. Conscience can be uncertain. In perhaps the majority of moral situations which confront us along the path of our lives, the moral values involved shine forth clearly enough so that conscience can, quickly enough, size up the situation and speak out its command without much hesitation, as difficult as it might be for us to acquiesce to its commands. But not rarely we will be faced with situations so complex, where the priority of values involved will be so obscure, that we will be unable to see clearly the appropriate moral decision to make. In such a case, conscience can for some time remain prudently suspended, while we unravel the various apparent conflicts of values and bring some order into the complexity. A mature conscience should itself warn us here not to jump too quickly before we can see clearly.

Sometimes we can never reach this clarity despite our sincerest efforts. Then, since we may have to act in real life, we can decide to follow one path of action as the most plausible accessible to my reason here and now. Another equally good and committed moral person may decide the opposite according to his practical decision made in good faith. Both will be acting morally within the context of how far their limited vision can guide them. That is all we are asked to do. "For every human being," St. Thomas tells us, "is obliged to act according to rea-
son, i.e., the reason which he or she actually possesses, whether natural or supernaturally infused,” not anybody else’s (De Veritate, q. 17, art. 5 ad 4). It is part of our basic human dignity as persons to take responsibility for our own journey toward God.

2. Conscience is fallible. Although the voice of conscience is ultimately, like the natural law of which it is an application, a participation in the divine law for us, and so an echo of the voice of God, it is so only through the mediation of our own finite and imperfect intelligence, which can be fallible not only as speculative but as practical. It can fail to grasp or can misread the relevant moral values involved in a particular situation, or even misread the actual situation itself, and this for many reasons proper to its own history: lack of mature self-awareness, lack of ability or willingness to reflect on one’s actions and their probable consequences, distorted training by parents or other social influences which induce biases or blindspots in the recognition of certain moral values, lack of adequate life experience to interpret accurately what is at stake in the situation before one, especially if it is complicated, impatience or undue haste in making judgments, even previous bad habits of ignoring or rejecting the voice of conscience, etc., etc.

Nonetheless, fallible and even erroneous though it may be in a particular case, we must in the last analysis follow what our conscience clearly command us to do with certainty, after we have sincerely tried our best to come to a reasonable decision, since our own reason is the ultimate immediate norm of all responsible human action. We must act according to the light we have, dim or even distorted though it may be, since it is a decision we are personally responsible for. However, we also have the moral obligation coming from a mature conscience to try our best to make our conscience a well-informed one, and, in this regard, to solicit the help of others as we seek to come to a decision as objectively as we can, and as close to authentic moral wisdom. (De Ver., q. 17, art. 4; Sum. Theol., I-II, q. 19, art. 5).

St. Thomas is uncompromising on the obligation to follow the voice of my own personal conscience, to act according to the light of my reason, the reason that God has given to me personally. We now take this position for granted; it has become the central position of traditional Catholic philosophy and theology. But it was quite an innovation when St. Thomas first introduced it in the 13th century. The Franciscan masters and most others, even his own master, St. Albert the Great, were
teaching that, out of respect for the divine law, expressed in the natural essences and order of things, it was a sin to follow an erroneous conscience. St. Thomas broke decisively with this tradition, standing at the cutting edge of, and giving precise expression to, a dramatic new wave of awakening of medieval consciousness to the interiority and personalization of the moral and psychological life. It began with Abelard’s introduction of the interior intention of the personal subject as a crucial element in the constitution of the moral act, provoked intense discussion within the university faculties, and was given mature technical expression by St. Thomas himself. What it meant was that in the analysis of the moral act, the good that was the object of the will’s free moral choice was no longer the objective good in itself, but the good as presented to me by my own personal reason, the reason that I have from God, natural or infused. This is a dramatic affirmation of the dignity of the individual moral subject, personal and free, as Chenu puts it in his illuminating brief study of the awakening of personal consciousness in the medieval civilization of the 12th and 13th centuries. St. Thomas, however, hastens to restore the balance with the objectivity of morality by adding that the objective moral goodness of an act in itself is still determined by conformity with the objective norm of right reason (recta ratio), i.e., reason as properly ordered to the human final end in accordance with nature. And one has an ever-present personal obligation of conscience to try to conform one’s conscience as closely as possible to this ideal of objective moral wisdom.

Conscience as Privileged Manifestation of Personhood

From all this it emerges that this remarkable human endowment of conscience, though not the only one, is one of the most privileged places where the distinctive characteristics of personhood—both its solidarity with the rest of the human family and its uniqueness as proper to me—shine forth most luminously. Because of its rooting in my basic innate orientation to the total human good, which I share with all human beings possessing the same specific nature, it declares my solidarity with all my fellow human beings, so that it is possible for them to

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instruct me in how to be a good moral person and to praise and blame me for my performance in this common human project. But it also makes manifests unmistakably my own uniqueness, the uniqueness of my own history, comprising not only my unique situation in the environment I was placed in and the influences I was subject to, but also my personal free responses to this history. Included in this are my degree of self-possession in self-knowledge and my ability and willingness to reflect honestly on my own actions, my degree of life-experience reflected on enough to enable me to recognize the most probable or certain consequences of certain types of action, and, above all, my own basic free commitment—at least implicit—to become a good human being, to respond to the guiding and commanding voice of my conscience. Since my response is basically free, however, this history can also include the gradual development of bad habits of response to this inner voice—systematically ignoring it, distracting myself so I do not have to pay attention to it, permitting my own immediate self-satisfaction to become the central motivating force of my life—though it conflicts with the authentic final end implanted in my nature by God, the “natural law imprinted on our hearts.” Such habits of negative response to the voice of conscience tend to gradually blur its vision and weaken its voice so as to reduce it almost to silence, since it has been deprived of the energy flowing from a basic conscious commitment to the good. It does not seem, however, that it can ever be totally silenced, though opinions differ on this. At any rate there is much truth in the adage, “If you don’t act according as your conscience judges, you will end up judging according as you act.” Included in all of the above, of course, is the influence of our own early education, how we were taught to live according to moral values first by enforced obedience, then by being encouraged to recognize and respond to values on our own, and especially by the power of good—or bad—example in actual living. The influence of social pressure here, both of the whole culture and/or peer groups, in either sensitizing us to values or imprinting unconscious biases, prejudices, moral blindspots that, if unrecognized or unrepudiated, can distort the clarity and sensitivity of our practical judgments of conscience.

All the above concerns the uniqueness in the process by which I come to make my own practical moral judgments and to express them by the voice of conscience. But far more striking and luminous is the unique-
ness that shines forth in my free response to the voice of my own individualized conscience. The voice of conscience guides me, warns me, commands me how to act. But it does not force or determine my free will. I alone, my whole person, expressing myself through my will decision, am responsible for making this decision—and nobody else. The child becomes, rather dramatically, conscious of this around the age of six or seven, but the mature person is acutely conscious of it, if willing to reflect at all on its action. Beforehand: “It’s up to me to decide; the buck stops here. I am responsible.” And afterwards: “I did it. And I’m glad—or sorry—I did it.”

Facing up to this unique personal responsibility and taking personal responsibility for the result rather than shifting the blame onto someone else lies at the very core of the awareness and acceptance of yourself as a unique person, an “I” in the full sense of the term, having the dignity and responsibility of self-governing my own life toward its final end. St. Thomas, at the very beginning of Part II of his great Summa Theologicae, in a striking passage on the return of the human being to God by the moral life and the life of grace, declares that this is why we are images of God in leading a good moral life. The essence of the moral life for him does not consist, as it did for many other Christian thinkers, in obedience to law, even God’s law, since God is not bound by any law imposed on him from without. We could not be images of God in this way. Our imaging of God consists rather in our participation in his providence over life. God is provident by his wise action over the whole universe; we are not big enough to do that (though some seem to think they are). But we can exercise our own wise providence over our own lives (and those in our care, such as children, workers, etc.), over our own turf, so to speak, and in this we are images of God, of one of the central perfections of God. Such is the profound dignity of the mature human person in his role of freely self-governing his own life toward the final end laid down for him by God.

St. Thomas is not at all afraid to follow out the implications of this fundamental obligation of every human person to take personal responsibility to guide his or her own life toward its final end by the light of this or her own reason, even where it leads to conclusions surprising—at least at first—to many, in the area of obedience to higher human authority. Thus, speaking of the obedience of a subject to any human superior, even a bishop—and by implication, of course, even to the Pope—

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St. Thomas makes this ringing affirmation of the independence of conscience of every human person:

It is not the place of the subject to pass judgment on the command in itself in its own wisdom and goodness, but it is his responsibility to pass judgment on his own fulfilling of the command here and now. For every human being is bound to examine his own actions according to the knowledge which he himself has from God, whether natural or acquired, or infused from above: for every human being is obliged to act according to reason” [i.e., his own personal possession or participation in reason] (De Ver., q. 17, art. 5, ad 4).

I once read this out to a group of young nuns without telling them where it came from, and asked them what they thought of it. “Oh, that’s far out,” they replied. When I said that it was actually from St. Thomas Aquinas, their response was, “They certainly didn’t teach us that in the Novitiate!” Once when I gave a talk on St. Thomas and the person to the Catholic Newman Club at New York University and read this passage, a very conservative Catholic layman broke in, “The Pope’s the ultimate authority. If he tells you to do something, you’ve got to do it. None of the private judgment stuff.” “But this is St. Thomas Aquinas speaking, declared the Common Doctor of the Church,” I replied. “Well, he said, without a moment’s hesitation, “then he’ll have to go!” In a lecture not too many years ago in a well-known Catholic seminary for the training of priests, I found that the same text was a surprise—although a welcome one—to many of the seminarians, and even—to my surprise—to a few of their teachers. But it is nothing far out at all. It is the constant traditional teaching of all the great Catholic philosophers and theologians in the Church—at least after Aquinas.

A shocking example of what it means to abdicate this basic obligation to take personal responsibility for your own actions in response to your own moral conscience was given us not too long ago in the case of the trial of the Nazi war criminals in Nuremberg after World War II. When, under questioning, Eichmann (I believe he was the one), one of the top Nazi officials, admitted quite openly to having carried out Hitler’s orders to exterminate the Jews, the judges asked him wonderingly, “But didn’t your conscience bother you in doing this?” he made this chilling reply, “The Führer is my conscience.” This is the abdication of the very core of what it means to be an authentic person. And haven’t we all met, in our own experience at least, some people who
seem to be skating all too close to this fatal precipice, which might be called "the suicide of the self"?

It is important to warn, however, that to apply wisely this obligation to judge personally whether to obey or not in a particular case requires considerable maturity, humility, and good judgment, not just giving in to an ego trip. A mature conscience will judge prudently that as a general rule, for reasons of the greater good, it is better to obey than follow your independent judgment, even though it might be better in itself. But once one's conscience speaks clearly to forbid something, one must have the courage to take a stand, cost what it may. (The Pope might have gone crazy, for example, just before he gave you the order your conscience forbids you to execute, or given a mind-bending pill, etc.) doing the act is your responsibility, not his.

Conscience in the Christian Life of Grace

The operation of conscience which is part of our natural equipment for the human journey towards its final end is not destroyed but transformed when subsumed into the spiritual life of the baptized Christian. It is now illuminated from above by the gifts of the Holy Spirit, counsel, wisdom, etc., which lend it quicker and deeper insight into what is the will of God for us to do in the present situation, often surprising those judging from natural practical wisdom alone. In general it lifts this voice of the inner judge, which can often seem to us on the natural level as somewhat aloof and impersonal to us, even at times a somewhat unwelcome intruder into our spontaneous plans for self-satisfaction, into a whole new dimension of personal relationship with God, our loving Father. It now appears as a personal call of God into closer intimacy with him, uniting our will to his ("Thy will be done . . .") in our growth in holiness and slow transformation from innate hidden image to a more manifest likeness of his own divine wisdom and goodness, something whose intrusion we no longer resent or accept reluctantly, but welcome as the personal loving guidance of the Holy Spirit itself.

As a result, it becomes more clear, more sensitive, more continuously present to our willing attentiveness as a function of our "living in the

5Cf. Gula, Reason Informed by Faith, chap. 4 and 5.
presence of God.” Rudolf Hoffmann, in his article on conscience mentioned above (from Rahner’s *Encyclopedia of Theology*) aptly writes:

The conscience of the Christian will fulfill its function only when every dawning value is deeply experienced as a gracious approach to the divine perfection and every situation of decision as a gift and a call of God, as a possibility of Christian loyalty in the presence of the divine ‘Thou’ (286 B).

Thus, deliberate conscious commitment to be willing to follow the call of conscience, at whatever level, natural or supernatural, turns out to be one of the most fundamental and indispensable manifestations of our unconditioned commitment to that most profound of all calls sounding deep within us, summoning is to become the unique authentic image of God that he has destined us to be—which in the last analysis is what is really means to be an authentic person.

*A Conversation with W. Norris Clarke*

by Dr. Tomas G. Rosario, Jr.

William Norris Clarke, S.J., *Professor Emeritus of Philosophy* at Fordham University in New York City, was at the Ateneo de Manila University recently to give a lecture series on the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas. Founding Editor of the *International Philosophical Quarterly,* and author of *The Philosophical Approach to God, Metaphysical Explorations, The Universe as Journey, Person and Being,* and *Central Problems of Metaphysics,* Fr. Norris Clarke lectures widely in Philosophy within and outside of the United States. Following are excerpts from an interview of Fr. Norris Clarke conducted by Dr. Tom Rosario of the Ateneo.

*Dr. Rosario:* You are best known for your work on St. Thomas Aquinas. Could you tell us what you find attractive in the thought of this medieval thinker who appears mainly to have been ignored by Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Husserl and Heidegger?

*Fr. Clarke:* That is a good question. As a youth, I had a great longing to understand reality and hold it together in some kind of a unity. But
it was not until I got to do my philosophy with the French Jesuits on the island of Jersey that, under the tutelage of the extremely creative Thomistic professor of metaphysics, Andre Marc, S.J., I found what I had been secretly longing for—some kind of a metaphysical vision of the whole. Then I came across the work of Fr. Joseph Marechal, founder of what is known as Transcendental Thomism. He was a very good historian of philosophy, and undertook to retell the history of philosophy from the standpoint of St. Thomas’ metaphysics. Of course, to tell that story is to bring focus to bear upon the shortcomings, the incompleteness, of other philosophers. So I would consider pivotal for the formation of my own intellectual commitments, both Andre Marc’s exposition of St. Thomas’ metaphysics, and the historical perspective on philosophy presented by Marechal in his five-volume work, *The Point of Departure of Metaphysics*. I must in this light also mention Blondel’s *Action*, which presented the whole dynamic aspect of how it all comes together. What is troubling about so much modern thought is its fascination with the part resulting in the total eclipse of the whole. An American philosopher who edited a book on contemporary philosophy once said to me, “We don’t have anymore these big visions, just careful piece-meal work!,” and I said to him, “Then you are in pieces, you are all in pieces!” Thomas’ vision of the whole, in contradistinction to the partial visions of the philosophers down the ages, is what has made me truly a Thomist. Of course, it takes about ten years for anyone to develop a central perspective on the thought of St. Thomas, ten years of assiduous and careful reading. I think it was Bergson who said that every great philosopher has one central, simple thing which he tries to say over and over again. If you get it, then you understand the whole. If you don’t get it, you are merely fighting skirmishes along the edge. In my view, that one great thing for St. Thomas is self-communication. Active existence, for Thomas, is self-communication.

*Dr. Rosario:* You say it takes ten years for anyone to get into the mind of St. Thomas. Where do you suggest a prospective student of St. Thomas should start?

*Fr. Clarke:* Start with Thomas’ metaphysics, his epistemology. And make sure you have a good teacher, one who truly understands Thomas’ central vision or insight. If a teacher has got it, he communicates it to his student, and the student will grow. If he has not, then all that the student can hope to gather is pieces, just pieces.
Dr. Rosario: You say that the central idea in the whole philosophical thought of St. Thomas is the act of existence as self-communicating?

Fr. Clarke: Yes! The act of existence is fundamentally dynamic, intrinsically self-communicating. That’s the way God is, the Supreme Being, of whom we are all images. Thomas once said you could sort of sum up the universe in terms of the communicatio essendi, the communication of the act of existence.

Dr. Rosario: Please tell us what you think about the influence of Aristotle on St. Thomas?

Fr. Clarke: St. Thomas saw that Aristotle had a much better metaphysics than Plato of this world of things that have real existence. For Plato, the world of change is not the real world but a kind of shadow world. So there can be for him no real metaphysics of this world. Only the Beautiful is real. For Aristotle, this world is real, this world of matter and form. And he sought to develop a good metaphysics of this world of change. At the center of this metaphysics are actions. Actions comprise the whole metaphysics of the finite. What, however, is missing in his metaphysics is creation. The world for him is eternal. There is no origin of all beings. The prime mover is not the efficient cause. In the 12th book of his Metaphysics, Aristotle argues that God, the Prime Mover, cannot be this world’s efficient cause, for if he were, then he would have to get involved in a reaction and get changed. The Prime Mover can only be this world’s final cause, knowing only himself, the pure good. God does not know this world. If he knew anything less than himself, if God knew all the misery, all the evil, and imperfection in this world He would be unhappy. To be happy, He can know only the best. He knows only himself because He is no creator. Being is simply eternal, with no source. Thus, Aristotle provides us with a good, immediate metaphysics of the world of change, but not with a metaphysics of being. He’s got the term “be” but unrelated either to origin or to creation. For Aristotle, there can be no ultimate explanation. It was at this juncture that St. Thomas began to draw from neo-Platonism. For Plotinus and Plato, Being traces its origins back to the self-diffusiveness of the Good. From this developed a participation metaphysics expressed in Aristotelian terms of act and potency.

Dr. Rosario: You deploy the notion of participation in explaining the thought of St. Thomas. Is it important to St. Thomas’ efforts to explain the totality of reality?
Fr. Clarke: Absolutely! The earlier Aristotelian Thomists were unaware of the implications of the fact that the term “participation” keeps recurring in Aristotle’s works. A coincidence, they thought, only a coincidence. The word does not even appear in the index of basic terms to the Summa theologica. Yet Thomas clearly insists that if there could be just one big act of pure existence, it would be participation. Every time he explains the relationship between essence and existence, it is in terms of participation. In and through the notion of participation we can explain the relation of God to creatures.

Dr. Rosario: In an early article, you write that you find Thomas’ doctrine of the Five Ways least relevant to his metaphysics. Would there be a point to re-working this doctrine using the notion of participation?

Fr. Clarke: Absolutely! But so long as you remember that St. Thomas himself did not do that. The 4th Way, comes very close to what you are proposing. It examines the different degrees of being, and asserts that there must be a highest being which is going to be the cause of all the rest, but without saying why. So, first comes the discovery of the highest being, and only subsequently to this discovery, a consideration of causality. The 4th Way, then, has everything reversed. The finite degree cannot explain its own existence, but needs to receive its own explanation from a higher. St. Thomas does not make the same mistake again. In all of the rest of his works, whenever there is a measure of degrees, it is not by some kind of a Platonic leap that he gets to the highest degree of being, but through causality. But if he makes that mistake in regard to the 4th Way, it is because he used a mis-translation of the text of Aristotle. Mis-translations of Aristotle were common in all of the 13th century until William of Morbœke provided a more exact translation. Working from a mis-translation of the 1st book of Aristotle’ Metaphysics, Thomas is prompted to say that the highest member of any genus is the cause of the rest. Clearly, however, for Thomas, you never get to the highest member of a genus, except through causality. That’s the Thomistic way. Of course, it’s very difficult to explain that if you have degrees there must be a first. Why? Why must there be a first? There is a good reason, but you can’t get to it by some kind of a Platonic leap. You must go through the existential causality. The 5th Way is fine except that it’s incomplete. It doesn’t say how many intellectual orders there are in the world. The 1st Way, from motion, the 2nd Way, from causality, both conclude logically to the first in this series of
effects of causes—this series has to have a first. What that doesn't tell you is that all the chains of causality in the world have to come from that first one. It merely gives you an Aristotelian "First Mover," not a God who is infinite and, therefore, one. The argument, then, is incomplete. It is only at Question 11, some 100 pages later, that St. Thomas completes his proof. The trouble with the 1st Way is that St. Thomas has local motion in mind, which requires a cause. With Newtonian physics, however, it's quite different. For as long as there is motion, that motion continues, and it requires no cause. Continuous motion in a straight line requires no cause. Aristotelians, on the other hand, understand that in the case of a projectile, its cause has to be constantly working, pushing behind it. This important distinction is not explained in the 1st Way. The Five Ways, in that sense are not complete, and St. Thomas was aware of that. Why didn't St. Thomas provide an account of motion in terms of "participation"? He does, in fact, in the De potentia. De potentia, question III, articles 5-6 is a kind of argument from participation. Why didn't he do the same thing in the case of the Five Ways? I think it's because he wrote the latter piece for beginners, beginners who must begin from sense experience. Motion is a sense experience; we see things in causal relation. But you don't see participation; participation roots in a deep metaphysical theory, which is not for beginners.

Dr. Rosario: What are the prospects today for work in the philosophy of St. Thomas?

Fr. Clarke: Well, in the U.S. it's coming back quietly through the concern in Ethics to root its claims in the dynamism of the natural law. Without such a ground, ethics becomes little more than custom or emotion. Thus, to ground the ethical obligation you have to go deeper into metaphysics. I myself am trying to bring it back through a "phenomenology of interpersonal relations." Interpersonal relations, that's a very living kind of a thing. It brings us face to face with the dynamism of being. The dynamism of being is expressed most strongly in the dialogue between two persons. ☞