Speaking Rationally About the Good
Karol Wojtyła on Being and the Normative Order

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ABSTRACT   In this paper, I explain and defend Karol Wojtyła's claim that "if we wish to speak rationally about good and evil, we have to return to the philosophy of being. If we do not set out from such 'realist' presuppositions, we end up in a vacuum." I begin by outlining Wojtyła's existential understanding of the good, according to which the good for x is found in those ends that complete the being that is lacking in x, or that enhance its existence in keeping with its nature. (Here Wojtyła is drawing from, and building upon, Thomas Aquinas's account of goodness and being.) Then I explain how Wojtyła moves from an existential understanding of the good to the thesis that "exemplarism is the very heart of the normative order." Finally, using representative thinkers from both the Continental and Analytic traditions, I defend Wojtyła's claim that when we divorce goodness from being we end up in a moral vacuum, in a kind of nihilism where the good signifies nothing other than the rationalized articulation of one's subjective needs, desires, or wishes. In such a state, the only means for resolving moral disagreements is through the consensus of the majority or the forceful rule of the strongest will.

KEYWORDS   exemplarism; good; goodness; normativity; Thomas Aquinas; Wojtyła, Karol

I. INTRODUCTION

Prior to his election to the papacy, Karol Wojtyła devoted his philosophical career to the study of the human person. Though he was trained in the thought of Thomas Aquinas, Wojtyła was also interested in phenomenology because of its focus on consciousness and subjective lived experience. His goal was to better understand the person in both its objective and subjective dimensions, with a particular focus on the manner in which the

inner nature of a person is revealed and affected by moral activity. In such works as *Love and Responsibility* and *The Acting Person*, Wojtyła used the phenomenological method to explore realities overlooked by Thomism, including the irreducible uniqueness of persons and the manner in which persons experience their moral agency.[1]

Despite his appreciation for other philosophical traditions, Wojtyła remained convinced that Aquinas's realist commitments are absolutely essential for grounding normativity. In the last work published before his death, *Memory and Identity*, he writes:

> If we wish to speak rationally about good and evil, we have to return to Saint Thomas Aquinas, that is, to the philosophy of being. With the phenomenological method, for example, we can study experiences of morality, religion or simply what it is to be human, and draw from them a significant enrichment of our knowledge. Yet we must not forget that all these analyses implicitly presuppose the reality of the Absolute Being and also the reality of being human, that is, being a creature. If we do not set out from such "realist" presuppositions, we end up in a vacuum.[2]

In what follows, I will unpack this claim by examining Wojtyła's account of goodness and normativity. I will begin by outlining his existential conception of the good, whereby to be good is to be actual, and to be perfect is to attain the fullness of being due to a thing by virtue of its nature. Next, I will discuss his subsequent claim that it is exemplarism, the theory that creatures participate in God's divine goodness and therefore resemble the divine essence, which ultimately grounds normativity, not teleology. This is because exemplarism offers the fullest metaphysical explanation

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1. See Karol Wojtyła, *The Acting Person*, trans. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1979), and *Love and Responsibility*, trans. H. T. Willetts (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1993). In my view, the best overview of Wojtyła's philosophical project can be found in Jarosław Kupczak's *Destined for Liberty: The Human Person in the Philosophy of Karol Wojtyła / John Paul II* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2000). Also to be recommended: Michael Waldstein's fine introduction to Karol Wojtyła [John Paul II], *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2006), 1–128. For an analysis of the ways in which Wojtyła's phenomenological reflections on ethics supplement a traditional natural law theory, see my "The Contributions of Personalist Arguments to Natural Law Reasoning," in *La persona: divina, angelica, humana* [The Person: Divine, Angelic, Human], ed. María Esther Gómez de Pedro, Maite del Pilar Cereceda Martínez, and Ignacio Serrano del Pozo (Santiago, Chile: RIL editores, 2014), 679–87.

2. Karol Wojtyła [John Paul II], *Memory and Identity: Personal Reflections* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2005), 13.

for why creatures have inherent ends, and, in the case of human beings, why we are obligated to realize the goods of our nature. I will defend Wojtyła's claim that the rejection of a realist account of the good ends in a kind of moral vacuum, using as examples thinkers from both the Continental and Analytic traditions, such as Jean-Paul Sartre and G. E. Moore. My position will be that such thinkers, in divorcing goodness from being, fail to provide an adequate measure or standard by which we can ground normativity, or distinguish right from wrong action.

II. Wojtyła's Existential Account of the Good

A moral norm is simply an ought statement that commands the performance or avoidance of certain actions. Within an Aristotelian or Thomistic framework, moral norms indicate that certain ends or goals ought to be pursued, and that which frustrates these ends or goals ought to be avoided. Because ends have the character of goodness or desirability, moral norms prescribe the pursuit of moral goods, or those things that are genuinely desirable for the perfection of human beings, and the avoidance of moral evils, or those things that are truly harmful for human beings. In an article entitled "On the Metaphysical and Phenomenological Basis of the Moral Norm," Wojtyła offers an account of these human moral goods.

Wojtyła begins with the observation that Thomas Aquinas accepts Aristotle's teleological conception of the good.[3] Aristotle, as is well known, calls "good" that which all things seek, but this understanding of good is only descriptive and not yet normative.[4] The good is here equated with the end pursued by a given being, because a being would not seek an end unless it were perceived as desirable or perfective of its nature. Genuine human goods are those ends that are truly perfective of us. We are usually inclined toward them by fundamental drives inherent in our rational and bodily nature, and these ends bring about various aspects of the perfection or completion of our very being.

Aquinas agrees with this account, but he thinks we can say something more fundamental about the good, namely, that something is good first because it exists. It is true that to be good is to be an object of desire, but in

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3. Karol Wojtyła, "On the Metaphysical and Phenomenological Basis of the Moral Norm in the Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas and Max Scheler," in *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, trans. Theresa Sandok, OSM (New York: Lang, 1993), 74. Hereafter cited in text as *BMN*.

4. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1094a1–5. The translation paraphrased here and used hereafter is the one by David Ross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

order to be an object of desire, the good must possess a certain perfection, that is, it must be actually existing, and it is this actual existence that makes the good capable of perfecting that which desires or seeks it.[5] In other words, a thing achieves perfection when it attains the goods that truly fulfill its nature, but these goods are only perfective if they themselves are perfect, or complete in their own kind. Because Aquinas equates goodness with being in this manner, his conception of the good can be called existential.[6] God is the absolute good because he is subsisting existence, or the unconditional fullness of existence.[7] Creatures can have their own respective type and degree of fullness of being or perfection, but because they are limited beings, this fullness does not occur all at once, as it does with God, but through a kind of multiplicity or series of stages.[8] Thus, a creature aims at certain ends because they complete the being that is lacking in it, or, to put it another way, because they enhance its existence in keeping with its nature (*BMN*, 74).

Wojtyła accepts Aquinas's existential account of the good and points out that it successfully combines Aristotelian teleology with the Platonic-

5. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, q. 5, a. 1. Hereafter cited as *ST*. The translation that will be used throughout the paper is the one by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Allen, TX: Christian Classics, 1981). Aquinas's conception of existence is quite different from that offered by someone like Frege, who claims that statements of existence are simply statements of number, so that the statement "Y's exist" means nothing other than "There is at least one x such that x is Y." See Gottlob Frege, *The Foundations of Arithmetic: A Logico-Mathematical Enquiry into the Concept of Number*, trans. J. L. Austin (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1980), §53. Frege is here building upon Kant's famous claim that being or existence is not a real predicate. On this Kantian or Fregean model, existence is not a first order predicate, or a predicate that tells us something substantial about the thing in question. Now, Aquinas agrees that a thing's existence fails to reveal anything about its essence. However, he thinks that a thing's existence is due to a metaphysical act that is distinct from and ontologically prior to that thing's form. Further, a thing cannot account for this act of being, or *esse*; such an act can only be explained by a being that is existence itself, and this is how Aquinas conceives of God. For a critique of Aquinas's conception of existence along Fregean lines, see Anthony Kenny, *Aquinas on Being* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). For a rejoinder to Kenny, see Gyula Klima, "On Kenny on Aquinas on Being," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (2004): 567–80, doi:10.5840/ipq200444446.

6. The equation of goodness with being is part of Aquinas's famous doctrine of the transcendentals. On his account, goodness, unity, and truth are coextensive with being. That is, any thing that exists, insofar as it exists, is desirable, actually undivided, and intelligible. For a comprehensive overview of Aquinas on the transcendentals, see Jan Aertsen, *Medieval Philosophy and the Transcendentals: The Case of Thomas Aquinas* (Leiden: Brill, 1996).

7. Aquinas comes to this conclusion because he thinks that only such a being can explain why there exists something rather than nothing.

8. Thomas Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 18, a. 1.

Augustinian notion of participation. In other words, the authentic goods that I pursue as ends perfect me as the kind of thing that I am, and they do so precisely by bringing about my proper mode of existence, and thus increasing my participation in and resemblance to the Creator, who is existence itself. Wojtyła articulates this relationship in the following manner:

> The perfection of created beings is essentially related to God: God is the fullness of existence, and creatures participate in this fullness because they owe their existence to God. The more perfect they are, the more they participate in the unconditional fullness of existence that is God. Hence, they must be said to be more like God. Participation in existence always entails resemblance. (*BMN*, 77)

For Wojtyła, what grounds Aquinas's existential understanding of the good is his theory of exemplarism, the notion that God uses his divine essence as the model for creation and the transcendent measure of all creatures (*BMN*, 77).[9] Because God's very essence is the model for creation, all creatures already resemble the divine essence simply by the fact that they exist, but this resemblance occurs in greater or lesser degrees. Human beings have the highest degree of resemblance in kind because by their rationality they are images of God, and they attain to a greater resemblance in fact through the correct exercise of this rationality, which includes the discovery and pursuit of authentic human goods according to the moral law inherent in human nature.

In sum, we see here that Wojtyła emphasizes Aquinas's two-fold conception of the good. Aquinas affirms Aristotle's nature based notion of goodness, whereby good is understood in terms of the end or *telos* that brings about the actualization of a thing's potentialities or capacities. However, he also holds a notion of goodness that emphasizes a theory of participation Platonic in origin, but understood in terms of the Christian doctrine of creation and the theory of exemplarism. On this account, things exist and are good insofar as they participate in God, who is existence and goodness itself.[10]

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9. For recent examples of moral philosophers working within the tradition of exemplarism, see Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, *Divine Motivation Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), and Robert Merrihew Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

10. For an excellent discussion of Aquinas's two-fold conception of the good, see Andrew J. Dell'Olio, *Foundations of Moral Selfhood: Aquinas on Divine Goodness and the Connection of the Virtues* (New York: Lang, 2003). In chap. 2, "The Metaphysics of Goodness," Dell'Olio

By incorporating exemplarism, Wojtyła makes use of a doctrine that has a long and distinguished lineage in the history of Christian thought. Christian philosophers articulated the theory of exemplarism or divine ideas in order to explain how God creates *ex nihilo*, and they began with the notion that God's creative act resembles that of the human artist who produces a work of art according to a previously formulated mental model.[11] God, too, creates according to models or exemplars, but these models are the divine ideas that eternally exist within the divine mind. Because the divine ideas are not products of God's mind but rather aspects of God himself, created natures are limited manifestations of the infinite perfection of God's very essence. In other words, God uses his own essence to know, to create, and to measure his creatures, and it is this key premise that Wojtyła utilizes in the existential account of the good that grounds his moral reflections.[12]

III. Exemplarism as the Heart of the Normative Order

Wojtyła goes so far as to equate exemplarism with the "very heart of the normative order." On his account, purposiveness or teleology gives an indispensable indicator of the fact of the moral order but does not yet get to the essence of what grounds a moral norm, that is, it does not yet get us to a full account of the reason for this fact. Rather, he says, "exemplariness . . . is the basis of purposiveness; the more perfectly a created being exemplifies the perfection of the Creator, the more fully it attains its end" (*BMN*, 78). How are we to understand this claim? We must keep in mind that Wojtyła is seeking the ultimate foundation or cause of moral norms, the reason for their existence. One might be content simply to acknowledge that beings have ends or purposes, that these ends are desirable, and that

introduces Aquinas's nature and participation approaches to understanding goodness and argues that the nature account is subordinate to the participation account.

11. For a general introduction to the theory of exemplarism or divine ideas, see Joseph Koterski, *Introduction to Medieval Philosophy: Basic Concepts* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), chap. 3. For an extensive treatment of the topic within the thought of Thomas Aquinas, see Gregory T. Doolan, *Aquinas on the Divine Ideas as Exemplar Causes* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008).

12. We find variations of the theory of exemplarism throughout the history of medieval philosophy. Thinkers like Origen and Augustine, for example, simply modify Plato's account of creation found in the *Timaeus*. They take the Forms, which the demiurge uses as models for structuring matter, and move them into the mind of God, who uses them to create the world *ex nihilo*. Later thinkers, like Aquinas and Bonaventure, recognize and address the metaphysical problems that arise with such a theory, like the problem of reconciling a plurality of ideas with God's simplicity. See Koterski, *Medieval Philosophy*, 64–71.

the attainment of these ends leads to a being's flourishing. In the case of human beings, we can understand these ends *qua* possible objects of choice and freely decide whether or not to pursue them. If one were to stop here, one would remain a kind of descriptive naturalist. Or, at most, one could generate certain conditional or hypothetical imperatives. Wojtyła is arguing that just as Aquinas provides a more fundamental account of the good than Aristotle, he also provides a more fundamental account of the normative order. Exemplarism grounds or fully explains the morally normative dimension of teleology because human beings would not have reliable inclinations toward certain authentic goods unless there exists at the same time a model that measures our progress toward those goods and grounds our obligation to realize them. In other words, the presence of inherent ends within human nature reveals that we are supposed to be a certain way. As Jean-Paul Sartre saw so clearly (and rejected) when he outlined his atheistic existentialism, inherent goods imply a design, and a design implies a designer and a model by which the creature is to be measured.[13]

Aquinas's exemplarism, and his depiction of God as the artist or designer of all reality, allows him to ground a strong conception of moral obligation, because God is the author of human nature and the natural law that requires of human beings certain actions and forbids others.[14] Aquinas thinks that within our very nature we discover a set of moral ordinances promulgated by a divine law giver, and these commands are to be obeyed. We should be clear, however, that though Aquinas grounds moral obligation in a theory of natural law, he does not divorce God's commandments

13. Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism and Humanism," trans. Philip Mairet, in *The Continental Philosophy Reader*, ed. Richard Kearney and Mara Rainwater (New York: Routledge, 1996), 67–8 (hereafter cited as *EH*). Though Sartre denies that human beings have inherent ends, he and Aquinas are in agreement regarding the fundamental connection between human nature and a designer. Both affirm that there can be no human nature, strictly speaking, if there is no creator of this nature. They disagree, of course, over whether such a being as God exists. See Josef Pieper, "Human Nature and the Created State," in *Problems of Modern Faith: Essays and Addresses*, trans. Jan van Heurck (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1985), 284.

14. G. E. M. Anscombe thinks that modern moral philosophy's emphasis on "ought" or obligation is misguided. Such concepts, she argues, were developed within the Judeo-Christian worldview, which understands God to be the supreme moral legislator. Apart from this context, the notion of moral obligation is unintelligible. Anscombe thinks that any attempt to locate the moral ought in human sentiment or in the demands of practical reason will necessarily fail. This is why she advocates a return to an Aristotelian virtue ethics, with its emphasis on the good and human flourishing over the right and moral obligation. See G. E. M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," in *Ethics, Religion, and Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981), 26–42.

from a robust conception of human flourishing, as do divine command theorists. Rather, Aquinas holds that moral precepts prescribed by God lead to happiness and the flourishing of our nature, because ultimately they lead to union with God, who is our highest good. Dell'Olio summarizes this point nicely: "What Aquinas does not allow is the separation of divine law from an overall teleological scheme."[15]

In addition to its ability to ground a strong conception of moral obligation, Wojtyła thinks that the theory of exemplarism allows us to ground an objective hierarchy of goods (*BMN*, 78). If we are to ground moral norms, not only must we establish a real distinction between genuine human goods and apparent goods, we must also place genuine human goods within a hierarchy, and we can only do so if we can discover an absolute standard by which goods are measured. There is no question that Aristotle points to a hierarchy of goods in his reflections on happiness. In Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, for example, he observes that of the three kinds of goods (external goods, the goods of the body, and the goods of the soul), the goods of the soul are "most properly and truly good."[16] But Wojtyła thinks that Aristotle cannot go beyond mere acknowledgment that some goods are higher than others. Aquinas, however, has the metaphysical framework in which to show that external and bodily goods are subordinated to spiritual goods, that is, the goods of the rational soul. On his account, the greater degree of existence something has, the higher a good it is. The rational soul, being independent of any corporeal organ, is superior to the body due to its greater capacity for existence.[17] The mind can in a sense become all things, as both Aristotle and Aquinas acknowledge, and this spiritual mode of existence is superior to bodily existence because of its ability to transcend the limits of space and time.[18] Therefore, the goods

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15. Dell'Olio, *Foundations of Moral Selfhood*, 29.

16. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1098b12–15.

17. Thomas Aquinas, *ST* I-II, q. 2, a. 6: "For since the rational soul excels the capacity of corporeal matter, that part of the soul which is independent of a corporeal organ, has a certain infinity in regard to the body and those parts of the soul which are tied down to the body: just as immaterial things are in a way infinite as compared to material things, since a form is, after a fashion, contracted and bounded by matter, so that a form which is independent of matter is, in a way, infinite. Therefore sense, which is a power of the body, knows the singular, which is determinate through matter: whereas the intellect, which is a power independent of matter, knows the universal, which is abstracted from matter, and contains an infinite number of singulars."

18. For an excellent description of spiritual activity, see Robert Sokolowski, "Soul and the Transcendence of the Human Person," in *Christian Faith and Human Understanding: Studies on the Eucharist, Trinity, and the Human Person* (Washington, DC: The Catholic Uni-

of the rational soul, the goods that contribute to the soul's ability to engage in this higher mode of existence, are objectively higher than the goods of the body.[19] Spiritual goods allow for a higher level of existence and thus they are superior goods because they more fully approach the absolute good, which is the very fullness of existence. Not all beings have access to these higher levels, but human beings do, precisely because of the rational and spiritual dimensions of their nature as persons.

The discovery of an objective hierarchy of goods allows us to justify positing moral norms to which all human beings are subject by virtue of their common human nature. It also provides us guidance for pursuing goods in a way that is respectful of this hierarchy.[20] Prudence, of course, is required to determine the concrete ways in which we should prioritize supernatural goods over natural goods, the goods of the soul over the goods of the body, and the goods of the body over external goods. Nevertheless, an objective hierarchy of goods does offer some practical guidance for positing moral norms, especially in instances of so-called "tragic conflict," situations in which it appears that the moral agent has conflicting moral requirements and no possibility for avoiding moral evil.[21]

versity of America Press, 2006), 157: "Spiritual activity is present whenever we do things that escape the confinements of space, time, and matter. We do this all the time, and we do it in a public way. For example, when we rationally communicate with one another, we carry on a spiritual activity, because we share a meaning or a thought or a truth with other people at other places and times. The same meaning, the same thought, the same intellectual identity, can be shared by many people, and it can continue as the same truth over centuries of time, when, for example, it is written down and read and reread at different times in history. Such a truth transcends both space and time, and it transcends material causality as well, because it is the kind of thing that matter alone does not generate. The same truth can be found in many places and in many minds."

19. Thomas Aquinas, *ST* I-II, q. 2, a. 6: "Consequently it is evident that good which is fitting to the body, and which causes bodily delight through being apprehended by sense, is not man's perfect good, but is quite a trifle as compared with the good of the soul."

20. *BMN*, 79: "Goods are primarily ends of action, but they may also be means to ends. An end is in some sense a measure for the means. The ends themselves, however, must also have a measure. The measure for the ends is determined by the hierarchy of goods. Knowing a hierarchy of goods allows us to aim toward ends in an objectively ordered way; it allows us in our aiming towards ends to rely on the objective measure of the perfection of beings."

21. See for example, Daniel McInerny, *The Difficult Good: A Thomistic Approach to Moral Conflict and Human Happiness* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 151: "For the sake of argument, what if it were the case that I had to choose, for example, between my family and my country? Should I reveal an important military secret in order to rescue my family? The dilemma is no doubt an excruciating one, nonetheless I would argue that one should never betray one's country by revealing, for example, an important military

Before moving forward, let me dispel one potential concern about Wojtyła's moral framework. He is not claiming that at the level of everyday moral discourse there is a need for metaphysical inquiry. Just as one does not need to know the science of fishing to practice the art of fishing, one does not need to know the science of morality to live a moral life. In addition, it is possible to reach a philosophically sophisticated agreement on essential moral first principles without recourse to explicitly metaphysical arguments. Aristotle's ethical reflections exemplify this. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle defends something like the distinction between true goods and apparent goods without recourse to an existential account of the good. One might say that as a nature-thinker, Aristotle is doing the metaphysical groundwork implicitly. We need to engage in metaphysics proper only when Aristotle's first principles require further justification.

IV. Objections to Wojtyła's Account of the Good

Obviously Wojtyła's Thomistic account of goodness and normativity goes against much of contemporary moral philosophy. So let us consider an objection that strikes at the heart of his position, namely, the rejection of moral goods as having any kind of ontological grounding, that is, as having a status in reality or being.[22] One can hold this position for any number of reasons. Some philosophers follow G. E. Moore and reject as fallacious any move from factual statements about natural properties to evaluative conclusions. This is the famous "naturalistic fallacy," according to which goodness cannot be equated with any natural property, because any natural property can be viewed as both desirable and undesirable, depending on the context.[23] Others hold this position because they adhere to some version of the transcendental turn, the belief that human beings construct their understanding of reality through the categories with which they experience the world. Any version of transcendental philosophy rejects the

secret. For it is in fact to undermine rather than promote my own and my family's good when I fracture my loyalty into a sharp-edged, incongruous division of loyalties. For in doing so I lose the sense that it is one and the same virtue that calls me to be faithful both to my family and country, precisely because my good is achieved in a context where the good of family life both nourishes and is supported by the good of political life. I can divulge the military secret to the tyrant, but then where am I and my rescued family to go?"

22. In what follows, I am indebted to Henry Veatch's analysis of the history of analytic and existentialist ethics in *For an Ontology of Morals: A Critique of Contemporary Ethical Theory* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1971). Hereafter cited as *OM*.

23. G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903), chap. 1, §12.

claim that we can know being as being or things as they are in themselves; therefore, it is impossible to call something good or bad in itself and the source of morality must be found elsewhere. Whatever the reason, if one rejects the claim that goodness is grounded in being, one is faced with the challenge of providing an objective foundation for ethics that does not involve an ontological grounding for right and wrong.[24] Jean-Paul Sartre offers one well-known such attempt.

IVa. Sartre on Being and Goodness
Sartre rejects a realist account of goodness for several reasons. First, he recognizes that this presumes the existence of a given human nature, that is, a structured way of being that directs us toward certain ends that bring about our proper mode of existence. And he thinks that the ultimate explanation for such a nature can only be the existence of a transcendent creator. Design implies a designer, and if we eliminate the designer we should not pretend that this fails to affect our conception of humanity. In "Existentialism and Humanism," Sartre states:

> Atheistic existentialism, of which I am a representative, declares with greater consistency that if God does not exist there is at least one being whose existence comes before its essence, a being which exists before it can be defined by any conception of it. That being is man or, as Heidegger has it, the human reality. . . . Thus, there is no human nature, because there is no God to have a conception of it. Man simply is. . . . Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. (*EH*, 67–8)

The rejection of a transcendent creator and lawgiver, and thus of a given human nature, necessarily leads to the rejection of objective human goods that can be discovered by rational reflection. Instead, Sartre thinks that human beings invent or create moral values through the dynamism of the will.[25]

In addition to his axiomatic atheism, Sartre also makes the transcenden-

24. *OM*, 17–8: "Accordingly, contemporary moral philosophers tend to find themselves caught in a kind of dilemma. . . . On the one hand, both the analysts and existentialists appear to be in agreement in their determination to deny anything like an ontological foundation for ethics. . . . On the other hand, they are equally determined to try to escape the seemingly inevitable consequence of the repudiation of any real objective basis for ethics."

25. This position is summarized nicely by E. D. Klemke: "We must say that the universe is valueless; it is we who evaluate, upon the basis of our subjective preferences . . . we 'impose' such values upon the universe." See E. D. Klemke, "Living without Appeal: An Affirmative Philosophy of Life," in *The Meaning of Life*, edited by E. D. Klemke (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 169.

tal or critical turn.²⁶ That is, he denies that we can know being as being, or things as they are in themselves; rather, things are neutral in their pure facticity, and it is up to us to fashion the concepts through which we interpret the world.²⁷ If, indeed, we cannot know being as being, then neither can we claim to know that something is good or bad in itself.

What grounds morality, then, if goodness has no status in reality or being? Sartre claims that we construct our notions of right and wrong based upon the values we attribute to the things encountered in human experience. However, this does *not* mean that humans are free to do whatever they please, and it is here that Sartre introduces his concept of responsibility. Because a person is condemned to be free, he is solely responsible for what he becomes. Further, when he chooses certain goals and thus endows them with value, he is also in a sense choosing for the whole of humanity, for "of all the actions a man may take in order to create himself as he wills to be, there is not one which is not creative, at the same time, of an image of man such as he believes he ought to be. . . . Our responsibility is thus much greater than we had supposed, for it concerns mankind as a whole" (*EH*, 68). If I marry, for example, I am choosing matrimony as valuable not only for myself, but for others, as well. Here we see a clear connection between Sartre and Kant, as both attempt to ground normativity in one's ability to universalize his willing or reason for acting, and both endorse Kant's principle that in willing any act, we endorse a principle of action that is, as John Davenport notes, "more than a singular prescription."²⁸

It is this notion of responsibility, Sartre thinks, that grounds normativity. For if I am contemplating a certain course of action, I must ask honestly whether or not I would be satisfied if others in my situation pursued

26. Most properly, transcendental philosophy applies to Kant and to the tradition of German Idealism, a tradition that rejects the possibility of knowing things in themselves. Because we cannot know being as being, only being as we experience it, Kant focuses on deriving the a priori principles or pure forms of the understanding that are necessary to explain human experience. Thus, according to Kant, we cannot derive from our knowledge of things the principle that every effect must have a cause, but we can know that such a principle is true and universal if we reflect on the way in which reason must function conceptually to experience the world in the first place. Henry Veatch suggests that existential phenomenologists like Sartre make the transcendental turn, as well, though perhaps not as systematically as Kant: "Interpreted . . . in the looser and more relaxed way that is characteristic of many existential phenomenologists, the transcendental turn may signify no more than that we human beings do ourselves choose the very categories in terms of which we shall structure our world." *OM*, 67.

27. See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Citadel, 1956), 464, for Sartre's famous depiction of the crag and the different ways in which it manifests itself to passing travelers.

the same course of action. In Sartre's mind, it is intuitively clear that we must ask such a question and one can avoid it only through self-deception (*EH*, 69).

At first glance, it seems plausible that Sartre's notion of responsibility can generate certain basic moral precepts because it is based on appeals to universality and consistency. No one wants to live, for example, in a world where murder and theft abound. It is when we try to apply Sartre's principles to the resolution of moral controversies that we see the inherent inadequacy of his moral theory. Imagine two people on either side of the euthanasia issue, or who disagree as to whether or not there can be a just war. Both support their respective positions in good conscience, as both would be happy if everyone acted or thought as they do on these important issues. And yet they support contradictory positions, so how are such disagreements to be resolved? James Collins helpfully articulates the problem:

> Taken by itself, an awareness of how man stands in existence is too formal a rule to prove useful in resolving particular problems of conduct. It is so hospitable that it is ready to authenticate any act, just as long as the self takes full responsibility for performing the act. Since diametrically opposed plans of action can be espoused by individuals who are equally convinced that no other moral law than their own intention exists, this criterion does not prove adequate for determining concrete choices or settling conflicts.[29]

Without any standard outside the will's volition to measure the goods that we choose, Sartre's notion of responsibility falls into a dangerous vacuum, because we lack any means by which we can adjudicate among competing values that have been authentically chosen. The lack of such a standard means that the good becomes good simply by virtue of being chosen or desired, because Sartre refuses to associate goodness or value with some sort of objective state of affairs that can be equated with human flourishing.

In such a moral vacuum, the only avenues out of moral disagreement are the unsubstantiated consensus of the majority or the forceful rule of the strongest will. Now, one might argue that Sartre's individualism and his emphasis on freedom would seem to refute the claim that his notion of responsibility leads to a rule by majority or by the strongest will. I grant

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28. John J. Davenport, *Will as Commitment and Resolve: An Existential Account of Creativity, Love, Virtue, and Happiness* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 77, doi: 10.5422/fso/9780823225750.001.0001.

29. James Collins, *The Existentialists: A Critical Study* (Chicago: Regnery, 1952), 76.

that Sartre himself would chafe at this accusation and would reject any po-
litical constitution that endorses such a state of affairs (see, for example,
his support of liberation socialism). However, there is a difference between
what philosophers explicitly endorse and reject, and what their principles
logically entail, and I maintain that it is Sartre's very principles that justify
my claim. For if we reject a realist account of the good, and if we claim
that value is created simply by virtue of being chosen in an authentic man-
ner, then there is *in principle* no way to adjudicate among competing moral
claims. Such a standstill can only be resolved if a majority of people agree to
endorse a given value, without any objective foundation for this endorse-
ment, or if the strongest will enforces his value over the values of others.

While not specifically addressing Sartre, Robert Sokolowski offers a
similar critique of any ethical theory that denies the distinction between
inherent ends and chosen purposes. In "What is Natural Law?," Sokolow-
ski defines a human end as a *telos* or goal that belongs to a human being
by his very nature or essence, a goal that exists apart from his wishes
and deliberations. Purposes, on the other hand, are intentions, and they
"come into existence when human beings set out thoughtfully to do some-
thing."[30] Ends exist in the human being by virtue of the kind of thing that
he is, while purposes exist only within the human mind. Sokolowski ob-
serves that ends and purposes present themselves to moral consciousness
together, and thus they are often difficult to distinguish. However, he in-
sists that it is possible to make this distinction, and in doing so we find
that sometimes ends and purposes coincide, while remaining distinguish-
able, and sometimes they conflict, in which case the differences between
the two are more obviously apparent.[31]

If the world is such that there are no ends but merely purposes or hu-
man intentions, then we have a world of "cross-purposes" with no obvi-
ous way to resolve moral disagreements. As a result, violence will ensue.
Sokolowski observes that the only way to avoid such violence, other than
through the recognition of innate ends, is through "the establishment of
a will that is overwhelmingly powerful, the sovereign or Leviathan, who
pacifies by decree and not by evidence, and for whom there are no ends
or natures in things."[32]

Now, one might object to this line of reasoning and suggest that a good
deal of my argument rests on the assumption that an adequate moral the-

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30. Robert Sokolowski, "What is Natural Law? Human Purposes and Natural Ends," in
Christian Faith and Human Understanding, 215–6.

31. Ibid., 218–20.

32. Ibid., 222.

ory ought to be able to resolve most, if not all, moral disagreements, and that this is an unreasonable expectation. Perhaps a moral theory can only be expected to provide general guidelines regarding the good life and right conduct, and that there simply are certain moral issues about which reasonable people can disagree, without any real hope of resolution.

I have several responses to such an objection. First, most people do expect an ethical theory to provide not only general normative precepts and insights into the good life, but also guidance toward resolving moral disputes. Second, when it comes to resolving moral disputes, the realist account of the good that I have been defending, which argues for the existence of a highest good that serves as the exemplar for all other goods, offers invaluable guidance because it provides a measure by which human goods can be placed within a hierarchy.[33] Often moral disagreements arise when there are several goods competing for the attention of the moral agent, and these goods cannot be upheld at the same time. The controversy, then, is over how to prioritize competing goods. An existential account of the good provides the metaphysical framework by which we can measure and prioritize competing goods, so that we can better evaluate difficult moral situations. Finally, I think that a moral theory grounded in a realist account of the good can and does acknowledge that there are often legitimate differences in how we go about pursuing the basic human goods.[34]

33. This claim is rejected by someone like Bernard Williams, who argues that there is no transcendent standard by which we can measure competing goods. Rather, conflicting values are incommensurable. See Bernard Williams, "Conflicts of Values," in *Moral Luck* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982). This claim is also rejected by the proponents of the "New Natural Law Theory," who are sympathetic to Aquinas and the Natural Law tradition, but find untenable Aquinas's contention that goods can be placed within a hierarchy. See, for example, John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), and Robert P. George, *In Defense of Natural Law* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198267713.001.0001. For criticisms of the position that goods are incommensurable, see Daniel McInerny's *The Difficult Good* (cf. note 21 above) and Russell Hittinger, *A Critique of the New Natural Law Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987).

34. Take Aquinas's account of the natural law, for example. It's true that he thinks there are no exceptions to the negative prohibitions of the natural law. But with respect to the positive prescriptions of the natural law, and how we are to apply these prescriptions in concrete circumstances, Aquinas thinks that the natural law has little to say, because different people at different times and in different circumstances can legitimately draw different conclusions from the general precepts of the natural law. See *ST* I-II, q. 94, a. 6: "It is therefore evident that, as regards the general principles whether of speculative or of practical reason, truth or rectitude is the same for all, and is equally known by all. As to the proper conclusions of the speculative reason, the truth is the same for all, but is not equally known to all: thus it is true for all that the three angles of a triangle are together equal to two right

IVb. G. E. Moore on Being and Goodness

Let us move, now, from the continental to the analytic tradition. Here we find different reasons for divorcing goodness from being, but similar results. Not all analytics make this move, of course, but when they do, it is often with reference to G. E. Moore's famous "naturalistic fallacy." As I mentioned above, Moore argues that a linguistic analysis of the manner in which we use the term "good" reveals that it is impossible to equate goodness with any natural property.[35] For whatever property justifies calling a thing "good" can, in a different context, justify calling a thing "bad." To equate the good with pleasure, for example, is problematic, because surely we can think of instances when taking pleasure in a given act (like torture) is morally wrong. Moore's naturalistic fallacy builds upon, and reaffirms, the dichotomy introduced by David Hume between statements of fact and statements of value.[36]

   Moore's position, of course, raises the obvious question: if goodness cannot be univocally defined, how are we to give reasons or justifications for pursuing something as good or avoiding something as evil? Moore's response is to treat the good as a kind of non-natural property that we intuit. We are unable to offer reasons for why we desire things like friendship or compassion, but we intuitively see that such things are good.[37] This kind of "intuitionism" naturally leads to the emotivism of such thinkers as A. J. Ayer and Charles Stevenson, who see the inherent difficulty in asserting that goodness is a real property of things, but not a natural property, and thus they reject the existence of non-natural properties.[38] Instead, Ayer and Stevenson take Moore's thinking to its logical conclusion: goodness is not a property at all, but rather a term that expresses our approval of a goal or action and our recommendation that others pursue this goal or action, as well (*OM*, 23). Now, if emotivists want to move beyond the mere description of moral language, they will have enormous difficulties justifying moral prescriptions. For why should we suppose that our subjective emotional response to a certain action is enough rational justification to

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angles, although it is not known to all. But as to the proper conclusions of the practical reason, neither is the truth or rectitude the same for all, nor, where it is the same, is it equally known by all."

35. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, chap. 1, §§ 10–12.

36. See David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), book 3, part I, section I.

37. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, chaps. 4 and 5.

38. See A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic* (New York: Dover, 1952), and Charles L. Stevenson, *Ethics and Language* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944).

recommend or forbid that action to someone else? The problem with saying that good and evil are distinguished by (or have reference solely to) feeling is that there is no objective criterion for evaluating two people who have conflicting feelings toward the same object. Here we see another example of the moral vacuum created when we deny goodness a status in being.[39]

Ayer and Stevenson serve as just one example of analytic moral philosophers who reject Moore's ethical theory, and yet affirm his belief in the discontinuity between fact and value. In fact, shortly after Moore introduced the naturalistic fallacy, scholars recognized that he did not really discover a fallacy, strictly speaking, and they rejected his version of intuitionism as fundamentally unsound.[40] Why, then, is Moore still so influential? In their analysis of recent trends in analytic metaethics, Stephen Darwall, Allan Gibbard, and Peter Railton suggest that Moore's influence can be explained by the ongoing power of his "open question argument," or his claim that one can always ask of a descriptive property that has been equated with the good whether it is "really good," or good in all instances.[41] The open question argument is compelling because we can always imagine a situation where the property equated with goodness is undesirable, or no longer offers a compelling reason for acting.

The problem, however, is that this way of stating the open question argument sets up a straw man. Most philosophers who are realists about the good don't presume that there is some single property that is identical to goodness. As Peter Geach pointed out long ago, to describe something as "good" is to refer to real attributes, but attributes as they relate to a particular subject that has a particular function.[42] On this account, goodness is that which allows a thing to complete its proper function.[43] The good

39. Emotivists also have difficulty explaining the apparent shift in meaning a moral sentence undergoes when it is placed in a more complex context. This is the famous "embedding" problem demonstrated by Frege and Peter Geach. A standard example is the shift that we find in the statement "lying is wrong" when it appears in the antecedent cause of a conditional, such as "if lying is wrong, then convincing your brother to lie is wrong." The meaning of "lying is wrong" shifts, because in the second sentence it can no longer mean the mere expression of disapproval. See Peter Geach, "Assertion," *The Philosophical Review* 74, no. 4 (1965): 449–65, doi:10.2307/2183123. For further criticisms of the emotivist position, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), chaps. 2–3.

40. See, for example, William K. Frankena, "The Naturalistic Fallacy," *Mind* 48, no. 192 (1939): 464–77, doi:10.1093/mind/XLVIII.192.464.

41. Stephen Darwall, Allan Gibbard, and Peter Railton, "Toward *Fin de siècle* Ethics: Some Trends," *The Philosophical Review* 101, no. 1 (1992): 116–7, doi:10.2307/2185045.

42. Peter Geach, "Good and Evil," *Analysis* 17, no. 2 (1956): 33–42, doi:10.1093/analys/17.2.33.

knife, then, is sharp, but the good bowling ball is not. Both the sharpness of the knife and the roundness of the bowling ball, however, allow the subjects in which they inhere to fulfill their respective functions of cutting and rolling. And the same can be said of natural objects. The good heart is good by virtue of different properties than the good eye, but in both cases we are talking about real properties that have a certain relationship to the subject in question.

The challenge for those analytics who continue to accept the fact / value divide but reject Moore's intuitionism is to provide an alternative objective grounding for ethics. Philosophers like Thomas Nagel and Christine Korsgaard, for example, offer as an alternative to intuitionism and emotivism a version of Kantian ethics that grounds morality in practical rather than theoretical reason.[44] On this model, ethics involves providing a valid or genuine reason for acting, rather than a valid reason for belief, and makes no reference to an independent metaphysical order.[45] Rather, normativity is grounded in the structure or nature of practical reasoning.

V. Conclusion

Obviously it is outside the scope of this paper to offer a thorough evaluation of such alternatives to Moore's intuitionism (or to Sartre's phenomenological ethics), but I maintain that, like Moore's intuitionism, they will fall into the kind of moral vacuum spoken of by Wojtyła. This is inevitable once goodness is denied an ontological grounding. And one might argue that the recent flourishing of naturalist ethics and virtue theories, which affirm some sort of connection between fact and value, is a testimony to this fact.[46] As I argued above, I believe that such moral theories are defensible if one is willing to grant their first principles, but an adequate defense of these first principles requires the kind of metaphysical argumentation we find in Aquinas and Wojtyła.[47]

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43. In other words, goodness supervenes upon a thing's actualization, or goodness is "present" when we find the existential actualization of a thing's potentialities.

44. See, for example, Thomas Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), and Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

45. Darwall, Gibbard, Railton, "Toward *Fin de siècle* Ethics," 131.

46. For a contemporary neo-Aristotelian ethics, one that grounds goodness in nature, see Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), doi:10.1093/0198235089.001.0001.

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