

Why Ought We Be Good? A Hildebrandian Challenge to Thomistic Normativity Theory

Abstract. In this paper, I argue for the necessity of including what I call “categorical norms” in Thomas Aquinas’s account of the ground of obligation (normativity theory) by drawing on the value phenomenology of Dietrich von Hildebrand. A categorical norm is one conceptually irreducible to any non-normative concept and which obligates us irrespective of pre-existing aims, goals, or desires. I show that Thomistic normativity theory on any plausible reading of Aquinas lacks categorical norms and then raise two serious objections which constitute master arguments against it. The upshot is that this theory requires reform. I end by proposing work remaining for such reform, namely, an expansion of the Thomistic metaphysic and anthropology.

Key words: Thomistic Normativity Theory • Categorical Normativity • Dietrich von Hildebrand •

Objective Value

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0. Introduction

A meta-ethic is a formal account of the meaning of those concepts which form the building blocks of ethical theories. Since meta-ethical inquiry extends beyond strictly normative concepts such as “ought” and “permissible” (to concepts such as “benefit” and “value”), let’s call a meta-ethical account of the nature of normativity a “normativity theory.” In this paper, I argue for the necessity of including the normative concept of “categorical normativity” in any Thomistic normativity theory faithful to Aquinas’s thought (hereafter, TNT). A categorically normative property (hereafter, “categorical norm”) is one irreducible to any other more fundamental norm and which obligates us irrespective of any of our prior motives — not merely our prior *subjective* aims, but also our *innate* desires for our own perfection as human beings. I take Aquinas’s meta-ethic to exclude (disallow) categorical norms, in contrast to Dietrich von Hildebrand. Granting the difficulty in mapping contemporary meta-ethical conversation onto that of historical thinkers, my aim is not primarily exegetical — I leave the question of best reading of Aquinas’s and Hildebrand’s normativity theory open — but to spotlight widely accepted features of Aquinas’s thought that, I contend (drawing on central features of Hildebrand’s), detrimentally exclude categorical normativity across all major Thomistic normativity theories on offer. I do this by introducing a master argument against (TNT) which, if successful, entails that it requires reform. I do not assume in advance the necessity of including categorical normativity in our meta-ethic since this would be question-begging against the Thomistic account. Instead, I object to the Thomist’s position by a kind of *reductio*, showing that an indefensible position resultant on Aquinas’s exclusion of categorical norms awaits defenders of (TNT) in the dialectic. I end by proposing reformative work

remaining for including categorical norms, namely, an expansion of the Thomistic metaphysics and anthropology.

1. Hildebrandian Value and Categorical Normativity

Following the phenomenological method developed by Edmund Husserl, Dietrich von Hildebrand analyzes the phenomenon of motivation by describing how it shows up for us in experience.¹ For Hildebrand, we are motivated by what manifests as three distinct kinds of importance.² (1) The importance of the *subjectively satisfying* motivates by appealing to what merely satisfies our preferences or affinities. For example, the pleasure resultant on receiving an underserved complement is important to me not for any reason higher than that it is satisfying to receive it.³ (2) A second kind of importance manifests as what is *objectively good for* the one motivated. For example, a glass of water motivates by appealing to my thirst but ceases to motivate once my thirst is quenched. While the importance of what is objectively good for a person motivates by appealing to my desires (e.g. my thirst), it does not merely appeal to what subjectively satisfies since what truly benefits me is not a matter of personal preference.⁴ (3) A third kind of importance manifests as what is “important-in-itself.”⁵ The motivation of the important-in-itself Hildebrand calls “objective value.” Objective values motivate unconditionally, that is, independently of what subjectively satisfies, what benefits me, or of any other self-regarding motives.⁶ For example, the value of loving my neighbor motivates me independently of its benefit

¹ Primarily Husserl’s *Logical Investigations* (1900-1901). See Hildebrand’s *Ethics* chps. 1-3 (2020: 25-178) and *Aesthetics: Volume I* chp.1 (2016: 13-73).

² *Ethics*, chp. 3, 36-65.

³ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁴ “When somebody is saved from a danger threatening his life ... what fills his heart with gratitude is the gift of his life or of his freedom; and this has the character of an objective good *for* him (*Ethics*, 52).”

⁵ For a helpful overview of Hildebrand’s account of the causal locus of motivation (in me or beyond me) see Francis Feingold’s “Principium Versus Principiatum: The Transcendence of Love in von Hildebrand and Aquinas,” *Quaestiones Disputatae* 3, no. 2 (2013): 56-68.

⁶ “[The importance of objective value] in no way depends on any effect that it produces in us ... It stands before us intrinsically and autonomously important, in no way dependent on any relation to our reaction (*Ethics*, 37).”

to me or of its personal satisfaction. While pre-existing motives, subjectively satisfying or objectively good-for motives, may be present when motivated by objective value, they are not the source of this further kind of importance.

For Hildebrand, values are experienced as *calling for a value-response*.⁷ The beauty of a great work of art calls for a value-response such as admiration, and such calls are strictly the appeal of what is important-in-itself irreducible to other kinds of importance.⁸ I propose to understand Hildebrand's "call-for-response" as (at least including) the force of the categorically normative; that is, objective value categorically obligates me to give a proper value-response, motivating me by calling me upward to something beyond my pre-existing motives, calling me to make an act of self-transcendence.⁹ And I propose to understand "value-response" in terms of just this properly self-transcending response to values.¹⁰ The account of categorical norms I next give, however, is my *own* Hildebrand-inspired account, and should not be read as a direct historical explication of Hildebrand's value phenomenology. Instead, my account explicates categorical normativity in Hildebrandian terms, the purpose of which, will be to show just what Thomistic normativity theory disallows but requires to remain persuasive in the dialectic; that is, to show that the Thomistic account requires reform.

⁷ *Ethics*, chp. 17, 201-254; Cf Mark K. Spencer "The Irreducibility of the Human Person: A Catholic Synthesis," (*Catholic University of America Press*, 2022), 199-201.

⁸ "Every good possessing a value imposes on us, as it were, an obligation to give to it an adequate response ... The call of an authentic value for an adequate response addresses itself to us in a sovereign but non-intrusive, sober way. It appeals to our free spiritual center (*Ethics*, 40)."

⁹ In Hildebrand's (untranslated) *Moralia: Nachgelassenes Werk* vol. 9 of *Gesammelte Werke* (Regensburg: Habel, 1980), he acknowledges sources of the important-in-itself beyond value and responses *relevant to* values but distinct from value-response (e.g., voluntary self-commitment). I thank an anonymous referee for this reference.

¹⁰ We can adopt a fundamentally self-transcending attitude toward values; cf. *Ethics*, 335-6. Self-transcending does not mean totally self-disinterested. Hildebrand shows that some value-responses such as love of my spouse *properly include* an interest in my own happiness the object of which is my beloved; see *The Nature of Love* trans. John F. Crosby and John H. Crosby (South Bend, ID: St. Augustine's Press, 2009), 211-212, 220. However, value-response is never *mere* self-interest. I thank an anonymous referee for this reference.

What exactly are categorical norms? A contrast makes the concept clear. A “hypothetical” norm expresses an imperative conditional on agents’ pre-existing aims or desires. For example, <If I want my birthday cake to turn out well, I ought to follow the recipe exactly> expresses a hypothetical norm conditional on my willing the antecedent of the conditional claim.¹¹ If I don’t want my birthday cake to turn out well, I am not obligated by the consequent. By contrast, categorical norms must meet the following two conditions:

The irreducibility condition. A norm is categorical only if the content of any normative predicate which ascribes this norm is conceptually irreducible to the content of any non-normative predicate. That is, no predicates the content of which are merely descriptive and in no way prescriptive ascribe categorical norms.

And

The unconditionality condition. A norm is categorical only if it motivates independently of an agent’s pre-existing aims, goals, or desires. That is, categorically normative obligations cannot be conditional on any prior, agent-relative, source of motivation.

For example, if my obligation to clean my room follows from the statement, “A clean room conduces to finding personal belongings,” then this obligation is *not* categorical since its norm is ascribable by the non-normative predicate “conduces to finding personal belongings.” It violates ***irreducibility condition.*** And if my obligation to clean my room is conditional on my pre-existing desire to benefit from a clean room, this obligation is not categorical since its norm violates ***unconditionality condition.***

¹¹ The hypothetical/categorical distinction is originally Kant’s in the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* trans. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 4:414-4:417 (25-27). However, in this paper these terms should be understood just in the senses I give.

By “normative predicate” I mean predicates such as “is obligatory” or “is impermissible” which deploy normative concepts such as *right* and *wrong*. And by non-normative predicates I mean predicates such as “is yellow” or “is 5’7” tall” which deploy merely descriptive (non-normative) concepts.¹² I make no metaphysical claim here about a fact/value distinction in reality. I am drawing a merely *conceptual* distinction between normative and non-normative predicates *whether or not* they veridically ascribe real metaphysical properties. The world may be indivisible into categorically distinct normative and non-normative properties. The irreducibility condition remains unaffected.

You might worry that no even *conceptual* division into the normative and descriptive is informative, and as evidence, we deploy what some philosophers call “thick” ethical concepts which contain evaluative and descriptive content together, escaping the distinction. For example, the predicate “is courageous” seems to contain both evaluative content (it’s *good* to be courageous) and descriptive content (courageous acts proceed toward danger). If evaluative concepts are “thick” in this way, they might be thought to constitute a counterexample to *irreducibility condition* (which works to purify categorical norms from descriptive derivations) since thick norms are both normative yet essentially contain descriptive content.¹³

Collapsing the normative/descriptive distinction, however, is no problem for *irreducibility condition*. Meta-ethical views denying a distinction *presuppose* the irreducible character — preventing inference from the non-normative to the normative — of normativity. For such views, either the world and all in it is thoroughly charged with *irreducible* normativity, or no norms exists

¹² For this way of construing the terms see Bart Streumer’s “Are Normative Properties Descriptive Properties” (2011: 325-348).

¹³ Anscombe thinks that action descriptions lacking normative content are *underdescribed*; see Adrian Haddock’s and Rachael Wiseman’s “Human Action” in *The Anscombean Mind* ed. Valérie Acoutrier (Routledge, 2021), 333-354.

at all. All the same, in section 3, I observe that the conceptual distinction between *hypothetical* and *categorical* normativity returns a kind of normative/descriptive conceptual distinction, and that *this* distinction risks, for one reading of (TNT), violation of *irreducibility condition*.

Notice that the *unconditionality condition* includes not only “if .., then ...” constructions but also “since ..., then ...” ones.¹⁴ For example, “Since it’s raining, I ought to take my umbrella” is a hypothetical imperative. Some such constructions express *necessary* prior conditions. For example, we necessarily desire food by virtue of possessing an animal body requiring food to survive. Yet, “Since I’m hungry, I ought to eat,” *also* expresses a hypothetical imperative of a “since ..., then...” construction. After all, I may elect not to eat. These sentences require the further claim that one *just plain ought* to avoid the rain and that one *just plain ought* to satisfy one’s natural desire for survival to ascribe categorical norms.¹⁵

A corollary of *unconditionality condition* is that we are categorically obligated if and only if (and when) we possess the freedom sufficient for giving unconditional *responses* to our categorical obligations.¹⁶ That is, to be categorically obligated, I must be capable of freely responding to my obligation such that no hypothetical motives condition my response. In this paper, I am understanding Hildebrand’s “value-response” and “self-transcendent acts” to be unconditional responses to categorical obligations. On my account of categorical norms, Hildebrand’s *objectively*

¹⁴ An important example of *universally binding* “since ..., then ...” construction is Kant’s *assertoric* hypothetical imperative which “may be set forth not merely as necessary to some uncertain, merely possible purpose but to a purpose that can be presupposed surely and a priori in the case of every human being, because it belongs to his essence (*Groundwork*, 4:415-4:416, 26).” By contrast, Hildebrandian values present concrete calls to self-transcendent response.

¹⁵ W. Matthews Grant (2004: 168-181) draws on a categorical/hypothetical ought distinction to sort out competing accounts of Aquinas’s natural law theory.

¹⁶ On the necessary correlation between obligation and capacity see Bart Streumer (2003) “Does ‘Ought’ Conversationally Implicate ‘Can’?” in *European Journal of Philosophy* 11: 2019-28. I take it that Aquinas accepts that “ought” implies “can” since he thinks it is proper to moral acts that they be voluntary (*Summa Theologiae* Part I-II Question, 1, Article 1; q. 18 a. 6; q. 74 a. 1). Translations of Aquinas throughout are my own, but I consult the Benziger Bros. edition, 1947 accessed at <https://isidore.co/aquinas/summa>. Texts of Aquinas accessed at <https://www.corpusthomicum.org/>.

good for category of importance *cannot* by itself elucidate such norms since it does not by itself express unconditional obligation. By contrast, his objective value category *does* by itself elucidate categorical norms since values call for a response unconditional on any ulterior motive.¹⁷

2. Aquinas's Normativity Theory: Four Themes

In this section, I introduce four themes in Aquinas's thought relevant to our discussion. My expositions of these themes are neither exhaustive treatments nor do they resolve exegetical disputes. Instead, I aim only to introduce fundamental elements of Aquinas's metaphysic necessary for constructing (TNT). However, this section's exposition is more extended than the previous Hildebrandian section's exposition because it is (TNT) which I will show to require reform in subsequent sections, so it is important to map out this theory in more detail.

(1) The central theme in Aquinas's metaphysic is being (*ens*). "The intellect has an operation which extends to universal being" since no concept is more general than being.¹⁸ Following Aristotle, Aquinas thinks that there are multiple senses of being.¹⁹ A primary sense is uncovered by the distinction between potency (*potentia*) and actuality (*actus*).²⁰ "Actuality" expresses what is present and unchanging while "potency" expresses what is not actually present and is brought to actuality only by what is already actual.²¹ God is unchanging, so God is pure actuality; there is no potency in God.²² Created things like us are a mixture of potency and actuality.²³ Following Aristotle, Aquinas expresses this mixture in terms of substance and accident: substance is the

¹⁷ If our account of the objectively good for us *includes* its character of being *also* objectively valuable, then we can speak about a categorical obligation to self-transcending response realized in the objectively good for us.

¹⁸ The object of the intellect is *ens universale* (*ST I*, q. 78, a. 1c. See also *ST I*, q. 79, a. 2.

¹⁹ *Sententia libri Metaphysicae VII, lectio 1; I, lectio 3.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, VII, *lectio 1*. The relevant text in Aristotle is *Metaphysics VI*, 2, 1026a33 - 1026b 2 also cited in Alejandro Llano's "The different meanings of 'being' according to Aristotle and Aquinas," in *Acta Philosophica* 10 (2001: 29-44).

²¹ *ST I* q. 2, a. 3.

²² *Summa Contra Gentiles (SCG) IV, caput 10*. See also *ST I*, q. 2, a.3; q. 9, aa. 1-2.

²³ *ST I*, q. 76, a. 1. We are hylomorphic matter-form composites. See Kendall A. Fisher's "Thomas Aquinas on hylomorphism and the *in-act* principle" in *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 25 n.6 (2017: 1053-1072).

actuality which underlies change and persists in presence through itself (*ens per se*) while accident persists only by dependently inhering in substance (*ens per accidens*).²⁴ Substance also communicates *what* a thing is.²⁵ Aquinas translates Aristotelian substance (*ousia*) as essence (*essentia*). In virtue of possessing a human substantial form, we possess a human essence that manifests human essential properties such as animality and rationality which differentiate us from other beings.

In addition to these Aristotelian conceptions of being, Aquinas introduces a distinction between one's act of existence (*actus essendi*) and one's essence (*essentia*).²⁶ It is possible that I cease to exist. What explains why this human substance which is me exists now is my particular *actus essendi*.

(2) A second central theme, crucial to our discussion, is goodness (*bonum*). For Aquinas, goodness is a transcendental property of being; that is, metaphysical goodness just is being *as desirable*.²⁷ Desirability, then, is a primary sense of goodness. Since every creature desires its own perfection, goodness also carries the sense of the perfection of a being.²⁸ The perfection of a being is its final “end” (*telos, finis*), what it was created *for*. Goodness, then, has the character of an “end”, that is, it

²⁴ *ST I*, q. 77, a. 6c; q. 3, a. 6; *Sententia libri Metaphysicae VII*, lectio 1-2; *In libros Physicorum I*, lectio 13; *II*, lectio 2 and 4.

²⁵ *Sententia libri Metaphysicae VII*, lectio 1. Substance is, in this sense, the *first* meaning of being.

²⁶ *Esse dupliciter dicitur, uno modo, significat actum essendi; alio modo, significat compositionem propositionis, quam anima adinvenit coniungens praedicatum subiecto* (*STI* q. 3, a. 4, ad 2) [Being is said in two ways. In one way, it signifies the act of existence; in another, it signifies the composition of propositions as when the mind conjoins the subject and predicate]. See also *Quaestiones disputatae De potentia* q. 7, a.2, ad 9; *STI* q.4, a. 1, ad 3; *SCG II*, caput 54, 5; *III*, caput 66, 4; *STI*, q. 45, a. 5.

²⁷ *ST* q. 1; *Scriptum Super Sententiis I* distinctio (d.) 31, q. 2, a. 1, ad 4; *IV* d. 49, q. 1, a. 3. *Et ideo, sicut bonum convertitur cum ente, ita et verum. Sed tamen, sicut bonum addit rationem appetibilis supra ens, ita et verum comparationem ad intellectum* (*STI* q. 16, a. 3) [And in this way, just as goodness is convertible with being, so too is truth. However, goodness adds the concept of desirability to being, just as “true” adds relation to the intellect].

²⁸ *STI* q. 5, a. 4.

describes a being in its completion according to its nature.²⁹ Moreover, Aquinas distinguishes three ways goodness manifests as desirability in practical deliberation. (i) The *bonum utile* or useful good expresses what is beneficial to us as a means toward a practical course of action. (ii) The *bonum delectabile* or pleasant good is a certain delight in acquiring the practical end we sought. (iii) And the *bonum honestum* or noble good is a practical end desirable for its own sake and not for any further end.

(3) The particular relation which holds between being and goodness constitutes a third theme.

Aquinas maintains that “being and goodness are convertible terms.”³⁰ That is, being and goodness are *really identical* and only conceptually distinct (*distinctio rationem*). Aquinas distinguishes between “real distinctions” (*distinctio realis*), where the relata are distinct in reality (*in re*) and not just in the mind³¹, and “conceptual distinctions” (*secundum rationem*), where the relata are in reality identical but are mentally distinguishable.³² In addition, Aquinas thinks some conceptual distinctions are a merely mental exercise without basis in reality³³, while others have a basis in reality (*fundamentum in re*).³⁴ To say that “x exists” metaphysically entails that “x is good” because good is an aspect of being itself. This is not to say that the two terms are conceptually identical, but only that there is no distinction in reality between being and goodness. However, being and goodness are not merely conceptually distinct with no *fundamentum in re*. We increase our

²⁹ That is, according to the “mode of its perfection (*modum suae perfectionis*)” in *STI* q. 5, a. 5. However, human persons have not only a natural end (the flourishing of our human nature by the perfection of all our powers) but a supernatural end by virtue of being created in God’s image for union with God. God is our supreme good (*summum bonum*), *STI* q. 6; I-II q. 1.

³⁰ *STI* q. 16, a. 3; *Bonum autem sicut et ens, cum quo convertitur, invenitur in quolibet praedicamento* [Goodness just as being – with which it is convertible – is discovered in all manners of predication (in every category)] in *Sententia libri Ethicorum I, lectiones 1 and 6*.

³¹ *STI* q. 28, a. 3; q. 30, a. 2; q. 39, a. 1; *Super Sententiis* I d. 2, q. 1, a. 5; d. 5, q. 1, a. 1 ad 1; *De veritate* q. 1, a. 7, ad 2; q. 2, a. 2 ad 3.

³² *STI* q. 28, a. 3; *STI-II* q. 5, a. 8, ad. 2; I q. 28, a. 3; *Super Sententiis* I d. 31, q. 1, a. 2c; *De potentia* q. 8, a. 2; *Responsiones De 108 articulis* q. 58.

³³ *Super Sententiis* I, d. 2, q. 1, a. 3 cited in David Bradshaw’s “Essence and Energies: What Kind of Distinction?” in *The Pemptousia Journal for Theological Studies* 6 (2019: 5-36).

³⁴ *Ibid.*

understanding of reality by conceptually distinguishing between that something “is” and that it is “desirable.” The same goes for all transcendental properties of being such as “one” and “thing”; by conceptually distinguishing these ways that being manifests to us, we better grasp the world as it really is and not merely as we might imagine it to be.

(4) Central to Aquinas’s meta-ethic is his metaphysical account of our powers of intellect and will. Aquinas thinks that our powers are individuated by their “formal object” which is an aspect of objects toward which a power is properly directed.³⁵ For example, the power of vision is formally directed toward objects *as colored*. Likewise, the spiritual powers of intellect and will have formal objects toward which they are properly directed. The will’s formal object is goodness in general.³⁶ A power *necessarily* aims at its formal object, so the will *necessarily* aims toward goodness in general as condition for any particular voluntary acts.³⁷ It is this theme of willing (desiring) goodness necessarily, in contrast to Hildebrand’s notion of value-responding motivation, which will later ground my arguments against (TNT).

We are now in a position to begin constructing Aquinas’s account of normativity. The first moral norm, “good ought to be pursued,” is also the first principle of practical reason which is grounded in the essential directedness of our will toward goodness.³⁸ Since Aquinas makes no sharp

³⁵ ST I. q. 78, a.1c; q. 77, a. 3. See Mark K. Spencer’s (2017) “The Many Powers of the Human Soul: Von Hildebrand’s Contributions to Scholastic Philosophical Anthropology,” in *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 91.4: 719-735. Spencer (2017: 722) notes that the formal object is not the *object* that the power is directed toward (*objectum quod*) but the aspect (*ratio*) of that object which directs the power.

³⁶ ST I q. 82, a. 2, ad 2; *Objectum enim voluntas est bonum; et sub hac ratione diligit voluntas omne quod diligit* [The object of will is indeed goodness; and under this aspect the will wills all that it wills] *Super Sententiis* I, d. 17, q. 1, a. 5, ad 3.

³⁷ ST I q. 82, a. 1. The “good in general” (*bonum universale*) cannot be Hildebrand’s general character of importance which characterizes every volitional act (*Ethics* 304-305) since the former lacks the possibility of resistance. For Hildebrand, the motivating power of importance cannot *engender* the will since we always retain the capacity to freely accept or reject this importance (305). For Aquinas, free choice (*liberum arbitrium*) and free will (*libertas voluntatis, libera voluntas*) apply only to particular goods *subsequent* to the will’s primary irresistible movement toward *bonum*. The desideratum for Aquinas is metaphysical: goodness and being are convertible, while evil as such is a privation of it (*privatio boni*) and does not exist alongside goodness (ST I q. 49).

³⁸ See note 35.

distinction between metaphysics and meta-ethics, he speaks of evaluative terms such as “right,” and “impermissible” always under the broader metaphysical theme of goodness.³⁹ Goodness just is what motivates. So, to be motivated by what is obligatory to do or believe is to be motivated by the good manifesting as norms governing action and belief.⁴⁰ For Aquinas, the first moral norm which underlies all others is that “good ought to be pursued and evil avoided.”⁴¹ Since every act of will is motivated by what seems good to the agent, the predicate “is an evil act” does not ascribe a normativity categorically distinct from goodness but instead marks acts performed under the mere *appearance* of good but which are in reality harmful.⁴²

Other normative concepts such as “imperative,” and “command” are, for Aquinas, acts of a will.⁴³ God is omnibenevolent, so God’s will just is the manifestation of the desire for the perfection of every creature according to its ultimate end.⁴⁴ We are obligated to obey God’s will not arbitrarily

³⁹ *Lex autem est quoddam bonum, cum sit regula humanorum actuum* [Law is a certain goodness since it is a measure of human actions] *STI-II*, q. 97, a. 3. Law belongs to reason since it is a rule of human acts, and reason directs actions toward an end which is the first principle of all action (cf *STI-II* q. 90, a. 1c). See also *STI-II* q. 90, a. 2; q. 92, aa. 1-2; qq. 93-114.

⁴⁰ “Belief” in the voluntary sense that we ought to assent to the truth (cf *STII-II* q. 11; q. 4, aa. 1 and 3).

⁴¹ *Sicut autem ens est primum quod cadit in apprehensione simpliciter, ita bonum est primum quod cadit in apprehensione practicae rationis, quae ordinatur ad opus, omne enim agens agit propter finem, qui habet rationem boni. Et ideo primum principium in ratione practica est quod fundatur supra rationem boni, quae est, bonum est quod omnia appetunt. Hoc est ergo primum praeceptum legis, quod bonum est faciendum et prosequendum, et malum vitandum. Et super hoc fundantur omnia alia praecepta legis naturae, ut scilicet omnia illa facienda vel vitanda pertineant ad praecepta legis naturae, quae ratio practica naturaliter apprehendit esse bona humana* [Now in the same way that being is the first thing apprehended without qualification, so too goodness is the first thing apprehended by practical reason, which is ordered to action; indeed every agent acts according to an end, which bears the mark of the good. And thus the first principle of practical reason is grounded in the concept of “good”, namely, that the good is what everything desires. This is therefore the first precept of law, that the good ought to be done and pursued, and evil avoided. And on this all other precepts of the natural law are founded, such that all that ought to be done or avoided pertains to the precepts of natural law, which practical reason naturally apprehends to be the human good] *STI-II* q. 94, a. 2c.

⁴² *STI* q. 82, a. 2, ad 1; *Nec est instantia de quibusdam, qui appetunt malum. Quia non appetunt malum nisi sub ratione boni, in quantum scilicet aestimant illud esse bonum, et sic intentio eorum per se fertur ad bonum, sed per accidens cadit supra malum* [There is no worry of some desiring evil. For they desire evil only under the appearance of good, insofar as they consider wrongdoing good, and in this way their intention is properly toward goodness, but incidentally it falls to evil] *Sententia libri Ethicorum I*, lectio 1, 10.

⁴³ *STI-II* q. 90, a. 3 ad 2; *I-II* q. 96, a. 5c; *I-II* q. 90, a. 2; *I-II* q. 92, a. 2 ad 2.

⁴⁴ *STI-II* q. 90, a. 1.

but because God's will is identical to God's goodness which goodness we participate in.⁴⁵ God only commands what is desirable both in itself and for our perfection.

Next, I argue that the convertibility of goodness and being, theme (3) above, which all major versions of (TNT) accept, renders Thomists vulnerable to a master argument from infinite regress. In section 4, I then show that even if Thomists reject the reading entailing vulnerability to regress, (TNT) still faces a master argument from a kind of self-defeat arising from Aquinas's account of willing which all major versions accept. My objections hinge only on a few major principles in Aquinas which no school of Thomism rejects or substantially modifies. So, if my arguments are sound, one version of (TNT) faces two master arguments against it, and all versions face at least one, so for all versions, reform is required.

3. The Objection from Conceptual Regress

On one version of (TNT) sometimes called "classical natural law theory" (hereafter, CNL), it looks like normative concepts are validly derivable from non-normative ones.⁴⁶ On this interpretation, ethical reasoning from "is" to "ought" is not fallacious, and so normative properties *are* ascribable by merely descriptive predicates.⁴⁷ Derivability seems to follow, on this version, from the convertibility of being and goodness which opens a pathway from being (conceptually "unpacked") to normativity in a coherent normativity theory. That is, by apprehending the

⁴⁵ *STI* q. 6; *Expositio libri De ebdomadibus* expositio 3.

⁴⁶ Advocates of (CNL) include Russell Hittinger (1987) and Ralph McInerny (1980). W. Matthews Grant (2004) also cites Henry Veatch's (1990) "Natural Law and the 'IS' - 'OUGHT' Question: Queries to Finnis and Grisez," in *Swimming Against the Contemporary Philosophy* (Washington D.C: The Catholic University of America Press) and Anthony Lisska's (1996) *Aquinas's Theory of Natural Law: An Analytic Reconstruction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press); see Grant (2004: 168-169).

⁴⁷ The Is/Ought fallacy was introduced by David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (eds. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton, Oxford, Oxford University Press: 2000), Book III, Part I, Section I. G.E. Moore's "naturalistic fallacy" according to which we cannot validly construe good-making properties in merely natural terms operates on a similar intuition; see Moore's *Principia Ethica* (ed. Thomas Baldwin, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 1993), Chapter 1, SS. 10, 12, 14.

metaphysical content communicated by human nature, we have sufficient information to apprehend the moral norms governing right action. For example, (CNL) Thomist Ralph McInerny considers the following argument valid:

(P1) Joe weighs two hundred and fifty pounds.

(P2) It is not healthy to be overweight.

(C) Therefore, Joe *ought* to go on a diet.

If so, then on (CNL), we can articulate the human good with predicates void of normative concepts such as “should” or “ought,” and then validly infer from such descriptive content of human nature what we normatively ought to do. On this view, what we ought to do is just what is good for humans to do, and that good is ascribable with descriptive predicates. If opponents object that such reasoning fails to explain why I *categorically* (and not just hypothetically) ought to do what healthy living prescribes, (CNL) Thomists can deny need for categorical normativity and define normativity in exclusively hypothetical terms. Morality is, as Philippa Foot puts it, “A system of hypothetical imperatives.”⁴⁸ On this view, apparently non-normative premises (P1) and (P2) actually smuggle in hypothetically normative content; if we analyze the concept of “health” we will find in it a hypothetical imperative to pursue it.⁴⁹

Let’s assume (CNL) has correctly defined normativity. If so, then if normative properties can be ascribed by apparently non-normative predicates (those constructed without normative terms), there must be a fact of the matter as to *which* apparently non-normative predicates *correctly*

⁴⁸ Foot’s characterization is a useful gloss on a (TNT) which denies categorical obligation. Foot (1972), “Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives,” in *The Philosophical Review* 81.3: 305-316.

⁴⁹ W. Matthews Grant (2004: 178-181) observes the equivocation on “normativity” without hypothetical/categorical disambiguation and notes the particularly *hypothetical* character of normativity in (CNL).

ascribe which normative properties.⁵⁰ That is, we must be able to explain *why* normativity is *correctly* accounted for in these non-normative terms.⁵¹ However, this view's notion of normativity evidently cannot satisfy *irreducibility condition* – and thus *categorical* normativity must be eliminated on it – which opens (CNL) to an objection I will call

The objection from infinite conceptual regress. If the concept of normativity can be conceptually inferred from apparently non-normative concepts, then for any action or belief, it will be possible to ascribe a normative property to that action or belief with an apparently non-normative predicate. If so, then for any action or belief, it will be *correct* to ascribe the normative property which that action or belief has with the apparently non-normative predicate which ascribes that property. However, “being correct” is a normative concept. So, it will be possible to ascribe the property of *being correct* with the non-normative predicate which ascribes that property. But then, for any action or belief, it will be *correct* to ascribe the normative property of *being correct* to ascribing the normative property which that action or belief has with the apparently non-normative predicate which ascribes that property. This is the start of an infinite regress.

For example, suppose that Joe ought to go on a diet. Then it is possible to ascribe being obligatory to Joe's going on a diet with an apparently non-normative predicate such as “is conducive to healthy living” such that Joe's going on a diet is conducive to healthy living. If so, then it will be *correct* to ascribe *being obligatory* to Joe's going on a diet with an apparently non-normative predicate such as “is conducive to healthy living.” Now suppose that we can ascribe the normative

⁵⁰ If you think norms aren't properties but are rather relations, dispositions, or something else, you can make this substitution for what follows without affecting my argument.

⁵¹ This way of proceeding is demonstrated clearly in Bart Streumer's (2011: 18) “Are Normative Properties Descriptive Properties?” In what follows, I draw from but adjust Streumer's arguments to fit our context.

property of *being correct* with the apparently non-normative predicate “is believing about the world the way it really is” such that *being correct* is believing about the world the way it really is. Then, it will be *correct* to ascribe the normative property of *being correct* to ascribing *being obligatory* to Joe’s going on a diet with the apparently non-normative predicate “is believing about the world the way it really is.” This is the start of an infinite regress.

This infinite regress is vicious. Benign infinite regresses are those in which the order of explanation runs from the first term of the series to the last. For example, “I know that P; I know that I know that P ...” is benign because that I “know that I know that P” is explained by the fact that I “know that P.” For vicious regresses, the situation is just the reverse: the order of explanation runs from the last term to the first. And since the regress is infinite, we never get to an explanation. In our case, it being correct to believe that P is not self-explanatory unless we are *irreducibly* obligated to believe that P. But since *being correct* is itself a normative property, if it is *not irreducibly* normative (so *not* self-explanatory), we must explain its normative status by appealing to some further property in the series, and since the series is infinite, we never arrive at an explanation for this normative status. So, the infinite conceptual regress above is vicious.

We can easily see that this is a problem for the classical version of (TNT) if we replace “Joe ought to go on a diet” with “We ought to believe (TNT).” Since now it will be *correct* to ascribe the normative property of *being obligatory to believe* to (TNT) with some apparently non-normative predicate which ascribes that property, and this results in infinite regress. (TNT) *requires* conceptually *irreducible* norms to block this regress.

The problem for (CNL) is that in its account of normativity it passes the explanatory buck to the antecedent of a conditional claim. *If* I want to get to London, *then* I ought to elect the train headed to London over trains headed to alternative destinations. However, the normatively fundamental

question isn't, "Which train ought I take?" It's rather, "Why ought I go to London in the first place?" And no amount of conditional imperatives will ever satisfy *that* question when we are forever wanting to hear what makes the antecedent obligatory in the first place.

(CNL) proponents might respond that we should not understand "correct" in categorically normative terms, but rather in terms of the normativity ascribed by (CNL). However, this will not block the regress. For then it will be *correct* to ascribe *being correct** – where *being correct** is understood in terms of the hypothetical normativity ascribed by (CNL) – to ascribing the normative status of *being correct* to (CNL). Regress ensues.

Instead, proponents might respond by rejecting any distinction between normative and apparently non-normative properties. After all, if being and goodness are really identical, perhaps there just are no apparently non-normative properties.⁵² If so, then it is inaccurate on (CNL) to talk of apparently non-normative concepts entailing normative properties since the world is not thus divided.

However, all that is required for the regress to run is a conceptual *entailment* between apparently non-normative and normative *concepts* even if no real distinction exists between the *properties* they ascribe. And "apparently" here means that the non-normative *predicates* employed like "is healthy" conceptually entail *normative* predicates like "ought to be pursued." The conceptual regress does not hinge on an ontological sense of "property." That is, apparently non-normative *properties* may not really exist, but so long as apparently non-normative *concepts* are conceptually

⁵² Robert C. Koons (2018) thinks Streumer's argument "depends on a claim about supervenience, specifically, the supervenience of the normative facts on the non-normative ones. If there are no non-normative facts, then such a supervenience is complete nonsense." Factual identity is not sufficient to secure *conceptual* identity, however.

distinct from but conceptually *entail* normative ones, regress returns.⁵³ And on this version of (TNT) there is clearly this conceptual distinction and entailment relation between them since on this version there is clearly a *conceptual* distinction and entailment relation between goodness and being. Therefore, any (TNT) constructed from Aquinas’s metaphysical principle of the convertibility of being and goodness *which fails irreducibility condition* (by construing normativity in hypothetical terms) faces a master argument from infinite regress against it.

Alternatively, we can read Aquinas as proposing at least one universally recognized categorical obligation: good *categorically* ought to be pursued. On this and related readings, infinite regress is avoided, but another master argument against it is not. I take this second objection to cut across all plausible readings of Aquinas’s normativity theory.

4. The Objection from Dialectical Toothlessness

Any reading of Aquinas’s normativity theory which accepts at least one categorical norm avoids conceptual regress.⁵⁴ For example, some Thomists defend a “new” natural law theory which sharply distinguishing between *practical moral reasoning*, deliberating about means and ends in decision-making, and *theoretical moral reasoning*, conceptually deriving normative conclusions from prior descriptive premises.⁵⁵ Practical reasoning proceeds from non-inferential practical

⁵³ Recall the conceptual distinction (*distinctio rationem*) with a *fundamentum in re*. By this, Aquinas thinks we can ascribe varying attributes to God without positing a real distinction in God (*ST I*, q. 13). Just so, the conceptual regress objection can run on a *distinctio rationem* with *fundamentum in re* between the normative and non-normative.

⁵⁴ A virtue or perfectionist ethics (TNT) might consider our perfected state categorically obligatory to pursue. Cf. Matthew Shea and James Kintz, “A Thomistic Solution to the Deep Problem for Perfectionism,” in *Utilitas* 34, (2022): 461–477; “Value Incommensurability in Natural Law Ethics: A Clarification and Critique,” in *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 97, no. 3, (2023): 361 – 386. Eleonore Stump, *Aquinas* (Routledge, 2003), 61-91; “Aquinas’s Virtue Ethics and its Metaphysical Foundation,” in Jan Szaif and Matthias Lutz-Bachmann eds. *Was ist das für den Menschen Gute?* (De Gruyter, 2008), 209-228; “Aquinas’s Theory of Goodness” in *The Monist* 105, no. 3, (2022): 321–336. Christopher Toner’s “Virtue Ethics and the Nature and Forms of Egoism” in *Journal of Philosophical Research* 35 (2010): 275-303; “Angelic Sin in Aquinas and Scotus and the Genesis of some Central Objections to Contemporary Virtue Ethics,” in *The Thomist* 69 (2005): 79-125.

⁵⁵ The claim that norms are non-inferentially cognized is the view advocated by Germain Grisez and John Finnis. Grisez’s (1965: 168-201) “The First Principles of Practical Reason: A Commentary on the *Summa Theologiae*, 1-2,

principles not theoretical concepts, and since normativity governs practical choice (about believing or doing), by practical reasoning we intuit normative properties directly, bypassing conceptual derivation.⁵⁶ Moreover, through practical reasoning we non-inferentially intuit multiple “basic goods” which ought to be pursued for their own sake and not merely as means for some other end.⁵⁷ On this reading, advocates reject the (CNL) method of, as Grant puts it, “deriving the natural law from conclusions drawn from the philosophy of human nature.”⁵⁸ Thus, Aquinas’s meta-ethic is no longer a system of hypothetical imperatives.

However, I cannot have obligations without the freedom to respond to them.⁵⁹ I cannot, say, be obligated to take my daughter to school *while I’m in a coma*. The explanation for exoneration is that obligations presuppose capacity to freely respond to them; insofar as I cannot freely respond to obligations, I don’t have any. Can there be manifesting conditions for obligation? Sure. Having moral obligation might be conditional on being conscious, or being human, or even having desires. But while my desires might occasion my obligations, they cannot be *sufficient* conditions for *categorical* obligations. To be sure, I need not remain *indifferent* toward my desires to be categorically obligated. It may be, for example, that we *ought* to will in accord with our universal desire for happiness. The requirement regarding obligation, however, is that we be free to will *against* it.

Question 94, Article 2” is the seminal work in this tradition. See Finnis (1980), *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press); Robert P. George (1988), “Recent Criticism of Natural Law Theory,” in *University of Chicago Law Review* 55: 1371-1429; Christopher Tollefsen’s (2008) “The New Natural Law Theory,” in *Lyceum* 10.1;) ; Grant (2004) also cites Grisez (1983), *The Way of the Lord Jesus*, vol 1., *Christian Moral Principles* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press).

⁵⁶ *In libros Ethicorum* I lect. 1; *STI*, q. 79, a. 11 also cited in Grisez (1965).

⁵⁷ Cf Grisez, 1965: 173, 174, 179, 187, 188, 190n56, 195.

⁵⁸ Grant, 2014: 169.

⁵⁹ Stump proposes “quiescence” or non-resistance (non-willing) to account for this; 2003, 294-306. James Dominic Rooney objects in “Stumping Freedom: Divine Causality and the Will,” *New Blackfriars* 96, n. 1066 (2015): 711-722 and “From Báñez with Love: A Response to a Response by Taylor Patrick O’Neill,” in *Nova et Vetera* 21, n. 2 (2023): 675-692.

But since on Aquinas's view, our will is necessarily directed toward goodness prior to any free particular choice, (TNT) eliminates categorical obligations by blocking in advance any satisfaction of *unconditionality condition* – we always will on the necessary prior condition that we will goodness in general, so we cannot be unconditionally motivated. For Aquinas, even *evil* acts are performed under the aspect of goodness (*ratio boni*) which aspect is not merely being motivated in any sense whatsoever since we are *always necessarily* motivated by our ultimate end (*voluntas ex necessitate inheareat ultimo fini*), which is perfect happiness (*STI*, q. 82, a. 1).⁶⁰ By so doing, however, (TNT) becomes vulnerable to another master argument against it, which I will call

The objection from dialectical toothlessness. Plausibly, I cannot be categorically obligated to do or believe what I am *necessarily determined* to do or believe. However, on (TNT), *all* of my free choices proceed from a will necessarily directed toward goodness in general. So, on this view, there are no categorical obligations. But if so, then there is no categorical obligation to accept (TNT). This leaves the defender of this theory dialectically toothless since any opponent of this theory will be compelled to accept it *only if* they accept the claim that we are determinately directed in just the way proponents say we are. And opponents will be compelled to believe *that* claim only if they already accept or are already inclined to accept (TNT). This gives opponents no serious reason to accept this theory since they were *not* already inclined to accept it.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Necessity conforming to the will's natural design is, for Aquinas, compatible with freedom; cf. *Quaestiones Disputatae de Veritate* q. 22, a. 8; q. 28, a. 7 ad 4, a. 9. Tobias Hoffmann and Cyrille Michon argue that Aquinas escapes intellectual determinism and compatibilism in "Aquinas on Free Will and Intellectual Determinism" in *Philosopher's Imprint* 17, no. 10 (2017): 1-36, but they don't deny the will's volitional determination toward goodness.

⁶¹ This objection is similar to Spencer Case's (2020) arguments in "The Normative Error Theorist Cannot Avoid Self-Defeat," *Australian Journal of Philosophy* 98, no. 1: 92-104. Cf. David Enoch's 2006, "Agency, Shmagency: Why Normativity Won't Come from What Is Constitutive of Action," in *The Philosophical Review* 115.2: 169-198.

For example, suppose that if I want to be happy, I ought to be virtuous. I am not categorically obligated to be virtuous if I do not want to be happy. Now suppose that *since* I am necessarily determined to want to be happy, and since to be happy requires virtue, I ought to be virtuous. I am *still* not categorically obligated to be virtuous since I cannot be obligated to will what I am necessarily determined to will. After all, we assign normative evaluations such as praise and blame to agents whose actions we hold them responsible for, and we cannot be held responsible for what we did not choose. On Aquinas's view, our will is *irresistibly* directed toward goodness in general. So, on this view, the obligation to virtue is not *independent* of our pre-existing motives — our will's being directed toward goodness in general is ineluctable — and so the obligation is not categorical. But if I do not *accept* the claim that we are determinately directed toward goodness in general, then the command to pursue virtue on that basis gives me no serious reason to obey the command.

The same applies *mutatis mutandis* to reasons for accepting Thomistic normativity theory. Serious reasons relative to theory-acceptance are ones which epistemically obligate me in some way whether I want to be so obligated or not. If an argument is sound, its soundness (an epistemic value) prohibits rejecting its conclusion.⁶² Epistemic obligations are polemical motivators; if I'm right, you ought to agree with me. Without such motivators, my position in the dialectic is undermotivated. If I offer you my gold watch on condition that you accept the reform of Thomistic normativity theory I propose in this paper, you may be motivated to accept, but you'd have no truth-relevant reasons to do so. By accepting my arguments in such a way, you accept an *irrational*

⁶² However, soundness permits judgment-suspension while considering whether arguments mislead or fail to convince in some way.

position in the dialectic. Pragmatic motivators, then, are insufficient for theory defense; what is needed is the unconditional motivation of epistemic obligation.

The problem is elucidated in observing two opposing ways of understanding malicious motivation as described by Augustine in his *Confessions*. Hildebrandian John F. Crosby and French phenomenologist Jean-Luc Marion both read Augustine's description of his wrongdoing as presupposing a broader moral freedom than (TNT) allows for.⁶³ For these phenomenologists, Augustine's malicious motives should be understood without qualification. By contrast, Aquinas, considering whether it is impossible to sin maliciously, introduces the following position as *sed contra*:

“Augustine says in Book II of his *Confessions* that while stealing fruit, he loved not the fruit itself but his own defection, that is, the theft itself. But to love evil itself (*ipsum malum*) is malicious sin. Therefore, one can sin maliciously.”

And then replies with qualifications:

“When Augustine says that he loved the defection itself, not the fruit being stolen, we should not take this to mean that *defection itself* or blameworthy deformity is capable of being desired fundamentally and *per se* but that there was fundamental and *per se* desire (*volitum*) either to impress peers, or to undergo some test, or to do something prohibited, or something of the like.”⁶⁴

⁶³ John F. Crosby, “Dietrich von Hildebrand on Deliberate Wrongdoing,” in *Quaestiones Disputatae* 3, no. 1 (2012): 113-119; Jean-Luc Marion, *In the Self's Place*, trans. Jeffrey Kosky (Stanford University Press, 2012), 175ff; John Rist's “Faith and Reason,” in Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzman eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine* (Cambridge University Press, 2001): 26-39. See also Martin Cajthaml's “Von Hildebrand on the Roots of Moral Evil,” in *Religions* 14, no. 7 (2023): 843.

⁶⁴ *Quaestiones Disputatae de Malo*, q. 3, a. 12.

Yet we have reason to accept Augustine's descriptions of deliberate evil-doing *without qualification* because we should reject Aquinas's limitation on moral freedom entailed by the will's prior directedness. And we should do so because prior directedness opens (TNT) to dialectical toothlessness.

Here the Thomist might offer a reply from disparity between epistemic norms governing theory-acceptance and practical norms governing deliberation between particular goods, arguing that the option of preserving *epistemic* categorical norms (while eliminating such practical categorical norms) remains open. To be sure, some meta-ethicists wanting to preserve uniformity across the epistemic and practical domains argue for sufficient parity between epistemic norms governing what we believe and practical ones governing what we do.⁶⁵ They argue from this parity that it would be unbearably arbitrary to eliminate the normativity obtaining in one of these two domains while refusing to do so in the other since a relevantly similar kind of normativity obtains in both. All the same, opponents can resist arguments from parity by showing a relevant *disparity* between norms governing the practical domain and those governing the epistemic one.⁶⁶ The Thomist might object that my argument assumes relevant parity between these domains where none exists. If so, then Thomists retain their polemical teeth in the dialectic and my objection fails to undercut motivations for accepting (TNT) since such motivators are clearly of the epistemic variety. Therefore, we have serious reason to accept (TNT) after all.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ See Philip Stratton-Lake's (2002) Introduction to W.D Ross's *The Right and the Good* (ed. P. Stratton-Lake, Oxford: Clarendon Press), ix-lviii. Arguments against disparity between epistemic and moral norms are called *companions in guilt* arguments; see *Companions in Guilt Arguments in Metaethics* eds. Christopher Cowie and Richard Rowland (Routledge University Press, 2019).

⁶⁶ Cf. Christopher Cowie's "Good News for Moral Error Theorists: A Master Argument Against Companions in Guilt Strategies," in *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 94, no. 1 (2016): 115-130.

⁶⁷ It might also be objected that the Thomist can avoid self-referentially incoherent worries by restricting (TNT) to all norms *except* those governing theory-acceptance. But this looks like an arbitrary exception. Arguments in the dialectic for and against theories clearly involve norms governing which theories we must accept or reject. Such norms must be included in any theory about all normativity.

However, this objection from disparity won't help proponents of (TNT) since normativity theories are theories about *all* and not just domain-relative *kinds* of normativity. No matter what relevant differences obtain between *epistemic* obligations and *practical* ones, we will still want to hear what on (TNT) it is *in general* to be normative in any sense. We have seen that for any version of (TNT), there are no categorical norms in *any* domain of free activity. So, there won't be epistemic categorical norms in the epistemic domain irrespective of domain-relative differences between the norms.

Moreover, even were it not unbearably arbitrary to posit epistemic categorical norms while simultaneously eliminating practical ones, and even were (TNT) a theory about *only* practical normativity, the disparity move would still not be available to the Thomist. On the Thomistic account of motivation, there are no purely intellectual motivations with no reference to the will. As we have seen, for Aquinas, all motivation involves appetite at some level, and the will just is the "intellectual appetite."⁶⁸ So, epistemic obligations involve the will. Since we've already heard that on (TNT), the will is necessarily motivated by goodness in general, no motivation can satisfy *unconditional condition* for categorical normativity, and so there is no room in this account for epistemic categorical norms.

Instead, the Thomist might respond that my objection from toothlessness misunderstands the notion of "aspect of good" (*ratio boni*). The will's being irresistibly directed toward goodness in general (all we will we will under the aspect of goodness) is only meant to signify the role of motivation in willing; "goodness" here just means a general desire for any object whatsoever. All willing involves motivation on some level but does not determine that agent to any particular motivating object. Hildebrand also acknowledges the motivational character of willing by observing

⁶⁸ *ST* I, q. 82, a. 5c.

that all acts of will proceed from the motivation of some kind of importance (*Ethics* 304-305). The will does not proceed toward nothing important whatsoever. On this corrected understanding of willing, we are not determinately directed to will any objective good (including our own happiness), and so are free to respond to categorical norms, including the epistemic norms governing the acceptance or rejection of normativity theories.⁶⁹

However, the *ratio boni* cannot merely signal a general motivation to act toward any importance whatsoever since, as before, Aquinas thinks we are *always necessarily* motivated by *our last end*. Our last end is an ontological principle not a subjective desire. For this reason, Aquinas's "good in general" (*bonum universale*) cannot be Hildebrand's general character of importance which characterizes every volitional act since the former lacks the possibility of resistance. By contrast, Hildebrand thinks the motivating power of importance *cannot* engender the will since we always retain the freedom to accept or reject this importance (*Ethics*, 305). For Aquinas, such resistance of the will applies only to particular goods *subsequent to* the will's primary irresistible movement toward *bonum*.⁷⁰ The desideratum for Aquinas is metaphysical: goodness and being are convertible and goodness is the formal object of the will.⁷¹ If this is right, it will be impossible to will *against* goodness in general (or for the notion of goodness to be reduced to that of a general subjective motivational state lacking any external object) since this would be to act against being, that is, to act without an end to direct our action.

The Thomist might insist that our will's being irresistibly directed toward our ultimate end is a self-evident practical first-principle underwriting all our actions. Well-conducted phenomenological analysis may reveal our universal condition such that all our choices, including theory acceptance,

⁶⁹ I thank Patrick Jobst for raising this objection.

⁷⁰ *STI*, q. 82, a. 1c.

⁷¹ *STI*, q. 49.

proceed from a will necessarily inclined toward goodness in general and that normative judgments are meaningful only insofar as they reflect our duty to choose in accord with this teleological orientation. Since we are all equally so oriented, we can safely discard worries about dialectical toothlessness manifesting in philosophic discourse; necessarily, we're all playing the same game.

However, if we did not choose to play the same game, we cannot be obligated by its rules *even if it's the only game in town*. The rules of a game hypothetically bind on condition that one wills to play; they do not bind otherwise. For example, suppose you've freely agreed to organize a baseball team to represent your local community in a tournament, but you're a player short. Suppose you then break into my home, tie me in a bag, and force me to join your team at gunpoint. Between you and me, our reasons for playing are nothing alike. It looks like obligation gives you serious reasons to play; you agreed to do so, and we ought to keep our promises. I've got no such reasons. Even if we are *all* forced to play baseball at gunpoint, no categorical norms obligate us to play, so we are left with only hypothetical reasons to do so.

Just so, categorical obligations to accept (TNT) are ones that motivate me whether they further my personal projects *or not*. To insist that we cannot *but* desire the truth (or our own happiness), and that (TNT) is true on phenomenological analysis, does not provide an obligation to accept this theory. To be sure, we *can* accept a system of hypothetical norms and insist that opponents do likewise. All the same, we remain without serious reason for accepting it. By now it's clear why it won't work to respond that we ought to accept the results of a well-conducted phenomenological analysis such as shows our necessary inclination toward our own happiness. Even if (TNT) is *correct* about our motivational situation, there are still no serious reasons to accept it *if* there are no categorical norms obligating us to accept correct theories. And neither version of (TNT) I've introduced in this paper allows for such norms. If the result of my phenomenological analysis is

that the world manifests as void of categorical obligations to accept the results of well-conducted phenomenological analysis, then either my analysis was conducted poorly or the world is such that there are no obligations to accept or reject theories at all, so we are in a collectively self-defeating position. Either way, (TNT) remains dialectically toothless.

5. Conclusion: Reforming the Metaphysic

Where does this leave us? I have argued that Thomistic normativity theory faces master arguments either from conceptual regress or from dialectical toothlessness against it. By contrast, Hildebrand's normativity theory avoids these objections since the call of values is not conceptually entailed by apparently non-normative concepts, and our response to their call does not proceed from a necessarily conditioned inclination toward them. If my arguments are sound, Thomistic normativity theory requires two reforms. The first is an expansion of the Thomistic metaphysic to include a *sui generis* category of categorical normativity or the "call" of objective value. The relation between this category and being (or goodness) I leave open provided the two remain conceptually irreducible. The second is the expansion of the Thomistic anthropology to include the freedom to adopt fundamental pro or con attitudes in response to categorical obligations. For Hildebrand, the response to value is a totally undetermined adoption of an attitude.⁷² The freedom to adopt fundamental attitudes need not compete with a necessary *eudaimonist* orientation provided we distinguish *attitude adoption* from *end-directed willing* as two distinct kinds of response. However, I leave the details of these reforms for future work.

⁷² For example, Mark K. Spencer proposes what he calls "free actuality" in *The Irreducibility of the Human Person*, *op. cit.*, 197-98, 203, 242, 249, 275, 277-81.

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