

MORAL DISCERNMENT AND DOUBT IN THE HUMAN JOURNEY

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Abstract. An ongoing challenge within all approaches to ethical decision making is reducing the degree of doubt about what action is right, good, or at least better in a given situation. The process of moral discernment within Christian thought is no exception; however, different Christian communities tend to understand moral doubt and moral certainty differently, to pursue different ways of allaying doubt, and to expect — and accept — different degrees of moral certainty. Drawing especially from Aristotelian virtue theory, selected teachings from the Eastern Orthodox tradition on humility, and recent discussions of the ‘grace of self-doubt,’ I sketch an account of virtuous moral doubt as a mean between the extremes of excessive and deficient moral doubt. In doing so, I hope to make space and provide the framework for an ecumenical understanding of doubt’s proper role in moral discernment.

“Have mercy on those who suffer doubt.” (Jude 1:22)

I. INTRODUCTION

At the heart of epistemology lies the issue of certainty and doubt. *How do we know that we know? On what basis and through what means can the certainty of a knowledge claim be established? Can doubt ever be fully eliminated?* Questions like these arise not only in the realm of science but also in the realm of ethics. Moral epistemology, within both philosophical and religious ethics, examines questions about certainty and about the proper role of doubt as they pertain to claims about what is right and wrong and what is good and evil.¹ *On what basis can one claim to have certainty about moral norms? Through what method(s) can moral knowledge be acquired? Can — and should — moral doubt be eliminated?*

Within ethical inquiry, when one shifts from theoretical wisdom, or knowledge of broad normative claims about what is good and right, to practical wisdom, or claims about how a person or community should respond to specific issues within a particular historical and cultural context,² one shifts from “moral epistemology” to “moral decision-making.” Furthermore, when moral decision-making occurs within a Christian framework, by the Church community or by individual members of the Church, the process can be called “moral discernment.”³

1 While a distinction between “ethics” and “morals/morality” is sometimes stipulated by scholars, typically connecting “ethics” to the public realm or to a heteronomous set of normative claims and “morals/morality” to the private or interior realm, there is no scholarly consensus on whether or not such a distinction should be recognized broadly. In the present context, I am using “ethics” and “morals/morality” interchangeably, both because the terms have not been clearly distinguished historically and because the ecumenical approach of this article benefits from a more inclusive use of terms. For a recent attempt to distinguish “ethics” and “morals” within the analytic tradition, see Zdzisław Wasik, “Ethics and Morality as Axiological and Praxeological Semiospheres of Culture: First Steps to a Conceptual Framework,” *Argumentum: Journal of the Seminar of Discursive Logic, Argumentation Theory & Rhetoric* 17, no. 2 (2019).

2 This distinction is commonly referred to as the distinction between “sophia” and “phronesis.” For a recent interdisciplinary overview to the topic, see Richard H. Trowbridge and Michel Ferrari, “Sophia and Phronesis in Psychology, Philosophy, and Traditional Wisdom,” *Research in Human Development* 8, no. 2 (2011).

3 For a helpful account of the distinction between “moral decision-making” and “moral discernment,” see World Council of Churches, *Moral Discernment in the Churches: A Study Document, Faith and Order Paper no. 215* (World Council of Churches Publications, 2013), 14-15.

As Christians traverse bumpy roads and uneven landscapes of the human journey, ethical questions, uncertainties, and challenges inevitably arise. People of faith can become unsure and doubtful; our moral knowledge, or certainty, can be shaken; our progress on the human journey can stop, or even regress. Questions frequently arise: *Are we heading for a good destination (is our telos congruent with God's will)? Are we on a good path toward the destination we are pursuing (are the means as good and as holy as the end)? How quickly should we embark and proceed? Should we travel alone, or with others? How should we respond to unexpected persons and events along the way? When we encounter a fork or crossroad on the path, how do we choose which direction to follow? What guides, navigation tools, or practices can help us when doubts arise? And what if these sources offer conflicting advice on how to respond to the uncertainties we are facing?*

Moral discernment, and the role of doubt with it, is a topic that Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox thinkers tend to approach differently. While his account reflects stereotypes about Catholic and Protestant views, James Gustafson's comments on the difference between a Catholic priest's and a Protestant pastor's frameworks for moral discernment are worth repeating:

The pastor has not needed the refined case-oriented literature that Catholic moral theology provides because he has not been the examiner of conscience and the judge of conduct in the same way [as the Catholic priest]... [The pastor] has not had to assign penitential acts... but has simply read to the penitential congregation the 'comforting words' of forgiveness.⁴

In addition, both of the above-described approaches would likely seem foreign to an Orthodox spiritual director.⁵ Not only are the various Christian traditions' teachings on the role of doubt different, the extent and manner in which different Christian communities conceptualize, systematize, and practice moral epistemology and moral discernment present significant contrasts that make any attempt at a unified, comprehensive account of the role of doubt in discernment itself... well... dubious.

What follows is an examination of the role of doubt in moral discernment intended for ecumenical consideration. I argue that a form of doubt is wholly appropriate and even necessary within moral discernment, and that this form of doubt can be understood as a virtue that overlaps significantly with a type of humility. Three themes will structure my argument: (1) the Nature of Moral Knowledge; (2) Excessive and Deficient Doubt; and (3) Virtuous Doubt, Humility, and the Grace of Self-Doubt. While my argument is suggestive and limited in scope, I hope that my analysis will prompt further study and discussion both within and between Christian traditions and denominations.

II. MORAL KNOWLEDGE IS LESS PRECISE THAN KNOWLEDGE IN OTHER SPHERES OF INQUIRY

A first point to note is simply that the realm of ethics, of inquiry and reflection on how we *should* live as persons and communities, on what constitutes human flourishing and how we can attain it, carries inherent epistemological limitations.⁶ Human life in the world is much more complex and resistant to systematization and certainty than other realms of reflection.⁷ For this reason, both ethics as a field of inquiry and ethical/moral decision-making eschew precision and certitude, and invite a degree of doubt. Aristotle makes this point in the opening Book of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, when he states that in ethical reflection "we shall be

4 James Gustafson, *Protestant and Roman Catholic Ethics* (SCM Press, 1979), 3.

5 For an excellent overview, see Kallistos Ware, "The Spiritual Guide in Orthodox Christianity", in *The Inner Kingdom: Volume One of the Collected Works*, ed. Kallistos Ware (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2000).

6 I am stipulating this meaning of the term "ethics" in order to distinguish between "ethics" as a scholarly discipline and "ethics" as a set of implicit or explicit normative beliefs or claims. I am not stipulating a difference between "ethics" and "morals/morality" here, as stated above in footnote 1. For a further account of the meanings of "ethics" see Perry Hamalis, "Ethics", in *The Orthodox Christian World*, ed. Augustine Casiday (Routledge, 2012).

7 An extended discussion of the debate between "cognitivist" and "non-cognitivist" approaches to moral knowledge lies beyond the scope of this article. For a helpful discussion, see Matthew Bedke, "Cognitivism and Non-Cognitivism", in *Routledge Handbook of Metaethics*, ed. Tristram McPherson and David Plunkett (Routledge, 2018).

satisfied to indicate the truth roughly and in outline; since our subject and our premises are things that hold good usually [but not universally], and we shall be satisfied to draw conclusions of the same sort...For the educated person seeks exactness in each area to the extent that the nature of the subject allows.”⁸

One finds a similar recognition of epistemological limitations in many early and medieval Christian thinkers. Commenting on the approach to discernment in the writings of John Duns Scotus, Mary Beth Ingham writes:

With his aesthetic model for moral goodness, Scotus elaborates a theory of moral decision-making that is more akin to artistic practice than to mathematical deduction. Moral situations appear as opportunities for creativity and beauty, as moments when the moral agent acts as a creative artist...The moral agent ‘sees’ something in the present situation that calls forth his/her creative response. The result of this moral vision is the birthing of goodness, relationship, and life in the particular set of circumstances at hand.⁹

For Duns Scotus, discerning good and evil along the human journey resembles the creative practices of artists more than the precision and certainty of logical deductions. Such an approach justifies neither a lack of rigor nor reflective negligence; instead, it is, in Aristotle’s words, the pursuit of “exactness in each area to the extent that the nature of the subject allows.”

Similarly, in the early Christian texts of the Eastern ascetical tradition, the connection is often made between the work of moral discernment and the work of physicians.¹⁰ Metropolitan Kallistos Ware writes, “Doctor (*iatros*)...is the dominant ‘model’ for the spiritual father in [St. John] Climacus and Symeon [the New Theologian], and indeed in Eastern Christian literature generally from the fourth century onwards.”¹¹ Like a good doctor, the spiritual director will make a diagnosis and prescribe an appropriate treatment based on each person’s unique history and symptoms. This is medicine as an art, requiring knowledge, but also creativity and freedom. As Ware states, “The spiritual father does not possess an exhaustive program, neatly worked out in advance and imposed in the same manner upon everyone.”¹² To do so would, in fact, be irresponsible and morally dangerous. While a full analysis of their reasons for affirming the imprecise nature of moral decision-making lies beyond our present scope, the freedom and uniqueness of every human person as well as the unrepeatable character of each historical situation seem to constitute the broad foundation for these authors’ claims.

The nature of moral epistemology and discernment thus *lends itself to doubt*, since moral knowledge resists precision and discernment cannot be separated from the distinctiveness of each human being. There are so many factors to consider, so much personal and cultural complexity through which to sort, so much potential for error. For these reasons, neither individual Christians nor Christian communities can expect certitude in all instances of discerning between good and evil, even when they are prayerful, careful, and experienced. The moral life is not a mathematics exam. The capacity for deciding between choices with at least some degree of freedom carries an inescapable limit on predictability and precision. One should expect, instead, that many instances of moral decision-making will generate doubts, to a greater or lesser extent.

III. THE DANGERS OF TWO EXTREMES: EXCESSIVE AND DEFICIENT DOUBT

Even the introductory comments offered thus far suggest that doubt can take healthy and unhealthy forms; that it can have a proper and an improper role in moral discernment. Before looking more closely at “proper,” “healthy,” or even “grace-filled” doubt, two especially dangerous forms of doubt in the dis-

8 *Ethica Nichomachea* I.3, 1094b20-23.

9 Mary B. Ingham, “Moral Decision-making as Discernment”, in *Moral Action in a Complex World: Franciscan Perspectives*, ed. Daria Mitchell (Franciscan Institute Publications, St. Bonaventure University, 2008), 124.

10 For an overview of the therapeutic character of discernment within the Orthodox tradition, see Hierotheos Vlahos, *Orthodox Psychotherapy* (Birth of the Theotokos Monastery Publications, 2008).

11 Kallistos Ware, “Foreword”, in *Spiritual Direction in the Early Christian East*, ed. Irénée Hausherr (Cistercian Publications, 1990), xii.

12 Ware, “The Spiritual Guide in Orthodox Christianity”, 143-44.

cernment process should be considered. To frame this discussion, recall my initial suggestion that proper doubt takes the form of a moral virtue, by which I mean that “virtuous moral doubt” is both (1) a state of character that facilitates moral discernment and (2) the mean between two extremes, one relating to excess and one relating to deficiency.¹³

Consider first a few ways that excessive moral doubt could be spiritually dangerous. Excessive moral doubt often presents itself during the “human journey” as an extreme lack of confidence about what to do when facing a moral choice. One arrives, so to speak, at a fork in the road or encounters someone unexpectedly on the way to one’s destination and is overcome with doubts about how to respond. For example, imagine an unmarried man who has been professionally successful as an accountant. As he walks to church on Sunday morning, an unfamiliar woman holding a baby approaches him and asks for financial assistance to buy necessities for her child. The man has a large amount of money in his pocket... however... many doubts arise in his mind and heart: *what if this woman is a drug addict and will use the money for drugs? What if this woman is lying and is just looking for “easy money”? How do I know that giving the money will in fact help this woman and her child? What if she uses the money to buy food that has spoiled and the child gets sick and dies, would it be my fault?* One can see here how excessive doubt can be paralyzing. It can overwhelm us, make us over-think and over-question even a relatively simple moral choice. As the above example also suggests, excessive doubt may be connected to another character flaw, or vice, like greed, which clouds our judgment, corrupts our deliberation process, and blocks good action.

Another way excessive doubt can obstruct progress is by preventing someone from making a serious commitment to Christ, to the Church, and to one’s fellow human beings. Repeated experiences of excessive doubt can promote spiritual laziness, the vice of *acedia* or sloth, since a person may believe that they cannot make an important spiritual decision unless they are *certain* that it is the *right* decision.¹⁴ One experience of doubt is followed by another, and another, until a person becomes habituated toward indecision. We see this today with many young adults who are contemplating marriage, ministry / ordination, or monasticism. They can become so concerned about “being sure” that they are making the right choice that they postpone, they stall, and they contemplate their options to such an excessive extent that they sometimes fall into serious spiritual problems. St. Basil of Caesarea warns against a similar phenomenon in *The Long Rules*. He writes:

Let us, on behalf of the rewards which are to come, take up the combat for the glory of God and of His Christ and of the Holy Spirit. Let us not remain in our present state of negligence and passivity and, by ever postponing to the morrow and the future the beginning of the work, fritter away the time at hand by our continued sloth.¹⁵

While not all negligence and passivity in spiritual matters stems from excessive doubt in the face of life decisions, such doubt can certainly contribute to inaction in matters of great significance. It seems clear that excessive doubt in the moral decision-making process presents a range of spiritual risks that can affect the dynamics of the human journey.

Looking briefly at the opposite end of the spectrum, the extreme deficiency of doubt in moral discernment, one finds other dangers. Those who have little or no doubt about their moral choices can easily become hubristic, overconfident, and rash. They trust fully in their own ability to discern the good, in their ability to hear and apply the guidance of their own conscience and practical reason. As they proceed in life, they move at a rapid pace, barely even pausing at a fork or a crossroad to deliberate.

Consider, for example, a mother who violently scolds her young child for eating a cookie before dinner. In her mind, she is *absolutely* doing the right thing; she is convinced, without a doubt, that she

¹³ I draw these two characteristics of a moral virtue from Aristotle’s seminal discussion in Book Two of *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1103a15-11-7a25.

¹⁴ For an excellent discussion of *acedia* as “laziness about love,” see Rebecca DeYoung, *Glittering Vices: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins and their Remedies* (Brazos Press, 2009) 79-98.

¹⁵ Basil of Caesarea, *St Basil: Ascetical Works*, ed. Sister M. M. Wagner (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic Univ. of America Press, 1962), 223-224.

is being a good and responsible mother — for (she thinks to herself) if she, as the child’s mother, doesn’t correct this transgression who will? And if she doesn’t correct her child’s behavior now, the child will *surely* grow up to break more significant household rules, then violate civil laws, and eventually end up a hardened criminal!

Given the messiness and complexity of the human journey noted earlier, one might say that such a person is traveling “beyond the speed limit,” putting both herself and others at risk. Rather than pausing at an intersection to consider possible alternative responses, she races ahead with absolute confidence. We can imagine all sorts of justifications she may have for harshly responding to her child’s every infraction — as she sees it, no one knows her child as well as she does. The point is, this mother is not even willing to consider that her immediate impulse is anything other than the best means toward achieving an unquestionably good end. She is totally unaware of the *possibility* that something other than love — perhaps wrath or the love of power — is driving her moral decision-making and her relationship with her child. Tragically, the result is that both she and her child are damaged by her extreme deficiency of doubt.

Many factors could contribute to such a person’s mindset and behavior; however, one factor could be that the mother’s conscience is not functioning properly.¹⁶ When the suggestion to respond harshly arises, there is no moral resistance. Repeated acts of confidence in her own moral judgment have silenced the “law written on her heart” (cf. Rom 2:15) and left her without an interior source of healthy uncertainty. On this point, the sixth-century desert father Dorotheos of Gaza writes:

When our conscience says to us ‘do this!’ and we despise it and it speaks again and we do not do it but continue to despise it, at last we bury it and it is no longer able to speak clearly to us from the depths where we have laid it. But like a lamp shining on a damaged mirror, it reflects things dimly and darkly, just as you cannot see the reflection of your face in muddy water.¹⁷

While an extended treatment of “conscience” is beyond the scope of this article, this example from St. Dorotheos highlights one corrupting dynamic that can undermine proper doubt, silencing the objections a person’s conscience may raise during moral deliberation. Like the clouded judgment that can result from excessive doubt, the extreme deficiency of doubt clouds moral discernment, with spiritually dangerous results.

Another expression of this vicious form of doubt is the mirror image of the “paralyzing doubt” that holds some people back from big decisions like marriage, ministry, or monasticism. Imagine a recent convert to Christianity who is driven by “a call” to evangelize those who have never heard the Christian gospel.¹⁸ The individual “knows” that this is his mission, his life’s calling, and, following the model of St. Paul, he plans to carry the good news beyond the borders of his home culture — perhaps to remote regions of South-East Asia. He prays, packs his Bible, passport, basic clothing, and toiletries...and heads to the airport.

Again, the extreme deficiency of proper doubt in this example lies at the heart of the problem. The zealous convert described above has not struggled enough, or in the right manner, as he arrived at his morally and spiritually dangerous decision. He does not seek spiritual advice from more experienced Christians, for he is *certain* that God is speaking directly to his heart. He is absolutely confident that his decision is not only morally good, but is a faithful (if not saintly) response to God’s call. Furthermore, he becomes rigidly unwavering in his decision — interpreting anyone who attempts to dissuade him as a “temptation” and a threat to his Christian commitment and true calling.¹⁹ The need here for an increase

¹⁶ While the term “conscience” has a rich tradition of meaning and interpretation in many Christian denominations, my use of it here is intentionally broad.

¹⁷ Dorotheos of Gaza, *Discourses & Sayings*, ed. Eric P. Wheeler (Cistercian Publications, 1977), 104.

¹⁸ This example is based roughly on the story of John Allen Chau, who was killed by indigenous people of North Sentinel Island. For an example of media coverage, see J. O. Conroy, “The life and death of John Chau, the man who tried to convert his killers,” *The Guardian*, February 3, 2019.

¹⁹ Such persons’ deficient doubt may even result in “spiritual delusion,” or “demonic delusion” (Russian, *prelest*, and Greek, *plani*), terms used frequently by writers in the *Philokalia* (e.g. St. Gregory of Sinai, St. Maximos the Confessor, St. Peter of

in healthy self-doubt is clear; overconfidence in one's own capacity for moral discernment can have disastrous results.

Thus the extreme deficiency of doubt in moral discernment, like the extreme excess of doubt, presents a range of dangers as one moves along in the human journey. From speeding through decisions, to silencing the voice of one's conscience, to trusting the purity of one's own judgment, critical reflection on the absence of doubt in moral discernment points to the need for a middle way.

IV. VIRTUOUS DOUBT: HUMILITY AND THE GRACE OF SELF-DOUBT

Having briefly considered the excessive and deficient forms of doubt that can occur as individual Christians practice moral discernment, we can turn now to the mean between the extremes, to the proper or virtuous form that doubt can take in the moral dynamics of the human journey. Again, my intention here is to paint with broad strokes and make suggestive claims appropriate for ecumenical consideration rather than to articulate a single, detailed, and systematic account. To begin, consider a short anecdote from the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, attributed to St. Anthony the Great:

Abba Anthony said, 'Once I had a vision, in which I saw all the snares that the enemy [Satan] spreads out over the world and I said, groaning, 'what can possibly deliver a person from such snares?!' Then I heard a voice saying to me, 'Humility.'²⁰

From this text, three teachings relevant to moral discernment and doubt in the human journey can be gleaned. First, Anthony's vision depicts a world that is broken, morally and spiritually dangerous, and saturated with traps and temptations that can prevent a person's progress. On account of humanity's fallen condition, both the landscape of society and the landscape of one's own heart and conscience are treacherous. Good moral choices, thus, are neither easy nor pleasant; they will require spiritual sweat and tears; they will entail bumps and bruises; they *will raise doubts*.

Second, "humility" is a virtue singled out as being of utmost importance. It is the one-word answer and singular focus in St. Anthony's anecdote, not because other virtues are irrelevant, but because humility fortifies and holds together so many vital elements for ethics and growth in Christian life. Dorotheos of Gaza expresses this teaching through the use of an extended construction metaphor:

First, [one] must lay the foundation, which is faith. Without faith, as the Apostle says, it is impossible to please God (Heb. 11:6)...[now] the builder must set his stones in mortar. If he piles up his stones without mortar, the stones come apart and the house falls down. The mortar is humility, which is comprised from the earth and lies under the feet of all. Any virtue existing without humility is no virtue at all, as it says in the saying of the elders: 'As it is impossible to construct a ship without nails, so there is no hope of being saved without humility.'²¹

In other words, without humility, there is no hope. Humility is the condition for the possibility of fulfilling one's potential as a human person called to holiness and communion with God, neighbor, and all of creation. Humility is the gritty "mortar" preventing the collapse of all that is built; it is the nails holding together the ship, the ark of the Church, amidst the chaotic waters of each age.

Finally, St. Anthony's anecdote suggests that humility constitutes the very method for spiritual development itself, a claim also found in the broader Orthodox ethical tradition.²² A method navigates or guides us across a world and, according to St. Anthony, it is an endeavor that demands and consists in humility. Only humility can avoid the traps and pitfalls of moral decision-making in a fallen world and in light of the broader epistemological limitations of ethical knowledge.

Damaskos, and St. Simeon the New Theologian) but developed especially by some more recent Eastern Fathers, like St. Ignatius Brianchaninov, St. Silouan and St. Paisius.

²⁰ Anthony #7, translation mine. Cf. Benedicta Ward, ed., *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Cistercian Publications, 1984), 2.

²¹ Dorotheos of Gaza, *Discourses & Sayings*, 202-203.

²² For an extended analysis of this point is the writings of Ephrem the Syrian, see Andrew Hofer, "The Humble Speech of the Lord: Revelation and Conversion According to St. Ephrem", *Pro Ecclesia* 17, no. 2 (2008).

Perhaps the most important implication of humility as a “method” is humility’s other-centeredness (as opposed to self-centeredness). While Christian humility sometimes means voluntarily placing oneself below others, as Christ did in His kenosis (cf. Phil. 2:7), and it sometimes means pursuing and sustaining an awareness of one’s own moral failures, as the Publican did (cf. Lk 18:10-14), humility also means ‘acknowledging one’s need for others,’ as is suggested by Christ’s exhortation to ‘become humble like this child (cf. Matt 18:4).²³ Alone, one cannot travel safely across a world covered with spiritual traps; however, *with others*, with God’s grace, with an experienced spiritual father or mother, with virtuous friends, with a worshiping community, and with the examples of Christ and the saints in front of us always, all things are possible. And here, St. Anthony’s anecdote about humility as the “method” connects with two other potent sayings attributed to him. The first connects to the example of the zealous convert and goes as follows:

I know of monks who fell after much toil and lapsed into madness, because they trusted in their own works and did not give due heed to the commandment of him who says, ‘Ask your father, and he will tell you’ (Deut. 32:7).²⁴

And the second reads simply as follows, “Our life and our death is with our neighbor.”²⁵ Humility is acknowledging our need for others; it is recognizing the impossibility of navigating the human journey alone.

The discussion of moral discernment and “virtuous doubt” has shifted from a focus on the role of doubt to the role of humility. This is not accidental; indeed, it is my contention that, within the context of moral discernment, “virtuous doubt” and “humility” are essentially indistinguishable. To possess humility during moral decision-making is to *doubt ourselves*; it is to refuse to expect certainty within the realm of ethics as well as to refuse to trust solely in our own capacity for moral judgment. Virtuous doubt is to *acknowledge*, over and over, our need for God and others if we are to have any hope of habitually making good moral choices as we stand in complex and confusing contexts.

While I believe this call for humility is a genuinely Orthodox Christian perspective on doubt in moral discernment, I am also convinced that it is a teaching consistent with Protestant and Roman Catholic moral thought. For example, Catholic moral theologian, Lisa Fullam, draws heavily from Aquinas to trace the many ways that humility is vital to moral discernment. For Fullam, humility is connected to the acquisition of virtue in general (as in Dorotheos), and it is the key to self-understanding as we live in the messiness of history. However, it also contributes vitally to the process of ethical-decision making. She writes:

If humility is a virtue, and we approach morals not just as humble persons but as persons *who conceive moral norms humbly*, a basic shift in moral epistemology ensues. Moral truth becomes not a collection of abstract a priori axioms, but rather a personal, communal process of discovery...Humility brings us to reject any notion that our own experience is the final word.²⁶

If we think back to the examples of unhealthy doubt, both the excessive and the deficient forms of doubt tend to absolutize the individual’s judgment and experience — *I must be certain* before I offer alms, before I marry, before I commit to a life of ministry, etc., and *I know* that what I am doing is good and right, as I beat my child, or set out as a missionary. Virtuous doubt rejects both extremes and guides the Christian be humble and to seek the spiritual counsel of others.

Until now, my focus has been on moral discernment in the lives of individual Christians. However, even this suggestive study requires a preliminary discussion of “virtuous doubt” on the communal or

23 For a detailed discussion of humility’s three meanings, see Perry Hamalis, “Recapturing the Virtue of Humility through an Orthodox, Child-Inclusive Lens,” in *Child-Attentive Theology: Rejuvenating Christian Thought and Practice Worldwide*, ed. Marcia Bunge (Orbis Books, forthcoming 2021).

24 Anthony #37. *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 8-9.

25 Anthony #9. *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 3.

26 Lisa Fullam, “Humility and Its Moral Epistemological Implications,” in *Virtue: Readings in Moral Theology* No. 16, ed. Charles E. Curran and Lisa Fullam (Paulist Press, 2011), 271.

ecclesial level. In 1984, the Roman Catholic ethicist Lisa Cahill wrote, “Contemporary Catholic Moral Theology has entered a period of critical doubt and controversy about the exceptionless character of certain key moral norms traditionally considered absolute.”²⁷ During the 35 years that have since passed, we have seen not only Catholics struggle with doubt over certain ‘absolute moral norms,’ but have seen the splitting apart of entire Protestant denominations, as well as sharp conflicts within the Orthodox church on a wide range of social and moral issues. That the Churches have entered a period of “critical doubt” is beyond question; what we *can* and *should* ask, with seriousness, is whether or not this has been a good thing, and whether or not it has been done well.

While several ethicists and moral theologians have expressed thoughtful positions on this topic,²⁸ it was the Catholic theologian Margaret Farley who coined the term, “the grace of self-doubt.”²⁹ Farley begins by affirming that, “human reason is capable of some genuine moral insight, especially when it is graced by the power of the Holy Spirit.”³⁰ She is rejecting neither the Natural Law tradition itself, nor the power of God to guide moral discernment to legitimate moral truths. However, she goes on to argue that one of the least recognized gifts of the Spirit is “the grace of self-doubt,” and that this healthy expression of doubt is especially important “for those who are in positions of power.”³¹ The significance of humility for not only individual Christians but for communal deliberations and church leaders is affirmed here. “If the greatest temptation of religious persons is self-righteousness,” she writes, “the second greatest is the grasping for certitude — fighting self-doubt in ways that shut the mind and sometimes close the heart.” For Farley, the “grace of self-doubt” is what allows for epistemic humility, the basic condition for communal as well as individual moral discernment. Her teaching points back to the inherent limits on certitude within moral discernment as well as the need for a collaborative approach. She writes:

This is not a grace for calling into question every fundamental conviction we have achieved. It will not foster doubt, for example, about the dignity of human persons or the trustworthiness of God’s promises. It is a grace for recognizing the contingencies of moral knowledge when we stretch toward the particular and the concrete. It allows us to listen to the experience of others, take seriously reasons that are alternative to our own, rethink our own last word. It assumes a shared conviction in the end. Absent such grace, it is not surprising that a church’s teaching will remain divisive and ineffective, unconvincing to many within the church and without.³²

While there is much in Farley’s account that merits detailed analysis and further discussion, her description of “the grace of self-doubt,” strikes me as being a key not only to restoring health and unity to divisions within Churches, but also to restoring health and unity to divisions between the Churches. Thus, “the grace of self-doubt” is a cornerstone of ecumenical hope. Embracing the grace of self-doubt, virtuous doubt, or a proper form of doubt within moral discernment is the most promising path to empowering a singular, humble, and grace-filled Christian witness in a “post-truth world.” For, in the words of Paul Lakeland, “The most dangerous kind of Christian and Church leader is the one who does not know what he does not know and consequently does not know when to speak and when to be silent.”³³

As Christians and communities of Christians continue along the “human journey” and face moral choices large and small, doubt should neither be rejected in full nor embraced without limit. Instead, it should be nurtured in its proper form through humbly acknowledging the need for others, through

27 Lisa Cahill, “Contemporary Challenges to Exceptionless Moral Norms”, in *Moral Theology Today: Certitudes and Doubts*, ed. Rev. G. Donald (Pope John Center, 1984), 117.

28 Bernard Häring argued in 1990 that moral theologians should have “the courage of the provisional” and seek the “grace of doubt.” See Bernard Häring, “The Role of the Catholic Moral Theologian”, in *Moral Theology Challenges for the Future: Essays in Honor of Richard A. McCormick*, ed. Charles Curran (Paulist Press, 1990).

29 See Margaret Farley, “Ethics, Ecclesiology, and the Grace of Self-Doubt”, in *A Call to Fidelity: On the Moral Theology of Charles E. Curran*, ed. James Walter and Timothy O’Connell (Georgetown Univ. Press, 2002).

30 *Ibid.*, 66-67.

31 *Ibid.*, 68.

32 *Ibid.*, 69.

33 Paul Lakeland, “Reflections on the ‘Grace of Self-Doubt’ in *Ecclesiology and Exclusion: Boundaries of Being and Belonging in Postmodern Times*, ed. D.Doyle, T. Furry, and P. Bazzell (Orbis Books, 2012), 16.

accepting the complexity and imprecision of moral knowledge, and through affirming the grace of self-doubt — the guiding power of God working in the hearts of those who know their own limitations.

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