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HUMAN NATURE AND TRUTH

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CONTENTS

Introduction, p. 4

1. Juan Carlos Flores, *Ethics and Truth: a Historical Assessment of the True Good in Light of Henry of Ghent's Medieval Perspective* pp. 5-15
2. Tommaso Mauri, *La teoria schellinghiana della religione come 'rapporto reale'.
Implicazioni per la filosofia della religione contemporanea* pp. 17-28
3. Juan Patricio Cornejo, *Sobre la verdad religiosa y la respectividad* pp. 29-34
4. Tiziano Conti, *Fondamenti antropologici della religiosità, tra la domanda e l'attesa della risposta* pp. 35-46
5. Hans-Bernhard Petermann, *Die Frage nach sich selbst als Natur des Menschen* pp. 47-58
6. Juan Pablo García Serrano, *Tertium non datur: notas para una ontología fenomenológica allende
la crítica totalizante de la metafísica, la razón y la verdad* pp. 59-80
7. Johnson Uchenna Ozioko, *Aquinas on Religion and Human Nature* pp. 81-94
8. Cyril Dunaj, *La natura umana come natura relazionale in un orizzonte ontologico.
L'attualità della relazionalità a partire dal pensiero personalista* pp. 95-103
9. Review_ Elisa Camilla Vincenza D'Ascola, G. Costanzo – V. Busacchi (ed.),
La filosofia alla prova dell'esistenza. Marcel, Jaspers, Ricœur pp. 105-108

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Ethics and Truth: a Historical Assessment of the True Good in Light of Henry of Ghent's Medieval Perspective

Across the history of ethics, various currents of thought lack an understanding of the true good considered as fundamentally desirable and universally sound. Among perspectives that might acknowledge the existence of the true good as so defined, medieval philosophy, through Henry of Ghent (d. 1293), provides a distinctively adequate and far-reaching conception of the true good, based on the faculties of intellect and will. The paper elaborates the character and strength of this conception against a diverse historical background.

Keywords

True, Good, Relativism, Utilitarianism, Existentialism, Nietzsche, Kant, Henry of Ghent, Thomas Aquinas, medieval, ancient

Ethics and Truth

A Historical Assessment of the True Good in Light of Henry of Ghent's Medieval Perspective

0 *Introduction*

It is hard for a philosopher (or anybody) to avoid truth—that is, the existence of truth. This is so regardless of one's metaphysical views, even when one doubts one's capacity to know reality. Heraclitus, Nietzsche, Hume, Sartre - who (for different reasons) embraced uncertainty - still sought to escape falsehoods and articulate true perspectives. As Aristotle pointed out, to give up the principle of non-contradiction is to give up speech, the capacity to say something significant of anything whatsoever.¹ Any judgment, by stating that something either is or is not, inherently has truth value: it is either true or false. On the other hand, to reject this and say that something both is and (at the same time and in the same respect) is not, is to say nothing significant at all. Thus, the existence of truth, in thought and language at least, seems unavoidable. Of course, what is true or what is truth is another matter.

Be that as it may, some philosophers (explicitly or implicitly) exclude truth from some areas of inquiry, notably from ethics. They either separate the true and the good, or they conflate them by reducing one to the other or both to a different principle. In these cases, the effect is the same for ethics: there is no genuine conception of a *true good*. For the purposes of this paper, the true good is defined as a good which is *both fundamentally desirable and universally sound*.

This paper will first provide brief examples from the history of philosophy highlighting the absence of this conception of the true good. Of course, these examples cannot be exhaustive. Their purpose is only to indicate lines of thought that remain persistent and influential in the history of philosophy. These lines of thought provide a helpful background to consider the requirements for a proper understanding of the true good. Finally, we will consider a more integrative approach to the true good in light of the faculties of intellect and will. This latter approach can be found in medieval philosophy, notably in the thought of Henry Ghent, the most influential thinker from the last quarter of the thirteenth century. Again, the discussion of Henry of Ghent and medieval philosophy cannot be exhaustive. This concise article is not meant to provide a full assessment of Henry of Ghent's views,² nor of their distinctive import in the vast

¹ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* IV, 4, 1006a1-20.

² This would require a more comprehensive analysis of his view of reality and human nature, which extends beyond the present parameters and already has been done (to a significant extent) elsewhere: J.C. Flores, *Henry of Ghent: Metaphysics and the Trinity*, Leuven

context of medieval ethics.³ Rather, the purpose is simply to indicate those fundamental principles of medieval thought, as developed by Henry, which support a rich conception of the true good.⁴ This is achieved here distinctively by placing Henry in dialogue with major historical figures and currents.

1 Separations of the True and the Good in Ethics: Relativism, Utilitarianism, and (Atheistic) Existentialism

In Plato's *Theaetetus*, the sophist Protagoras divorces the good from the true. Truth is completely relative and equivalent to individual sense-perception. Wisdom, on the other hand, instills better and more beneficial opinions, albeit not truer ones. Based on individual sense-experience, every person sees the truth as well as another and no one fails to see it.⁵ However, appearances can be controlled for the 'better', since presumably some are more advantageous, useful, or pleasant than others.⁶ Thus, wisdom deals with what is good independently of what is true. Since there is no universal truth in this view, there is no room for a true or universal good. The same may be said about any and all relativistic views of truth which nevertheless still include in their vocabulary judgments about good and bad, better or worse.

Likewise, the utilitarian tradition, as early as Epicurus, has implicitly or explicitly excluded the true from the good understood as pleasure. The reason is that pleasure, pure and simple, lacks universality.⁷ What pleases the individual or the majority varies and the means to obtain it vary as well as circumstances and preferences change. Thus,

University Press, Leuven 2006. However, this paper will discuss fundamental principles that ground a balanced conception of the true good.

³ For an overview of Henry of Ghent's ethics, see M. Leone, Moral Philosophy in Henry of Ghent, in G.A. Wilson [ed.], *A Companion to Henry of Ghent*, Brill, Leiden - Boston 2011, pp. 275-314. Another useful article on this topic is J.M. Counet, Henri de Gand: la prudence dans ses rapports aux vertus morales, in G. Guldentops – C. Steel [eds.], *Henry of Ghent and the Transformation of Scholastic Thought*, Leuven University Press, Leuven 2003, pp. 227-240. For an account of Henry of Ghent's distinctive conception of the will, see R.J. Teske, Henry of Ghent on Freedom of the Human Will, in G.A. Wilson [ed.], *A Companion to Henry of Ghent*, Brill, Leiden - Boston 2011, pp. 315-335.

⁴ Of course, the assumption is not that only medieval philosophy can yield an understanding the true good defined as fundamentally desirable and universally sound. As mentioned below, some ancient thinkers (such as Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics) understand the good in ways that fit this definition. The same may be said of certain modern and contemporary thinkers. However, as shall be shown, medieval philosophy does provide a distinctively strong conception of the true good. Naturally, this basic conception is developed by medieval thinkers in their own ways. Below, the perspective of Henry of Ghent is given special attention.

⁵ «For it is impossible to judge what is not, or to judge anything other than what one is immediately experiencing; and what one is immediately experiencing is always true» (Plato, *Theaetetus*, 167a-b, in B. Williams [ed.], Hackett, Indianapolis 1992, p. 35).

⁶ «In this way we are enabled to hold both that some men are wiser than others, and also that no man judges what is false. And you, too, whether you like it or not, must put up with being a 'measure'» (*Ibid.*, 167d).

⁷ Here it may be helpful to recall Aristotle's insight in *Nicomachean Ethics* (Book X, chapter 5, 1174a30-1175b14). There he clarifies that pleasures differ in kind because the activities they depend on differ in kind. Thus, a given pleasure may interfere with another one. For instance, the pleasure of eating can distract someone at a given moment from the pleasure (and thus from the activity) of learning. Accordingly, pleasures are distinct according to the activities in which they are found. The pleasure of listening to music, for example, can never be found in physical exercise, which yields its own particular kind of pleasure. Although everyone pursues pleasures, specific pleasures differ in kind and as such, therefore, lack universality.

the greatest good for the greatest number - the first principle of utilitarianism - is always conditional.

Epicurus himself conceives the true as the product of individual perception. Perceptions as such are always true⁸ and these may be pleasant in the short run. But stable pleasure, or steady absence of pain, requires experience and training. We learn to accept some pain and to refuse some pleasure for the sake of long-term pleasure,⁹ found above all in freedom from mental disturbance according to Epicurus.

Other utilitarians, however, conceive of the greatest pleasure in different ways. Moreover, some of them consider pleasure only quantitatively while others rank different kinds of pleasure.¹⁰ Since pleasure is a feeling, these accounts of pleasure are ultimately based on individual experience, which varies and fluctuates among individuals and groups. Although pleasure is certainly desirable in general, what actually pleases individuals differs and changes (and this might require in some cases certain 'true' opinions¹¹). Thus, in utilitarianism, the good (i.e., pleasure) remains separate from what is universally true. Pleasure, pure and simple, lacks the universality that is necessary for it to qualify as a *true good*.

Atheistic existentialism also divorces the true from the good. Sartre,¹² for instance, while reducing the ethical to radical freedom and human subjectivity, considers that universal or absolute values are impossible. The good is freedom itself, the existential condition and possibility for the creation of human essences and their values.¹³ These creations cannot be good in and of themselves; they exist only as long as they continue to be freely chosen. In this view, the only fundamental truth is existential. This is the human condition of freedom, subjectivity, and possibility. But human essences or values are grounded in the contingency of human action. Accordingly, there is no universal or true good, only infinite possibilities for partial, contingent goods.

⁸ «One must also believe that it is when something from the external objects enters into us that we see and think about their shapes [...]. And whatever presentation we receive [...] this *is* the shape of the solid object, produced by the continuous compacting or residue of the image. Falsehood or error *always* resides in the added opinion [...]» (*Letter to Herodotus*, in B.R. Inwood – L.P. Gerson [tr.], *The Epicurus Reader*, Hackett, Indianapolis 1994, p. 9).

⁹ «[...] not every one [i.e., pleasure] is to be chosen» (*Letter to Menoeceus*, in B.R. Inwood – L.P. Gerson [tr.], *The Epicurus Reader*, cit., p. 30).

¹⁰ For instance, John Stuart Mill ranks pleasures qualitatively (against Jeremy Bentham's quantitative assessments) and claims: «Of two pleasures, if there be one to which all or almost all who have experience of both give a decided preference, irrespective of any feeling of moral obligation to prefer it, that is the more desirable pleasure» (*Utilitarianism*, II, in M.L. Morgan [ed.], *Classics of Moral and Political Theory*, fifth edition, Hackett, Indianapolis 2011, p. 1073). Notice that Mill's qualitative framework is still based on the preferences of the majority, which can vary and fluctuate.

¹¹ As is well-known, Epicurus recommended the study of nature to his disciples primarily as a means to dispel beliefs that would cause disturbance and pain to the soul. «I recommend constant activity in the study of nature; and with this sort of activity more than any other I bring calm to my life» (*Letter to Herodotus*, in *The Epicurus Reader*, cit., p. 6)."

¹² Although this section is confined to Sartre, Heidegger and others also qualify as atheistic existentialists. Within Sartre's view of existence, the question of whether God exists or not does not matter. Human freedom is the sole cause of values. Following a religion is purely a free choice. Human beings cannot transcend their subjectivity and access absolute or transcendent values. His view is not atheistic because it claims to prove the non-existence of God, but rather it is so because (according to this view) a transcendent reality would be irrelevant to human action and experience even it would exist.

¹³ «The ultimate meaning of the acts of honest men is the quest for freedom as such [...]. We want freedom for freedom's sake and in every particular circumstance. Of course, freedom as the definition of man does not depend on others, but as soon as there is involvement, I am obliged to want others to have freedom at the same time that I want my freedom» (*The Humanism of Existentialism*, in S.M. Cahn [ed.], *Classics of Western Philosophy*, eighth edition, Hackett, Indianapolis 2012, p. 1331).

Existence, freedom, and possibility remain necessarily, but not the actual essences which are their byproduct.¹⁴

2 *Reductive Approaches: Nietzsche and Kant*

The same conclusion - that there is no true good - can result by a reducing the true and the good to a metaphysical principle. Nietzsche, who reduces all life to the will to power and its arbitrary acts of generation and destruction,¹⁵ rejects absolute values and, thus, a true good defined as both desirable and universal. The basic good that life seeks is power to overcome resistance, to create and destroy. This will to power, the basic impulse driving all beings, assumes particular modes of life which strive for domination at various levels, thriving, morphing, or perishing in a continual process of change stimulated by tensions. There is here no place for a true good in a stable, rational sense.

In the realm of ethics, Nietzsche considers that aristocratic morality is more genuine than slave morality because it identifies the good as strength and victory, rather than as altruism or even law. As a means to consolidate power, law itself is a contingent byproduct of the will of life. It makes no sense to speak of right and wrong in themselves, as universal or absolute values, since the will of life (including human life) essentially seeks power. Subjection, violence, destruction, exploitation - all means to power - cannot be inherently wrong.¹⁶

However, the various means to power, including concrete values, vary in character and expression as life transforms itself. Thus, slave morality (with its deceitful praise of suffering and weakness) ends up subverting aristocratic morality as a means to power, to Nietzsche's seeming regret.¹⁷ Power, like freedom in Sartre, is the fundamental condition for values, but its arbitrary and ever flowing life resists the production of specific values that transcend time and place. Rather, power generates values that are its requisite instruments in different periods and regions of life. Accordingly, power thus conceived cannot qualify as a good that is both desirable and universal.

In the case of Kant, on the other hand, one finds a reduction of the good to the true, whereby the good loses its desirability as an end for human nature as such. The good and the good will are reduced to the rational law, divorced from all human inclinations.

¹⁴ Sartre does include some notion of universality whereby human beings can understand one another and the significance of their actions. But this universality, as he himself admits, is still contingent on human action: «Every configuration [of man] can be understood by every man. This does not at all mean that this configuration defines man forever, but that it can be met with again. There is always a way to understand the idiot, the child, the savage, the foreigner provided one has the necessary information [...] there is a universality of man; but it is not given, it is perpetually being made» (*ibi*, p. 1329).

¹⁵ This is already evident in Nietzsche's first major work, *The Birth of Tragedy* (see «A Critical Backward Glance», section V, in F. Golfing [tr.], *The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals*, Doubleday, New York 1956).

¹⁶ *Ibi*, *The Genealogy of Morals*, Second Essay, section XI, p. 208.

¹⁷ *Ibi*, *The Genealogy of Morals*, First Essay, section X.

Even more, moral worth is incompatible with natural desire and inclinations.¹⁸ In this view, there certainly is an absolute or universal good considered formally as the moral law,¹⁹ but not a true good that attracts the empirical self, let alone human nature considered as a whole. Such a fundamental desire by human nature as such, which includes the empirical self that Kant removes from his morality, would confuse the will's a-priori obedience to the universal, moral law.²⁰

Accordingly, Kant's good will is understood as pure practical reason,²¹ whose function is formal - that is, the application of the universal or a-priori law, the so-called categorical imperative. This good will is free or autonomous in the sense that it is self-legislative; its obedience to the moral law is self-elicited. But it is still subject to the necessity of the universal law.²² Moreover, it is not a free faculty that leads the whole soul towards its perfection and good, towards the proper end of human nature as such. In lacking the desirability that can move the whole soul, the good constituted by the moral law is universal merely in a formal sense. It lacks empirical content and fails to engage the human being as a whole. It is therefore not a *true good* that is both universal and desirable by human nature as such.

Contrariwise, the understanding of the true good as universally sound and fundamentally desirable is basic in medieval philosophy.

3 *An Integrative Approach — The True Good in Medieval Philosophy: Henry of Ghent*

¹⁸ That is, when inclinations agree with reason, moral worth is uncertain. For, in such a case, it is not clear whether the will is obeying the moral law from duty or from inclinations, since inclinations alone might be sufficient grounds to act in agreement with the moral law. Thus, considering people who rejoice in the satisfaction of others, Kant claims: «But I maintain that in such a case an action of this kind, however dutiful and amiable it may be, has nevertheless no true moral worth. It is on a level with such actions as arise from other inclinations [...]» (*Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, I, in M.L Morgan [ed.], *Classics of Moral and Political Theory*, cit., p. 950).

¹⁹ «Since I have deprived the will of every impulse that might arise for it from obeying any particular law, there is nothing left to serve the will as principle except the universal conformity to law as such, i.e., I should never act except in such a way that I can also will that my maxim should become a universal law» (*ibi*, I, p. 952).

²⁰ «Hence there is nothing left which can determine the will except objectively the law and subjectively pure respect for this practical law, i.e., the will can be subjectively determined by the maxim that I should follow such a law even if all my inclinations are thereby thwarted» (*ibi*, I, p. 951). Clearly, in Kant we find remnants of Descartes' definition of the human subject as a thinking thing: emotions, desires, the soul as living and sentient - these elements fall outside the this new, specialized, philosophical focus on thinking itself. Kierkegaard, among the moderns, saw the limitations of an absolute ethic that neglects concrete existence (as well as - against other thinkers - the limitations of ethical conceptions defined by their inability to transcend human subjectivity).

²¹ «As practical reason or as the will of a rational being must reason regard itself as free» (*ibi*, III, p. 976).

²² «The practical use of reason with reference to freedom leads also to absolute necessity, but only to the necessity of the laws of the actions of a rational being as such» (*ibi*, III, Concluding Remark, pp. 983-984).

For Henry of Ghent (and generally for medieval philosophers), the unqualified true good is God himself, the first principle and last end.²³ God's own nature is seen as both intellectual and volitional. In the medieval Christian tradition specifically, this nature is understood as triune, namely as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Thus, this nature is said to know itself and all creation through the person of the Son, and to love itself and all creation through the person of the Holy Spirit. Additionally, this nature manifests itself to us through its image - the human mind,²⁴ whose faculties of intellect and will cooperate in search of their objects, the true and the good.²⁵

Of course, human understanding does not begin with a full awareness of these principles and conditions. However, human beings are defined by their basic inclination to the true and the good, as already understood by Plato and Aristotle, and by the ancient and medieval thinkers who developed their ideas. For those Greek thinkers, the true good for human beings is happiness, consisting mainly in (intellectual and moral) virtue, in the perfection and right functioning of human nature.²⁶ This true good is both desirable and universal. It is desirable because human beings seek it for its own sake as their final end. It is universal insofar as human beings are essentially rational and seek truth as the very perfection of reason. Moreover, this perfection requires knowledge of theoretical and practical truth, knowledge of principles and causes, as well as knowledge that serves as the standard and guide for conduct.²⁷ Accordingly, this classical understanding of the true good involves knowledge of universal truths as well as the satisfaction of essential human desires. Nevertheless, the full development of the true good in ethics - specifically in relation to the faculties of intellect and will - takes place in medieval philosophy, though with a reliance on ancient sources. This development is exemplified by Henry of Ghent.²⁸

²³ The same may be said about Augustine, Bonaventure, Aquinas, Duns Scotus and many others in the medieval tradition. Plato already designated his first principle as the Good, the source of being, truth, and knowledge (see *Republic*, VI, 508b-509b). Aristotle, who develops a different metaphysical view, also considers the first cause of the universe as the truest and best substance (see *Metaphysics*, XII, chapter 7).

²⁴ Classical medieval sources for understanding the human mind as an image of the Trinity are Augustine's *De Trinitate* and Bonaventure's *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*. Both of these thinkers were particularly influential for Henry of Ghent's own conception of the Trinity and for his philosophy and theology in general. See J.C. Flores, *Henry of Ghent: Metaphysics and the Trinity*, cit., Introduction, especially sections I-II.

²⁵ In the medieval philosophy generally, the true and the good (and unity) are understood as transcendental categories which apply to every being as being, since these categories transcend and are irreducible to any particular kind of being. Accordingly, these categories are convertible with being itself. The true indicates being as that which can be known and, thus, as the perfection of the intellect, while the good indicates being - the basic perfection of every entity - as desirable.

²⁶ For an analysis of these themes in Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, see chapter 1 in: J.C. Flores, *Reexamining Love of Wisdom: Philosophical Desire from Socrates to Nietzsche*, Cascade Books, Eugene, OR 2016.

²⁷ Theoretical truth is truth for its own sake while practical truth (as related to morals, not craft) is truth for the sake of action. The latter involves knowledge of the standard of right and wrong as generally applicable in different circumstances (still allowing for certain exceptions in particular cases, though always in light of universal principles). As Aristotle reminds us (*Nicomachean Ethics* I, 3), we should not expect ethics to possess the exactness of mathematics. For, its subject matter is human action, which exhibits a good deal of variety. In this respect, ethics is more like the science of health: despite their inherent differences, both are based on general principles while still allowing for particular exceptions in individual cases. Hence, this conception of universality in ethics, grounded in reason as found within human nature as a whole, as well as in experience, contrasts with Kant's stricter and more abstract conception of moral universality as grounded purely in reason irrespective of inclinations and experience.

²⁸ How Henry of Ghent exemplifies the transformation of philosophy in the medieval period is already described in: J.C. Flores, *Ancient Love of Wisdom and its Medieval Transformation: Henry of Ghent on the Purpose of Contemplation*, in «History of Philosophy Quarterly», 39(3) (2022), pp. 217-234.

Henry of Ghent claims, like Avicenna, Aquinas, Bonaventure and others, that being is the first concept of the intellect, since it is the condition for every concept.²⁹ But this is only a first step toward truth, science, and knowledge of causes. We may know what it means for something to be, or even that something is, but still lack the full analysis of the thing's essence and causes. This incompleteness along with a desire for completeness marks the beginning of the human desire to know. For Henry, Aristotle's famous claim at the beginning of *Metaphysics* - «All human beings by nature desire to know»³⁰ - means that the will moves the intellect to search for truth, the proper end of the intellect.³¹ The will, the commanding faculty of the soul,³² desires as its final end the perfection that comes from attaining the highest good. This fundamental desire for the good requires that each potency of the soul achieve its proper end. This completion is all the more important for the intellect, the other chief faculty of the soul.

«Therefore, the rational desire in a human being, or the will, is that which moves the other potencies of the soul to their acts and to their proper ends. However, nothing moves toward an act seeking an end, unless it desires the end. Therefore, the will in a human being, or rather the human being through the will, desires the ends and proper perfections of all the other potencies of the soul by encompassing, within its own act, the acts of all of them, and within its own end, the ends of all of them. Moreover, the will moves itself in the first place, by desiring the good as such for itself, and it moves all the other potencies by desiring, not its own good, but rather their particular goods that are proper to them, but it does so with the aim of ordering all of those goods for the sake of its own good. Since, therefore, the intellect is one of those several potencies, whose object and end is truth and knowing, we must say that a human being desires to know on account of the will, but he does so according to intellect».³³

The will desires the proper good of the intellect, which is the true. Although the will - the mover of the whole soul - is the commanding faculty, the will is consubstantial with the intellect. Together, intellect and will constitute one mind.³⁴ Thus, the will and

²⁹ «It is necessary that whatever a human being can know is a being, so that it is proper that the first concept known be the concept and intension of being, as Avicenna says» (Henry of Ghent, *Summa*, art. 3, q. 1, Solution, in J.C. Flores [tr.], *Henry of Ghent's Summa: The Questions on Human Knowledge (Articles 2-5)*, Dallas Medieval Texts and Translations 25, Peeters, Leuven 2021, p. 7). Thomas Aquinas indicates the absolute priority of the concept of being in human understanding in *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 94, art. 2, Reply. Bonaventure makes the same point in *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*, chapter 3, section 3. Of course, each of these thinkers develops this basic insight in their own ways.

³⁰ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* I, 1, 980a21.

³¹ In ancient philosophy, the will is mainly considered as a practical function of the intellect: the intellect as the capacity to choose between alternative courses of action. In medieval philosophy, beginning with Augustine, the will is considered as an autonomous faculty of the mind along with the intellect. See J.C. Flores, *Reexamining Love of Wisdom*, cit., p. 66.

³² Henry of Ghent explains this commanding role of the will (as well as how the will is influenced by the intellect) in the second block quotation below.

³³ Henry of Ghent, *Summa*, art. 4, q. 1, Solution, in J.C. Flores (tr.), *Henry of Ghent's Summa: The Questions on Human Knowledge (Articles 2-5)*, cit., p. 97.

³⁴ Of course, the mind also includes memory, treated as the third faculty of the mind in the tradition of Trinitarian theology. The activities of intellect and will presuppose the basic role of memory.

the intellect always involve one another: we can only will what we know, we will to know and know that we will, etc. Thus, will without intellect is blind and cannot move towards a definite end. Moreover, without truth the will could not distinguish between merely apparent and real goods. The will needs truth to seek what is genuinely good and beneficial. On the other hand, intellect without will is inert and sterile, lacking all drive. The intellect needs will to aim for and find truth, its proper end, which is necessary for the whole soul to reach what it fundamentally desires: the good.

For an intellectual nature, knowledge of the true is vital for its perfection and end. In fact, we cannot love what we do not know at all, as Augustine said.³⁵ Conversely, we can only love what is really good when we know its truth. Not surprisingly, in medieval thought the true and the good coexist inextricably not only as transcendental, metaphysical categories equivalent to being itself,³⁶ but also as interrelated objects that perfect the coexisting faculties of intellect and will.

«To the second [argument], that “the object of the faculty of desire is not the true, but rather the good,” we must say that this is true, because only the good is the object of desire, but this is either the good absolutely, which is its own immediate good, or a given good, which is the proper good of some other capacity under its rule. Wherefore, the object of desire is not the true considered as the true so defined, but rather considered as the good of an inferior capacity, namely the intellect, and on that account it desires it, as stated, just as conversely the object of the intellect is not the good of the will considered as the good so defined, but rather as considered in terms of being true. And therefore, these two capacities, will and intellect, move each other mutually, or rather, to speak more precisely, they move the [agent] who wills and understands, because the intellect conceives the end defined as true and proposes it to the will, which is moved by the very end considered as good, and in this way the intellect moves the will in a metaphorical sense, the way in which the end moves the efficient cause. Contrariwise, the will moves the intellect in the proper sense, as that which drives and propels into action, as stated. And therefore, these two powers reflect on themselves mutually as well as on their acts. For, the intellect understands itself to understand, both its act and its object; similarly, it understands the will to will, both its act and its object. And conversely, the will wills itself, both its act and its object; similarly, it wills the intellect to understand, both its act and its object. And so, for each of them, whatever is an object for the one, is [also] an object for the other».³⁷

The intellect's truth is its conformity with being through knowledge, while the will's desire for the good is its tendency to the end that completes it.³⁸ At its core, the human

³⁵ Augustine makes this point at various places, for instance in *On the Trinity*, book 15, chapter 27, section 50.

³⁶ For instance, Thomas Aquinas discusses these primary or transcendental concepts (being, true, one, and good) in his *Disputed Questions on Truth*, q. 21, art. 1, Reply. Henry of Ghent discusses them in *Summa*, art. 24, q. 7, Solution.

³⁷ Henry of Ghent, *Summa*, art. 4, q. 1, ad 2, in: J.C. Flores (tr.), *Henry of Ghent's Summa: The Questions on Human Knowledge (Articles 2-5)*, cit., p. 99.

³⁸ As is well known, Thomas Aquinas also considers the true and the good as perfections. See, for instance, *Disputed Questions on Truth*, q. 21, art. 3, Reply. He also expresses how they operate as perfections of the soul as follows: «Thus something is an object of the soul [...] inasmuch as it is capable of being in the soul [...]. This is the essential constituent of the knowable in so far as it is knowable [...] something is the object of the soul according as the soul is inclined and oriented to it after the manner of the thing itself as it is in itself. This is the essential constituent of the appetible in so far as it is appetible» (R.W. Schmidt, [tr.], *Truth*, III, q. 22, art. 10, Reply, Hackett, Indianapolis 1994, p. 70). The 'knowable' refers to being as true, the perfection of the intellect; the 'appetible' refers to being as good, the perfection of the will. Both perfections refer to being and so are always integrated as some 'true good'. Of course, according to Henry of Ghent

soul desires the true good as its perfection and end. Every being as being is true and good. But not every being has reached the proper perfection - the true good - that is meant for it, and it remains restless until does so. Of course, only the first principle is the true good absolutely speaking. For, every other being has participated rather than subsistent being, as its being is caused by and derived from a higher cause.³⁹ However, since the human soul is defined by intellect and will, which are ordered to the true and the good - not as separate realities, but as equivalent aspects of being itself - the soul has a natural desire to reach the truest knowable object and the best object of love: God himself.⁴⁰

This inclination to being itself - to perfection - is what is lacking in Kant's and any other purely formal understanding of the good, which reduce the good to a universal law to be followed and enacted by the intellect.⁴¹ This understanding along with other reductive approaches, and others still which divorce the true and the good, neglect the fundamental principle of medieval ethics: the human person freely and as a whole - as an organized unit of emotion, desire, mind, and body - seeks completion as a whole.⁴² Accordingly, the vital source to understand the true good is none other than the human essence itself; its faculties of intellect and will reveal the tendency towards a truth that is its own perfection or - which is the same - towards a good that is its true fulfillment.⁴³

and Thomas Aquinas, for human beings the true good in the proper sense is not any inclination to or attainment of being, but rather the final perfection of the soul found in the first truth and highest good. And again, each thinker develops this insight in his own way.

³⁹ Henry of Ghent and Thomas Aquinas both develop a metaphysics of participation (of course, with important differences) and speak of the creature's participation in being in many places, for instance: Thomas Aquinas, *On Being and Essence*, chapter 5; Henry of Ghent, *Summa*, art. 2, q. 6, Solution.

⁴⁰ In question 5 of article 4 of the *Summa*, Henry argues that the human soul naturally desires knowledge of God's essence, while recognizing (like other medieval thinkers) that this final end and perfection also requires divine assistance. Aquinas expresses similar views in *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 12, art. 1, and in *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 5, art. 5, Reply and Response to 1.

⁴¹ In classical and medieval philosophy, such an understanding of the good is perhaps more closely associated with art, which must follow the necessary steps of a rational pattern to reach an intended end or product that is consistent with the art. However, such a model - though perhaps adequate for specialized arts and techniques - remains inadequate to grasp the true good as the end of the human soul as such, which requires intellectual and moral perfection. In his *Summa*, art. 60, q. 1, Henry of Ghent discusses the nature of practical knowledge with reference to ethics and art. See G.A. Wilson – G.J. Ezkorn – B. Goehring (eds.), *Henrici de Gandavo Summa*, art. LX-LXII, Ancient and Medieval Philosophy 2, Henrici de Gandavo Opera Omnia XXXIII, Leuven University Press, Leuven 2018, pp. 51-68. As regards action specifically, in both ancient and medieval philosophy, ethical truth is indeed conceived as something universal that needs to be consistently chosen. However, unlike Kant, it is conceived as an end that, by being consistently chosen, perfects our very selves through virtuous living. Human nature as such is inclined to virtue as the body is to health. Virtue (both intellectual and moral) is fundamentally desirable because it satisfies the soul as a whole by perfecting it. Moral virtue alone does more than satisfying the mind's demand for rational consistency in actions. For, it is vital for the proper order of the soul as a whole. Additionally, for Henry of Ghent and other medieval thinkers, virtuous living strengthens the character and the mind in the search for God as the highest truth and final good. Of course, they also recognize that this final end, which exceeds human natural ability, can only be attained fully in the next life through divine assistance.

⁴² This distinguishes medieval ethics from utilitarianism. Although perfection includes pleasure, it extends beyond pleasure as a type of fruition that encompasses the human person as a whole (which by definition excludes the pleasures which detract from this fruition). Additionally, such perfection is the universal good as the proper end of every human soul, which is by definition intellectual and volitional.

⁴³ This is what distinguishes medieval ethics from views that disregard or fragment the basic identity of the human person, like those of Nietzsche, Sartre, and others. Generally, medieval thinkers recognize the vast potentialities of the human soul, which can assume innumerable configurations of character based on life choices. However, they also recognize that the human soul is ordered to and meant for a perfection that is commensurate with its essence, consisting in knowledge of the truth and love of the good, the proper objects of the leading faculties of the mind, intellect and will. Only this perfection satisfies – completes - the soul as a whole.

4 *Concluding Remarks*

Henry of Ghent and other medieval thinkers develop the classical understanding of human nature as a rational life-form. And, with the help of revelation, they also see it in a new light - as an image of the Trinity, defined by the illuminating coexistence of intellect and will.⁴⁴ But again, human understanding does not begin with a full awareness of these principles and conditions. What is immediately available to human consciousness, however, is its own tendency to the true and the good in virtue of its very life defined by intellect and will. The coexistence, mutuality, and interdependence of these faculties reveal the coexistence, mutuality, and interdependence of their objects - the true and the good. This basic tendency and this essential interrelatedness indicate that the soul can only find completion in one integrated goal - the true good, a good that is both fundamentally desirable and universally sound.

⁴⁴ This does not mean to suggest that medieval analyses of intellect and will are purely theological. In some contexts, these analyses remain strictly philosophical, based on natural reason. How a particular medieval thinker approaches this and other subjects will depend on his own approach to reason and revelation. Although Trinitarian theology provides a rich background for Henry of Ghent's overall understanding of intellect and will, his view of the true good in light of intellect and will may be gathered from texts lacking explicit reference to his Trinitarian theology. For Henry's own distinction between philosophy and theology, see J.C. Flores, 'The Intersection of Philosophy and Theology: Henry of Ghent on the Scope of Metaphysics and the Background in Aquinas and Bonaventure', in «Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia», 71(2-3) (2015), pp. 531-544.