Intractable Moral Disagreements

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Reading through what I have written about moral disagreement—and more generally practical disagreement—during the past thirty years, I find that an overall view of what such disagreement is, and of how far it can or cannot be resolved, does emerge, but it is one that I have never stated systematically in a single piece of writing. This lacuna I now seek to fill. I do so in order to address a question that is of particular importance to Roman Catholics, although not only to them.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church speaks of “the natural moral law” and says of that law that it is “established by reason,” that “it is universal in its precepts,” and that its authority extends to all human beings, determining the basis for the fundamental rights and duties of the human person (par. 1956). Yet, if the precepts of the natural law are indeed precepts established by reason, we should expect to find
agreement in assenting to them among rational agents. But this is not what we find, at least if we judge the rationality of agents as it is usually judged. Many intelligent, perceptive, and insightful agents either reject what Catholics take to be particular precepts of the natural law or accept them only in some very different version, or, more radically still, reject the very conception of a natural law. And these disagreements seem to be intractable. How can this be? It seems that either the 
Catechism’s account of the natural law must be mistaken or else it is possible for some theses to be rationally vindicated without thereby being able to secure the assent of all rational agents.

For the Catholic Church the problem thus presented is not only a philosophical problem. It is a problem of everyday practice, one arising in all those situations—debates about poverty, about social justice, about war and peace, about abortion and contraception, about capital punishment, and more generally about the common good—in which Catholics appeal to precepts of the natural law in arguing against positions incompatible with the Catholic understanding of human nature and the human condition. This appeal purports to be to standards prescribed by reason, and yet exceedingly often it is impotent in the face of radical moral and political disagreement. It is this practical dimension that gives to the philosophical problem a good deal of its urgency and importance.

The philosophical problem is one arising for any philosopher who insists that, if the principles and rules that govern the moral life are to have authority, then they must be justifiable by rational argument. So it is not only with Thomists and other Catholic thinkers, but also with, for example, Kantians and utilitarians. And all these parties are at odds with each other. If what Kantians assert is true, then what utilitarians assert is false, and vice versa. And, if what either asserts is true, then what Thomists assert is false. Yet each contending party claims the authority of reason and each remains unconvinced by the arguments mounted by their opponents and critics. So utilitarians and Kantians need, just as much as Thomists do, to explain how it is possible both that they can claim the authority of reason in support of
their views and yet be unable to convince certain others who are, it seems, not only quite as intelligent, perceptive, and insightful as they are, but also quite as philosophically skillful and informed, yet who remain in radical disagreement.

I shall proceed as follows. First, I will set out Aquinas’s claims for the precepts of the natural law as precepts of reason that are universally binding. I will argue, as I already suggested, that, if these claims are true, we should expect to find near-universal agreement among human beings on moral matters. Secondly, we need to examine the impressive evidence that nothing like this extent of agreement is to be found, and I will catalogue a variety of types of disagreement. Thirdly, I will outline and endorse Aquinas’s account of what it is to be practically rational and move from that to asking what rationality requires of us in situations in which we confront others who are in radical moral disagreement with us. The answer proposed will be that we will only be able to enquire together with such others in a way that accords with the canons of rationality, if both we and they treat as binding upon us a set of rules that turn out to be just those enjoined by the natural law. How then do failures to arrive at agreement on those precepts occur? They occur, even the most radical of such failures occur, so I shall claim, because of a variety of failures in practical rationality which the earlier arguments now enable us to diagnose. So radical moral disagreements can after all, it may seem so far, be accommodated within the Thomistic account of natural law.

Is this the end of the matter? Not at all. For this account of the genesis of moral disagreement turns out to be itself contentious and not only theoretically. The view of reason and of what reason requires of us that informs it is at odds not only with rival accounts of practical reason advanced by philosophers, but also with views of reason presupposed in a good deal of contemporary everyday discourse. The next step therefore is to spell out one of those rival accounts. The example that I shall use is that of utilitarianism, and the next section of the essay will sketch the history of utilitarianism, as it has developed from Bentham to the present through its encounters with a series of
objections to which it has constructed replies that satisfy the requirements of reason, as utilitarians understand them.

How then are we to characterize the practical and especially the moral disagreements between Thomists and utilitarians? Given the different and incompatible standards of practical rationality that each acknowledges, do we here encounter a genuine example of incommensurability? Is this a kind of disagreement that may be irremediably intractable? In the succeeding section of the essay I will argue that the answer to the second of these questions is “No” but that the answer to the third is “Yes,” and I will outline a view according to which, even when the protagonists of two or more rival moral traditions do not share enough by way of premises or standards of argument to settle their agreements, one may nonetheless be shown to be rationally superior to its rivals. Finally, I will suggest how an argument might proceed that would at one and the same time show in what ways Thomistic ethics and politics might be rationally superior to utilitarian ethics and politics and yet would remain unacceptable and unconvincing to anyone committed to utilitarianism. That is, I will be trying to show that it is possible to establish that one moral standpoint may be rationally superior to others without securing the assent of highly intelligent, perceptive, and thoughtful adherents of those other points of view.

When we have reached this point, how should we proceed further? The urgent practical question will have become that of how we may most effectively find common ground with at least some of those with whom we are in continuing and irremediable disagreement. It is with a short discussion of possible strategies directed to this end that this essay will conclude.

I

What then are Aquinas’s claims concerning the natural law? He argues that the first principles, the fundamental precepts, of that law give
pression to the first principle of practical reason: that good is to be done and pursued and evil to be avoided. The goods that we as human beings have it in us to pursue are threefold: the goods of our physical nature, that is, the goods of preserving our lives and health from dangers that threaten our continuing existence; the goods of our animal nature, including the good of sexuality and the goods to be achieved by educating and caring for our children; and the goods that belong to our nature as rational animals, the goods of knowledge, both of nature and of God, and the goods of a social life informed by the precepts of reason (Summa Theologiae Ia-IIae 94, 2).

There are therefore several distinct precepts of the natural law, each a precept of reason directed to our common good that enjoins the achievement of one or more of these shared human goods or forbids what endangers that achievement. Notable examples are: never take an innocent life or inflict gratuitous harm; respect the property of others; shun ignorance and cultivate understanding; do not lie. To say that these are precepts of reason is to say that to violate them knowingly would be to assert “It is good and best for me here and now to act in such and such a way; but I shall act otherwise.” What my actions express, if I knowingly violate the precepts of the natural law, is an incoherence that parallels the incoherence of someone who asserts “It is the case that this is how things are; but I shall believe otherwise.” To say of these precepts that they are directed to the common good is to say that the goods that they enjoin are goods for each of us, not qua individual, but qua member of this family or that household, qua participant in the life of this workplace or that political community. And they are therefore goods that we can achieve only in the company of others, including not only those others with whom we share the life of family, household, or workplace, or political community, but also strangers with whom we interact in less structured ways.

Precepts that in this way give expression to the first principle of practical reason Aquinas calls primary precepts of the natural law. They are not derived from any more ultimate precept and therefore
are known noninferentially. About them Aquinas makes four assertions: that they are one and the same for everyone, that they are unchanging and unchangeable, that they are known to be what they are by all human beings insofar as they are rational, and that knowledge of them cannot be abolished from the human heart. Each of these needs further explanation and in some cases qualification. The primary precepts of the natural law are indeed one and the same for everyone, but there are also secondary precepts that vary with circumstances. What does Aquinas mean by a secondary precept? Secondary precepts of the natural law (IIa-IIae 92, 4, 5) are those through which primary precepts find application in and to particular circumstances. A primary precept, for example, requires those in political authority to provide whatever may be necessary for the security of their community from external foes. But what is so necessary varies from one set of circumstances to another, depending on the nature of current threats and the level of weapons technology and the resources possessed by this particular community. So the application of a primary precept will often be in and through some set of legally, socially, and culturally ordered institutions which implement that primary precept through secondary injunctions. The primary precepts remain the same in every society and culture, but the socially and culturally embodied forms through which they receive expression do not.

Primary precepts are known and their authority is recognized by human beings in virtue of their rationality. But Aquinas invites us to understand this with two qualifications. One concerns the amens, the mentally defective or disordered human being. Such lack the use of their reason per accidens; some bodily impediment has prevented the actualization of their rational potentialities. So they are to be accounted rational and respected as rational, even if not aware of precepts of which the normally rational are aware, and they are not culpable for this failure (IIIa, 68, 12; IIA-IIae 46, 2). Another qualification is this: there will in the case of each primary precept be some types of case, relatively rare in occurrence, in which the application of primary precepts to particular situations raises difficult questions.
mary precept of the natural law requires us, for example, not to de-
prive a legitimate owner of her or his property. But what of the prob-
lematic case where “it would be harmful and therefore unreasonable to
restore goods held in trust, for example, if they are claimed for the pur-
pose of aggression against one’s country” (IIa-IIae 92, 4)? Such difficult
cases require a sometimes complex spelling-out of the relevant pri-
mary precept through a series of secondary precepts. And how good
we are at this task of elucidation and supplementation will vary from
individual to individual, depending upon how practically wise each is.
So Aquinas’s claim is that everyone rational does indeed know what
the primary precepts of the natural law are and that they are to be
obeyed, but not that everyone knows how to apply them in detail or
how to translate them into some set of secondary precepts.

There is of course another way in which our grasp of primary
precepts can fail. On particular occasions each of us may and all of us
do allow some impulse of desire to blind us to what the primary pre-
cepts require here and now. Some strong desire proposes to us a good
that is other than and whose achievement is incompatible with that
of the particular good that the primary precepts of the natural law
require us to acknowledge and to attempt to achieve here and now.
Temporarily we allow ourselves to ignore those precepts. Failing to at-
tend to them, we flout them, although it was in our power to attend
and obey. Such failures, although endemic in sinful human life, are
temporary and involve no tendency generally to deny the authority of
the relevant precepts. But what then of more extended and widespread
lapses?

Aquinas appeals to evidence provided by Julius Caesar—as it
happens, not a reliable witness—for an example of a lapse by a whole
culture: “in some reason is perverted by passion, or bad habit, or bad
natural disposition; thus formerly theft, although expressly contrary
to the natural law, was not considered wrong among the Germans”
(Ia-IIae 92, 4). Aquinas does not tell us how his explanation of this fail-
ure to apprehend a particular precept of the natural law is to be under-
stood, so that the question of how this type of cause could produce
this kind of effect remains for the moment unanswered. But Aquinas
does take this kind of failure to be exceptional, occurring only “in
some few cases.” And to note this is also to note what seems on a first
reading to be a plain implication of Aquinas’s overall account: that
agreement in acknowledging what it is that the precepts of the natural
law enjoin and prohibit and in according them authority is, if not uni-
versal, so widespread that dissent from it can be expected to be an occa-
sional and exceptional phenomenon, always requiring special explana-
tion. But do the facts concerning moral disagreement bear this out?
They do not.

II

Consider five types of moral disagreement. The first concerns the in-
violability or otherwise of innocent human life. In every culture there
is of course some kind of prohibition of homicide. But there have
been societies in which infanticide is regarded as a justified means for
controlling family size. And Aristotle, considering the ancient Greek
practice of exposing unwanted infants, so that they will die, expressed
a view that was not just his own when he said that we should not allow
deformed infants to grow up (*Politics* vii 1335b 19–21). In our own cul-
ture there are many who, although they would condemn the killing
of a newly born child, think that a pregnant woman who decides to
procure an abortion of the same infant a few months earlier, does no
wrong. All these dissent from a precept of the natural law that in-
structs us that no active intervention intended to terminate an inno-
cent human life is morally permissible.

A second type of moral disagreement is more general, concern-
ing relationships between ends and means. There are those of us who
hold that, if some type of action is evil, then no action of that type is
morally permissible, whatever predictable beneficial consequences
may flow from it. An example is the use of torture on a prisoner,
something widely viewed as wrong. Suppose, however, that that prisoner very probably, even if not certainly, possesses information about planned terrorist acts, so that by torturing her or him, it is probable that the deaths of many innocent people can be prevented, and this is our only chance of achieving this good end. May we then torture that prisoner? Those who hold that a means otherwise evil cannot be justified by any end, no matter how good, are committed to answering “No.” But the answer “Yes” will be given by those who hold that the goodness of an end always can and sometimes does outweigh what would otherwise be evil in the use of some means. This latter position seems to entail that no type of action is ever morally prohibited as such. For it will always be possible to envisage some set of circumstances, such that in that situation the evil of this particular means would be outweighed by the goodness of the end. So there is here the largest of disagreements with all those who, like defenders of a Thomistic account of natural law, or, like Kant, do believe that some types of action are forbidden as such.

A third type of disagreement concerns human sexuality and our intentions in engaging in sexual relations. That sex affords pleasure and sometimes very great pleasure is, I take it, uncontroversial. When Aquinas wishes to give an example of the reasoning of an incontinent human being (Ia-IIae 77, 2), it is the pleasure of fornication that provides him with a premise. The question is: what is the relationship between intending in one’s sexual activity to beget, if possible, children for and within a marriage and intending to enjoy the pleasure of that activity? Is the latter intention legitimate when wholly divorced from the former? Here attitudes characteristic of modernity clash with attitudes central to all the great theistic traditions, and it is from different answers given to these questions that the most fundamental disagreements concerning sexuality derive.

A fourth type of disagreement hinges on the place given to certain concepts in our shared moral discourse. An example is the place given to the concepts of honor and loyalty in the lives of seventeenth-
and eighteenth-century aristocrats in Europe and twentieth-century gangsters in Chicago. These of course are not the only cultures in which concepts of honor and loyalty have been at home. But the issue is always whether considerations of honor or of loyalty or of both are or are not held to be overriding in respect of other precepts, justifying in the case of the European aristocrats the avenging of an insult by the infliction of death, perhaps in a duel, and in the case of the Chicago gangsters the assassination of informers who had betrayed their associates.

Fifthly, and in this catalogue finally, there are disagreements that derive from different and incompatible conceptions of justice. Here again just one example must serve to focus our attention. There is a moral tradition concerning economic justice, running from medieval theorists of the just price and the just wage to those modern trade unionists who have demanded “a fair day’s wage” in exchange for “a fair day’s work.” But there are also those who, in the light of what they take to be conclusions of economic theorizing, argue that such expressions as “just wage” and “just price” cannot be given a coherent meaning and that the notion of fairness has application only in relationship to the fulfillment of contracts freely entered into, not to the terms of such contracts. This is of course only one area among a number in which conflicts between rival conceptions of justice are such that the concept of justice appears to be indefinitely contestable.

Each of the contending parties in the conflicts generated by these disagreements characteristically present us with their view as embedded in some more general standpoint. They appeal, that is, to some set of first principles that provides them with what they take to be a justification for their particular moral claims concerning the taking of human life or sexuality or economic justice. Implicitly or explicitly they ground their first principles in some account of human nature and action, and more especially in some account of how the reasons that justify actions are related to the causes of actions, an account whose truth is presupposed by their practical claims. And in the con-
licts between these rival points of view appeals to the primary precepts of the natural law seem to take their place as no more than the expression of one more contending standpoint. Furthermore because each of these contending points of view has within it its own standards and mode of justification there appear to be no common, shared standards sufficient to decide between such rival claims. So at a certain point in debate between the adherents of rival views, argument gives out and is replaced by the mere and usually shrill assertion and counterassertion of incompatible first principles.

There are therefore two respects and not just one in which Aquinas’s account of the natural law seems questionable when viewed in the light afforded by these facts of moral disagreement. It is not only that, if Aquinas’s account is true, we should, so it seems, expect to encounter a much higher degree of uniformity in moral belief and moral judgment than we actually find. It is also that on Aquinas’s account the primary precepts of the natural law satisfy the requirements of practical reason and all sets of precepts incompatible with them fail to do so. We should also expect, it may therefore seem, that in rational enquiry and debate the superiority of those precepts would generally become evident without any great difficulty. But this too is not the case. So there is a problem. It appears on the basis of the argument so far that either we must revise our assertions about the nature and extent of moral disagreement or else we must reject Aquinas’s account of the natural law. Are these the only alternatives?

III

We need at this point to make a new beginning by asking to what questions Aquinas’s theses about the natural law are an answer. Most obviously they answer the question “How is good to be pursued and evil to be avoided?” And that question presupposes a prior answer to the question “What are the goods that are to be pursued and how are
we to recognize them?” So we need now to ask how this prior question is to be answered, remarking that characteristically and generally human beings first encounter judgments about goods as small children in situations in which what is for their good is sharply contrasted with what they are about to do or have just done at the immediate prompting of some desire. “Don’t eat, drink, do that. It’s bad for you.” And the same contrast is also central when the young are later initiated into a variety of practices as students or apprentices.

Every one of us initially brings to practices in which we engage motivations grounded in our antecedent desires: we want to please our parents or teachers, we want rewards of income and prestige that excellence or at least competence in this or that activity may bring, we want to present ourselves to others in a favorable light. But what successful initiation into each particular practice requires, whether it is farming or fishing, playing football or chess, participating in a theatre company or a string quartet, house-building or boat-building, is that one should come to recognize the goods internal to that practice and the standards of excellence necessary to achieve those goods. So to achieve those goods our desires have to be redirected and transformed. And in the course of this education of the desires we learn that it is never sufficient to explain or to justify our actions by citing some desire. For the question always arises as to whether it is good for me here and now to act from this desire rather than that and what has to be explained or justified is why I in this particular situation choose or chose to act from this desire rather than that.

We distinguish, that is, between what it is good to do or to achieve and what we currently happen to want. Our reasons for action, if they are good reasons, always involve at least implicit reference to some good or goods to be achieved by acting in this particular way rather than in that. This distinction between goods and objects of desire is one that is primarily embodied in our everyday practice, including our practical discourse, and only secondarily in our theoretical reflections about that practice. And it is at the level of everyday prac-
tice that we face the question of what place to give in our lives to the multifarious kinds of good that it is possible for us to achieve. Every individual life does of course already express some answer to this question. Each of us, by living as we do, gives expression, usually implicitly and unreflectively, to some conception of how, with our characteristics in our circumstances and under our constraints, it is best for us to live. That is, we give expression to some conception of what for someone with these characteristics in these circumstances and under these constraints human flourishing is, just by the way in which we assign to some goods a larger place in our lives, to others a smaller place, and to some none at all. What rationality requires is that we ask what good reasons there are for taking the conception of human flourishing that has been embodied in our actions and relationships so far to be the most adequate conception available to us. And is the account of human nature presupposed by that conception true?

Aquinas argued that each of us does in fact pursue some single final end, some single ultimate good (Ia-IIae 1, 5). He makes it clear that this thesis is not incompatible with the fact that each of us does and cannot but pursue multiple ends, multiple goods. But our single final end is revealed in the way in which we organize those goods, in which good or goods it is to which we give the highest place, in what we are prepared to sacrifice for what, in our priorities. We all of us then presuppose in our practice one and the same concept of human flourishing and one and the same concept of an ultimate good towards the achievement of which that practice is directed. But we disagree, as our various conflicting beliefs and modes of life show, about what it is that we take that ultimate end to consist in, about what it is that we take human flourishing to be. So Aquinas catalogues twelve different conceptions of what the human good is, each of which would dictate a different way of life, and eleven of which he takes to be in error (Ia-IIae 2, 1–8; 3, 6; 4, 6–7). It is at this point in his overall argument in the Summa Theologiae, long before his discussion of the natural law, that Aquinas takes notice of the facts of fundamental practical
disagreement as arising from disagreements about the nature of the ultimate human good.

We each of us then, insofar as we are rational, find ourselves compelled to ask the question of whether the particular conception of our ultimate end that we have hitherto presupposed in our activities is indeed rationally justifiable, when we compare it to alternative conceptions of that end, and to press enquiry into that question systematically. Can we expect such rational enquiry to resolve disagreement? The answer that Aquinas gives is: not necessarily.

In the opening *quaestiones* of the first part of the second part of the *Summa* Aquinas does of course advance what he—and those of us who follow him—take to be compelling philosophical arguments against a range of competing conceptions of the ultimate end of human beings and for a conception in which the imperfect happiness that is the best that can be had in this present life directs us beyond itself towards a conception of a happiness that is possible only beyond this present life in a perfected relationship to God. Did he expect such conclusions to be treated as philosophically unassailable? The answer is “No.” Aquinas was well aware that it is of the nature of philosophy that no conclusion is ever treated as unassailable. “Human reason,” he wrote, “is very defective in matters concerning God. A sign of this is that philosophers in their researches by natural investigation into human affairs have fallen into many errors and disagreed amongst themselves” (IIa-IIae 2, 4). Continuing disagreement is a permanent condition of philosophy.

Is it then the case that there is no remedy for such disagreement, apart from the gift of faith in divine revelation? This would be a premature conclusion, one that depended on a failure to ask what *practical* rationality requires of us by way of a response to the facts of disagreement. It is the word *practical* that is important here. Fundamental moral disagreements are indeed matter for theoretical, philosophical enquiry, just because in such moral disagreements each contending party presupposes a view of human nature for which *truth* is
claimed. And Aquinas follows Aristotle in taking truth to be the aim and end of theoretical enquiry (Metaphysics II 993b 20–21; Commentary on the Metaphysics II lect. 2, 290). But disagreements concerning the truth of this or that theoretical account of the human end initially come to our attention, not directly but indirectly, at first in the form of practical disagreements, disagreements about how we ought to act here and now. It is in the course of deliberation about what to do here and now that we encounter radical disagreement, and what rationality requires is that we deliberate further with others about how such disagreement should be resolved, including among those others with whom we most deeply disagree. Why so?

IV

It is insufficiently often remarked that deliberation is by its very nature a social activity, that the central deliberative questions are not of the form “What should I do here and now?” and “How should I live?” but of the form “What should we do here and now?” and “How should we live?” Of course I always have to decide for myself how to act, but, when my relationships with others are in good order, my conclusions as to how it is best for me to act will often be one of a set of decisions, by others as well as by myself, which give expression to a common mind that we have arrived at together in our shared deliberations. Both Aristotle and Aquinas observe that this is so. Both are too brief in their accounts of why it should be so. “In important matters we deliberate with others,” wrote Aristotle, “not relying on ourselves for certitude” (Nicomachean Ethics III 1112b 10–11). Aquinas expands a little further on this remark: “‘Council’ [consilium translating bouli],” he says, “means sitting together from the fact that many sit together in order to confer with one another. Now we must take note that in contingent particular cases, in order that anything be known for certain, it is necessary to take several conditions or circumstances into consideration,
which it is not easy for a single individual to consider, but which are considered with greater certainty by several, since one takes note of what escapes the notice of another” (Ia-IIae 14, 3).

What Aquinas stresses is the one-sidedness of each individual’s point of view and perspective and how that one-sidedness can be overcome by learning how to view this or that particular subject-matter from the standpoints of a number of others. But this remark could have been made just as aptly about theoretical as about practical thinking. Its peculiar importance for practical reflection derives from the relationship between goods and desires. I have already pointed out that we have to learn to distinguish between genuine goods and other objects of desire, but this is not something that is learned once and for all at some early stage in our lives, so that the distinction thereafter becomes easy to make in everyday life. We have to recognize that we always remain liable to suppose that we want this or that because and only because it is good, when in fact what will primarily be satisfied by our obtaining or achieving this or that is our desire for pleasure or power or money or some such.

In the opening *quaestiones* of the first part of the second part of the *Summa*, as I also noticed earlier, Aquinas catalogues a number of misconceptions of our final end. Pleasure, power, and money are all items in this catalogue, and it is important to remember that to take any one of these to have precedence in the hierarchical ordering of our goods is not only to make an intellectual mistake, but also to yield to a practical temptation presented by desire, a temptation that often presents itself in subtle and disguised forms. Indeed, even when the good that we are pursuing is a genuine good, we may be unable to recognize that we are pursuing it not so much because it is good as because its achievement will satisfy our desire for, say, power. This is when we most need the ruthless correction of our judgments by others who can see in us what we cannot see in ourselves, and that is why deliberation not conducted in the company of such others is deliberation on which we would be unwise to rely. We should always therefore treat solitary deliberation as peculiarly liable to error.
Of course others are sometimes a source not of deliberative correction, but of deliberative corruption. We need from others, as they need from us, the exercise of the virtues of objectivity. Lacking that objectivity, others may reinforce our phantasies and collaborate in our misconceptions. So it is not just that deliberation will fail unless it is social, but also that the social relationships in question have to be governed by norms of objectivity. And we can only hope to resolve deliberative disagreements rationally with others who agree with us in respecting certain norms of objectivity. Yet at this point we confront another difficulty.

V

Deliberation, as Aristotle asserted (Nicomachean Ethics III 1112b 13–14) and Aquinas repeats (Ia-Iiae 14, 2), is about means and not about ends. When we deliberate about what means to adopt in order to achieve some end, we take for granted, for the moment at least, that this particular end should be our end, that it is the good to be pursued by me or by us here and now. We may of course pause and ask whether this is indeed so, but, if we do, it will be because we are now considering the achievement of this particular end, this particular good, as a means to some further end, either a means that will be causally effective in producing that end, as traveling across the Atlantic is a means to arriving in Paris, or a means that, as a part of some whole, plays its part in constituting that whole, as moving my pawn is a means to implementing a winning strategy in a game of chess. Debate about means, disagreement about means, always presupposes agreement about the immediate end to which means now have to be chosen. And although, as I have just noted, that immediate end can itself be considered as a means to some further end, and therefore provide subject-matter for deliberation, there is one end that by its very nature can never be a means, namely the ultimate end, that which provides all our practical reasoning with its first premises.