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Humble Authority in Saint Thomas Aquinas and Master Chu Hsi

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A man was meant to be doubtful about himself, but undoubting about the truth. Nowadays the part of man that a man does assert is exactly the part he ought not to assert- himself.

G.K. Chesterton, Orthodoxy

This claim is a provocative one, perhaps especially so to those of us in the contemporary West. We might feel a vague sense of disagreement, one expressed in skeptical or even suspicious questions like, "what is this truth, exactly?" and "will it get in my way?" Value judgments aside, it is certainly the case that Chesterton's characteristically epigrammatic statement encapsulates a great deal of what Adam Seligman and Philip Rieff have to say about autonomy and authority in the late modern West. This essay will briefly present a question raised by the work of these two contemporary thinkers before turning to Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225-1274) and Chu Hsi (1130-1200) for an answer. In particular, this paper will argue that the theories of Aquinas and Chu encourage a very timely virtue: that of humble authority.

I. The Problem

According to Adam Seligman, in the West of today, "few are willing to envision the self as subjugated to an external, heteronomous matrix of rules and obligations through which that self is constituted."¹ Instead, he says, "we all seek the core of the self in the image of the self-actualizing agent who realizes his or her autonomous will. The more this will is realized, the more the self does, as it were, exist."² With such an understanding of the self on the table, a key- if not *the* key- moral issue will involve infringements of personal autonomy. This becomes quite clear in the rhetoric with which we are all familiar, especially in America, of empowerment, and of balancing inequalities of power. The pervasiveness of such rhetoric leads Seligman to make the claim that people in the late modern West are "inherently hostile to the idea and experience of authority."³ Philip Rieff agrees with this assessment: "what characterizes modernity, I think, is just this idea that man need not submit to any power- higher or lower- than his own."⁴ Like Seligman, who explicitly recognizes that "we may be constituted by actions and external events, sometimes

¹ Seligman, p. 39

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., p. 3

⁴ "The Impossible Culture: Wilde as a Modern Prophet," in Rieff, p. 280

even random circumstances, over which we have no control,”⁵ Rieff finds the primacy currently assigned to the autonomous will problematic. However, the force of Rieff’s critique falls more squarely on the proposed effects rather than the feasibility of a wholly autonomous will. Against those who happily conceive of a wholly unfettered freedom, he bluntly claims, “from authority itself there is no escape.”⁶ In fact, he claims, failure to positively engage with the notion of authority can easily produce “the bad faith of an egalitarianism in which some are bound to become ever so much more equal than others.”⁷

In short, the work of these two theorists provides a slightly countercultural perspective on the problem of abuses of power, suggesting that the solution lies not in destroying or dismantling authority,⁸ but rather in properly grounding it and building it up.

The morally charged cosmologies of Saint Thomas Aquinas and the Neo-Confucian Master Chu Hsi have a great deal to contribute to this latter project of “fixing” authority. Unlike the contemporary comparativist Aaron Stalnaker, who professes that he is “skeptical about all such deep structures or ‘epistemes’ that are supposed somehow to determine or explain [human] thought and practice,”⁹ Chu and Thomas felt that they were indeed illuminating just this kind of ontological meaning or order. While this essay certainly does not attempt to make the argument that Chu and Thomas are “the same”, and very real differences between the two will emerge in the course of the following discussion,¹⁰ I will proceed on the

⁵ Seligman, p. 64

⁶ “For the Last Time Psychology,” in Rieff, p. 331

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 359

⁸ Of course, this is the approach most often taken in the contemporary United States. As Seligman notes, “we are, in this country anyway, concerned about spreading [power] around more fairly, as can be seen by the pervasive rhetoric of empowerment.” (Seligman, p. 7)

⁹ Stalnaker, p. 41. When dealing with issues of competing- but possibly complementary- views of reality, Stalnaker prefers to use “bridge concepts,” which “are general ideas, such as ‘virtue’ and ‘human nature,’ which can be given enough content to be meaningful and guide comparative inquiry, yet are still open to greater specification in particular cases.... Bridge concepts are not, then, hypotheses about trans-cultural universals that purport to bring a ‘deep structure’ of human religion or ethics to the surface.” (*Ibid.*, pp. 41-42)

¹⁰ I certainly agree with Stalnaker on this point: “For comparative ethics to have a compelling intellectual rationale, it needs to be able to articulate the possibility of social and conceptual diversity without collapsing into either naïve universalism or pernicious relativism. If, for example, 18th century Americans, ancient Chinese, medieval Maya, and contemporary Middle Eastern Muslims all share so much as human beings that their differences of thought and life are not particularly significant, then there is no real point in attending to the differences in ethical conceptions between (let alone within) these groups. But few people who reflect carefully on these matters remain tempted by this possibility for long.” (*Ibid.*, p. 24)

grounds that genuine commonality is to be found in the two thinkers.¹¹ More strongly, the implicit argument of this paper is that both shed light on the same objective, eternal order, from different cultural perspectives. It is my contention that identifying such an order provides the grounds for a particularly timely virtue: that of humble authority. While neither Chu nor Thomas ever explicitly identified this virtue, it may be derived from their cosmologically grounded notions concerning the common good, the value of humility, and the finitude of human cognitive capacity.

II. An Ontological Morality

According to Chu Hsi, “the student must devote himself to reality.”¹² In his understanding, this reality is infused by the Great Ultimate (*T'ai-chi*), which he defines as “merely the principle of Heaven and Earth, and the ten thousand things.”¹³

Chu, who famously conceives of this one universal principle as having many manifestations (*li yi fen shu*),¹⁴ understands that different things embody principle in different ways, and to an extent that enables him to claim: “as soon as there is a thing, there is its principle.”¹⁵ Such ontological principles have their pragmatic implications. A peach, for example, may be eaten, but is not a particularly good mode of transport. As John Berthrong puts it, “for Chu Hsi, to answer *what* constitutes the formal, normative nature is to answer *how* a person makes choices about the world.”¹⁶ Even further, as other scholars have noted,

¹¹ Of course, proceeding in this manner also pays a certain amount of respect to both thinkers. As Andrew Flescher points out, reading the moral exhortations of Dorothy Day “rhetorically” “fails to acknowledge sufficiently the nature of [Day’s] virtuous character, which surely consists of moral *insight*, as well as moral *fortitude*. If we extol Day... wouldn’t it be disingenuous of us to fail to assume that as a moral authority, she has credibility? Is it consistent to praise her for what she does without trusting her when she tells us what to do?” (Flescher, p. 5) As a genuine admirer of the philosophical insights of both Chu and Aquinas, I similarly find it difficult to set aside their most central claims; in this case, not about what I should do or who I should be, but about the objective order underlying existence.

¹² *Chin ssu lu*, 2:62, p. 67

¹³ *Zhuzi Yulei*, 1.1, <http://sangle.web.wesleyan.edu/etext/song-qing/z1-6.html>. NB: All translations of the *Zhuzi Yulei* in this paper are my own.

¹⁴ See *Chin ssu lu*, 2:89, p. 80; comment on 1:7, p. 10

¹⁵ *Zhuzi Yulei*, 4.61, <http://sangle.web.wesleyan.edu/etext/song-qing/z1-6.html>. While space does not permit a full discussion of Chu’s cosmological system, I note here in passing that the Neo-Confucian cosmos is constituted by *li*, or principle, and *chi*, or material force: “there is nothing under Heaven that has material force without principle, and there is also nothing that has principle without material force.” (Ibid., 1.2) While principle is seen as more fundamental than material force, Chu is careful to caution his students: “essentially one cannot speak of which comes first and which last with principle and material force.” (Ibid., 1.3)

¹⁶ Berthrong, p. 88

these principles have their moral dimensions as well: “in the same way that everything has a shape and size, so it has a moral value. Exactly in the way that when I see a chair I know it as having a certain color, a certain shape legs, and a surface to sit on, I also know it as something that can be offered to an elderly person when necessary.”¹⁷

In a similar way, Thomas conceives of one thread tying together all of existence. In his system, the whole point and purpose of creation is the communication- and reception- of God’s goodness: “[God] brought things into being in order that His goodness might be communicated to creatures, and be represented by them.”¹⁸ However, good as God’s goodness must indubitably be, the universe is permeated throughout by something even more glorious: God Himself. According to Thomas, “God is necessarily present to all things to the extent that they have existence. But existence is that which is the most intimately present in all things. Therefore God must be in all things.”¹⁹

Of course, Thomas, an orthodox- and canonized- Roman Catholic Christian, is no pantheist: he does not view creatures as pieces of God, so to speak. Rather, he is careful to distinguish between that which is unquestionably and ontologically good on the one hand, and that which is more problematic on the other: “we may consider two things in man, namely that which is God’s, and that which is man’s. Whatever pertains to defect is man’s: but whatever pertains to man’s welfare and perfection is God’s.”²⁰ The practical and moral implications of this stance may be easily inferred; Thomas himself draws the logical conclusion that “we must not only revere God in Himself, but also that which is His in each one.”²¹

Clearly, both Thomas and Chu offer an ontologically grounded morality that is in no way dependent upon the arbitrariness of the human will. Indeed, the moral imperatives inherent in all that exists endure

¹⁷ Patt-Shamir, p. 355. In fact, Chu suggests that virtue and morality are as ontological as anything else in existence when he ties them to the Five Agents, or elements, of the Neo-Confucian cosmological account: “if a person obtains more wood material force [in his endowment], [his] humanity will be greater; if someone receives more metal material force [in her endowment], [her] justice will be greater.” (*Zhuzi Yulei*, <http://sangle.web.wesleyan.edu/etext/song-qing/z1-6.html>)

¹⁸ *Summa Theologica*, I, q. 47, a. 1, resp., <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/1047.htm>

¹⁹ *Compendium*, I:130, p. 147

²⁰ *Summa Theologica*, IIa IIae, q. 161, a. 3, resp., <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/3161.htm>

²¹ *Ibid.*, ad. 1. Again, Thomas is no pantheist, and thus immediately qualifies the latter part of this statement: “although not with the same measure of reverence as we revere God.”

irrespective of human consciousness or desire; as Chu asks, "when has the Way stopped operating? The only thing is that people do not follow it."²² This emphasis on the *objective nature* of moral worth and appropriateness, similar to Aquinas', provides not only the grounds for authority, but also offers safeguards against its abuse:²³ a topic addressed in the following section.

III. Humble Authority

A. Authority

According to Thomas, "divine Wisdom, to put perfection in things, produced them in such order that the universe of creatures should embrace the highest of things and the lowest."²⁴ All creatures share certain attributes with God Himself, with these attributes multiplying as the hierarchy of existence is ascended:

the higher a thing is in the scale of being, the closer it draws to likeness with God. Thus we observe that some things (e.g., those pertaining to the lowest degree, such as lifeless beings), share in the divine likeness with respect to existence only; others, however, such as plants, share in the divine likeness with respect to existence and life; and yet others such as animals share in the divine likeness with respect to sense perception. But the highest degree- and that which makes us most like to God- is conferred by the intellect.²⁵

In Thomas' great chain of being, human beings are placed on the top hierarchical level of the seen and sensed world due to the intellect that they possess.

²² *Chin ssu lu*, 14:4, p. 292

²³ Comprehensive and systematic thinkers, both philosophers address the question of how to identify the good. While a full discussion of their methods is beyond the scope of this paper, it may be briefly noted that Chu is famous for exhorting his students to *gewu*, or "investigate things"- preferably as many things as humanly possible. He says, "what sages and worthies call extensive learning means to study everything. From the most essential and most fundamental about oneself to every single thing or affair in the world, even the meaning of one word or half a word, everything should be investigated to the utmost, and none of it is unworthy of interest." ("The Complete Works of Chu Hsi," p. 610) Meanwhile, Thomas has a similarly academic approach to discerning the good: his is based on his faith in the power of reason. As Aertsen notes, for Thomas, "order is related to reason in four different ways, to which different sciences respond. First, there is the order that reason does not make but only examines. This is the order of natural things, with which natural philosophy (*philosophia naturalis*) is concerned. But reason in its consideration of things can also produce an order. The order that reason produces in its own acts- for example, the arrangement of its concepts- pertains to rational philosophy (*philosophia rationalis*), that is, to logic. The order that reason produces in the actions of the will pertains to the consideration of moral philosophy (*moralis philosophia*). Finally, reason can be the rule for the making of external things; the order that reason makes in the production of artifacts belongs to the mechanical arts (*artes mechanicae*)." (Aertsen, p. 236)

²⁴ *Summa contra gentiles*, Vol. IV, Ch. 1, Sec. 2, p. 35

²⁵ *Compendium*, I:75, pp. 71-72

Just as in Thomistic Catholicism, humanity holds a very special place in the Neo-Confucian hierarchy of being. However, this place is not given to humans on the basis of an intellect that they uniquely possess, but rather because of the refined nature of their universal endowment: "it is man alone who receives the material forces in their highest excellence, and therefore he is most intelligent."²⁶

The hierarchy described as inherent in creation as a whole is mirrored in the hierarchy Chu and Thomas both see in the human race. There are people with stronger intellects in Thomas's system, and people with more refined material force in Chu's. It is on the basis of such an understanding that Chu claims that "there must be outstanding talented men who rise to become rulers to rule the others, to govern them so that quarrels will stop, to direct them so that the mutual sustenance and support of life will be accomplished, and to teach them so that the principles of human relations will become clear."²⁷ Quite clearly, Chu considers the rule of some by others to be constitutive of the common good. In Chu's estimation, the proper qualifications for such rule include a clear perception and judgment of reality: the rightful ruler "will not allow sensual desires to be a burden to his mind, the small to injure the great, or the secondary to destroy the fundamental."²⁸

As any student of Thomas knows, the Saint views sensual desires with a certain amount of suspicion as well. While such desires are not evil in and of themselves,²⁹ their strength and impetuosity can cause grave disorder and confusion within the human person: "inordinate stirrings of passion quickly

²⁶ *Chin ssu lu*, 1:1, p. 6

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 3:6 1, p. 114. It should be noted that, if a ruler does not perform these services, the Confucian tradition says flatly that he is no longer a ruler. According to the *Mencius*, one of the Four Books enshrined by Chu Hsi as the basis for a Confucian education, such a ruler has lost the Mandate of Heaven: "King Hsüan of Ch'i asked, 'Was it a fact that... Wen punished King Chou? ... Is it all right for a minister to murder his king?' Mencius said, 'He who injures humanity is a bandit. He who injures righteousness is a destructive person. Such a person is called a mere fellow. I have heard of killing a mere fellow Chou, but I have not heard of murdering [him as] the ruler.'" (IB.8, p. 62)

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 5:33, p. 167

²⁹ Thomas understands that "things were produced by God in a supremely excellent way; for the most perfect Being does everything in the most perfect way." (*Compendium*, I.100, p. 109) Thus, for example, although he gives comparatively little space to lust's opposing vice, as it "is not found in many, since men are more inclined to pleasure," he does identify a deficiency of natural sexual passion as problematic: "the contrary vice is comprised under insensibility." (*Summa theologiae*, IIaIIae, q. 153, a. 3, ad. 3, <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/3153.htm>)

[follow] one another in the lower appetites and at the same time the light of wisdom, which supernaturally illuminated man as long as his will was submissive to God, [grow] dim in his intellect."³⁰

Of course, in pondering the diminished intellectual capacity of humankind as a race, Thomas does not draw the conclusion that individual persons are incapable of enlightenment sufficient to legitimate their power over others. Rather, he counsels that rulers develop the virtue of prudence, which rectifies both the disordered human appetite and the subsequently clouded human intellect.³¹ Such a virtue, unsurprisingly, is meant in turn to be exercised on behalf of the common good.³²

The reference of both Chu and Thomas to the common good implicitly contains within it a warning against the mere autonomous exercise of the will by the ruler: a theme further explored below.

B. Humility

According to Thomas, "man's first sin was pride."³³ This pride involved, amongst other things, the desire "that by his own natural power he might decide what was good, and what was evil for him to do."³⁴ In Thomas' estimation, the "natural power" of human beings is simply not up to such a task, for they are created for an end and a purpose wholly beyond their power to imagine. In responding to the question, "Whether any created good constitutes man's happiness," Thomas replies that even attaining an angelic state does not represent the fullness of all that God has in store for those who love Him: "the summit of man does indeed touch the base of the angelic nature, by a kind of likeness; but man does not rest there as in his last end, but reaches out to the universal fount itself of good, which is the common object of

³⁰ *Compendium*, II:194, p. 223

³¹ *Ibid.*, IIa IIae, q. 47, a. 4, resp., <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/3047.htm>. Nor is humanly acquired prudence the only useful element in reining and redirecting human passions. Divine grace, a topic unfortunately outside the scope of this paper, also plays a role in increasing wisdom and other relevant intellectual virtues. See *Summa theologica*, Ia IIae, q. 62, a. 1, <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/2062.htm>, for a brief discussion of the theological virtues, and *ibid.*, q. 63, a. 2, <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/2063.htm>, for his treatment of divinely infused virtue.

³² For his discussion of the political prudence of rulers, see *ibid.*, a. 11. No proponent of mindless obedience, he also conceives of a related kind of political prudence to be exercised by those ruled: "it is manifest that prudence is in the ruler 'after the manner of a mastercraft' (Ethic. vi, 8), but in the subjects, 'after the manner of a handicraft.'" (*Ibid.*, a. 12, resp.) His teachings on the importance of personal conscience (see *Summa theologica*, Ia IIae, q. 19, esp. a. 3, 5, 6, <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/2019.htm>) and tyranny (*Ibid.*, IIa IIae, q. 42, a. 2, ad. 3, <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/3042.htm>) are also relevant in this context.

³³ *Ibid.*, q. 163, a. 1, resp., <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/3163.htm>

³⁴ *Ibid.*, a. 2, resp.

happiness of all the blessed, as being the infinite and perfect good."³⁵ A point crucial to any Thomistic discussion of authority is that, even though the blessed will enjoy this supernatural end after death,³⁶ they will never know God as He is: "of course, we shall never comprehend Him as he comprehends himself.... We shall not know Him as perfectly as He can be known, since the capacity of our intellect for knowing cannot equal His truth and so cannot exhaust His knowability."³⁷ If this is true of the blessed, it is even more so for those of us still on earth. From this perspective, people in a mortal state of existence should be very careful about claims to understand God's will.

Thus, it is quite fitting that Thomas not only identifies pride as a vice, but also sets humility against it as a virtue,³⁸ one which he defines in the following terms: "it belongs properly to humility, that a man restrain himself from being borne towards that which is above him. For this purpose he must know his disproportion to that which surpasses his capacity. Hence knowledge of one's own deficiency belongs to humility."³⁹ Certainly, knowledge of ultimate meaning, rightness and ends is possible due to a Divine Revelation that far exceeds anything humans could rightfully ascertain on their own.⁴⁰ Nonetheless, even in the face of such Revelation, everyone- the wise most of all- must acknowledge that not all answers have been provided.

In a similar vein, one of the scriptures commented upon by Chu, the *Doctrine of the Mean*, provides the explicit acknowledgement that no one fully comprehends the pattern and meaning of existence: "in its utmost reaches, there is something which even the sage does not know."⁴¹ As is often the case in Confucian philosophy, this theoretical premise flows very smoothly into more prosaic observations. Given that everything in the universe is comprised of morally charged *li* and *ch'i*, if there is that which the sage

³⁵ Ibid., Ia IIae, q. 2, a. 8, ad. 1, <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/2002.htm>

³⁶ Ibid., q. 1, a. 7, resp., <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/2001.htm>

³⁷ *Compendium*, I:106, p. 119

³⁸ *Summa Theologica*, IIa IIae, q. 161, a. 1, resp., <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/3161.htm>

³⁹ Ibid., a. 2, resp.

⁴⁰ "Knowledge of God's greatness and goodness cannot come to men except through the grace of divine Revelation." (*Compendium*, II:8, p. 348)

⁴¹ Chapter 12, *The Doctrine of the Mean*, in Chan, p. 100

does not know in the furthest reaches of the universe, he does not have all of the moral answers.

Furthermore, if the sage does not have all of the answers, the rest of us should be prepared to acknowledge that we do not, either.⁴² Indeed, we do not always know where it is that moral insight is to be found. It is within this kind of context that Chu Hsi counsels humility to his students with statements such as: “many people think they are mature and experienced and therefore are not willing to learn from their inferiors. Consequently they remain ignorant all their lives.”⁴³

Clearly, this advice does not attack the concept of social inferiority *per se*, just as Thomas’ humility does not take away from rulers the right to rule. These systems are not offering an early version of Marxism, nor even liberal egalitarianism: both thinkers eschew the rhetoric of empowerment. Authority, as such, indubitably remains.

Nonetheless, such authority is never absolute, and not only because knowledge is never absolute. For example, Chu understands that meaningful participation in the Confucian trinity of Heaven, Earth and Humankind does not require an expert understanding of obscure scriptures or even a rigorous meditation practice, and can be achieved by the most uneducated of people. To quote the *Doctrine of the Mean* once more: “[the Way] has its simple beginnings in the relation between man and woman.”⁴⁴ Simply by engaging in the creation of new life, men and women both exercise and gain insight into the universal process of production and reproduction. This insight is no less true for being partial: “men and women of simple intelligence can share knowledge [of the Way].”⁴⁵

In a similar manner, Thomas provides a continuum of knowledge whose fundamental elements are almost universally available: “intellectual knowledge is caused by the senses.”⁴⁶ While this passage from the *Summa theologica* goes on to note that such sense knowledge is not sufficient on its own to qualify as

⁴² Moreover, it should always be borne in mind that the last sage was Confucius, who died in 479BCE.

⁴³ *Chin ssu lu*, 2:98, p. 84

⁴⁴ Chapter 12, *The Doctrine of the Mean*, in Chan, p. 100

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 100

⁴⁶ *Summa theologica*, Ia IIae, q. 84, a. 6, resp., <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/1084.htm>

“human” knowledge,⁴⁷ it nonetheless implies that, in the memorable phrase of G.K. Chesterton, “the philosophy of Saint Thomas stands founded on the universal common conviction that eggs are eggs.”⁴⁸

More certainly can- and should- be learned about the eggs, but most people can see and understand that they are eggs, and in so doing have some portion of the truth.

Thus, Aquinas and Chu believe that people can gain significant insights into reality by participating in the ordinary round of life.⁴⁹ Moreover, given that *everyone’s* knowledge is partial, even that of the saint or the sage, Aquinas and Chu raise the distinct possibility that someone who has never learned the art of methodic doubt may yet know a great many things that the professionals will never have the time to explore or question. Thus emerges a somewhat startling paradox: namely, that old-fashioned supporters of hierarchy such as Thomas Aquinas and Chu Hsi are actually somewhat democratic in their thinking.

Recognition of the universal capacities of human beings provides the grounds for what we may call a democratic hierarchy. In such a hierarchy, while true authority is possible with reference to ontological order and human development and achievement, it is implicitly feasible that the most unexpected of people may have insights as yet unseen by the wise. Moreover, such insights may be not only into the order of existence, but also into the character of authority figures. While the juxtaposition of “democratic” and “hierarchy” may be strange, it makes the virtue of humble authority possible. This virtue, in turn, is particularly timely in that it simultaneously permits power and prohibits its abuse.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ “But since the phantasms cannot of themselves affect the passive intellect, and require to be made actually intelligible by the active intellect, it cannot be said that sensible knowledge is the total and perfect cause of intellectual knowledge, but rather that it is in a way the material cause.” (Ibid.)

⁴⁸ Chesterton (2), p. 121

⁴⁹ This, of course, does not mean that people cannot or do not make mistakes in their assumptions or understandings.

⁵⁰ Although space does not permit a satisfying discussion of the practices that encourage such a virtue, I do wish to note here that both Thomas and Chu provide advice in this regard. For example, in a chapter entitled, “The Way to Regulate the Family,” Chu provides a moral model via a panegyric to a mother who did not allow her children to “speak harshly” to their social inferiors (see *Chin ssu lu*, 6;17, p. 180). Thomas, meanwhile, counsels saying the Lord’s Prayer (*Summa theologica*, IIa IIae, q. 83, a. 9, resp., <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/3083.htm>): a practice which reminds one not only of his or her own faults and weaknesses, but also of the importance of perhaps authoritatively cooperating with God’s will on earth.

IV. Conclusion

Such prohibitions, unfortunately, are never fully successful. As Philip Rieff wryly observes, “authority is bound to take its toll in nerves.”⁵¹

In any kind of discussion of power, the critical problem of its abuse may not be cast aside. Nor may such a discussion ignore the fact that, when questions of ultimate meaning enter the fray, the inescapable stakes are raised. As Adam Seligman notes, “the Axial revolution and the breakthrough to transcendence and absolute heteronomous authority that it called forth provides as well a source for a new intolerance. In this sense the ‘corruption’ of authority is almost, as it were, built into its very constitution, in its claims to reorganize worldly existence in the name of a higher truth.”⁵² When people believe that they have special access to divine or hidden truths, it is all too often the case that they use this perceived access to justify overpowering others not quite as enlightened as they.⁵³

Nonetheless, it may be argued that such use is not a problem with power *qua* power, but rather with its corruption: a distinction nicely indicated by Seligman, who notes, “the idea of authority is traditionally defined as legitimate power, that is, as power which is seen as *fairly exercised or justly wielded*. Authority, then, with its attendant association of legitimacy, stands in contradistinction to power *simpliciter*.”⁵⁴ Such *legitimate* power, by definition, recognizes its own limitations, perhaps most fittingly and strikingly so in the religious arena. In Rieff’s formulation, “the sacredness of power contradicts the sacredness of religion. Religion assumes a power beyond. Power assumes there is nothing beyond itself,

⁵¹ “By What Authority? Post-Freudian Reflections on the Repression of the Repressive as Modern Culture,” in Rieff, p. 335

⁵² Seligman, p. 125. While this paper makes a case for the establishment and exercise of proper authority, it should be noted that the unfortunate validity of Seligman’s premise leads many thoughtful scholars in the highly sensitive field of Christian ethics to argue against unequal power distributions and relationships *per se*. For example, Joseph J. Kotva displays a distrust of, if not hostility towards, authority as such when he writes, “several recent books have noted the inequality of power in the pastoral relationship... [Pastors are] seen by many as representing the church, sometimes even as representing God. These factors can cause a tremendous inequality of power between pastors and parishioners. *Recent books in clergy ethics rightly wrestle with this inequality.*” (Kotva, p. 15) Italics added.

⁵³ Paul Knitter is keenly aware of such problems: “belief that one has the truth [can be] very dangerous.” (Knitter, p. 11) In a solution particularly characteristic of the late modern West as viewed by Seligman and Rieff, he suggests that Christians in the field of interreligious dialogue recognize “the contingent nature of their claims” on the grounds that not doing so is simply unjust: “if one of the participants enters the field with better equipment than the other, or with a ‘special relationship’ with the umpires or referees, the interchange isn’t going to be fair.” (Ibid., p. 110)

⁵⁴ Seligman, p. 4. Italics added.

only power after power."⁵⁵ While the issue of whether Confucianism may properly be called a "religion" is a topic far too vast to address here,⁵⁶ the claim that Chu, like Thomas, recognizes an objective moral order, and a "power beyond" that of the human will, has hopefully been adequately demonstrated here.

Thus, Thomas Aquinas and Chu Hsi suggest that the beginnings of a solution to religious and other abuses of power lie not in dismantling authority, but rather in correctly building it up. Such a project, if successful in embodying the virtue of humble authority common to both Thomistic Catholicism and Chu's Neo-Confucianism, will not make the totalitarian error of claiming to have all the answers. On the other hand, the practitioners of such an approach may also rest secure in the knowledge that "every truth- if it really is truth- presents itself as universal, even if it is not the whole truth."⁵⁷

In conclusion: if Philip Rieff is right in claiming that "from authority itself there is no escape,"⁵⁸ then perhaps Chesterton is as well. Perhaps we ought not to assert our wills quite so much, or look for new ways in which we may do so. The project tending to edification may well indeed involve answering a slightly different pair of questions than those with which we began: "what is the truth, exactly?" and "*should* it get in my way?"

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⁵⁵ "On Religion and Power," in Rieff, p. 160

⁵⁶ For (qualified) arguments in the affirmative, see Ching, esp. pp. 145, 178; Yao, esp. p. 38, and Tucker, p. 3.

⁵⁷ John Paul II, p. 43

⁵⁸ Rieff, "By What Authority? Post-Freudian Reflections on the Repression of the Repressive as Modern Culture," p. 331

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