

Moral Theology in the Ruins: Introducing a New Journal

DAVID MATZKO MCCARTHY

THE BEGINNING of the *Journal of Moral Theology* (JMT) offers no manifesto or solution that will right the problems of society and church. The rationale for the journal is simple. At present, a journal in the U.S. that focuses on Catholic moral theology does not exist. There are Catholic journals that include moral theology, and journals in ethics that include articles by and about Catholic thinkers. In contrast, the main concern of the JMT is the Catholic tradition of theological reflection on the moral life. The JMT will be attentive to a broad spectrum of approaches and the relationship of theology to other disciplinary inquiries, such as economics, psychology, and political philosophy. Since moral theology has emerged as a distinct discipline after the Council of Trent, there has been no golden age. It could be argued that the very establishment of the discipline is a response to widening fissures in the shared theological world of the West. Doctrinal divisions of the sixteenth century reflect a new “disembedding” of ordinary life from a common social-metaphysical landscape.¹ The JMT offers no solutions to fractures in a common theological orientation. But we cannot give up on the task of finding a way forward that is both common and good. What we hope to do is to find a way to think and converse well as moral theologians among the ruins.

“The ruins” is an allusion to Walker Percy’s novel *Love in the Ruins*.² Percy’s Tom More is plagued by the fragmentation of modern life and experiences apocalyptic anxiety. Dr. More, in his desire to

¹ See John Bossy, *Christianity in the West 1400-1700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985) and Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007).

² Walker Percy, *Love in the Ruins* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971).

heal and to re-connect the fragments, provides an illuminating exaggeration of a moral theologian. (Or maybe I am projecting; perhaps he is just an exaggeration of me.) A discussion of Percy's Tom More will follow. At this juncture, we will begin with the source of the analogy between *Love in the Ruins* and theology as a discipline. The analogy is made in an essay by Reinhard Hütter in "The Ruins of Discontinuity."³ Hütter discusses the lack of unity in Catholic theology. His main concern is how this fragmentation leaves "theologians in the making" vulnerable on "a difficult and often treacherous landscape in late modern America."⁴ Specifically, he cites difficulties in sharing a common vision within a university culture where theologians have to adopt "theologically extraneous perspectives... [and] standards" in order to have legitimate academic standing and where we are tempted to think about the Church in terms of ideal constructs "jerry-built" with "current political ideas."⁵

To underline the point, Hütter writes his "Ruins of Discontinuity" for *First Things*. He, no doubt, feels pinched by the irony of using a medium that intentionally stakes out conservative territory on the contentious landscape of "current political ideas." Surely he writes for *First Things*, not because he shares their place amid political ideologies, but because he is aware that his worries about the ruins will resonate with the journal's readers. But the ruins are a concern for not merely social conservatives. Hütter could have gone elsewhere, but everywhere (to prove his point) seems to be shaped in part by contemporary politics. For example, despite the differences, there are striking similarities between Hütter's concerns (fragmentation and formation) and an essay written a few months earlier for *Commonweal* by Peter Steinfels, "Further Adrift."⁶ Hütter attends to fragmentation and what theologians should do in relationship to the Church, especially its ancient and medieval theological tradition. Steinfels makes recommendations to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and what it should do in relationship to American culture, specifically in response to well-documented and obvious social change. The politics are different, but the landscape (the ruins) and the desire for unity are the same.

³ Reinhard Hütter, "The Ruins of Discontinuity," *First Things* (January 2011): 37-41.

⁴ Hütter, "The Ruins of Discontinuity," 38.

⁵ Hütter, "The Ruins of Discontinuity," 38, 41.

⁶ Peter Steinfels, "Further Adrift: The American Church's Crisis of Attrition," *Commonweal* (October 22, 2010): 16-20. Steinfels, like Hütter, is concerned primarily with formation. He recommends "a quantum leap in the quality of Sunday liturgies, including preaching: a massive, all-out mobilization of talent and treasure to catechize the young, bring adolescents into church life, and engage young adults in ongoing faith formation..." (20).

Hütter's proposal for the discipline of theology is worth considering for moral theology. His main worry about academic life is its exaggerated standards of originality and productivity, which incline intellectual life to be competitive, individualistic, and dismissive of traditional thought. Intellectual life becomes a practice of disconnection. His worry about Catholic theology in particular is a "hermeneutic of discontinuity," a post-Vatican II break with the past, which is reinforced by a "pervasive adoption of the [secular] political geography of left and right." The problem is that "categories of secular politics dominate the theological imagination of the Church."⁷ Hütter's proposal is the development of a "school" to provide a common vision, to offer a shared synthesis of the tradition, and to chart avenues of the continuity of the tradition amid contemporary thought. He cites various schools that developed prior to Vatican II based on the works of figures like Karl Rahner, Bernard Lonergan, and Hans Urs von Balthasar.⁸ He recommends a new school called "Ressourcement Thomism," which appears to be represented by the work of Romanus Cessario, O.P., among others.⁹

The idea of a school is an interesting, but finally inadequate prospect for the new *Journal of Moral Theology*. It is inadequate precisely in the way that it is interesting. Schools, as I understand Hütter's use of the term, are internally diverse and might include a great deal of disagreements. But there is a common theoretical lens or imagination that gives sense to a common intellectual world and a common set of questions.¹⁰ Hütter refers to John Henry Newman's submission "to the universally received traditions of the Church"¹¹ and its "modes of reflection... that educate us to meet future challenges with a faithful intelligence."¹² Elsewhere he refers to a "theological imagination." I take these references to "modes" and "imagination" to be something like what Newman, in his Oxford University sermons and the *Grammar of Assent*, calls "presumption."¹³ Presumptions are pre-

⁷ Hütter, "The Ruins of Discontinuity," 39.

⁸ Hütter, "The Ruins of Discontinuity," 40.

⁹ See Reinhard Hütter and Matthew Levering, eds., *Ressourcement Thomism: Sacred Doctrine, the Sacraments, and the Moral Life: Essays in Honor of Romanus Cessario* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2010).

¹⁰ Charles Taylor, "Reason, Faith, and Meaning," *Faith and Philosophy* 28, no. 1 (2011): 5-18. Taylor uses the term "theoretical imagination," but he also refers to Thomas Kuhn's use of the term "paradigm."

¹¹ Hütter, "The Ruins of Discontinuity," 37.

¹² Hütter, "The Ruins of Discontinuity," 39.

¹³ Consider John Henry Newman's Oxford University Sermons, "Faith and Reason, Contrasted as Habits of Mind" (176-201), "The Nature of Faith in Relation to Reason" (202-21), and "Love the Safeguard of Faith against Superstition" (222-50) in

liminary assumptions and expectations that demarcate reason, argumentation, and considerations of evidence. Presumptions are reasonable to hold, but they are prior to systematic thought and the collection of data. They do not inhibit reasoning. They make it possible. I take this understanding of presumption to be the primary way that Hütter thinks of a school—the shared modes or paradigms that give us Quantum as opposed to Newtonian physics.¹⁴

A school in this sense of shared modes of inquiry, common imagination, and basic presumptions is an interesting and thought-provoking goal for a journal of moral theology. A problem, however, occurs when Hütter actually names a school. The assertion of Ressourcement Thomism or any school as the unity amid the fragments will have an effect opposite from what he intends. The discipline remains fragmented; one merely defines the whole by privileging one of the pieces and putting everyone else (I suppose) on the outside. For example, I have learned a great deal from reading Ressourcement Thomists such as Fr. Cessario. But Cessario's uses of the terms "moral realism" and "realist moral theology" have been unsatisfying and have not provided, for me, an adequate orientation to moral reasoning. In his *The Virtues and Theological Ethics* and *Introduction to Moral Theology*, he often tells us what moral realism does and what realists accept as true, but he does not offer arguments that help orient the reader to a realist position. We are simply there or we are not. We learn, for instance, that truths like "the divine judgment which determines our eternal destiny" are knowable to human reason, "not merely dogmas of Christian faith or of religions of biblical origins, but they are age-old insights of philosophy."¹⁵ Cessario, however, does not engage modern philosophy on these questions, and I am left with the conclusion that moral realists, so defined, simply establish unity by ignoring the philosophical fragmentation. This kind of school establishes intellectual unity for its members, but the cost, in terms of moral theology, is a widening disconnection between my office in a theology department and much of the world in which I live.¹⁶

Fifteen Sermons Preached Before the University of Oxford (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1909), <http://www.newmanreader.org/works/oxford>.

¹⁴ The example of physics is used by Taylor in "Reason, Faith, and Meaning," 6.

¹⁵ Romanus Cessario, O.P., *Introduction to Moral Theology* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2001), 12.

¹⁶ Some contributions to *Ressourcement Thomism* (ed. Hütter and Levering) do attempt to apply theology to moral matters, and these contributions are fragmented to say the least. Particularly interesting/troublesome is a chapter by Graham McAleer ("Vanity and Commerce," 353-64) which attempts to develop a Whig Thomism which combines the ethics of Thomas with an antithetical Scottish, post-Enlightenment tradition. Thomas becomes an ally of David Hume and Adam Smith.

There are benefits to developing this kind of intellectual enclave, but the benefits would not accrue to a journal of moral theology. A school as enclave will advance theological unity by bracketing problems of philosophical and cultural disintegration. But it will not engage the lives of people who live and work among the fragments, including academic moral theologians who teach students immersed in contemporary culture and colleagues across universities who are looking for lines of conversation with theologians. The schools of the mid-twentieth century listed by Hütter offer something different from enclaves, and perhaps the *Journal of Moral Theology* can too. Bernard Lonergan, Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar argue, in much different ways, for realist positions in relationship to modern philosophies (in the plural, given modern fragmentation) and their disorienting effects on theological presumptions. They attempt to move beyond the mid-twentieth century Catholic enclave. They give us a way to think about life as a whole amid, rather than above or apart from the ruins. They give us a way to think about the history of theology and philosophy as a whole. They offer a way to think about life in modern culture. Whatever the successes and failures of these schools, each attempts to describe an intellectual landscape where theological inquiry is unified amid the fragmentation of modern life and makes real connections between the everyday world that we inhabit with our secular neighbors. How can a mere journal of moral theology, likewise, foster common modes inquiry and a shared theological imagination? I don't know precisely. I do know that naming a school or circulating a manifesto will only foster further fragmentation. It seems to me equally as futile to have simply an open-ended and directionless conversation—a conversation for the sake of conversation. For a way between, I turn to Walker Percy's Tom More and an analogous approach to thinking about moral theology among the ruins.

For Percy's Tom More, the fundamental problem is the unity of metaphysics and matter. More (descendant of the author of *Utopia*) is in ontological and physical ruin. He anxiously expects and prepares haphazardly for the apocalypse, but he is convinced, at first, that he can invent his way out of it. His ontological lapsometer promises to be a technological means to calibrate the soul and to fix our alienation. I noted above that I would like to consider the fiction-

What would Leo XIII say to that? McAleer's chapter can be criticized on the grounds that Michael Novak's "Catholic Ethic" will be criticized below. It combines "Whig" and "Thomism" on a highly abstract level, despite its surface concern for practical economic matters. The inclusion of the chapter unravels the unity of *Ressourcement Thomism*, and it suggests that this *Ressourcement* school will not hold together when it attempts to attend to theological proposals for living amid a secularized world.

al More as an illuminating exaggeration of moral theologians. If I am pressed, I will admit that, perhaps, he exaggerates only me. I will assert another point, however, to defend my use of *Love in the Ruins*. We could define moral theologians as members of a guild. The benefit of this definition is that it points to our association and our common work. The danger is that we might begin to think about moral theologians as academics who converse *about* other moral theologians. A better understanding of moral theology is to consider moral theologians, similar to Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, as thinkers who converse about the good life. Focusing on Tom More, as a character, offers a medium to talk about moral theology as an inquiry about a theological orientation to life. A moral theologian is one who thinks theologically about common goods and ends, especially in terms of the fragmentation of life.

Tom More worries that he is fading in and out of reality. He suffers from the very fragmentation that he is able to diagnose. Should not these problems be constant worries for us as moral theologians? We live an odd calling of putting hope into words and living up to what we say. More experiences a personal end-times, and he turns out to be wrong about the apocalypse. In being wrong, however, he is right about the ruins. His psychic sickness is precipitated by his sensitivity to the fragmentation of common life, our spiritual isolation amid scientific and technological progress, and our alienation from ourselves—divided in body and spirit. At bottom, his problems are a metaphysical disorientation. After his own apocalyptic experience, More learns to live among the ruins by finding solid ground.¹⁷ He settles down on the bayou, in old slave quarters, with his wife and children and the sacraments (the Eucharist and Confession). He lives modestly through a small practice as a psychiatrist, where he struggles to help one person at a time. He learns to “watch and listen and wait.”¹⁸ Thomas More lets go of his hopes for a grand Nobel-Prize-winning solution to modern alienation, but he does not give up on the healing of the world. The difference (before and after his apocalypse) is that his desire to heal his own and our modern spiritual maladies comes down to earth, to living an ordinary life, to living well among the ruins and thinking things through day by day.

Percy puts modern struggles in the novelist’s relief, highlighting key dimensions of everyday existence. In *Love in the Ruins*, he points to the separation of body and spirit into angelism and bestialism.¹⁹

¹⁷ In the epilogue of *Love in the Ruins*, Tom contemplates, with satisfaction, his new pair of boots. “A good pair of boots is the best thing a man can have” (381).

¹⁸ Percy, *Love in the Ruins*, 382.

¹⁹ “For the world is broken, sundered, busted down the middle, self ripped from self and man pasted back together as mythical monster, half angel, half beast, but no

Both are a break with human solidarity. Angelism is the individual spirit lifted out of the world—out of bodily relations. More's wife Doris is "spiritual," and therefore no longer touches him and eventually leaves him. This spirituality (as angelism) is homelessness and alienation in the world. Its main source is a modern reductionist understanding of matter and its inhospitality to the human spirit. One result of the separation of spirit and matter is that the things of the earth no longer bind us together. For example, More notes that a major feast day of the new American Catholic Church (apparently based in Cicero, IL) is Property Rights Sunday, represented by Christ holding in his hands the conventional American home with picket fence.²⁰ When the spirit transcends the body, there is no hope for the unity of things.

Bestialism, then, is the other side of the coin. It is a materialist reduction of the human being. It is faith in technology over human relations. It is the supposed neutrality of matter. Yet, it is also sex, money, and power for their own sake; that is, our desires also have been de-personalized. For Tom More, the way between angelism and bestialism is to see connections in material things. Before his apocalypse, he finds connections by driving the interstate highways in order to find a thread that connects one place to another. After his end-times, he becomes part of the connection. He lives on the bayou, and he walks and takes the bus where he needs to go. He settled down in a community of faith. Throughout *Love in the Ruins*, the antidote to human fragmentation is the Eucharist. Religion, he says, saves the spirit by bringing it down to the world. It takes "eating Christ himself to make me mortal man again and let me inhabit my own flesh and love her [his wife Doris] in the morning."²¹

Tom More's apocalyptic experiences, although obviously excessive, offer insights on the tasks of moral theology. Given that moral theology is, for the most part, concerned with this-worldly objects and ends, it is instructive to think about our role, not as lifting human action to transcendent heights, but as "bringing [the human spirit] down to the world." When referring specifically to Catholic

man. Even now I can diagnose and shall one day cure: cure the new plague, the modern Black Death, the current hermaphroditism of the spirit, namely: More's syndrome, or: chronic angelism-bestialism that rives the soul from the body and sets it orbiting the great world as the spirit of abstraction whence it takes the form of beasts, swans and bulls, werewolves, blood-suckers, Mr. Hydes, or just poor lonesome ghost locked in its own machinery" (Percy, 382-3). He experiences what Charles Taylor calls "the great disembedding" and the spiritual isolation of the modern "buffered self" in *The Secular Age*, 146-58.

²⁰ Percy, *Love in the Ruins*, 181.

²¹ Percy, *Love in the Ruins*, 254.

moral theology, our role “in bringing down to the world” fits with a Catholic topography—what Andrew Greeley (drawing on David Tracy) calls the Catholic Imagination. Greeley defines it as “one that views the world and all that is in it as enchanted, haunted by the Holy Spirit and the presence of grace.”²² For Hütter and Steinfelds, for instance, the backdrop for their analyses of the ruins is the Eucharist—the real presence of Christ and our sharing in one body. Whatever can be said about a common mode of inquiry for moral theology, we should say that it is a theological mode or imagination and, as Catholic, an imagination that begins with a world where God has given himself as gift, where creation itself is gift, and where we have been offered participation in things as they are in fragments and will be in the restoration of creation. The theological mode responds to divine life incarnate, crucified, and resurrected so that we might share God’s communion.

Does this theological mode make a difference? I will hazard two examples. First, we moral theologians are inclined to be apprehensive about economic mechanisms when they are detached from a broader account of human fulfillment. Keynesian and Australian school economists will argue about public and private sector agency. We worry that the two sides of the debate have in common an abstract economic agent who is not really a human being (or only part of a human being). Too often it is the “market” that is held to be an agent or manager of human agency. The economy is referred to as a natural and given set of mechanisms, to which we must submit. We are the fuel for the machine: Keynesian/government infusions and Australian school calls for unfettered private investment are arguments about managing us (the fuel) and, as such, tend to be utilitarian. In this framework, the economy is the most celebrated disenchanting zone of modern life. Second, and on the other side of disenchantment, we also worry about the various “value” or “enchanted” zones, which usually are privatized spheres of modern life and often are seen as ways to transcend a utilitarian and impersonal world. When the enchanted zones (like interpersonal love) are privatized and lived in transcendent isolation, we moral theologians tend to want to bring them down to earth. For example, we tend to be suspicious of (but not necessarily opposed to) popular accounts of the theology of the body. We are likely to worry about the hyper-enchantment of sex when it becomes the linchpin for human embodiment. Again, we worry that we are seeing an abstraction and only part of a human being. In what follows, these two boundary areas of disenchantment

²² Andrew M. Greeley, *The Catholic Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 184.

and hyper-enchantment will be used to identify a landscape for moral theology.

The examples of the market and sexual ethics are not intended to be controversial. But they will be. I will review the theology of Michael Novak and Christopher West. In dealing with economics as a theology free zone and sexual ethics as a realm of enchantment, my goal is not to convince about one side of the debate or the other, but to suggest a common mode or theological imagination while also allowing a broad spectrum of views. I am assuming that the reader has already taken a position on Novak and West. I am looking for limit cases. The purpose in raising these issues is to highlight the trajectory of “coming down to earth” in moral theology amid the modern divide between metaphysics and matter. In his analysis of the fragments of theology, Hütter focuses on the pitfalls of academic life and the susceptibility of theologians to stand upon the fragments rather than the traditions of the Church. In Steinfels’ analysis of the American church, he notes the failures of the USCCB to face the fragments. Likewise, the goal of my review of Novak and West is to get a better look at these fragments and begin to map a landscape of a common theological imagination.

A great deal of good work has been done in moral theology on economic matters. But making a difference in our market-driven world is an uphill struggle, to say the least. To understand the struggle theoretically, I will borrow a line from physicist Paul Davies, who offers a critique of contemporary physics. His critique sets the ground for his arguments for teleology and meaning in matter. Albeit not theological or religious, he is arguing for a kind of enchantment—for matter, as we have it, as engaged at a fundamental level with the meaning giving capacities of human beings.²³ Pointing to a downside of scientific disengagement, Davies holds that “most theoretical physicists are Platonists in the way they conceptualize the laws of physics as precise mathematical relationships possessing a real, independent existence that nevertheless transcends the physical universe.”²⁴ Davies argument is that in this Platonic view the actual, concrete relations of matter and the complex relationships of human life, both material and non-material, end up making little difference to the meaning of things. Likewise, economists speak of real markets in terms of abstract data (like rational self-interest) and mathematical

²³ Paul Davies, *The Cosmic Jackpot: Why our Universe is Just Right for Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2007), 222-60. Davies is a revolutionary scientist in terms of Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970). He tackles the anomaly in the current scientific paradigm, that it cannot adequately explain the human being.

²⁴ Davies, *The Cosmic Jackpot*, 236.

formula that transcend actual markets, and then ask policy makers to manage existing markets so that consumer spending, production, and investment will yield data for advantageous formula.²⁵ In terms that I will borrow from Daniel Finn (below), there is a disembedding of markets from their human ecology and then an attempt to shape an environment amenable to the abstracted relations.²⁶

Michael Novak's *The Catholic Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism* serves as an example of this disembedding. Novak seeks to promote a "Catholic Ethic" as a companion to "capitalism rightly understood" and "capitalism truly defined."²⁷ Unlike some economists, Novak does not assert that capitalism is a neutral or amoral mechanism. He holds that capitalism, rightly understood, does not stand alone but is part of a tripartite system: a free polity (civil law), a free economy, and a free moral-cultural system.²⁸ There is no argument, on this point, from the side of moral theology or a "Catholic Ethic." There are only minor arguments and qualifications, for example, with Novak's general approach to poverty.²⁹ He wants to empower the poor. But there is something troubling about *Catholic Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. I admit that I feel uneasy before I am able figure out and think through the problems with his Catholic ethic. Despite his statements to the contrary, I sense that ethics has been used as a tool for something else. I feel a challenge to what I do as a moral theologian.

As noted above, my intention in discussing Novak is to provide an uncontroversial, albeit negative, example—a limit case. I am assuming that moral theologians, by and large, are going to find Novak's method to be puzzling at best, and at worst, an inversion of what moral theologians are trying to do. I have noted my visceral reaction (which is real) in order to indicate that it is not a point of logic or a data set that bothers me most. It is the framework of thought. It seems to be a challenge to what moral theologians do. If

²⁵ Oliver Blanchard, *Macroeconomics*, 3rd Edition (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003). I took a semester long course in macroeconomics that used this text. I should have known, but it was striking to me that monetary-fiscal policy is the whole point of macroeconomics regardless of one's view of the self-regulation of the market. A free market requires a government role in keeping the market free. The need to control the market and market behavior increases a great deal when there is a need to keep the market in a process of stable growth. Ironically, the so-called opposition between big business and big government is logically and empirically false.

²⁶ Also see Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate* (2009), no. 51, and John Paul II, *Centesimus annus* (1991), no. 38.

²⁷ Michael Novak, *The Catholic Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: The Free Press, 1993), xiv, 85.

²⁸ Novak, *The Catholic Ethic*, 53, 219.

²⁹ Novak, *The Catholic Ethic*, 147-68.

the reader finds me to be unkind or unreasonable, I will say only that Novak himself has established the dividing line between us. His reasoning is this. Capitalism *rightly understood* offers the ideal system and set of values for making progress in the world. Once this claim is accepted, there is a moral imperative to hold theology and Catholic moral theology accountable to it. To say otherwise—to point to the ruins of particular capitalist systems or ruinous tendencies in global markets—to complain that an economic system ought not to circumscribe ethics appears to Novak to be an anti-capitalist bias of social scientists and theologians.³⁰ I am attempting to indicate what moral theology is about by clarifying the difference that Novak sees between himself and theologians.

The problem is that Novak abstracts the essential features of capitalism “truly defined” or “rightly understood” from various market systems that actually exist. He peels off various injustices and immorality from actual economic practices in order to define the real (ideal) entrepreneurial capitalism. So, in the last chapter of *The Catholic Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, he denounces the adversarial culture of Hollywood and television for its nihilistic philosophy. Yet, he never mentions that entertainment is a business and that the market rewards its entrepreneurs. Lady Gaga may very well be a nihilist, but first of all she is a business woman. She has made herself into a brand (which might be a nihilist assertion). Novak’s rejoinder, it seems, is that someone like Lady Gaga is parasitic on the bourgeois virtues that enhance entrepreneurial capitalism. His claim is that capitalism, rightly understood, is Lady Gaga’s victim rather than her enabler. It seems that capitalism rightly understood is an ideal that is distinct from any given culture, and therefore, it is free from blame for the culture that makes Lady Gaga rich. The economic system (as abstract system) and its proper spirit need no correction. The failures of actual capitalist systems are failures of the two other partners in the tripartite relations: civil polity (e.g., socialist leaning welfare states) and the moral-cultural system (e.g. the adversarial culture of cultural elites). In short, the primary agent of Novak’s *Catholic Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* is a reified ideal: capitalism truly defined.

In Novak’s case for capitalism rightly understood, the economic system is an agent that ought to set the standards and to circumscribe a Catholic ethics. I suspect that it is this control that I feel viscerally when I read Novak’s *The Catholic Ethic*. He holds that capitalism is a “way” and a “practice.” It manages human life properly. It “imposes certain moral and cultural attitudes, requirements, and demands... The capitalist way requires, as well, a respect for the larger political

³⁰ Novak, *The Catholic Ethic*, 104.

and cultural orders within which humane practices and the rule of law are established.”³¹ True capitalism (rather than actual capitalisms) does no wrong. It requires us to be good. Certainly there is evidence that capitalist economic systems also have the potential to do harm. We see it. Novak’s response is that what we see is real, but is it not capitalism rightly understood. The problem is with the cultural, moral, and political orders that inhibit the true spirit of capitalism. For example, radical individualism, according to Novak, is anti-capitalist.³² He is not clear about its source or how it has invaded democratic capitalism, but he is clear that it is celebrated and promoted by elitist academics and the adversarial/nihilistic culture.³³ His “Catholic Ethic” is generically social and industrious; it is the cultural lubricant that will no longer stand in the way of the capitalist spirit.

Novak’s *The Catholic Ethic* has been reviewed as a limit case, which began with the intuition that his approach to a Catholic ethics is not the approach of moral theologians by and large. The point is to develop a clear case, but Novak’s theology is not made explicit. At bottom, it seems to me, he depends upon a dualism between material relations and spirit/culture. It is not a crass dualism, but a dualism nonetheless. He seems to begin with a dichotomy between the natural workings of the market and human values (fact and value), and then modifies the separation by attaching a preferred spirit/ethos to a distinct economic sphere. In terms of theological modes or imagination, it seems that his considerations of a Catholic ethics and the market tend toward deism. The human spirit is called to be faithful to the clockwork of economic life. The clockwork is good, and it requires good from us. Communities and institutions, including the Church, have a responsibility to lubricate and to avoid gumming up the system. Theological intrusions on the market clockwork are certainly wrongheaded. Moral theologians need to get out of the way.

Whether or not deist or dualist, Novak’s Catholic ethics depends upon an abstraction of the economic sphere from human life, or in Daniel Finn’s terms, a disembedding from human ecology. Novak abstracts (disembeds) an economic “way” or system from its context in various times, cultures and social relations; then, he attempts to insert a cultural spirit (the Catholic Ethic) that accords with the ideal system (capitalism rightly understood). In order to be inserted as spirit/ethos, the Catholic ethic and culture itself must be independent

³¹ Novak, *The Catholic Ethic*, 8.

³² Novak argues against individualism and for civic duty. Again, this civic duty aligns with the economic sphere as an agent: “Markets serve communities, even link and unify communities; to be excluded from them is more alienating than to be included within them” (Novak, *The Catholic Ethic*, 202).

³³ Novak, *The Catholic Ethic*, 197.

of actual economic systems. Indeed, while entrepreneurial capitalism is individualist in practice, Novak will want to argue against an individualist or libertarian culture—against a culture that would seem to fit with the economic system as we now have it. To this degree, both economic relations and culture have to be detached in order to be joined together. Without changing the moving parts, we have to be able to extract Lady Gaga and insert Bing Crosby in her place. We seem to be able to select our cultures (suitable to capitalist virtues) as if they were items on the market. Novak asserts a dualism of matter (the autonomous market) and spirit (autonomous culture), and attempts to bring them together by making each a transcendent type.

Daniel Finn offers an alternative approach in his *The Moral Ecology of Markets*. Finn's conceptual frame does not settle moral arguments. Rather, he seeks to clarify lines of disagreement, so that arguments might be more coherent and convincing. Similar to Paul Davies' description of Platonism in modern physics, Finn holds that markets tend to be understood (wrongly) as disembedded.³⁴ Given the philosophical roots of economic theory, a more fitting description might be "Newtonian" rather than "Platonic." The mathematics of economics tries to determine how objects, as it were, will fall in a vacuum. In this view, actual markets are in social and political contexts that either frustrate or facilitate the natural laws of economic life. According to this logic of disembedding (e.g., Novak's), the market is defined as a separate sphere/mechanism, which is then instantiated in a culture. Novak does not think to consider that disembedded markets actually might disembed and thin out culture as well. He cannot account for the market character of morality and religion as it has been portrayed by social scientists, such as Robert Bellah, et al., in *Habits of the Heart*.³⁵

To offer an alternative conceptualization, Finn shifts the analogy from structures or spheres to organisms in a habitat.³⁶ Markets are not instantiated as if they emanate from trans-historical law. They grow within an ecological system, which includes the natural environment, human culture, and networks of relationships that interact with market exchange. A particular ecological system might foster a market that enhances some kinds of human relations and endangers others (and vice versa). Within this ecology, Finn directs our moral arguments to issues of allocation, distribution, scale within the natural world, and the quality of human relationships. He does not settle

³⁴ Finn, *The Moral Ecology of Markets* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 114.

³⁵ Robert Bellah, et al., *Habits of the Heart* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

³⁶ Finn, *The Moral Ecology of Markets*, 104.

these issues; he sets economic arguments within an inclusive moral context—a context of human flourishing through participation in the common good. His question is not, “What kind of ethics do we need to grease the machine?” but, “What kind of human ecology do we need to develop serviceable markets?” In moral theology, we ask about the ends and flourishing of human life, what kind of ecology best fosters that flourishing, and the role economic development plays in the ecology.

This human ecology, created and graced, is the intellectual landscape of moral theology. Put theologically, Novak’s tendency toward deism is countered with an account of human life that has the Trinitarian God in view as beginning and end. The *Journal of Moral Theology* hopes to cultivate this intellectual landscape and make progress with our theological treatments and debates on economics, political philosophy, and moral psychology. Aside from disciplinary labels, a moral theologian is someone who argues the ecological questions in terms of a theological backdrop. The backdrop for the arguments is constituted by our natural and supernatural ends. The backdrop is the place and purpose of being human as creatures and the image of God in relationship to creation and as restored and elevated to friendship with God. With Tom More’s plight and the Catholic imagination in view, this prospect of the unity of human life might be the source of what Michael Novak thinks of as the “bias” of theologians. Our despair about economic systems might sound to him to be apocalyptic and irrational.

As a discipline, we are oriented to this-worldly objects and ends, but we are oriented in a way that keeps us perpetually dissatisfied. Moral theology keeps the supernatural end in view, assumes that we can inquire about natural ends and this-worldly goods within our histories and particular cultures, but rejects the attempt to speak about the supernatural end without regard to this-worldly activities. Moral theology focuses on embodiment, and the paradigm is the Eucharist. We worry about theological and moral problems, but we—as a group—are far more uneasy about ideal or disembodied solutions. On our side of the supernatural end, seamless solutions are invariably fractured; yet, well-reasoned solutions we must propose. This tension, I will wager, is why St. Thomas More’s *Utopia* is a work of criticism and satire that seems to satirize itself. For Percy’s Tom More, the diagnostic and therapeutic tool (his Qualitative Quantitative Ontological Lapsometer) promises to bring coherence to life, but does not deliver precisely because it represents mere technique. However, More’s desire for a solution provides a pathway for living and thinking things through among the ruins. Rather than a quick fix, he sees hope in the daily grind. Now the point about our disciplinary make

up: Could it be that we are moral theologians partly because we are sensitive to the fissures of life, cannot help but envision solutions and human healing, and the envisioning (rather than theoretical/technical success) becomes a pathway for working day-to-day as moral theologians?

This envisioning of unity is the topic of the second issue on our spectrum of metaphysics and matter—the theology of the body. Like the “disenchanted” and “disembedded” view of markets, its account of sexual unity will be discussed in order to think about the contours of the discipline. Like the analysis of Novak’s “Catholic Ethic,” a discussion of the theology of the body is intended to be explanatory rather than argumentative. But it will be, no doubt, controversial. The theology of the body started to build momentum in the early 1980s, and it hit the U.S. like a tidal wave at about 2000–2003. However, it is already receding.³⁷ For example, David L. Schindler calls Christopher West’s version of the theology of the body “too much about sex and too romantic.” According to Schindler, West “conceives love in a reductive bodily-sexual sense, then reads the Christian mysteries as though they were somehow ever-greater and more perfect realizations of what he emphasizes as key in our own experience, namely, sex.”³⁸ Schindler’s criticisms are especially noteworthy given that he explains intra-divine relations and the relationship of God in Christ to the world in terms of Hans Urs von Balthasar’s account of nuptiality.³⁹ Criticisms like Schindler’s have come from various quarters, so that the topic of the theology of body is of interest, not in order to argue against it, but to understand why it would not endure among moral theologians.

Christopher West is often singled out for criticism, but West claims only to be developing the thought of John Paul II, particularly his Wednesday addresses given from 1979–1984.⁴⁰ In this exposition, I will follow the analysis of William Mattison, who shows that West develops the theology of the body in ways that depart from John Paul II’s writings but are justifiable inferences within the framework that

³⁷ I put the crest of the wave at George Weigel’s biography of John Paul II, *Witness to Hope* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), and its impact on the beach at the publication of Christopher West’s *Theology of the Body Explained* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2003). The receding of the wave begins, perhaps, with Benedict XVI’s *Deus Caritas Est* (2005). Benedict begins with Eros in relationship to the love of God and manages an entire Encyclical on love without the theology of the body.

³⁸ David L. Schindler, “Christopher West’s Theology of the Body,” *Headline Bistro*, http://www.headlinebistro.com/hb/en/news/west_schindler2.html.

³⁹ David L. Schindler, *Heart of the World, Center of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 237–74.

⁴⁰ John Paul II, *Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1997).

John Paul II (Karol Wojtyła) puts in place.⁴¹ Before outlining Mattison's analysis, it should be noted that Karol Wojtyła, as philosopher and moral theologian, struggles with the more basic issue at hand—the relationship between metaphysics and matter, between objective norms grounded ontologically and “lived experience” as a context of meaning, between norms received in a Thomistic frame and Wojtyła's interest in phenomenology.⁴²

Wojtyła does not arrive, in his own assessment, at a satisfactory unity of objective norms and the lived experience of value.⁴³ This point is certainly not cause for criticism. The fragmentation of metaphysically good and personally/culturally “meaningful” is a basic problem of modern moral thought. With the problem in view, we develop ways to move forward toward unity rather than further fragmentation. For example, Alasdair MacIntyre argues for the concepts of practices and tradition, and for the Aristotelian-Thomist tradition in particular, not because they resolve problems related to the fragmentation of moral reason, but because they best explain that fragmentation and offer the most promising means of moving forward among the ruins.⁴⁴ Wojtyła's means of moving forward is to posit the objective norm as the necessary ground for the lived experience of meaning. One does not first display the norm at its root; rather, one begins with the experiences of human flourishing and posits the root/source of the flourishing. The root, although not grasped at its source by philosophy, is assumed to be integrally and organical-

⁴¹ William C. Mattison III, “When they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given to marriage”: Marriage and Sexuality, Eschatology, and the Nuptial Meaning of the Body in Pope John Paul II's Theology of the Body,” *Sexuality and the U.S. Catholic Church*, ed. Lisa Sowle Cahill, T. Frank Kennedy, and John Garvey (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2006), 32-51.

⁴² Karol Wojtyła, “On the Metaphysical and Phenomenological Basis of the Moral Norm,” *Person and Community*, trans. Theresa Sandok, OSM (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 73-94.

⁴³ Wojtyła, “On the Metaphysical and Phenomenological Basis of the Moral Norm,” 88-93. Consider the discussion of monogamy and indissolubility in marriage in Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, trans. H. T. Willetts (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1981), 211-15. To argue for the indissolubility of marriage, Wojtyła shifts from a phenomenological display of experience to an objective order of principles. Phenomenology is not up to the task. See also Christopher West's treatment of the objective and subjective in *Theology of the Body Explained*, 36; and West's shift from personalism to law in his treatment of divorce in *Good News about Sex and Marriage* (Ann Arbor: Servant Publications, 2000), 60.

⁴⁴ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981) and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990).

ly connected to the experience of value; therefore it is experienced in the experience of what is good.⁴⁵

This phenomenological display of objective norms sets the context for the theology of the body, its internal tensions, and the slippage in its explication by Christopher West. The tension is between phenomenology and a structure of objective norms. The slippage is what Schindler, above, calls a “reductive” sexual account of the body and what William Mattison refers to as a “myopic fixation” on extraordinary sexual experiences.⁴⁶ The slippage occurs when a phenomenological “experience of value” becomes (rather than simply points to) the ontological root of the norm. In the sexual act (penetration and male orgasm), we experience and offer a “total self.” It is the meaning of a lifetime in a single moment. In terms of the ruins put in relief by Walker Percy, the theology of the body resolves the dichotomy of spirit and matter (angelism-bestialism) through a “hyper-enchantment” of the sexual sphere. While Novak’s *The Catholic Ethic* served as counter-example of the moral-theological mode, West’s theology of the body represents internal tensions and temptations of a Catholic imagination.

Mattison develops criticisms of the theology of the body from a variety of angles. However, he emphasizes questions of eschatology; his article is titled, “When they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage.” Eschatology, in moral theology, raises the issues of means and ends in human life, and for this reason, Mattison’s approach offers a general orientation to moral theology (and love) among the ruins. In brief, Mattison shows that the nuptial meaning of the body, for John Paul II, functions on two basic levels that do not require sexual intercourse for their fulfillment. First, there is “the human person’s call to self-giving love found in the communion of persons. Second, persons are embodied as male or female.”⁴⁷ A third level interprets marriage and sex in terms of the first two points. Mattison notes that John Paul II’s is careful to avoid “map[ping] fulfillment of the nuptial meaning of the body directly on to marriage and sex.” He also notes, however, that the Pope does, at points, “move rather cavalierly between appeals to levels two and three.”⁴⁸ Christopher West, then, makes level three (marriage and sex) the foundation of theological anthropology—“as the crux and content of the Christian meaning of life.”⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Wojtyła, “The Problem of Experience in Ethics,” *Person and Community*, 107-128.

⁴⁶ Mattison, “When they rise from the dead...,” 45.

⁴⁷ Mattison, “When they rise from the dead...,” 38.

⁴⁸ Mattison, “When they rise from the dead...,” 38.

⁴⁹ Mattison, “When they rise from the dead...,” 42.

Problems ensue. Mattison points to two main difficulties. The first pertains to the description of the sexual act and to an understanding of the goods of marriage. If Wojtyła's approach to moral norms is to find them within experiences of value, West pushes the point as far as it can go. West goes as far as to claim that the experience of the sexual act contains the entirety of all sexual norms and the meaning of marriage. In contrast, in a typical moral/theological frame, the ongoing marriage—its fidelity, steadfast love, and openness to children—is the context for understanding the/a sexual act. The marriage provides the context. As sacramental embodiment, marriage itself has its context in the Eucharist, where we are conformed to common life in Christ and discover our call to love the world (in a bodily sense, particularly in the works of mercy).⁵⁰ West inverts the relation.⁵¹ Sex becomes the meaning carrying event that accounts fully for the ongoing marriage. Sex is the extraordinary experience—a primordial sacrament—that communicates the full meaning of the ordinary. A second problem follows. To be the full moment of marriage, the sexual act for West, and at times for John Paul II, becomes a return to the prelapsarian unity of human life.⁵² A prelapsarian innocence is preferred over eschatological fulfillment because the eschatological frame puts us *on the way* rather than in a moment of completion. We are on the way to our good end but still incomplete and most often broken. Eschatology, for West, does not allow sex to be elevated high enough (enchanted enough) right now. Ironically, West's idealization of the sexual act gives us very little means to deal with the practical struggles, sin and forgiveness, failures and ongoing conversions of married life.⁵³ Ironically, sexual embodiment is lifted to a level of abstraction—the account of embodiment is disembodied. West's theology of the body frustrates the purpose of moral theology, which, in Walker Percy's phrase, is to bring the spirit down to earth, to inhabit our own flesh and love day-to-day.

Mattison proposes two reasons why a theology of the body would elevate and isolate the sexual act. Both are instructive for moral the-

⁵⁰ David Cloutier and William C. Mattison III, "Bodies Poured Out in Christ: Marriage Beyond the Theology of the Body," *Leaving and Coming Home*, ed., David Cloutier (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), 224.

⁵¹ Cloutier and Mattison, "Bodies Poured Out," 215-22. Cloutier and Mattison point out that Christopher West's theology of the body does not articulate a social mission of the Christian family (223). In other words, he extracts John Paul II's account of marriage and sexuality from the Pope's social and theological frame of *Familiaris consortio* (1980) and his "Letter to Families" (1994).

⁵² David Cloutier, "Composing Love Songs for the Kingdom of God? Creation and Eschatology in Catholic Sexual Ethics," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 24 (2004): 71-88.

⁵³ Mattison, "When they rise from the dead..." 49.

ology. One reason is that “a vision of the human person tightly tied to fulfillment in marriage and sexuality affords the theology of the body an instant credibility in modern Western society preoccupied with sexuality.”⁵⁴ In other words, there is an immediate solution to the fragmentation of life. In a culture focused on the good of sex, West argues that popular notions of sexuality are poor imitations of the real good that we find in the theology of the body. This attempt to meet people where they live and think is certainly a good idea. Part of the discipline of moral theology is to do so with great care. In this regard, Mattison’s accusation is simply that proponents of the theology of the body tend to be careless and cavalier. In his biography of John Paul II, George Weigel calls the theology a “theological time bomb” with “ramifications for all of theology” and perhaps “the history of modern thought.”⁵⁵ It is an affront to Christian theology to say that a phenomenology of sexual relations is going to change everything. Moral theologians are tempted to and suspicious of these kinds of solutions.

The second reason for elevating and isolating the sexual act, according to Mattison, is that a high and weighty view of nuptial union will seal off the joints and seams in normative arguments against non-marital sex, homosexuality, and contraception.⁵⁶ Again, this goal provides cautionary point for moral theologians. There is a temptation to put forward seamless solutions that knock down a long line of issues and arguments like dominoes. In the theology of the body, the meaning of the sexual act is often used as the whole argument on all questions sexual and marital. The move, however, from description to various moral arguments is not seamless. My first encounters with the theology of the body were different from the inferences made by West. But as far as I can tell, they are as consistent as West with John Paul II’s Wednesday addresses. I found the theology of the body in Andrew Greeley and Mary Greeley Durkin’s *How to Save the Catholic Church* (1984) and in a chapter by Mary Aquin O’Neil in Catherine LaCugna’s (ed.) *Freeing Theology* (1993). Greeley and Durkin detach the theology of the body from specific moral/sexual norms, which they claim are secondary. In fact, they claim that a way to save the Catholic Church is to stop focusing primarily on norms and to educate people primarily on a sacramental view of life (and, in this case, of sex).⁵⁷ O’Neil uses John Paul II’s Wednesday addresses to

⁵⁴ Mattison, “‘When they rise from the dead...’,” 40.

⁵⁵ George Weigel, *Witness to Hope*, 343.

⁵⁶ Mattison, “‘When they rise from the dead...’,” 40.

⁵⁷ Andrew M. Greeley and Mary Greeley Durkin, *How to Save the Catholic Church* (New York: Elisabeth Sifton Books/Viking, 1984), 105-29.

undermine arguments against the ordination of women.⁵⁸ Greeley, Durkin, and O'Neil probably do not represent the time bomb that George Weigel was considering. Moral reasoning will not be as seamless as we sometimes hope.

One of the most objectionable aspects of West's theology is that sex seems to work like a magic (enchanted) bullet, both in terms of practical problems in marriage and in terms of moral argumentation. With the magic bullet, West undermines Christian marriage as a way of life that works, by the grace of God, through the puzzlements of human sexuality. West takes one of the more inexplicable things about marriage, asserts a single, definitive meaning, and makes it the center of how he explains marriage as a whole. For this reason, Schindler calls West's theology both romantic and reductive. As romantic, it lifts us out of the everyday world. As reductive, its elevation of our embodiment is narrow. In terms of *Love in the Ruins*, West's theology of the body is a kind of theological lapsometer; it is an easy fix to the divide between spirit and body, metaphysics and matter. After More's apocalypse, when his new life begins, he does not give up on the lapsometer. He still has hope for it, but it is no longer the focus of his struggles or hopes. It no longer sets the context and pathway for the unity of body and spirit. He realizes that he must work things through on the bayou, keeping up a home with his wife and children, with his parish in sharing the Eucharist, and in his office, one patient at a time, day by day.

Tom More's new beginning is suggestive for this new *Journal of Moral Theology*. It is tempting to think about providing a new answer to the ruins, but what the *Journal* needs to be is an ordinary place of conversation, argument, and rigorous thinking. Karol Wojtyła's intuition, cited above, about norms and the roots of experience offers a direction. We reason *to* moral concepts by first of all reasoning *from* them and doing so repeatedly, through trial and error, through practice and amid practices in a variety of contexts and situations. That is to say, moral theology is not simply a reflection on the Christian life and on God in Christ, our hope for the world. Moral theology is also a practice of the moral life. For the "discipline" to be coherent, the practices will have to be formative in a way that forms the virtues of following Christ. Thinking theologically and speculatively about human life is in itself something that needs to be done, and done as a way of life. We moral theologians share this way of life with others but in a more focused, persistent, and plodding way. Hopefully, the

⁵⁸ Mary Aquin O'Neil, "The Mystery of Being Human Together: Anthropology," *Freeing Theology*, ed. Catherine Mowry LaCugna (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 139-60.

Journal of Moral Theology will be persistent and plodding and, by so doing, become a piece of ground along the bayou where we think through the connections and unity of things.

Hütter is right that we need a shared theological mode or paradigm, but he is wrong and precipitous in naming a school. We moral theologians do need to cultivate common modes of reflection and a shared theological imagination. I have taken on Hütter's allusion to Percy's *Love in the Ruins* and have highlighted Tom More's anguish and his struggles amid the ruins of metaphysics and matter. I have done so because, it seems to me, a shared mode of reflection or theological imagination will emerge only through struggling with these deeply rooted problems of modern life. Our task is both speculative and practical. We are trying to account theologically for human embodiment, human ecology and flourishing, and the meaning of things. I have used Greeley's oft cited "Catholic imagination" to suggest that this common mode and set of presumptions ought to be shared also with ordinary Catholic people who live day to day among the ruins. I have used two limit cases, Novak and West, to suggest that there already is, however vague, a common landscape for the discipline. Moral theology is about metaphysics and matter, and I have used the ruins of Percy's Tom More to set the boundaries of the discipline where matter becomes mechanism and where metaphysics coasts above the complexities of our embodiment. Certainly these boundaries are wide; but they provide a place to start. The beginning of the *Journal of Moral Theology* offers no manifesto, but hopefully a venue to think and converse among the ruins in a way "that views the world and all that is in it as enchanted, haunted by the Holy Spirit and the presence of grace." **M**