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CONFESSION: A WAY FOR THE WEAK TO LIVE COURAGEOUSLY IN TRUTH — A PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH

There are people who are strong, or at least seem to be strong. They are examples of integrity, honesty, courage, fidelity and other admirable virtues. Yet they are few and far between while the rest of us are more or less weak. Some of us are rather weak, some simply weak, some pathetically weak. Most of us would like to be strong and courageous but we fail on many accounts. However, the weak always have some opportunities to embrace a fragile form of courage and live in truth. One such opportunity is confession.

This topic can be treated theologically but I would like to stay — somewhat controversially — on the level of philosophical reflection. It is controversial because confession looks like a highly confessional topic. Besides, I take my inspiration from St. Thomas Aquinas' texts on that matter which are decidedly theological. Nonetheless I would like to make three points which taken together might serve as a philosophical apology of the Catholic practice of sacramental confession. In Poland there have been attempts to limit or prohibit this practice for underage believers and this circumstance is one of the triggers for my reflections on this topic. My remarks are not meant to be an answer to these attempts but touch upon a broader human experience.

1. The liberating power of acknowledgement — living the truth of my past

While working on contemporary approaches to courage I was struck how popular is Daniel Putnam's distinction between physical, moral and psychological

courage.[1] Physical courage concerns the fear of death. Moral courage is identical with authenticity, i.e. the courage to be oneself, or a kind of civil stance.[2] And the paradigmatic example of psychological courage is admitting that one has psychological problems and needs some professional help. This distinction is perhaps useful for psychologists and psychoanalysts but it seems rather useless for philosophers. Especially troubling is the limited scope of the moral domain — what kind of moral theory should be embraced to exclude the fear of death from moral domain or the whole sphere of internal admitting of one's problems and their external signaling? And where to place the psychological problem of a disturbingly exaggerated fear of death? Nonetheless we could agree here that to admit one's problems — psychological or moral — and to ask for help may indeed constitute a feeble act of courage. Denial, self-deception, and various forms of escapism are examples of cowardly alternatives. Of course, courageous in a stricter sense might be someone who has no such psychological problems and any need for professional help. Consider, for example, somebody who suffers from almost all possible forms of cowardice in his life. Once he acknowledges that he suffers from that, and asks for help, we can agree that it could be an act of courage yet taken in proportion with the whole life of cowardice, it would be perhaps a promising act of courage but still a small one, a first step to escape from the swamp of cowardice in order to begin the journey to attaining the virtue of courage.

Thomas Aquinas noted that human beings spend most of their lives in error and ignorance.[3] He based this remark on simple human experience but con-

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[1] Cf. D. Putnam, *Psychological Courage*, Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2004. Similarly idem, *Philosophical Roots of the Concept of Courage*, in: *The Psychology Courage: Modern Research on an Ancient Virtue*, edited by Cynthia L.S. Pury, Shane J. Lopez, Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2010, p. 9–22.

[2] Such an identification of moral courage with civil courage can be also found in other studies, for example: S. Osswald, T. Greitemeyer, P. Fisher, D. Frey, *What is Moral Courage? Definition, Explication, and Classification of a Complex Construct*, in: *The Psychology Courage: Modern Research on an Ancient Virtue*, edited by Cynthia L.S. Pury, Shane J. Lopez, Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2010, p. 149–164.

[3] Although Aquinas notes that deception and error is a great part of human misery and because of that all people naturally avoid it ("deceptio autem et error magna pars miseriae est: hoc est enim quod omnes naturaliter fugiunt" — Thomas de Aquino, *Summa contra Gentiles*, III, 39, n. 2170 [edited by P. Marc, C. Pera, P. Caramello, Taurini — Romae: Marietti, 1961]), he nonetheless claims that in fact it can be observed that people can be deceived by themselves and fall in error, and even remain in deception longer than in knowing the truth ("Videmus enim quod homines ex se ipsis decipi et errare possunt … et iterum pluri tempore anima est in deceptione quam in cognitione ueritatis" — idem, *Sentencia libri De anima*, II, 28 [*Opera omnia iussu impensaque Leonis XIII P.M. edita*, vol. 45/1, Roma – Paris: Commissio Leonina – Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin 1984, p. 189, lin. 141–146]).

temporary science seems to roughly agree with him on this point. It will not be a stretch to add that error and ignorance are often accompanied by mistakes in choices, failures in behavior and pitiful conduct.

Each personal past contains many good things which should be acknowledged and for which we are bound to be thankful in order to live in truth. Without due gratefulness for the past benefits one becomes unjust, denies the truth of the past or adulterates it.[4]

Yet each personal past also contains bad things, some of which were our choices or caused by our choices or lack of them, i.e. caused by our negligence. These as well call for our acknowledgement with disapproval and this is also a matter of justice. Even an internal acknowledgement of one's failure may be truly liberating because thereby you have no longer need to feign, pretend or simulate. Simulation would not be problematic if we did not feel embarrassed, degraded, oppressed, smeared by falsehood and artificiality. The acknowledgement would not be liberating if living in truth was not normative. In other words, the experience of liberation which accompanies us once we acknowledge our failure after some time of attempting to hide, cover, or deny it, reveals something of the objective obligation of living in truth. It is better for us to live in truth because it is liberating from sticky falsehood. Yet such an internal acknowledgement with disapproval or displeasure[5] often might be insufficient and too elusive to live the truth of the past — it is rather only the first step. This is especially true when we take into account our social nature, it becomes more evident that in some contexts in order to help ourselves to really live the truth of our past we need to confess externally and sometimes at least try to repay our debts or repair what we have broken. Otherwise, our acknowledgement could be deficient, lacking, fake or hypocritical.

Our past constitutes us in a sense, especially when we identify with it. However, we retain some power to reject, renounce or turn away from certain aspects of our past although not from all of it because there still remains some continuity, memories, habits, or other lingering consequences. Our past can be a good foundation to build the present life but sometimes it is not. Sometimes it needs fixing. Cracks appear in the building of your life, you see the danger that it is going to fall apart or even it already resembles ruins. Confession might help to

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[4] Cf. *ST*, II–II, q. 106. Gratitude is a matter of justice in two senses — in a strict (sometimes even legal) sense when it concerns others and in a moral sense when it concerns the truth of one's own being and condition (then it is closer to the virtue of truth).

[5] "[…] contritio […] nihil aliud est quam displicentia praeteriti peccati." *In Sent.*, IV, d. 17, q. 2, a. 3, qc. 1, corp.

fix the foundations of your life's building so as to avoid the situation that the past holds a binding, burdening, paralyzing or destructive force.

2. The courage to confess and ask for help — facing the truth of my present condition

In human life there are moments when everything within you is in tears, your entire soul melts, all your internal strength disappears. You feel compelled by your experience to admit to yourself in this situation that something went wrong, you don't see any good solution or don't have any reasonable means, and that you simply need help. In such weakness, this admission and request for help might be an act of courage, because there are many handy, seemingly easier alternatives: e.g. thoughtlessness, superficiality, self-deception, duplicity, taking refuge in alcohol, drugs or sex, or falling into despair. These are examples of forceful adversaries of living in truth that need to be overcome in order to enter on the right path, even if or especially when the truth of your present condition is dramatic.

But such moments are usually rare. There are also more numerous and longer moments when the truth of your present condition doesn't seem dramatic. Thus, you don't feel so much compelled by your experience to acknowledge any weakness or failure and there may appear some kind of internal resistance to admit something goes wrong. What causes this resistance? It begins with some form of pride, or a desire to attribute something positive to oneself without sufficient basis. The admission that you have a weakness or have failed in something is contrary to this desire. When such a desire arises unchecked, it creates resistance to acknowledgement, admission, confession, or asking for help. Then the simple truth of your condition seems less compelling than what you want to think. In other terms we could say that this resistance is caused by an exaggerated attachment to some image of myself that is not consistent with what I do and who I am. There are various causes of this false image. There are situations that to some extent this image was once true or at least seemed to be true, but ceases to be true as a result of my choices or other circumstances. There are also various causes why such an exaggerated attachment occurs. For our purposes we do not need to enumerate them here.

Of course it sometimes happens that an exaggeration goes in another direction, when you don't see or you don't want to recognize, acknowledge or admit the truth about what is good in your life, what good things you do or are able to do. This direction is no less false from its opposite.

Aquinas identifies many internal enemies of our living in truth and they are

legion. All of them begin with certain disordered acts which when repeated tend to become vices, bad habits of mind. One of the remedies for this host of enemies is the virtue of penance, called also repentance. Repeating the acts of acknowledging and confessing of one's failures or weaknesses with the intention to amend may lead to gaining a virtue — a good habitual disposition of mind that enhances human life. One of the latest questions written by Thomas Aquinas in his III part of *Summa theologiae* concerns exactly penance understood as a virtue, in distinction from penance understood as a sacrament.[6] This virtue remains hidden from ethicists and moral theologians who content themselves with reading only the second part of Aquinas's *Summa theologiae* considered as the moral part. However, reflections concerning ethics appear also in other parts and the virtue of penance is one of such examples. Why Aquinas did not mention this virtue when he discussed the virtue of justice in the second part even if now he explicitly says that penance as a virtue is a part of justice?[7] Perhaps by the end of his life he remembered that he should add something important or perhaps it was simply convenient to treat this virtue in close relation to the sacrament of penance because of the obvious context of religious practice.

There is a space for choice in acknowledging because from our abundant experience we know well that even in obvious cases we sometimes have great difficulties in acknowledging the truth about ourselves. It happens that exaggerated attachments to particular lesser goods might lead to refusing to admit I did something wrong. In Aquinas's analysis, penance is based on acts of the will — it implies a choice. A habit of choosing according to right reason is called virtue, hence penance understood as a good habit of mind can be called virtue.[8] Right reason indicates 1) what in your past requires your grief and confession, 2) to what extent this grief should be present in your life so as to live in truth, and 3) how to amend. Whatever exceeds right reason in practice in any of these points, cannot be counted as an act of this virtue. In particular it should be noticed that grief is excessive when it destroys its subject or hampers his good functioning.[9] Regret, distress and sorrow because of one's own deeds should

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[6] Cf. *ST*, III, q. 85, a. 1–6 (*De poenitentia secundum quod est virtus*). Aquinas takes it from Peter Lombard that there is a distinct virtue of penance and develops this idea in his own *Commentary* to Lombard's *Sentences* (*In IV Sent*., d. 14, q. 1, a. 1–4; q. 2), as well as in his *Summa*. Cf. M.L. Colish, *Peter Lombard*, vol. 2, Leiden: Brill, 1994, p. 600–601; M.C. Morrow, "Reconnecting Sacrament and Virtue: Penance in Thomas's *Summa Theologiae*," *New Blackfriars* 91 (2010), p. 309.

[7] Cf. ST, III, q. 85, a. 3; *In IV Sent*., d. 14, q. 1, a. 3, qc 1 co.

[8] Cf. *ST*, III, q. 85, a. 1.

[9] "In his autem omnibus debet accipi pro mensura conservatio subiecti et bonae habitudinis sufficientis ad ea quae agenda incumbunt" — *In IV Sent.*, d. 17, q. 2, a. 3, qc. 2 corp.

have some reasonable limits.[10] The virtue of penance is therefore the virtue of deploring reasonably one's moral failures.[11] In other words, it is the virtue of living in truth with one's lamentable past choices.

At the beginning of conscious human life, the use of reason is usually subject to various forms of exaggeration. Hitting in the middle in moral matters, that is to say acting energetically but avoiding exaggeration in one direction or another, is similar to an aquired skill because it comes with practice. Developing right reason can be a tedious process, further slowed by the acquisition of negative tendencies. Sometimes negative tendencies from childhood remain with a person for decades. Therefore, it is crucial to be vigilant in the early years of development to practice good skills so as to acquire steady, reliable tendencies that improve human functioning for the rest of life. These good skills in moral matters are virtues. The virtue of penance is one of these virtues that can be aquired even in childhood or early adolescence. The Catholic practice of sacramental confession can be an exquisite way for young people to aquire this virtue that helps one to live courageously in truth. It is of course a way available to believers but others can practice similar forms of secular confession because living in truth is valuable for everyone. Although it might be easier to begin learning through practice early in life, there is no age treshold beyond which the virtue of penance cannot be aquired.

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[10] Cf. *ST*, III, q. 84, a. 9, ad 3: "ad virtutem pertinet tenere medium in passionibus. Tristitia autem quae in appetitu sensitivo poenitentis consequitur ex displicentia voluntatis, passio quaedam est. Unde moderanda est secundum virtutem; et eius superfluitas est vitiosa: quia inducit in desperationem."

[11] There are, of course, authors who believe that the rationality of regret for one's own actions is in general questionable — cf. for example R. Bittner, "Is It Reasonable to Regret Things One Did?" *Journal of Philosophy* 89 (1992), p. 262–273. This attitude has an ample lineage — for a brief sketch see Jörgen Vijgen, "St. Thomas Aquinas and the Virtuousness of Penance: On the Importance of Aristotle for Catholic Theology," *Nova et Vetera*, English Edition, 13 (2015), p. 601–616. Such skepticism either presupposes a specific understanding of both rationality and affectivity or wrongly identifies the object of regret. Interestingly, Thomas Aquinas responds to a similar objection in *ST*, III, q. 85, a. 1, arg 3: "stultum videtur dolere de commisso praeterito, quod non potest non esse, quod tamen pertinet ad poenitentiam. Ergo poenitentia non est virtus." To which he replies: "dolere de eo quod prius factum est cum hac intentione conandi ad hoc quod factum non fuerit, esset stultum. Hoc autem non intendit poenitens, sed dolor eius est displicentia seu reprobatio facti praeteriti cum intentione removendi sequelam ipsius […]. Et hoc non est stultum" (ad 3; the same argument can be found in *In IV Sent.*, d. 14, q. 1, a. 1, qc 6, arg. 3 and ad 3). For a more nuanced and positive contemporary approach to regret in ethics (with stark criticism of the claims of Bernard Williams on regret) see R.J. Wallace, *The View from Here: On Affirmation, Attachment, and the Limits of Regret*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 15–77, 132–185.

3. Confessing in hope and accepting imperfection — bracing for the truth of my future

It might seem that it doesn't make sense to confess periodically and repeatedly similar things with no discernible improvement. The same internal mechanism emerged in many of us when we learned multiplication table early in our life — at the beginning it seemed impossible to manage it. And yet usually what is needed is only practice and some persistence. Of course useless and fruitless repetition is possible, especially when our willing remains defective. Other rare problems requiring some professional help are also exceptions from this general rule.

There are two extremes in approaching our own imperfections. Desire to be perfect on all accounts seems to be good and commendable. Yet, as almost everything, it may be exaggerated. There are things in us we can change and enhance but there are also limitations we cannot change no matter how much we endeavor.[12] Such limitations call for our acknowledgement and acceptance so as to live in truth.

But acknowledging and accepting our limitations cannot boil down to abandoning all effort so as to avoid frustrations. This method could calm down some frustrations but it brings along other deeper frustrations proper to a dull, shallow, narrow or simply a false life.

In order to be virtuous, confession has to be done in reasonable hope. Confessing without any hope, i.e. without any prospect of amending or correcting one's conduct, could be better than blank denial and could be close to an act of courage but still not courageous enough to be virtuous. On the other hand, confessing without r e a s o n a b l e hope, i.e. with exaggerated expectations and inadequate self-image, is only seemingly better but in a longer term it could be even worse because in the case of future failure, despair tends to strike with a greater force. Reasonable hope contributes to our living in truth. Adequate self-image is both attainable through repeated acts of living in truth (to which confession also belongs) and leading to ever deeper living in truth.

Our past failures call for our acknowledgment, regret and confession but this experience calls also for caution in the future.[13] Some of our bad choices or negligence introduce significant disorder in our mind and debilitate our interior strength in such a way that it is easier to do bad things and we are slower in doing good things.[14] Knowing from experience that the same failures tend to

[12] For some interesting reflections on that matter see C. Calhoun, "On Being Content with Imperfection," *Ethics* 127 (2017), 327–352.

[13] Cf. *In IV Sent.*, d. 14, q. 1, a. 1, qc. 6, ad 4; d. 17, q. 2, a. 2, qc. 4.

[14] Cf. *Summa contra Gentiles*, IV, 72.

repeat themselves it is worth to identify for ourselves an internal obligation to remember[15] about these failures in order to undertake some remedies for these incurred weaknesses and shape future more reasonable choices. There are such failures in our lives that should be kept in our memory even until death.[16]

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Our lives contain things to celebrate and to deplore, to affirm and to reject. People seek ways to deal with their past, with their present unsatisfactory life and with their expectations. Some of them ask psychoanalysts for help. If we agree that it is an act of courage to admit that one has psychological problems and needs some professional help, then consequently we could say that the Catholic practice of confession instills or is an opportunity to develop some kind of courage. The Catholic institutionalized practice of periodic confession of past sins is a response to a deeply rooted human need to live in truth of one's past, present and future. It constitutes also a discreet forum for such interpersonal acknowledgments, confessions and determinations of will to amend, repay or repair. It seems reasonable to engage even young people in this practice in order to develop a good habitual disposition in them, a true virtue of penance, so as to help them to live in truth.

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[15] For Aquinas memory as a virtue is a part of prudence — practical reason would be defective without good memory, see *ST*, II–II, q. 48 and q. 49, a. 1. The same applies to caution, see ibidem, a. 8.

[16] Cf. *ST*, III, q. 84, a. 8–9; *In IV Sent*., d. 17, q. 2, a. 4, qc. 2: although Aquinas approvingly quotes the beatitude of the weeping (*Beati qui lugent* — Matt 5,5), and refers it to the act of the virtue of penance (which is *displicentia quaedam in appetitu rationis*), he adds a warning in reference to the passion of grief: „sicut passio doloris, quam voluntas assumit, debet esse moderate intensa; ita debet moderate durare: ne si nimis duret, homo in desperationem animi et animi pusillanimitatem et huiusmodi vitia labatur."

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Summary

This paper is a philosophical reflection based on Thomas Aquinas's texts on the value of admitting one's failures to oneself and confessing them to others. Under special conditions such admitting and confessing may be helpful in embracing a fragile form of courageous living in truth even with the burden of many miserable deeds. Reflecting on one's own past, present and future can lead to an appreciation of a special habit of mind, a disposition enhancing one's functioning, even a virtue of deploring reasonably one's moral failures. It can be called virtue of penance — a virtue of living in truth with one's lamentable past.

Keywords: confession, living in truth, justice, courage, virtue of penance, Thomas Aquinas

Słowa klucze: wyznawanie win, życie w prawdzie, sprawiedliwość, męstwo, odwaga, cnota pokuty, Tomasz z Akwinu