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The Weight of Love

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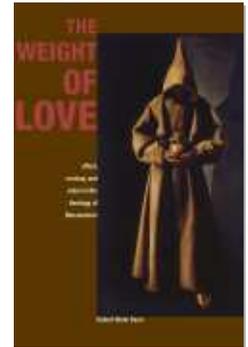
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Affect, Cognition, and the Natural Motion of the Will

As the highest point of the soul and the principle of mystical ascent, the now-obscure concept of “synderesis” provides a focused lens through which to view the interpenetration of scholastic theology and devotional practice. Medieval theologians held sharply divergent theories about the nature and operations of the *apex mentis*, divergences that were implicated in very different approaches to the devotional life and mystical theology. This chapter examines Bonaventure’s account of synderesis as wholly affective, an interpretation that distinguished him from many of his scholastic predecessors and contemporaries and that presents a number of theoretical difficulties. Bonaventure’s account of synderesis reveals the difficulties inherent in attempting to articulate affect as something that is at least theoretically distinct from language, cognition, and judgment. The fact that he attempted it suggests the importance of the distinction between affect and intellect for his understanding of Dionysian mystical theology and the devotional program that it organizes. For Bonaventure, humans’ ability to be restored to their original rectitude and united with God depends on there being an aspect of the soul that desires God (at least theoretically) independently of the mind’s cognitive deliberations.

The emergence in medieval theology of the concept of synderesis—the innate “spark of conscience” by which humans naturally apprehend or desire the good—was both fortuitous and overdetermined.¹ The scholastic debates about synderesis concerned fundamental theological questions about the original constitution of human nature, the corruption of the soul through sin, and the possibility and components of moral action in the state of fallenness. The question of synderesis was essentially the question of how humans were created to seek and to find righteousness. Such questions, of course, exceed the semantic field of the term “synderesis” and predate its emergence. A number of scriptural authorities, for example, refer to some kind of desire for the Good naturally implanted in the soul or to a natural and universal knowledge of the law.² Such ideas inevitably gave rise to speculation about the nature, operations, and limits of these innate endowments.

The converging of these questions around the concept of synderesis, however, appears to have been the result historically of what Jacques de Blic characterizes as a “happy accident.”³ In this case something was gained in the translation of the Greek *syneidesis* (as in, for example, 2 Corinthians 1:12) as *conscientia* in the Latin of the Vulgate, and particularly in Jerome’s discussion of the term in his commentary on Ezekiel. In that commentary, Jerome considers a novel interpretation of the four figures of Ezekiel’s vision (a man or angel, a lion, an ox, and an eagle), which already by the fourth century were commonly understood to refer allegorically to the four Evangelists. He reports that some commentators, “following Plato,” read Ezekiel’s vision as a reference to the *logikon* (the man), *thumikon* (the lion), and *epithumetikon* (the ox)—the rational, irascible, and concupiscible parts of the soul discussed in the fourth book of the *Republic*.⁴ But Jerome is most interested in the way these Platonizing exegetes square the tripartite structure of the soul with the fourfold figure of Ezekiel’s vision by positing a fourth power above the other three:

The Greeks call it *syneidesin*—the spark of conscience [*scintilla conscientiae*], which, even in the sinner Cain, after he was thrown out of paradise, was not extinguished. Through it we feel ourselves to sin [*nos peccare sentimus*] when, deceived by a likeness of reason, we are conquered by pleasures and furor. And they properly consider it to be the eagle, since it is not mixed up with the other three but corrects them when they err. And meanwhile, we read in scriptures that it is called the spirit which “intercedes for us with ineffable groans.” For no one knows [*scit*] what is in human beings except the spirit within them, which Paul,

writing to the Thessalonians, implored them to preserve together with body and soul. And yet, following what is written in Proverbs (“The wicked one esteems it lightly when he goes to the depths of sin”), we can see that in the wicked it falls and loses its place, since they have no embarrassment or shame in their delights, and thus deserve to hear: “Your face has become that of a prostitute, for you do not even know that you should blush.”⁵

This already enigmatic passage, here translated from the modern critical edition, was further complicated for medieval readers by the subsequent fate of Jerome’s text. Medieval manuscripts of Jerome’s commentary rendered the Greek term in question as *synderesis* or *synteresis*. This mistranscription left medieval readers with an entirely unattested term that eventually came to be regarded as distinct from *conscientia*.⁶ The strange term, which Jerome’s commentary furnished with a sequence of interpretive problems, provided a fruitful locus of theological speculation for medieval Christians concerning the extent and nature of sin’s corruption of the soul, the capacity of the soul to recognize this corruption, and the presence in the soul of a motivation for moral action.

In other words, Jerome’s commentary framed for theologians of the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries a nexus of questions about the relations between the intellectual and affective or motive parts of the soul. Jerome describes *synderesis* as that by which humans *feel* shame and embarrassment at their sin. But he also attributes to *synderesis* the power to correct, and calls it the spirit that knows the soul interiorly, suggesting a cognitive or intellectual faculty. Given the ambiguity of the passage on this point, then, it is no surprise that the question of the intellectual or affective nature of *synderesis* produced perhaps the greatest variance of opinion among the theologians and canon lawyers who gave accounts of this obscure concept. Theological reflection on *synderesis* thus generated complex, conflicting, and often highly nuanced explanations of the respective roles of cognition and affect in human beings’ pursuit of the good.

When Bonaventure began lecturing on Peter Lombard’s *Sentences* in 1250 or 1251, a tangle of conflicting opinions on the nature of *synderesis* preceded him. Bonaventure, like several of his Franciscan predecessors at Paris, advances a notion of *synderesis* as a wholly affective and inexorable tendency to motion toward the good. His account stands out in the history of discussions of *synderesis*, however, for the thoroughness of its attempt both to work out the implications of positing such a tendency in the soul and also to account for the relation of this affective capacity to conscience

(*conscientia*), which he places in the cognitive part of the soul. Bonaventure's effort to account for this relationship, I argue, is significant above all for the difficulties he encounters in describing the function of synderesis in deliberative moral action—difficulties that his account does not fully resolve and which I believe echo throughout his later works. In Bonaventure's early account of synderesis, we see the productive tension between the soul's natural and inexorable affective movement toward the good and the circuitous paths traced by the deliberative motions of the soul acting as a whole. It is one of the central arguments of this book that this very tension reverberates throughout Bonaventure's subsequent writings on the spiritual life, and thus constitutes one of the animating forces of Bonaventure's "mystical theology"—that is, his interpretation of the Dionysian ascent to union with God as uniquely revealed through the life of Francis of Assisi.

My focus on the irresolvable difficulties that Bonaventure's account of synderesis produces is not an attempt to find fault, but rather to offer an alternative to the overwhelming emphasis on synthesis and integration as the primary hermeneutic lenses through which Bonaventure has been read by modern theologians and historians. In this vein, Douglas Langston highlights the cooperation and interpenetration of the cognitive and affective to be one of Bonaventure's signal contributions to the medieval theory of conscience and synderesis. "Bonaventure," Langston writes, "while placing synderesis and conscience in different parts of a human being, does not isolate them. On the contrary, he views conscience as driven by synderesis and at the same time directing synderesis."⁷ Langston elaborates this view elsewhere: "Although some might see in this interpenetration of the rational and the affective orders untidiness, in fact it is a sign of sophistication for it escapes the tendency to identify particular human functions with particular parts of the human being."⁸

In regard to Bonaventure's broader aims in delineating the respective functions of conscience and synderesis, Langston's conclusion is entirely convincing and thoroughly supported by Bonaventure's text. Bonaventure does describe the interpenetration and mutual dependence of conscience and synderesis, and he frequently warns against overly reifying the distinctions among the soul's parts.⁹ But despite Bonaventure's emphasis on integration, his attempt to reconcile this interpenetration with Jerome's claim that synderesis is "not mixed up in the errors" of the other faculties results in an ambiguous account of the nature of synderesis and its place and function in the execution of moral acts. How can synderesis be both inextricably involved in the operations of the other powers and remain aloof from their errors?

I am by no means the first to see such enduring tensions and ambiguities in this notion of *synderesis*. In his critical survey of medieval theories of conscience, Timothy Potts concludes that Bonaventure fails to adequately distinguish between conscience and *synderesis*, thereby rendering the latter concept useless as an explanatory mechanism for moral action, and thus unhelpful for a modern analytic approach to conscience.¹⁰ And with regard to Christian conceptions of conscience more generally, Joseph Ratzinger has argued that the distinction between two levels of conscience is vital, but dismisses the particular concept of *synderesis* as “unclear in its exact meaning,” and thus “a hindrance to a careful development of this essential aspect of the whole question of conscience.”¹¹ The target of Ratzinger’s critique is not medieval discussions of *synderesis*, but the modern notion of conscience as “subjective certitude,” which would make the individual infallible.¹² For Ratzinger, what is needed is not a recovery of the medieval concept of *synderesis*, but a new way to articulate the notion of a higher level of conscience, for which he suggests the term *anamnesis*: the innate and universal ability to recognize the truth of authoritative teaching (thus undermining the notion of conscience as a resource for faithful dissent from the magisterium). Significantly, Ratzinger identifies *anamnesis* both as a “primordial knowledge” and as the natural love of God—both cognitive and affective—thereby sidestepping medieval debates about the precise nature of this “spark” in the soul and avoiding the difficulties of maintaining that *synderesis* is wholly affective.

I agree with Potts and Ratzinger that the concept of *synderesis*, especially as articulated by Bonaventure, is an ambiguous one. But I do not agree that this ambiguity is grounds for dismissal. On the contrary, as I will suggest, the difficulties raised by positing an inexorable affective tendency to the good are extremely useful for historians and theologians insofar as they throw into relief some crucial contours of the complex landscape of affectivity in medieval Christian theology and devotion. If there is an enduring obscurity in Bonaventure’s account of *synderesis*, it is not due to the “untidiness” of Bonaventure’s thought, but rather, I will argue, to the very intractability of affect, the limits of reducing it in an account, and the ways in which the distinction between the cognitive and the affective pushes, pulls, and twists (yet never fully breaks) Bonaventure’s theological synthesis.

In this chapter, then, I will trace the distinctive moves by which Bonaventure realigns the commonplace arguments about the nature of *synderesis* with attention to the contexts of that realignment. First, I will examine some of the views of Bonaventure’s immediate predecessors, in

the context of which the novelty of Bonaventure's contribution appears more clearly. Then, I turn to another important context of his treatment of synderesis—his commentary on Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, Book Two, Distinction Thirty-Nine, in which his most extended exploration of the concept occurs. Bonaventure's introduction of synderesis into this context was not original; it was commonplace for lecturers on the *Sentences* to discuss conscience and synderesis at this point. The placement is nevertheless significant: For synderesis, as Bonaventure defines it, echoes and fulfills the main subject of the work that he outlines in his prologue—the original rectitude of human beings lost in the Fall—and thus reveals the crucial significance of synderesis for Bonaventure's larger themes in the commentary. Orienting Bonaventure's discussion of synderesis in this context, then, will in turn set the stage for analysis of how Bonaventure relates synderesis to conscience, and the limits of integration that he encounters in this project.

Background

By the time Bonaventure began lecturing on Lombard's *Sentences* in 1250 or 1251, the main lines of scholastic debate on synderesis and conscience had been drawn. A number of questions, derived from Jerome's commentary, were commonplace in these debates: If synderesis is unerring, is it then extinguished in grave sinners and the damned? What is its relationship to the sin that human beings perform? Insofar as it is good, does it confer merit to the soul? But perhaps the most fundamental question—and one about which no consensus emerged—had to do with its nature: Exactly *what* is synderesis in the soul and “where” does it reside? Writing in the first years of the thirteenth century, Alexander Neckam (d. 1217) surveyed the variety of opinions on this point: Some equate synderesis with Augustine's *ratio superior* (this was the opinion Alexander himself favored), or along similar lines refer to it as the “spark” of superior reason.¹³ But others, Alexander observes, “say that synderesis is a natural affect by which the mind always desires the good and tends to that good whose image it carries in itself.”¹⁴ That is to say, for some, synderesis is a capacity that reveals or illuminates what should be done, while for others, it is the stimulus that motivates action toward the good. Roland of Cremona (d. 1259), first to hold the Dominican chair at Paris, argues that Ezekiel's vision identifies synderesis with the face of the eagle because its function is to *see* or to discern; thus he defines synderesis as an intellectual capacity.¹⁵

More influential, however, were those commentators who saw synderesis as pertaining, in some way, to both the cognitive and affective parts of the soul. In the first extended treatment of conscience and synderesis, Philip the Chancellor (named for the office he held at Notre Dame de Paris from 1217 until his death in 1236) staked out what might be called a moderate voluntarist position on synderesis. Philip defines synderesis as a *potentia habitualis*, a power perfected by a habit, i.e., a capacity of the soul that is naturally informed by a disposition for a particular end.¹⁶ As such, it pertains both to “apprehension” and “desire,” but more properly to desire.¹⁷ Philip is also among the first to distinguish *conscientia* as a distinct phenomenon from synderesis. In earlier treatises, when *conscientia* was mentioned at all, it was used more or less interchangeably with synderesis. But with Philip the two concepts become distinct, even if only partially: Philip defines conscience as the conjunction of synderesis and free choice (*liberum arbitrium*).¹⁸ Philip’s definition of synderesis as a power informed by a habit appears in several subsequent treatments of the subject, as in the *Summa* of Bonaventure’s teacher and predecessor, Alexander of Hales (d. 1245).¹⁹ Alexander attributes synderesis to the cognitive aspect of reason. It is natural rather than deliberative, and belongs to practical reason—that is, reason concerned with moral action. But for Alexander, synderesis can also be called motive, owing to the overlap of the cognitive and motive powers.²⁰ Conscience, too, belongs both to the cognitive and the motive aspects of the soul, and is situated, as it were, below synderesis but above reason.²¹ Thus, Alexander notes, it is not inappropriate simply to call synderesis the higher part of conscience.²² In this way, Alexander’s account proves to be ambiguous. But this ambiguity reflects a concern to avoid drawing the lines between faculties—especially between the cognitive and affective faculties—too sharply.

Like Alexander, Bonaventure’s Franciscan teacher Odo of Rigaud (d. 1275) regards the cognitive and motive parts of the soul as two aspects of reason. Because synderesis belongs to natural reason, he concludes, the name synderesis could be applied, substantially speaking, to a cognitive habit as much as to a motive habit. But more strictly speaking, synderesis names a power of the natural *will* determined to the natural law. And, following Philip’s account, Odo identifies *conscientia* as the conjunction of synderesis with free choice (*liberum arbitrium*). “Whence,” Odo explains, “conscience is related to synderesis and to free choice, so that conscience in acting is, as it were, a medium between knowledge of universals and knowledge of particulars.”²³ As for Alexander, the substantial unity of the

cognitive and affective aspects of reason forbids any absolute distinction between conscience and synderesis. And more significantly, Odo's analogy indicates that synderesis, though properly called motive, still must function as knowledge (of an innate and general kind) in order for conscience to carry out its operation. For Odo, it seems, synderesis supplies the general principles that conscience applies to particular situations. The act of free choice is the result of all of these capacities working in concert. Or, as Odo puts it in another analogy, synderesis is the light that illuminates the vision of conscience.

Each of these authors deserves a more thorough treatment than I can give here. Yet even a brief examination is sufficient to demonstrate that Bonaventure was not the first medieval Christian thinker to suggest some interpenetration between the cognitive and affective components of moral action. Indeed, while he upholds the substantial unity of the intellect and will, Bonaventure, I argue, revises the tradition of Philip the Chancellor—and does so precisely in ways that sharpen rather than attenuate the distinction between the cognitive and judicatory functions of conscience on the one hand and the affective motion of synderesis on the other. This revision testifies not to a gradual ossification of the “faculties” in later thirteenth-century scholastic theology, but instead represents a specific and careful effort by Bonaventure to account for human beings' desire for the Good in ways that do not reduce that desire to a deliberative operation.

In the early years of the thirteenth century, a very different conception of synderesis was elaborated by Thomas Gallus, the Victorine scholar and Dionysian commentator discussed in the previous chapter. As noted by Declan Lawell, who has examined Gallus's use of the term “synderesis” in painstaking detail, “synderesis” appeared in Gallus's writing as early as his 1218 Commentary on Isaiah.²⁴ There Gallus describes synderesis as a power of the soul (*vis animae*) above the sensitive appetites and even above *ratio*. The power of synderesis reaches out for God's grace, which Gallus describes as a “fiery river” that flows into the *affectus* rather than the *intellectus*. In one of his final works, an extended commentary on the Dionysian corpus, Gallus describes the *principalis affectio* of the mind, which, he writes, “exceeds the intellect no less than the intellect exceeds reason, or reason exceeds the imagination.” And this *affectio* is “the spark of synderesis which alone is capable of union with the divine spirit.”²⁵

Gallus's treatment of synderesis ignores many of the questions raised by Jerome's commentary that other masters discussed. But his association of synderesis with the soul's union with God, and his placing of synderesis above *ratio*, exercised a great influence on Bonaventure's discussion of

the term, both in the *Itinerarium* and in the discussion of synderesis and *conscientia* in his *Sentences* commentary. Thus, in the case of Bonaventure, Lawell's caution that Thomas Gallus's unitive sense of synderesis must be "distinguished from the use it acquired in ethics to designate a kind of perception of moral truths or an inclination towards moral goodness" does not apply.²⁶ What is most distinctive about Bonaventure's account is his attempt to integrate Gallus's affective understanding of synderesis into previous debates about the term. For Bonaventure, synderesis as the capacity of the soul to be carried into union with God and synderesis as the infallible inclination towards goodness are one—and thus the latter sense, as I will argue, cannot be understood except with reference to the former. Indeed, the concept of synderesis serves as an index of the ways in which Bonaventure's understanding of natural law and moral action are rooted in a devotional program of affective union. Because the ascent to God is ultimately a passage beyond knowledge, the principle or agent of that ascent must itself exceed knowledge and stand apart from it.

Bonaventure on Conscience

All medieval discussions of synderesis were in some sense a gloss on Jerome's Ezekiel commentary. But for Bonaventure and many of his scholastic contemporaries and predecessors, the concept of synderesis helped to explain a problem posed in the second book of Peter Lombard's *Sentences*. The question Peter frames in the thirty-ninth distinction of that book is how the will, if it is a natural good inhering in the human soul, can ever be called wicked. As Ambrose affirmed in the fourth century, human beings, even while slaves to sin, always will the good by nature. Peter interrogates the sense of nature intended in this affirmation: "For some hold there to be two motions: one by which we will the good naturally. But why 'naturally'? And why is it called 'natural'? Because this was the motion belonging to human nature in its first condition, in which we were created without vice, and which is properly called nature. For humans were created with an upright will."²⁷ And human beings were also endowed with free choice by which they sin, "not by necessity, but by their own will." The will is called a sin, then, according to this view, insofar as it freely chooses an evil act. But as a natural gift it is only and necessarily good, and Peter identifies this aspect with the *scintilla* of Jerome's Ezekiel commentary: "Therefore it is said rightly that human beings naturally will the good, since they were created with a good and upright will. For the superior spark of reason, which, as Jerome said, could not be extinguished even in Cain, always

will the good and hates evil.”²⁸ The will is thus called good because of its natural righteousness, which remains in the soul as the “spark of reason” and which, distinct from free choice, cannot be corrupted.

As Bonaventure glosses it, Peter’s question concerns two issues: the “cause of corruption in the deliberative will” and “the rectitude of the human will as it is moved through the mode of nature.”²⁹ Bonaventure is primarily concerned here with the latter issue—how are human beings created to desire the good naturally? The answer is twofold: through the “natural judge” of conscience and the “spark of reason or conscience” known as *synderesis*.³⁰ Yet in the three articles he devotes to the subject, conscience turns out to be more complex than simply a natural judge. Instead, he defines conscience as a cognitive habit perfecting the practical intellect. Each component of this definition requires elaboration.

The initial question on conscience is devoted primarily to clarifying the first aspect of the definition: whether conscience belongs to the intellect (*intellectus*, or *potentia cognitiva*), or to the affect (*affectus*, *potentia affectiva*, or, sometimes, *pars motiva*). Bonaventure—through the initial supporting arguments or *fundamenta*, and through his own conclusion and response—primarily establishes the cognitive nature of conscience by appeal to its function (*per actum*). Conscience judges, testifies, argues, rules, and directs, and these are clearly cognitive operations.³¹ Further support for this position is found in Ecclesiastes 7, which attributes knowledge to conscience (“Scit conscientia tua, quia et tu crebro maledixisti aliis”). And it is self-evident, according to these initial arguments, that “all knowledge (*scientia*) is from the part of the intellect,” and “all that belongs to conscience is knowledge (*omnis conscientia est scientia*).”³² Thus the noetic nature of conscience is obvious (to a Latin reader) even from the form of the word.

The prefix, however, suggests an important inflection to the kind of knowledge that belongs to conscience. Conscience is not concerned with knowledge in general, but with knowledge directed to works. And so conscience belongs to the practical intellect, which Bonaventure defines as the intellect “as it is joined, in a certain way, to affection and operation.”³³ Accordingly, the “con” of conscience signifies this conjunction, and this practical orientation. It is concerned not with speculative knowledge, such as geometrical principles, but with moral imperatives, such as the honor and obedience due to God and one’s parents. Thus, conscience is distinguished from the affective power not by reason of its object (which is the good, or the performance of good works), but by its function. Still, we should note that Bonaventure’s explanation of this conjunction reflects some concern about the interpenetration of cognition and affect (or intellect and will),

insofar as he is at pains to reaffirm the distinction of the powers: “‘For the speculative and practical intellect are the same power, differing only by extension,’ as the Philosopher [i.e., Aristotle] says. Nor should it in any way be understood that the practical intellect is an appetite or will; even the Philosopher himself denies this.”³⁴

In this way, Bonaventure cites Aristotle in support of an un-Aristotelian scholastic distinction of powers. This ambivalent Aristotelianism is also evident in his characterization of conscience as a *habitus*. By naming conscience a habit, Bonaventure distinguishes it both from a determinate object of knowledge (in this case, the principles of the natural law) and from a power or potentiality of the soul, which is in itself undetermined toward a number of possible objects (and which, therefore, may resolve itself toward right or wrong).³⁵ As a habit, conscience is neither fully determinate nor fully indeterminate. Rather—and in an Aristotelian sense—it is an acquired disposition that informs or “perfects” the practical intellectual power. That is, through the acquisition of good (or bad) conscience, the practical intellect acquires a particular character, a trained readiness to act in a certain way.³⁶ (Analogously, speculative knowledge is a habit that perfects the speculative intellect.) But habits, unlike the principles of the natural law, vary from person to person—a habit can dispose the practical intellect to good works or to sin.

Or at least this is the case insofar as the habit of conscience is acquired through repeated actions and experience (such actions and experience being the source of *habitus* in the Aristotelian sense). Bonaventure recognizes another sense in which conscience inheres as a habit of the intellect, one which he indicates by naming conscience the “natural judge” in the soul. In this sense, the habit of conscience is not acquired but innate and serves as a principle of acts. Thus, Bonaventure’s conception of conscience holds together an Aristotelian understanding of *habitus* with a concept of “natural habit,” which is oxymoronic in the Philosopher’s terms. It is therefore ironic that, again, Bonaventure turns to Aristotle to explain and defend a distinction between the natural and the acquired habits of conscience. Bonaventure regards “the Platonic position [of *anamnesis*] which posits all habits of knowing to be simply innate” as too absurd to be worthy of serious consideration (and refuted both by Aristotle and Augustine).³⁷ He thus attempts to reconcile the notion of a “natural judge” of conscience with the Aristotelian axiom that the soul is created a “blank slate” (*tabulam nudam*). Accordingly, he is not content to conclude, as some have, that the universal principles of good works are known innately and the particular conclusions are acquired. Rather, particular conclusions are indeed the result of

acquisition, but, as Aristotle demonstrated, knowledge of universal principles is also acquired “through the senses, memory, and experience.”³⁸

Yet as Bonaventure explains, knowledge requires both a knowable object and a mediating light by which we judge that object.³⁹ It is this light that is innate and is called a “natural judge.” Thus, there are no innate objects of knowledge, only an innate light, which allows those objects derived from sense and experience to be known. A distinction between universal principles and particular conclusions is still operative here, but it does not correspond neatly to the distinction between innate and acquired conscience. On the one hand, particular conclusions are acquired, for they require some moral education and experience in order to be known. General principles, on the other hand, are both innate and acquired. The general principles (construed as universal tenets of moral action) include, for example, the command to honor one’s father and mother or to treat others as one wishes to be treated. In a sense, these principles are innate to the soul because the natural light of conscience is sufficient to recognize their validity. Yet such principles are not known innately because they are only meaningful if one knows the particular objects (in Bonaventure’s words, the “exterior species”) to which they refer. Until I learn what a “father” or “mother” is, I do not really *know* that I should honor them.⁴⁰ The acquisition of these exterior species occurs through sense perception and experience. Even innate moral knowledge (at least from the perspective of the knowing subject), then, is embodied, temporal, and linguistic.⁴¹

More precisely, all knowledge is acquired to the extent that it becomes present to the soul through conceptual and imaginal representations derived from sense perception (an “abstracted likeness”). But some things, Bonaventure adds, are present to the soul through the soul’s own essence, thereby requiring no exterior species. Concepts like “parent” and “neighbor” depend on sense perception, and therefore the commandments regarding them are, in a way, acquired. God, on the other hand, “is not known through a likeness received by the senses,” but through a knowledge naturally and essentially present to the soul. Thus, we know to love and to fear God (*Deum amare et Deum timere*) with a truly innate understanding because “human beings know what love and fear are not through a likeness accepted exteriorly, but through essence. For in this way, affects are in the soul essentially.”⁴² This kind of knowledge, then, is innate to the soul for two reasons: because it pertains to God and because it is affective. The knowledge of God to which Bonaventure refers here is not a discursive (much less exhaustive) understanding of God’s attributes, but simple infinitives—to *love* and to *fear* God.

The innate, affective disposition of the soul toward God demarcates a sphere of absolute interiority, of a strictly *essential* ineffability. In itself, free from the contingencies of sense perception to which all other knowledge is subject, this affective knowledge (if that word is still appropriate here) can only be represented or made known by a betrayal of that interiority into exterior species. The only knowledge that is entirely natural to the soul is not really knowledge at all but an immediate and interior affective relationship to God. With respect to these affective dispositions, Bonaventure concludes, conscience is a simply innate habit. Yet an innate affective orientation to God is *also* how Bonaventure characterizes synderesis.⁴³ One might be tempted to see here, then, nothing more than a blurring of the distinction between conscience and synderesis. But it is not simply a matter of imprecision: Bonaventure has, after all, drawn very clearly the line between the truly innate love of God and those modes of conscience characterized by knowledge obtained through external species. Rather, insofar as conscience names a truly and simply innate habit, it proves indistinguishable from synderesis. Synderesis, then, would be the interiority of conscience, or its secret, the absolute limit of its representability to itself.⁴⁴

Bonaventure on Synderesis

If the soul's innate love of God is thus set apart in the soul, what practical effect can it have on concrete moral action? This is the problem to which Bonaventure turns in his discussion of synderesis—one that, I argue, he cannot fully resolve given the heterogeneity of the affective orientation toward God and the operations of the practical intellect. Bonaventure acknowledges the difficulty of determining the best way of distinguishing synderesis from the other powers.⁴⁵ Some have said that conscience is the habit that orients the power of synderesis toward the object of the natural law. Synderesis would then be the superior portion of reason directing the inferior powers in the performance of the law. Bonaventure sees no problem with this scheme *per se*, but it contradicts Jerome's claim that synderesis is not mixed up in the errors of the other powers. The proper way of speaking must, then, render synderesis more autonomous, or more aloof, with respect to the fallible power of cognition.

More to the point, Bonaventure surmises that if synderesis were simply a knowledge of the natural law (for example, a knowledge of the universal principles of the law), then one would still have to posit some further motivation to follow the law. As Douglas Langston rightly observes, in

Bonaventure's terms, a purely cognitive theory of moral action could provide no explanation for why human beings should follow, rather than disregard, the principles of the law. Only a motive cause could provide that explanation: "It is part of Bonaventure's achievement to see that the goal which justifies our following first principles must be found outside the rational order, viz., in the affective order."⁴⁶ On the face of it, however, this solution remains tautological (we are motivated to the good by our motivation to the good). To have any explanatory value, Bonaventure must account for the role this natural motivation plays in the discernment of and concrete action towards the good. And at the heart of this task lies a basic dilemma, of which Bonaventure was certainly aware: How can synderesis be utterly infallible if it is efficaciously involved in fallible human desire and action?

After considering several unsatisfactory opinions about the "place" of synderesis in the soul, Bonaventure then offers a definition of synderesis as the "weight of the will [*pondus voluntatis*], or the will with that weight, insofar as it inclines to the noble good [*bonum honestum*]."⁴⁷ In the next chapter, I explore the significance of Bonaventure's use of the term "weight" in this connection. But the explicit point to be made here is that Bonaventure's definition works to restrict the goal of synderesis to the noble good (*bonum honestum*). Corresponding to the distinction between speculative and practical knowledge in the intellect, the things that the affect desires are of two genera: the noble and the pleasing. Those things belonging to the latter type (*in genere commodi*) are not intrinsically and universally good, though they may represent a genuine good to the one desiring them (such as food and drink). Synderesis refers, by contrast, to the affective power insofar as it desires the noble good of the natural law—the obedience due to God and the respect due to one's neighbor. Further, synderesis may be distinguished from the desirous powers of the soul more generally by its movement. The rational, concupiscible, and irascible powers are either moved naturally or deliberately, while "synderesis names the affective power as it is moved naturally and rightly."⁴⁸ In this way, Bonaventure sets the natural rectitude of synderesis in opposition to deliberative movement. To move deliberately, for Bonaventure, means to act in accordance with free choice (*liberum arbitrium*), which involves the cognitive and affective powers working together.⁴⁹ If "free choice" names the deliberative (and fallible) movement of the will in conjunction with the intellect, then "synderesis" refers to the will's natural (and thus infallible) motion—that is, the affective power insofar as it can be considered distinct from the operations

of the cognitive faculty. “And this is why synderesis,” the eagle of Ezekiel’s vision, “is said to soar above the others.”⁵⁰

Only in terms of movement, and not in essence, then, is synderesis distinguished from the rational, concupiscible, and irascible affective powers. Furthermore, it shares with these other powers its essential functions—and in this way, too, synderesis is to be distinguished from the cognitive functions of conscience. Corresponding to the concupiscible and irascible powers, the functions of synderesis are to desire (*appetit*) the noble good and to flee (*refugit*) evil (that is, to feel remorse over sin). Synderesis moves and inclines the soul; without it, the directives of conscience could never be translated into action. Moral action requires, then, some cooperation between synderesis and conscience, in the same way that action generally requires the interpenetration of cognitive and affective functions: “Just as reason is not able to move without the will mediating, so neither can conscience move without synderesis mediating.”⁵¹ This is why synderesis is called the “spark” or stimulus of conscience. Moral action requires the integration of synderesis and conscience. But this integration produces certain conceptual problems. If the conjunction of reason and will is deliberative action, in what sense can the motion of synderesis still be called natural when it is working in conjunction with conscience and is dependent on its cognitive judgments? And in what sense can it be called infallible if it is involved with the fallible actions of human beings?

Bonaventure considers these problems at length, according to the terms set by Jerome’s commentary, by way of two questions. First, can synderesis be extinguished through sin? That is, can the soul be so corrupted that synderesis no longer has any effect? And second, can synderesis *itself* be corrupted (*depravari*) by sin or “lose its place,” so that it desires evil instead of good? To the first question, Bonaventure responds that synderesis cannot be extinguished totally (as Jerome wrote, “not even in Cain”). Because synderesis is natural to human beings, its removal would constitute a change in human nature, which, as divinely instituted, sin can never effect.

Yet with respect to the act of synderesis, three vices can interfere: blindness, lasciviousness, and obstinacy. The last case refers to the damned, who, Bonaventure maintains, still possess synderesis but are so confirmed in their wickedness that it no longer inclines them to the good. In the damned, synderesis marks the site of a punitive and unredeeming sorrow over sin. The other two vices are found among the living. One’s lust for carnal pleasure can be so powerful that it drowns out the murmuring and remorse of synderesis. The darkness of blindness, similarly, can impede

synderesis from murmuring against evil, “because the evil is believed to be good.”⁵² Here, it appears, an error of *judgment* causes the function of synderesis to go awry. Though it continues to stimulate the soul toward the good, it cannot murmur against evil because that evil is misidentified as the good. Thus, it would seem, not only is synderesis impeded, but it is stimulating the pursuit of evil, insofar as it inclines toward an evil end which is wrongly identified as good.

The problem may seem abstract, but it raises serious practical and theoretical problems when one considers, as Bonaventure does, the case of heretics, “who, dying for the impiety of their errors, believe that they are dying for the piety of their faith. And therefore they feel no remorse, but in fact feel a false and vain joy.”⁵³ Heretics, no doubt, are in error, but are they right to pursue the wrong good? According to Bonaventure’s understanding of conscience, they are not. Such people are guilty of an “erroneous conscience,” a culpable bad *habitus* developed through a long history of sinful actions, and thus are accountable for their bad consciences—and morally bound to correct them.⁵⁴ But what about synderesis? Is it right in inclining the soul even if, due to a cognitive error, its inclination is, in fact, directed toward evil? Heretics do not necessarily pose a threat to the understanding of synderesis as inextinguishable. After all, as Bonaventure notes, being wrong about one important thing does not preclude being right about many other smaller issues: Thus, synderesis in heretics “does not carry out the function of murmuring against the errors because of which they are killed. Yet it is not extinguished, because it murmurs against other evils . . .”

This show of fair-mindedness toward heretics on Bonaventure’s part is primarily in service of a theoretical point—synderesis is not extinguished so long as *some* aspect of its operation is carried out, even if it is partially impeded from time to time. This seems sufficiently clear in itself, and it is therefore curious that Bonaventure presses the example of heretics further than would appear necessary to make his point. That is, he goes on to contend that synderesis is not extinguished in heretics, in spite of their confusion of good and evil, not only because it murmurs against other evils, but also because it murmurs “against that which the heretics believe to be evil.”⁵⁵ With this clause, then, Bonaventure appears to affirm the dependence of the natural movement of synderesis on a deliberative judgment of reason.

On one level, this dependence would seem to be inevitable. How, after all, can synderesis move toward the good and flee evil unless the soul has some understanding (whether correct or incorrect) of what that good

and evil are? If synderesis is an act of the affective part of the soul, then it must be preceded by cognition because, as Bonaventure affirms repeatedly, intellect precedes affect.⁵⁶ This axiom in itself does not jeopardize the infallibility of synderesis, which Bonaventure understands to follow the innate aspect of conscience as natural *lumen* of the practical intellect, prior to an act of deliberative reason.⁵⁷ Understood in this way, synderesis's dependence on conscience would precede the introduction of any possibility of error. That is, synderesis follows the natural light of conscience as it is truly innate, not as it is informed by the external species abstracted from sense perception. And thus, synderesis must not be dependent on actual knowledge. Yet the example of heretics is problematic from this standpoint. There a judgment regarding evil (undoubtedly deliberative because erroneous) directs or determines the course of synderesis. Synderesis, in turn, is in some way misled by reason, even if it is not held to be culpable for that error.

Note, however, that despite Bonaventure's frequent use of language of priority and precedence, it is clear that he is not offering a temporal account of the soul's operations. A concrete act is, after all, not the final outcome in a temporal chain, but the sum of all the soul's powers acting in concert. Yet especially in matters of rectitude and error, it is important for Bonaventure to distinguish the various operations of the soul—and in doing so he relies, even more than on temporal metaphors, on a topography of the soul, delineating spheres of operation within a hierarchy of the soul's powers. If this topographical language is not strictly literal, since the soul is not localized, it is nevertheless indispensable to the distinctions Bonaventure draws and, especially, to the account of synderesis that he gives.

To further clarify synderesis's relation to sin, Bonaventure distinguishes between synderesis itself, which is incorruptible, and its dominion in the soul, which can be compromised through the sins of the inferior powers. Repeating a common analogy for synderesis, Bonaventure compares it to "a knight who, in himself, always sits well on his horse, but when his horse falls, he is said to have fallen too."⁵⁸ Thus, reason (through cognitive error) and will (through obstinacy) can resist the promptings of synderesis. The distinction between the act of synderesis and the resistance of the other powers depends on a hierarchical scheme that protects the superior from the deficiencies of the inferior, while allowing for the interpenetration that makes a concrete action possible.

The hierarchical scheme, however, is simply one spatial logic that Bonaventure offers to explain the place of synderesis, and it stands in tension with other analogies he draws, such as the comparison of synderesis to

the bodily organ of sight. Just as the eye itself remains faultless when it is used to take in an illicit sight, so too does synderesis remain free from sin even when its inclinations are carried through to wicked ends.⁵⁹ Bonaventure hesitates over this analogy, however, because it implies that synderesis is subject to the deliberative movement of free choice—that which synderesis is supposed to “soar above.” As he affirms, “synderesis, since it is a natural power and is moved naturally, is not subject to the rule of free choice. And therefore it does not follow that free choice can misuse it.”⁶⁰ The analogy to the eye, then, is a hedging of analytical bets: “Moreover, even if free choice is able to misuse synderesis, it does not follow that there is sin in synderesis.”⁶¹ Just as the body is not morally accountable for the sins of the soul, so synderesis is not corrupted by the deprivations of free choice. Thus even if synderesis can be moved in the service of a deliberative error (as seems to be the case with heretics who believe themselves to be martyrs), still it is not, strictly speaking, the subject of that error.

What accounts for this persistent ambiguity in the relation between synderesis and free choice—that is, between the natural and deliberative motions of the will? One factor, perhaps, is that Bonaventure seems to hold little esteem for the practical value of such speculative discussions. He prefaces a discussion of the substantial unity of reason and will, for example, with the caveat that the issue is more a matter of curiosity than utility—one’s moral and spiritual life simply does not depend on getting it right.⁶²

Additionally, the ambiguity regarding synderesis may be traced back to a more fundamental ambiguity, one previously encountered in the discussion of the innate and acquired aspects of conscience. The fact that *all* actual knowledge is acquired—that is, informed by the species of things derived from sense—means, as Potts argues, that practically speaking, Bonaventure provides no criterion with which to distinguish categorically our knowledge of the universal principles of the law (which are certain) from our particular conclusions (which can be erroneous). Bonaventure recurs to this uncertain distinction in responding to the objection that, since conscience can be right or wrong, so too can synderesis, since it “follows conscience as its natural judge.”⁶³ He explains that “conscience, insofar as it remains in the universal and is moved by a simple aspect, is always right. But as it descends to particulars and connects them, it is able to be mistaken, on account of the fact that it is mixed up with the act of deliberative reason.”⁶⁴ It is thus only with respect to universals that synderesis can be said to follow conscience because synderesis is “moved not against this or that evil thing, but against evil in universals. Or, if synderesis is in

some way inclined to detest this or that evil thing, it is not insofar as it is a this or that, but insofar as it is evil.”⁶⁵ Again, the ambiguity between the universal and the particular prevents a univocal determination as to the precise domain of synderesis. A further example provided by Bonaventure offers little clarification:

Even the conscience of the Jews, by the original natural command, dictates that God is to be obeyed. And they assume still that God now commands circumcision and discretion in food. And from this their conscience is formed in particular to circumcise themselves and to abstain from food. The error does not come from the first principle, which was certainly true, but comes from an assumption which does not issue from conscience insofar as it is a natural judge, but rather from an error of reason.⁶⁶

The command to obey God is truly innate to the soul, prior to any information by sense perception or language. But the attempt to define what it means to obey God requires the operation of reason and thus introduces the possibility of error. Thus synderesis cannot be held to “descend” with conscience to particulars. But does this mean that synderesis has no place in the carrying out of universal commands? Perhaps, or perhaps not: Synderesis may move toward good and detest evil not only in universals, but also insofar as those universals exist (universally) in particular beings and acts. What is certain, and apparently the crucial point to get right, is that “synderesis does not deviate (*obliquatur*) as conscience errs (*errat*)”⁶⁷; rather, “synderesis is always right (*recta*), but conscience can be right or wrong.”⁶⁸

Despite Bonaventure’s agnosticism on many aspects of synderesis and its relationship to the other powers, two points appear to be fundamental: Synderesis is always right, and synderesis is wholly affective. The conceptual difficulties that arise in maintaining the former proposition in relation to the deliberative action of the soul, I contend, help to explain the emphasis Bonaventure places on the latter. The distinction between universals and particulars, both in relation to conscience and to synderesis, proves to be too ambiguous and too porous to secure the place of rectitude in the soul, and to keep synderesis free, as it were, from the imputation of error. But synderesis is always right *only insofar as it is heterogeneous to the order of cognition*. Rectitude in synderesis means something very different from rectitude in conscience. The rectitude of synderesis is not a question of right belief or correct knowledge—its object is not truth but the good, and its operation is not the apprehension of the good but the simple move-

ment toward it. Thus its rectitude consists not in knowledge but, like the rider on his horse, in its posture, its place, the straightness of its motion. However interdependent with conscience it may be in the functioning of the practical intellect, *synderesis*, in itself, remains set apart from cognition in the soul.

What, then, of the rectitude of conscience? Perhaps it is better to say that the crucial distinction between the natural and the deliberative is more fundamental than that between the cognitive and the affective. Indeed, Bonaventure makes a place for inerrancy in conscience insofar as it is innate. Yet the only truly innate aspects of conscience that Bonaventure mentions—to love and to fear God—are themselves affections, which, Bonaventure explains, are truly present to the soul prior to and apart from the intrusion of knowledge acquired exteriorly. The natural, the affective, and the infallible converge in his account at a point that can never be translated into concrete knowledge without breaking it apart—a pure interiority that, as such, never betrays its mute allegiance to the good.

In a gesture that appears to anticipate the analysis of Husserl's *Logical Investigations*, Bonaventure establishes *synderesis* as a (non)space of pure interiority as the exclusion of exterior species, prior to and uninterrupted by representation. And yet, in Bonaventure's attempts to represent this pure interiority, a strange reversal or torsion occurs—the innermost becomes ecstatic, a curiously alien force acting upon the soul. More intimate than knowledge and prior to language, *synderesis* is the "spirit which *intercedes* with ineffable sighs."⁶⁹ It is not a light but the "weight" and "heat" of the soul, carrying the soul inexorably to its end. The innate affective motion to God, more interior than the structures of discursive knowledge, is also ecstatic, standing outside those structures. As an interiority that exceeds and eludes the order of reason and the logic of cognition, *synderesis* conforms itself instead, perversely, to the dynamics of embodied movement. The goal of the next three chapters is to elucidate those embodied dynamics of the natural *affectus*, tracing at the same time this torsion of interiority and exteriority that manifests itself most spectacularly in the body of Francis, as it is shaped and inscribed in Bonaventure's account.