New Blackfriars (2026), **107**, 273–286
doi:10.1017/nbf.2025.10128

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

ARTICLE

The Creative Role of Virtue in Conscientious Objection: A Thomistic Perspective

Jaime Hernandez Ojeda

School of Theology, Department of Moral Theology, Pontifical University of the Holy Cross, Rome, Italy
Email: jaheroj@gmail.com

(Received 3 September 2025; revised 20 October 2025; accepted 27 October 2025)

Abstract

Recent debates in moral philosophy have placed significant emphasis on personal conscience, often elevating individual autonomy above all other considerations. This overemphasis has paradoxically led to the suppression of another's conscience in situations where two moral agents must act together toward a shared goal, as in the physician–patient relationship. Critics of conscientious objection argue that recognizing its legitimacy fosters moral relativism or subjectivism. How, then, can conscience be properly formed and understood in a way that safeguards against relativism while upholding its rightful role in conscientious objection? This article argues that Aquinas's integration of natural moral law, conscience, prudence, and virtue offers the most coherent and original framework for addressing these challenges. By grounding conscience in truth and sustaining it through virtue, Aquinas provides a robust basis for defending conscientious objection while safeguarding human dignity and moral integrity. While primarily theoretical, this study also draws practical implications for healthcare and institutional ethics, showing how a Thomistic understanding of virtue and conscience can inform dialogue and policy in pluralistic contexts.

Keywords: conscience; conscientious objection; natural law; prudence; virtue ethics

1. Introduction: the autonomy trap and the question of conscience

Contemporary debates on conscientious objection in healthcare have often polarized around two extremes: the defense of individual moral integrity and the subordination of conscience to professional or institutional mandates. This article focuses specifically on conscientious objection within the modern clinical context, particularly in physician–patient encounters. While conscientious objection also arises in other domains – such as military conscription – those cases are beyond the scope of the present analysis.

Philosophers such as Giubilini and Savulescu argue that conscience cannot justifiably override patient autonomy or professional duty,[1] while others such as Sulmasy,

[1]Alberto Giubilini and Julian Savulescu, 'Guest editorial: conscientious objection in healthcare: problems and perspectives', *Camb Q Healthc Ethics,* 26 (2017), 3–5.

© The Author(s), 2025. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2025.10128 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Pellegrino, and Wicclair emphasize conscience as integral to moral integrity and the humane practice of medicine.[2] Yet, the existing literature often lacks a metaphysical account capable of grounding conscience in objective moral truth.

This paper addresses that gap by asking a theoretical question with practical implications: Can conscientious objection be coherently justified within a realist moral framework that preserves both truth and freedom? In modern healthcare – often structured by liberal and market-oriented assumptions that frame medical care as a service to be delivered on demand – moral conflict tends to arise not merely from competing consciences but from a reductive understanding of moral integrity that risks reducing the physician's moral agency to a secondary consideration.

On the other hand, recent debates in moral philosophy have elevated moral agency to a notion of autonomy understood as subjective preference.[3] While respect for autonomy is crucial in safeguarding human dignity, its overextension has produced paradoxical effects – especially in medical ethics, where physicians are often compelled to suppress their own moral convictions in order to honor unlimited patient choice.[4] In such cases, one conscience is protected only by silencing another. This reveals what might be called the 'autonomy trap': the tendency to absolutize individual autonomy in a way that undermines the very freedom it seeks to defend.

The consequences are evident in bioethical debates over abortion, euthanasia, and assisted reproductive technologies. In some jurisdictions, legal frameworks that privilege patient autonomy require physicians to either provide or refer for procedures they consider morally objectionable.[5] Here, the physician is told that to act on conscience is to impose personal values on another; yet paradoxically, the patient's autonomy is upheld by nullifying the physician's. The rhetoric of freedom thus becomes a tool for coercion.

Critics of conscientious objection argue that appeals to conscience cannot be justified without endorsing moral relativism or subjectivism.[6] But this objection assumes what it denies – that conscience is merely the expression of subjective preference. It ignores the possibility that conscience is an act of reason, ordered to truth. If two opposing moral systems can both be valid, then the same act could be simultaneously right and wrong – an incoherent position. Even the most pluralistic societies tacitly reject such relativism: no serious ethicist would affirm that genocide is morally right in one culture and wrong in another. The very possibility of moral discourse presupposes an order of truth against which conscience must be measured.

[2]Daniel Sulmasy, *The Healer's Calling: A Spirituality for Physicians and Other Health Care Professionals* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997). Mark Wicclair, *Conscientious Objection in Health Care: An Ethical Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). Edmund Pellegrino, 'The Moral Foundations of the Patient-Physician Relationship', *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy,* 18, 4 (1993), 371–379.

[3]Cf. John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor,* n. 32–35.

[4]Alberto Giubilini and Julian Savulescu, 'Guest editorial: conscientious objection in healthcare: problems and perspectives', *Camb Q Healthc Ethics,* 26 (2017), 3–5.

[5]Rafael Navarro-Valls and Javier Martínez-Torrón J. *Conflictos entre conciencia y ley,* (Madrid: Iustel; 2011), pp. 35–72.

[6]Alberto Giubilini, 'The paradox of conscientious objection and the anemic concept of conscience: downplaying the role of moral integrity in health care', *Kennedy Inst Ethics J,* 24 (2014), 59–185.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2025.10128 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Here, autonomy is not used in the Kantian sense of self-legislation independent of the good, but in the Thomistic sense of rational self-governance ordered toward truth.[7] In this view, autonomy finds fulfillment not in self-assertion but in moral integrity – the freedom to act according to what is true and good. By grounding conscience in natural law and integrating it with the virtues, conscience is not a sovereign voice of the self, but reason's witness to the moral order.[8] In this framework, conscientious objection is not a private exemption from public duty, but a rational judgment that certain actions contradict human dignity and therefore cannot be chosen.

This Thomistic starting point reframes the autonomy trap: genuine freedom does not consist in protecting one person's choice at the expense of another's, but in safeguarding every conscience as a witness to the truth. To escape this trap, we need a clearer account of what conscience actually is – and what it is not. Only then can its authority be defended against relativism.

2. What conscience really is (and what it's not)

A proper account of conscience is essential for understanding why conscientious objection cannot be reduced to personal preference or subjective autonomy – especially in the medical context, where moral judgment guides action under conditions of real responsibility.

The pursuit of moral understanding begins with the recognition that human beings, through reason and experience, can discern good ends and the actions that lead to them. This discernment is not automatic but cultivated – through education, the influence of just laws, imitation of the wise, and the moral habits that gradually form character.[9] At its core, moral knowledge is the fruit of both rational insight and virtuous disposition.

Classical philosophy already recognized this capacity.[10] Aristotle, for example, held that within human reason lie the seeds of virtue, potentialities that must be developed in order to deliberate and act well.[11] Aquinas refines this insight through his distinction between synderesis and conscience.[12] Synderesis is the natural habit of practical reason by which the intellect spontaneously grasps the first principles of moral law: do good and avoid evil. These principles are universal, infallible, and provide the foundation for all moral reflection. Conscience, by contrast, is the act of applying these principles to particular situations. Unlike synderesis, it is fallible, because human reasoning can misapply or distort moral truth.

[7]Cf. Thomas Aquimas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q.79, a.13; I–II, q.19, a.5. See also Servais Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1995), pp. 27–335.

[8]Cf. Servais Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1995), pp. 327–335.

[9]Giacomo S. Lodovici, *La coscienza del bene: La voce etica interiore, le sue deroghe alle norme, l'imputabilità morale, l'obiezione alle leggi* (Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2020), pp. 53–60

[10]Julia Annas, *The Moral of Happiness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 186–219.

[11]Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, n. 1144a, pp. 25–30.

[12]Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *De Veritate,* q. 16; *Summa Theologiae* I, q.79, a.12–13; I–II, q.94, a.2. See also Servais Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics* (Washington, D.C.: CUA Press, 1995), pp. 327–330; Martin Rhonheimer, *Practical Reason and the Foundations of Ethics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), pp. 75–85.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2025.10128 Published online by Cambridge University Press

This distinction is crucial. Many modern accounts of conscience collapse the two together, treating conscience as if it were an innate source of moral truth or intuition. From Shaftesbury and Hume through to contemporary subjectivist theories, conscience has often been described as a kind of moral sense or inner feeling of approval and disapproval.[13] But if conscience is equated with intuition, then sincerely held but immoral convictions – racism, sexism, or other forms of prejudice – would demand respect merely because they are 'conscientious'. Such an account ultimately undermines moral authority by detaching it from truth.

Aquinas avoids this trap. For him, conscience has dignity not because it is infallible, but because it binds us to act according to our best judgment of truth.[14] Even when conscience errs, it presupposes an objective moral order to which it seeks fidelity. In this sense, conscience is best understood not as a sovereign voice of authenticity, but as what Leo Elders calls a 'normed norm'[15]: a judgment of reason accountable to a higher law, namely the eternal law of God inscribed in creation.

This Thomistic insight allows us to distinguish an erroneous conscience from a counterfeit one. An erroneous conscience still acknowledges the existence of a moral order, even if it misjudges it; a counterfeit conscience, by contrast, denies any order beyond the self and treats authenticity of feeling as sufficient justification.[16] Only the former can rightly be called conscience at all.

Understanding conscience in this way has practical consequences. It shows why conscientious objection is not reducible to personal preference. When a physician refuses to participate in euthanasia or abortion, the objection is not based on sentiment, but on the rational application of moral first principles to concrete actions. Conscience here functions as an inner tribunal, judging whether the act accords with the dignity of human life. Such judgments may be fallible, but they are never arbitrary. They participate in the universal capacity of reason to discern good from evil, rooted in synderesis.

Conscience, then, is a rational judgment that can bind, mislead, or even be corrected. It is not a self-sufficient source of moral truth, but an act that witnesses to the truth inscribed in human nature. This perspective prevents both the collapse into relativism and the idolatry of autonomy, and explains why conscientious objection must be evaluated according to truth rather than merely protected as an expression of authenticity. Yet conscience alone is not enough. Even when it recognizes truth, the question remains: how is this truth translated into action? Here prudence enters the picture.

[13]See Anthony Ashley Cooper, 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury, *An Inquiry Concerning Virtue, or Merit* (1699), II.i; David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, III.i.2, and *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751), I. For discussion of the moral sense tradition, see Stephen Darwall, *The British Moralists and the Internal 'Ought'* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995), chs. 4–5; Michael B. Gill, *The British Moralists on Human Nature and the Birth of Secular Ethics* (Cambridge: CUP, 2006).

[14]Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *De Veritate* q.17, a.1; *Summa Theologiae* I, q.79, a.13; I–II, q.19, a.5–6.

[15]Leo J. Elders, *The Ethics of St. Thomas Aquinas: Happiness, Natural Law and the Virtues* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2003), p. 84.

[16]Reinhard Hütter, *Bound for Beatitude: a Thomistic Study in Eschatology and Ethics* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2019), p. 169.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2025.10128 Published online by Cambridge University Press

3. From intention to action: how conscience and prudence work together

For conscientious objection to be morally credible and not merely subjective refusal, it must arise not only from a judgment of conscience but from the virtue of prudence, which governs how truth is enacted in concrete situations. In healthcare, this distinction is decisive: it separates principled objection from mere resistance or preference.

If conscience is the rational judgment that measures an action against moral truth, prudence is the virtue that ensures this judgment is effectively carried out. Aquinas calls prudence the 'right reason in action': it does not invent moral norms, but guides the will to apply them rightly in concrete situations.[17] Without conscience, we would lack the capacity to judge whether an action is good or evil. Without prudence, even correct judgments would fail to be translated into consistent and excellent action.

Aquinas's analysis of moral agency shows how the two interact.[18] Every human act unfolds in stages: intention, deliberation, decision, and execution. Conscience is involved above all in identifying whether an action conforms to moral law; prudence, by contrast, is operative at every stage, shaping intention, weighing alternatives, commanding choice, and guiding execution. The result is that conscience supplies moral orientation, while prudence provides the art of bringing that orientation to life in concrete action.

Thomists such as Merkelbach and Labourdette have emphasized that conscience and prudence issue different kinds of judgment.[19] Conscience judges the moral quality of an act – whether past, present, or future – by applying universal principles. Prudence judges by election, discerning the best course of action here and now in light of circumstances and desires. Because prudence is bound up with the will and the passions, it is more exposed to error, but also more creative, integrating moral truth with practical wisdom.

The importance of this distinction becomes clear in medicine, where intentions are often complex. Timothy Quill's account of prescribing barbiturates to a terminally ill patient illustrates the difficulty[20]: he described his intentions as mixed, simultaneously seeking to relieve suffering while making death possible. Conscience can rightly judge that deliberately hastening death violates the good of life. Yet only prudence can guide the physician through the practical complexities – what alternatives to pursue, how to manage pain, how to support the patient – without collapsing into either rigidity or sentimentality.

[17]Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II–II, q.47, a.2; II–II, q.47, a.4. See also Josef Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), pp. 6–16; Romanus Cessario, *Introduction to Moral Theology*, 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C.: CUA Press, 2009), pp. 119–123.

[18]Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I–II, q.12, a.1; q.13, a.1–6; q.15, a.1; q.19, a.5–6; II–II, q.47, a.8. See also Servais Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics* (Washington, D.C.: CUA Press, 1995), pp. 327–336; Martin Rhonheimer, *Practical Reason and the Foundations of Ethics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), pp. 89–95.

[19]Michel Labourdette, *La prudence* (Paris: Pierre Téqui, 1948), pp. 51–63; Benedikt Merkelbach, *Summa Theologiae Moralis*, vol. I (Paris: Desclée, 1938), pp. 80–83.

[20]Thimothy E. Quill, 'Death and dignity. A case of individualized decision making', *The New England Journal of Medicine,* 324, 10 (1991), 691–694; 'The ambiguity of clinical intentions', *The New England Journal of Medicine,* 329, 14 (1993), 1039–1040.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2025.10128 Published online by Cambridge University Press

In this way, prudence does not replace conscience but perfects it.[21] Conscience warns, 'this act is wrong' or 'this act is required', but prudence decides how that truth is to be embodied in action. Far from being a merely syllogistic deduction, prudence has an artistic dimension: like an artist selecting colors and forms, the prudent person discerns the fitting means to realize the good. This is why Aquinas aligns prudence with creativity – not in inventing norms, but in wisely applying them to new circumstances. This creativity is crucial in medicine, where intentions are complex. Consider a physician treating a terminally ill patient who requests excessive sedation. Conscience may judge that deliberately hastening death is wrong; prudence must discern how to relieve suffering while respecting life. Prudence perfects conscience by translating its insight into fitting action. It is not mere deduction but a kind of moral art: the prudent person knows how to realize the good amid complexity.[22]

Conscience and prudence thus converge: both are directed to truth, but in different registers – conscience as rational witness to the law, prudence as the virtue that translates that witness into concrete, life-giving action. This distinction is essential for conscientious objection, since what justifies objection is not merely the presence of moral belief, but its prudent enactment as a truthful and responsible refusal – especially in medicine, where lives are affected. Together they safeguard freedom from both arbitrary will and sterile legalism, allowing human acts to be not only correct but also excellent. Both conscience and prudence, however, require a measure against which their judgments can be tested. Aquinas finds this in natural law, the rational participation in God's eternal law.[23]

4. Natural law as the measure of conscience

Any account of conscientious objection that hopes to avoid collapse into relativism must identify a real and objective measure of conscience – and this measure is natural law. Without this grounding, conscience risks being reduced to sincerity or personal preference, which cannot justify refusal in clinical practice.

If synderesis enables us to grasp the first principle – 'do good and avoid evil' – then natural law articulates what this good concretely consists of. For Aquinas, natural law is nothing other than the participation of rational creatures in God's eternal law: the imprint of divine wisdom in human reason.[24] It is through this law that conscience finds its measure and moral judgments their authority.

Natural law is universal and immutable. Its precepts are not legislated by states or cultures but arise from the very structure of human nature. Even if cultural blindness or inadequate formulations obscure its clarity, certain goods are always recognizable:

[21]Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II–II, q.47, a.2; a.8; q.49, a.3.

[22]For Christians, prudence is also illuminated by grace and the gifts of the Spirit, especially counsel and wisdom, which elevate practical reason beyond what natural virtue alone can achieve. Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I–II, q.68, a.1 and a.4; II–II, q.52, a.1; II–II, q.45, a.1. See also Servais Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics* (Washington, D.C.: CUA Press, 1995), pp. 367–373; Romanus Cessario, *The Moral Virtues and Theological Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), pp. 192–198.

[23]Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I–II, q.91, a.2–3; q.93, a.6; q.94, a.2.

[24]Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I–II, q.91, a.3; I–II, q.91, a.2; q.93, a.5–6; q.94, a.2. For commentary, see John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: OUP, 2011), pp. 23–27; Jean Porter, *Nature as Reason: A Thomistic Theory of Natural Law* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), pp. 83–91; Servais Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics* (Washington, D.C.: CUA Press, 1995), pp. 379–386.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2025.10128 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the protection of innocent life, the pursuit of truth, the cultivation of justice, the rejection of slavery and genocide. These truths are not imposed externally; they are discovered by reason as inscribed within human flourishing. As Aristotle observed, 'what each thing is when it has completed its development, we call its nature'.[25] To discern nature is to discern the ends toward which human beings are ordered.

Therefore, natural law is not a rigid civil code but the rational orientation of human freedom toward the good. Its universality lies not in uniform political legislation but in the shared structure of practical reason. Every person can, by reflecting on their inclinations – toward life, knowledge, sociability, justice – recognize fundamental moral obligations. This explains why dialogue between cultures is possible and why concepts such as human rights have universal resonance. At the same time, the application of natural law admits diversity. While the first precepts are constant, their specification varies with historical and social contexts.

For Aquinas, this law is luminous because it is a reflection of divine reason: 'the light of understanding infused in us by God, whereby we know what must be done and what must be avoided'.[26] This divine origin gives conscience both dignity and limit. Its dignity lies in testifying to God's wisdom; its limit lies in the fact that when conscience contradicts natural law, it errs. Conscience is not authentic simply by being sincerely held – it is authentic only when it conforms to truth.

The implications for conscientious objection are clear. A physician who refuses to perform an intervention does not appeal to private preference but to the moral order revealed in natural law. The refusal is rationally defensible because it safeguards fundamental goods – life, integrity of medicine, the dignity of the vulnerable – that civil law ought to protect but sometimes fails to. In this light, conscientious objection is not an evasion of responsibility but a moral safeguard, ensuring that professional practice remains oriented toward human flourishing rather than subordinated to unjust norms.

Thus, natural law prevents both extremes: it resists the reduction of conscience to subjective autonomy, and it resists legal positivism that collapses morality into civil statute. By grounding conscience in the eternal law, Aquinas shows that the voice of conscience has authority only as it participates in truth. This grounding is precisely what allows conscientious objection in medicine to be intelligible as a moral act rather than a mere personal exemption – rooted in the protection of fundamental human goods. It also allows conscientious objection to be defended without falling into relativism, and to be proposed not as a sectarian privilege but as a rational claim intelligible to all. If natural law anchors conscience, it also sheds light on freedom. Far from being opposed to law, freedom reaches its fulfillment in truth and love.

5. Freedom, truth, and love: conscience within a virtuous life

If conscientious objection is to be more than an appeal to personal preference, it must be rooted in a correct understanding of freedom – one grounded in truth rather than individual will. This is especially crucial in medicine, where freedom must never be separated from responsibility. If conscience has dignity, it is not because it is

[25]Aristotle, *Physics* II.1, 193b7–8. Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Physics*, II, lect. 1, nn. 141–143.

[26]Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I–II, q.91, a.2, ad 2.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2025.10128 Published online by Cambridge University Press

autonomous but because it bears witness to truth. Personal conscience is not the source of moral law but the inner tribunal that recognizes it. Freedom, then, is not arbitrary self-determination; it is the capacity to live in the truth of the good.[27] Only in this alignment does freedom reach fulfillment, because only truth makes freedom truly human.

The relationship between freedom and law has often been mischaracterized. Some accounts reduce freedom to the bare capacity to choose between opposites, setting it in tension with moral law understood as an external imposition.[28] On this view, conscience becomes a kind of judge arbitrating between the will of the legislator and the desires of the agent. Such a framework produces either legalism – where obedience is prized for its own sake – or rebellion, where law is rejected as an obstacle to autonomy. In both cases, truth disappears from the moral horizon.

Reinhard Hütter has described this collapse as the 'counterfeit of conscience'[29]: when freedom is equated with sovereign self-will, conscience is reduced to authenticity of desire, detached from divine order. Such 'conscience' is easily shaped by cultural fashions or personal feeling, but it no longer serves truth. It becomes counterfeit precisely because it refuses to acknowledge God as the source of moral order.

Against this distorted view, the Christian tradition insists that law and conscience are not adversaries of freedom but its condition. Law is not a heteronomous imposition but a gift, enabling human beings to discern and pursue what leads to flourishing. Conscience is not the voice of self but the echo of God's law in the depths of the person. And freedom is not arbitrary choice but the power to perform good actions, grounded in love of truth.[30] As John Paul II stressed in *Veritatis splendor*, 'freedom is not realized in decisions made against God's law, but in those made in obedience to it'.[31]

This view makes love central. Conscience does not impose rules as alien commands but invites love's response to the good. Obligation is not the negation of freedom but its perfection, because to obey truth is to choose the good we were created to desire. Virtue then sustains this dynamic: without virtue, conscience remains fragile, and freedom risks collapsing into license. With virtue, conscience is strengthened, freedom matures, and love directs both toward beatitude.

Prudence plays a decisive role here. As Matthew Levering observes, conscience functions within the broader horizon of prudence, which ultimately commands the action.[32] Conscience identifies moral truth; prudence translates that truth into concrete, fitting decisions. In this integration, freedom becomes not simply the ability to resist evil, but the creative capacity to embody truth in new and complex circumstances.

Thus, conscience, freedom, and truth are not competing forces but interwoven dimensions of the moral life. When shaped by virtue and elevated by grace, they

[27]John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor* (1993), §§31–34, 84.

[28]Servais Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics* (Washington, D.C.: CUA Press, 1995), pp. 327–336, 354–361; Germain Grisez, *Christian Moral Principles* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1983), pp. 179–185.

[29]Reinhard Hütter, *Conscience and Its Counterfeits: Pluralism, Prudence, and the Unity of Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), pp. 29–35, 44–50, 73–79.

[30]Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I–II, q.90, a.1–2; q.93, a.6; q.19, a.5–6; *De Veritate*, q.17, a.1.

[31]John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor* (1993), §35.

[32]Matthew Levering M, *The Abuse of Conscience: A Century of Catholic Moral Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2021), p. 96.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2025.10128 Published online by Cambridge University Press

converge in love – the only power capable of making freedom expansive, conscience reliable, and moral action genuinely human. For conscientious objection, this means that the legitimacy of refusal depends not merely on freedom of choice but on freedom ordered to truth – safeguarding both moral integrity and the dignity of those affected by the decision. But for freedom to flourish in truth, conscience must be carefully formed. The question becomes: how do we train the moral compass to see rightly?

6. How to train the moral compass: building a conscience that sees the truth

A Thomistic account of conscientious objection must explain not only what conscience is, but how it is properly formed – since in medicine, the moral legitimacy of objection depends precisely on the integrity of the one who objects. Without formation, conscience risks becoming mere preference or ideology. If conscience has authority, it is because it participates in truth. A correct conscience aligns with the objective moral order; an erroneous one, however sincere, reflects a mistaken judgment. For this reason, conscience must be formed. As Labourdette observed, conscience is shaped through *habitus* – stable dispositions that orient reason and will.[33] Without deliberate formation, conscience risks distortion, becoming captive to cultural fashions or private whim.

Formation of conscience begins with the intellect's natural orientation to truth.[34] Human beings are not indifferent to moral truth; they are drawn to it, however obscurely. Yet this orientation must be cultivated. Knowledge of moral principles is not enough unless it becomes conviction, embedded in character. Errors due to ignorance may reduce culpability, but they remain harmful because they separate action from truth and stunt moral growth. Education in conscience must therefore teach not only precepts but the love of truth itself.

Aquinas insists that conscience is bound by reality. Its authority does not come from sincerity alone but from its conformity to the truth about the good.[35] Hence, the formation of conscience requires more than information: it requires training the mind to see reality rightly and the heart to desire it. This is why conscience can be described as a normed norm[36]: it issues judgments, but only insofar as it is itself measured by the moral law and, ultimately, the eternal law.

Practically, formation occurs through both natural and supernatural means. On the natural side, families, teachers, communities, and just laws shape conscience by habituating individuals to recognize and pursue the good. Merkelbach emphasized that genuine education enables the young to choose the good not merely out of fear of punishment but from conviction of its intrinsic value.[37] On the supernatural side, conscience is enlightened by grace: prayer, the struggle against disordered passions, frequent use of the sacraments, and spiritual direction all strengthen its fidelity to

[33]Michel Labourdette, *Les actes humains*, vol. 2 of 'Grand cours' de théologie morale, trans. Abbaye Notre-Dame du Pesquié (Paris: Parole et Silence, 2016), p. 209.

[34]John Haas, *Crisis of Conscience* (New York: Crossroad Pub. Co., 1996), pp. 59–75.

[35]Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q.79, a.13; I–II, q.19, a.5–6; q.93, a.6; *De Veritate* q.17, a.1–2.

[36]Leo J. Elders, *The Ethics of St. Thomas Aquinas: Happiness, Natural Law and the Virtues* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2003), p. 84.

[37]Benedikt Merkelbach, *Summa Theologiae Moralis,* vol. I (Paris: Desclée, 1938), pp. 72–74.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2025.10128 Published online by Cambridge University Press

God.[38] In this sense, conscience is not only a rational capacity but also a spiritual faculty, made receptive to the voice of the Holy Spirit.

This dual formation protects freedom. An unformed conscience does not liberate but enslaves – either to exaggerated autonomy, where every preference is elevated to law, or to the tyranny of social opinion. True freedom of conscience is never freedom 'from' truth, but freedom 'in' truth.[39] For Catholics, the Magisterium plays an essential role here: not as an external imposition, but as an illumination of truths that conscience is already ordered to perceive. The Church does not substitute for conscience; it educates it, expanding the horizon of moral reasoning and guarding against error.[40]

Ultimately, formation of conscience is a lifelong task. It unfolds in the dynamic interplay of personal experience, reflection, and growth in virtue. Each judgment of conscience reflects a person's moral history, yet it is also capable of development and purification. Through education, community, grace, and prayer, conscience matures into a reliable witness of truth, capable of guiding freedom without falling prey to distortion. It is this formed and truth-oriented conscience – not merely subjective sincerity – that provides the only reliable grounding for conscientious objection in the medical context. Only such a well-formed conscience can provide the solid ground on which conscientious objection stands. Once formed, conscience still raises a difficult question: if it can err, in what sense does it bind? Aquinas offers a nuanced answer.

7. When conscience binds – and when it misleads

Aquinas insists that individuals must always follow the certain judgment of conscience. To act deliberately against conscience is to condemn oneself, for it is to betray one's best judgment of truth.[41] However, this does not mean that every act of conscience is morally correct – only that it binds the agent subjectively. In other words, an erroneous conscience may still obligate the person internally, but it does not possess the same moral legitimacy as a well-formed conscience.

Here, Aquinas makes an important distinction. A correct conscience binds both absolutely and intrinsically. It binds absolutely because to reject it is to embrace immorality, and it binds intrinsically because it conforms to truth.[42] For example, if a physician rightly judges that neglecting a patient's basic care is wrong, that judgment cannot be reversed without compromising moral integrity. Correct conscience is stable precisely because it shares in the stability of truth itself.

An erroneous conscience, by contrast, binds only conditionally and extrinsically. It binds conditionally because it obliges only so long as the error endures; it binds extrinsically because its authority depends on the mistaken belief that it is true. Aquinas explains this clearly: to act against what one takes to be right is always wrong, but

[38]Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I–II, q.109, a.1–2; q.68, a.1–2; II–II, q.52, a.1; II–II, q.45, a.1. See also John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor* (1993), §64.

[39]Joseph Ratzinger, *On Conscience*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007), p. 33.

[40]Vatican II, *Dignitatis Humanae* (1965), §14.

[41]Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theologiae* I–II, q.19, a.5–6; *De Veritate* q.17, a.4.

[42]Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I–II, q.19, a.5–6; *De Veritate* q.17, a.4. See also Benedikt Merkelbach, *Summa Theologiae Moralis*, vol. I (Paris: Desclée, 1938), pp. 80–84.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2025.10128 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the mistaken judgment itself can – and should – be corrected.[43] Suppose a physician sincerely believes they must continue futile treatment to preserve life. So long as they hold this belief, they are bound to follow it, for to act against it would violate their integrity. Yet this binding is not absolute: once they recognize the futility of the treatment, the error must yield to truth.

This distinction clarifies why an erroneous conscience differs from a counterfeit conscience. An erroneous conscience still acknowledges a moral order but misapplies it. A counterfeit conscience rejects universal moral law altogether, reducing obligation to personal desire or authenticity. When someone justifies an action solely by saying 'I feel at peace with it', we are no longer dealing with conscience but with self-will disguised as moral authority. As D'Arcy noted, to affirm that violations of natural and divine law can be 'objectively good' would be to collapse into moral relativism.[44]

Recognizing the difference matters for medicine. A physician who, after careful reflection, wrongly believes a procedure obligatory is in error but still operating within the framework of conscience. By contrast, one who claims absolute authority to define morality for themselves – independent of natural law or professional integrity – has abandoned conscience altogether.

Importantly, even in error, the intellect is never indifferent to truth. Its orientation to truth remains, which is why correction is always possible. A mistaken conscience does not condemn a person to perpetual error. As physicians consult colleagues, study the literature, reflect on experience, and engage with the teaching of the Church, they can discover their mistake and revise their judgment. At that point, fidelity to conscience requires changing course.

This distinction is crucial for conscientious objection in medicine. While the law may need to protect the space for objection – even in cases where the objection is erroneous – not every objection is morally defensible simply because it is sincerely held. Legal tolerance does not imply moral endorsement. In institutional and clinical contexts, this Thomistic account implies that conscientious objection cannot be an isolated assertion of personal belief. Its legitimacy depends on whether conscience is formed in truth – through reason, virtue, and accountable moral discernment – rather than guided by preference or ideology. It therefore requires structured discernment and accountability rather than private assertion. Hospitals and professional bodies can provide mechanisms – such as ethics committees, continuing formation, and collegial consultation – to ensure that objections arise from well-formed, rather than counterfeit, consciences, distinguishing between authentic and distorted forms of objection. These structures embody the communal dimension of prudence and protect against abuses of conscience while honoring its binding force.

Thus, conscience always binds, but not always in the same way. Correct conscience binds with the force of truth; erroneous conscience binds temporarily and can be corrected; counterfeit conscience does not bind at all because it is not conscience. This nuanced account avoids both relativism and legalism. It honors the integrity of the

[43]Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I–II, q.19, a.5–6; *De Veritate* q.17, a.4. See also Michel Labourdette, *Les actes humains*, vol. 2 of 'Grand cours' de théologie morale*, trans. Abbaye Notre-Dame du Pesquié (Paris: Parole et Silence, 2016), pp. 208–210; Servais Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics* (Washington, D.C.: CUA Press, 1995), pp. 327–330.

[44]Eric D'Arcy E, *Conscience and Its Right to Freedom* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1961), p. 128.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2025.10128 Published online by Cambridge University Press

person while insisting that conscience finds its authority only in truth. Thus, Thomism can affirm both legal protection of conscience and moral evaluation of conscience – distinguishing what must not be coerced from what deserves to be imitated. Finally, the discussion turns to virtue. Only virtue ensures that conscience, even when fragile, can reliably guide freedom and provide a firm foundation for conscientious objection.

8. How virtue grounds and guides conscientious objection

The question now arises: what ultimately enables conscience to resist error, avoid distortion, and provide reliable moral guidance – especially in cases of conscientious objection? The answer, for Aquinas, lies in virtue.[45] Conscience may judge correctly or incorrectly, but only the virtuous person has the stable disposition to see and embrace truth consistently. Virtue grounds conscience in reality, transforms knowledge into conviction, and equips freedom with creativity in action.

Formation of conscience, therefore, is inseparable from the cultivation of virtues. Rules and information are necessary but insufficient; they must be interiorized until they shape character. A student may learn that abortion is wrong, or a physician may hear that euthanasia violates the dignity of life. Yet unless these truths become convictions integrated into their identity – sustained by justice, fortitude, and prudence – they remain fragile. Conscience speaks with clarity only when virtue has tuned the ear to recognize the harmony between moral law and human flourishing.

Errors of conscience often stem from ignorance, but just as often from defective habitus. A person may know, in theory, that human life is sacred, but if their will is weakened by vice or indifference, they may rationalize acts that contradict that principle. Aquinas distinguishes here between theoretical ignorance, which can be corrected by instruction, and practical ignorance, which only growth in virtue can heal.[46] In medicine, this distinction is vital: a physician might err about the moral object of abortion due to lack of knowledge, or they might know the truth but fail to uphold it because defective moral habits incline them toward compromise. The remedy in the latter case is not more data, but deeper virtue.

This explains why conscientious objection cannot be defended as a mere subjective right. To refuse an unjust command is not an exercise of personal preference but a moral duty rooted in fidelity to objective goods. The virtuous objector does not oppose the legal order as such; indeed, they affirm its value by insisting it must not betray its very purpose – the protection of the vulnerable, the defense of dignity, the service of justice. Conscientious objection arises when authority demands actions that undermine these goods. To obey such commands would be to cooperate in injustice; to resist them is to remain faithful to the true end of law itself.

In this light, virtue plays a creative role. Prudence and conscience, in the virtuous person, converge into a single act of moral discernment: what is true is recognized as good, and what is good is commanded as action. This unity equips the objector not only to refuse immoral acts but also to propose alternative paths that embody genuine

[45]Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I–II, q.57, a.4; II–II, q.47, a.3; I–II, q.19, a.5–6; *De Veritate* q.17, a.1. See also Servais Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics* (Washington, D.C.: CUA Press, 1995), pp. 339–344; Matthew Levering, *Conscience and the Common Good* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), pp. 56–61.

[46]Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I–II, q.76, a.1–3; q.77, a.2; *De Veritate* q.17, a.3.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2025.10128 Published online by Cambridge University Press

care. Here lies the originality of a Thomistic account: conscience is safeguarded not by autonomy alone, but by the integration of truth, freedom, and virtue.

Thus, conscientious objection emerges not as a threat to social order but as its guarantor. It protects the integrity of the moral agent and, more deeply, the goods on which society itself depends. The conscientious objector is not an anarchist but a witness: one whose virtuous life ensures that conscience remains a source of truth and freedom in the face of coercion. In this light, conscientious objection is not a retreat into subjectivity but the fruit of a virtuous conscience: a creative act of fidelity to truth that safeguards both the dignity of the person and the integrity of medicine itself.

The Thomistic framework also offers insight into how institutions might embody a culture of virtuous conscience. Catholic healthcare institutions, for example, operationalize this integration through moral formation programs, professional codes grounded in the sanctity of life, and structures of ethical consultation. These initiatives express a shared human concern for moral integrity in professional life.

At the same time, the Thomistic view illuminates how individual moral reasoning can contribute to this institutional ethos. Human reason, when shaped by virtues, such as prudence, can recognize the danger of reducing human life to mere raw material and can point toward the deeper truth that individuals are to be welcomed, not manufactured. This perspective opens a fruitful dialogue with contemporary society. Aquinas teaches that the acquired virtues dispose the human person toward the good in accordance with reason – even apart from grace – and thus prepare the way for a fuller grasp of truth.[47] In this light, virtues such as generosity and restraint dispose the human person toward a truthful understanding of human dignity, particularly in the biomedical context. For this reason, Thomistic ethics provides the positive conditions for responsible action. It shows that conscientious objection is not a withdrawal from responsibility but an affirmation of the moral integrity necessary for authentic care. The goal is not to protect private preference but to safeguard the integrity of persons acting in truth.

Even in pluralistic contexts where Thomistic metaphysics is not assumed, its practical wisdom remains accessible. These dispositions encourage dialogue rather than coercion and help reconcile conscientious integrity with the pursuit of the common good. Thus, Thomistic virtue ethics provides a grammar of moral reasoning that can foster mutual respect even among non-Thomists.

Thomistic ethics does not claim to be the only realist framework capable of defending conscientious objection, but it uniquely integrates freedom, truth, and virtue in a coherent moral anthropology – avoiding both relativism and authoritarian imposition. By grounding conscience in truth and perfecting it through virtue, this approach safeguards human dignity and integrity even within pluralistic societies. Its insights can inform institutional policies that balance respect for conscience with commitment to patient care and the common good. In this sense, the creative role of virtue in conscientious objection is not confined to the Thomistic tradition but offers a universal language of moral integrity.

[47]Cf. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I–II, q. 63, a. 2.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2025.10128 Published online by Cambridge University Press

9. Conclusion

This article has examined conscientious objection specifically within the medical context, where decisions directly concern the protection of vulnerable human life and the integrity of the healing profession. Against accounts that ground objection in autonomy or subjective preference, a Thomistic moral framework shows that conscience bears authority only insofar as it participates in truth and is sustained by virtue.

Therefore, conscientious objection is not a withdrawal from responsibility but an act ordered toward the good – one that safeguards both the dignity of the person and the moral integrity of medicine itself. Its legitimacy does not rest on private conviction but on the recognition that certain actions contradict objective human goods and may not be chosen in justice. In this light, conscientious objection is not a threat to social order but a service to it.

While Thomism does not claim to be the only realist framework capable of grounding conscience, it offers one of the most coherent and integrated accounts of freedom, truth, and virtue – avoiding the pitfalls of both relativism and authoritarianism. Its vision is not sectarian: by grounding moral action in human flourishing, it offers a language of integrity that can be received even in pluralistic settings.

In this sense, the creative role of virtue in conscientious objection extends beyond the defense of individual rights; it illuminates the conditions under which freedom becomes responsible, care becomes authentic, and medicine remains truly human.

Disclosures: None.

Cite this article: Jaime Hernandez Ojeda, 'The Creative Role of Virtue in Conscientious Objection: A Thomistic Perspective', *New Blackfriars*, 107 (2026), 273–286. https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2025.10128

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2025.10128 Published online by Cambridge University Press