Personal Growth: Up-Dating the Natural Law

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In his first editorial, the new editor of the Linacre Quarterly presented a challenge to moral theologians to contribute sound theological opinion to discussions on some pressing contemporary problems so as to give guidance where possible in controversial areas within the framework of our traditional beliefs and concepts (November, 1969, pp. 211-212). Certainly the reader of this journal will contest the words of Dr. Mullooly that "we are living in a peculiar, revolutionary age where everything that has been "given," and unchanging natural law taken for granted is suddenly questioned and discredited.

But it is true that these notions were indubitably beneficial if one could disavow that the natural law was an unchanging body of moral principles. These areas of life are areas where everything ends with the "natural institution" which is marriage and the natural biological processes. These areas of life are areas where everything has been "given," and unchanging natural law taken for granted is suddenly questioned and discredited.

It should be stated from the outset that Catholic moral teaching has not always relied on natural law teaching, that there have been many good but differing natural law theories employed by Catholic theology, that the Church's magisterium has employed some very different approaches to the natural law from time to time and has altered some significant natural law teachings, and that no natural law system has been revealed or confirmed by revelation. (The Bible shows very little interest in essential descriptions of man on which a natural law theory could be developed; rather, it is concerned with human existence and human behavior in light of the call of grace from God.)

Due to these variables, and because of this, we are now faced with the need to rely more and more on Scripture, and to speak a common voice with our separated Christian brethren in addressing ourselves to the moral problems of the day. However, there are many of us in the field of Catholic moral theology who believe that, if viewed in a true Christian fashion and based on the best available knowledge of the meaning of man, a natural law theory is not only viable but indispensable to Christian morality. Some of the components of a Christian natural law theory as conceived by theologians nowadays, in the light of the teaching of Aquinas and contemporary anthropological philosophy and theology, can be summarized under two headings.

1. In the proper sense of the term, the natural law is an unformulated moral law. St. Thomas gives a simple
The divine law for excellence is the eternal law of God which reigns over the entire universe. It is the plan of divine wisdom which is given promulgation in time by creation and revelation. The natural moral law corresponds primarily to the eternal law promulgated in creation. Aquinas adds that all beings are subject to the eternal law (divine providence) and for this reason have an inherent inclination to a corresponding way of acting. In other words, the eternal law (the divine command governing the sum total of reality) is so much at the very heart of things that it is identical with the innermost nature and activity of a being. This natural inclination or natural tendency toward a goal which runs through the entire order of creation may be called the natural law, but it is not yet a natural moral law. Perhaps a scientific law of nature may be deduced from the operation of nature itself; but the natural moral law, as the specific moral law of man, is a law of reason. The merely natural order of creation constitutes an ontological presupposition for what we mean by the natural moral law: it must be penetrated by reason before we know what moral demands it holds in store for us.

This means that men, in striving for their final goal, are not subjected to a set of ready-made and eternally valid laws which they only need to carry out. Man is not directed in a passive way by the eternal law: he shares in it as a person has the task not simply of recognizing the realities and facts found in this world of man and to place himself in the service of these realities: he has to humanize all the given data of his given nature through his discreet use of reason (illumined by faith).

This understanding of the natural moral law should not be alien to the world of today, for modern man is becoming more and more aware of his autonomy, of his need for freedom from physical, psychological, social, political and economic slaveries, and of his spiritual powers. But it is asking too much of man accurately to recognize and pursue his true self-idealization in the sight of God and to make this relevant to the law of his conduct in every situation? Hardly. Tradition Catholic moral theology has put great emphasis on the notion of syndra (sometimes called "natural conscience" or "fundamental conscience") — the deep and irresistible tendency of man to the good, the personal goodness of the entire man moving him to know the basic goods of his nature infallibly and intuitively, to pursue and affirm and do the good, and to avoid the evil. This is clearly a great responsibility and a great risk: to embrace one's own law of freedom, not through merely imposed norms nor through innate moral ideas, but through an active rational orientation whereby man derives the (obliging) moral law of free action from reality.

2. The natural moral law is also a formulated law, but in a secondary and derived sense. We could not even speak of a natural moral law of man unless we acknowledge that it is possible to derive specific obligations and to formulate them as universally valid on the basis of a rational insight into certain ultimate ontological structures valid for all men. Obviously the validity of any such precepts of the natural moral law depends entirely on whether and to what extent general structures of human existence can be known and verified. It is precisely here that we are faced with many perplexing questions nowadays. What is the meaning of man? Can this meaning be defined once and for all? Are the mere and obvious animality and rationality of man adequate expressions of his meaning? Does not man himself undergo significant changes in the course of history? For that matter, does man not undergo important changes in his individual lifetime? And is our knowledge of man itself conditioned by historical process and cultural presuppositions? Do we ever have a grasp on absolute truth, even in a few basic human matters, or is it not always a question of perspectives of the knowledge of truth? These questions cannot be easily brushed aside.

A knowledge of the meaning of man cannot adequately be acquired through the empirical method, because no matter how carefully empirical data may be gathered, it never gets beyond the realm of part particular. It does not attain to the knowledge of essences. The social scientist or anthropologist may be able to tell us what man has always considered just or unjust, but he can never tell us what must be considered just, based on the nature of man himself.

Because we are looking for what must be considered good based on the nature of man himself, we are looking for an a priori law governing human nature and man's conduct. For this, philosophical reflection is indispensable — a deduction on the very meaning of man and the essential categories of his being resulting from a rational penetration of what is true on the empirical, factual level. According to St. Thomas, the moral imperatives which are known from the basic structures of human nature are self-evident "first principles." It cannot be demonstrated that the good is (naturally) to be done and sought after and the evil is to be avoided. But if one does not accept this first principle and such other principles which self-evidently embody it (the good of preserving life, of the brotherhood of all men, of man's dependence on God), then one fails to understand one's own nature. In fact, man implicitly affirms them even in denying them, for their very denial involves their use.

Therefore, when Catholic theology speaks of those demands of the natural moral law which are always and universally valid, it is speaking of the self-evident laws of one's own created nature. All other more precise and concrete moral dictates come from the application and interpretation of these
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must be somewhat tentative. This

means that our most certain principles

are necessarily very general and rather

abstract. They are nonetheless obli­
gatory, but they can specify concrete

moral demands only in a general way

and after a thorough scrutiny of con­
temporary ways of thinking about the

various activities of man.

For instance, it is clear that man has a

natural inclination to self-preser­
vation, but man’s God-endowed

provident reason only gives rise to a

very general moral dictate on this

cscore: that there is a moral duty to see

that life is respected and pre­
served. It is a further step, requiring

more data and more possibly inade­
quate distinctions, to formulate a

negative absolute precept such as

“thou shalt not kill” or “thou shalt

not commit suicide” and apply them

(by way of interpretation) to all

imaginable kinds of lethal activity.

Traditional Catholic moral theology

has always made exceptions to these

norms, and we are not completely

satisfied with all these exceptions
today (e.g. capital punishment).

Another example is to be found in the

sexual, procreative life of man. It is

more self-evident to deduce that

“sexuality demands some form of

regulation,” but if one is to deduce

“thou shalt not practice birth

control,” this must result from an

accurate knowledge of not only the

biological processes, but the psychol­
ogy and sociology of sexual behavior

as well. If one is content to deduce

the dominant moral obligation only from

natural biological processes, and then

relies only on thirteenth century

biology which did not know, for

instance, that woman produces germ

cells, one will arrive at a historically

conditioned conclusion which subse­
quent discoveries can render woefully

inadequate.

Even so basic a natural law norm as

“thou shalt not lie” is obviously

subjected to constant re-assessment

and re-formulation as human in­
dependence and human com­mu­
nications change. In each of these cases

there is an unchanging, morally

obliging principle which, however,
depends on a progressing knowledge of the changing human condition in order to find (obliging) expression in new

personalized concrete norms which

will be applicable to (having truthfully

arisen from) definite historical

situations.

The three quite general examples of

natural moral laws just given (self­
preservation, procreation, truth)

which are easily discovered by an

elemental reflection on the struct­
ure of man’s existence, are also exam­

ples of the multi-leveled analysis of the

“human construct” advocated by

Aquinas. He said that “the concrete
good” and which are naturally apprehended

is known from those things by

reason as being good, and conse­
quently as objects of pursuit (the

contraries would be evil and objects

be avoided). The precepts of natural

law, then, correspond to natural incli­
nations on three different levels of

man: man as substance, man as animal

and man as rational (S. Theol. I-II

94.2).

Today’s philosophical outlook

however, would see man more as a

total unity. The contemporary notion

of “person” is having a strong effect on

natural law theory. Personism (we

are not speaking of some superficial

sentimental or merely existential at­
titude) sees man not only as a subsisting

substance, as passively experiencing

vegetable and animal functions, and as

thinking; but as a loving, valuing and

acting person who essentially tran­
sends the mere thing. This personalist

understanding of the meaning of man

is taken to consider the person’s “substantial

essence” to be important, but above all

it’s perfection through which alone

it is complete. This self-perfection is

achieved “by nature” through the

personal relations of dialogue ex­
istence. Thus the individual not only

becomes truly a person through

personal reciprocity (love), but is led

to a personal God through other finite

persons. There is a most decisive

compensation of the various aspects

of human existence at a level prior to

and embracing the functions of all

of man’s faculties.

It can now be said that man’s

“incli nation” to be more fully a

person is the most radical sign of “the

good” in man, and this tendency

penetrates and gives new meaning to

every “level” of human existence.

Interpersonal principles are now an

integral (through self-enhancing)

component of natural law theory,

because there has appeared in the past

20 or 30 years a more carefully estab­
lished ontology of inter-subjectivity.

Hence natural law theory is no longer

a stranger to the truly “personal” in

man; it is seeking to become more

personally oriented. It can be

said, in summary, that the natural

moral law has as its most radical

“precept” the obligation of man to

personal growth in authentic human

self-realization: all other “precepts”

can be subsumed under this heading.

The concrete commands of the

natural moral law must take as their

starting-point, then, not man in the

abstract, but man in the concrete. The

search for the moral law of man is not

completed, because the meaning of

personal and historical man has not

been frozen. New truths become

apparent when man is viewed more in

a total personal dimension. New truths

of the natural law emerge in an in­

dustrial period which were not true in

an agrarian era. Furthermore, man as

evolutionary seems to experience

thresholds of dramatic modifications

of his situation or disposition, and this

calls for a renewed analysis of the

“ought” of the human condition, in

the light of the universally valid,
largely unformulated natural moral

law (as illumined by the faith of the

Gospel of love).

These observations on the natural

law have, by necessity, been brief and

limited. There are many other aspects

of the use of a natural law theory

which would have to be treated else­
where, among them: the relationship

of the natural law to the Gospel law

of love, and the role of the Church’s

magisterium in assisting mankind to

arrive at an ever more certain self-

understanding of its natural moral

law. But these introductory comments on a

natural law theory, partial as they may

be, should hopefully find some

acceptance among psychologists,

psychiatrists and medical men general­
ly, for these specialists also begin with

an inward aid to the concrete man in the

here-and-now world, they frequently

recognize within individual men the

transcendental (universal) dictates of

the natural and radical good of man,

and they are apt to consider authentic

self-realization, or total personal

growth (physical, psychological, social,

moral and spiritual), as the law of

man. In removing the obstacles to

actively assisting this growth to human

self-fulfillment, these specialists are

making man free to participate in the
domine law by making it possible for

him to fulfill the innermost nature of his

being — the natural and radical

string toward the good, ultimately

the absolute Good.