

The background of the cover is a photograph of a church with a tall, dark spire, built into a cliffside. The church is painted in warm tones of orange and yellow. The cliff face is rugged and textured. In the foreground, there are several white buildings with terracotta roofs. The sky is a clear, bright blue.

PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

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SELECTED READINGS



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Thomas Aquinas

Ethics and Natural Law



Even if we assume that theists can justifiably maintain that ethical truth originates in God, this still leaves the question of how such truth is communicated from God to humans. In this reading, Thomas Aquinas (1224–1274) argues that as the result of being created in God's image, we as humans possess the rational capacities to comprehend those aspects of God's ethical standard that have been revealed in nature. Moreover, he maintains that from these observations, we can often deduce how human beings are to act and be treated. This is not, he maintains, to place natural reason above divine revelation. However, although written revelation is *sufficient* for giving us God's basic moral perspective, it is not always *necessary*. Human reflection on the nature of things can discover much about God's basic ethical standards and their application to our daily lives.

The precepts of the law of nature are related to practical reason in the same way that the first principles of demonstration are to speculative reason. Both are principles that are self-known [*per se nota*]. Now, we speak of something as self-known in two ways: first, in itself; second, in relation to us.

Any proposition is called self-known in itself when its predicate belongs to the intelligible meaning of its subject. However, it is possible for such a proposition not to be evident to a person ignorant of the definition of the subject. Thus, this proposition, *man is rational*, is self-evident in its own nature, since to say man is to

say rational; yet, for a person who is ignorant of what man is, this proposition is not self-known.

Consequently, as Boethius says (*De Hebdomadibus*, PL 64, 1311), there are some axioms or propositions that are in general self-known to all. Of this type are those propositions whose terms are known to all; for example, *every whole is greater than its part*, and *things equal to one and the same thing are equal to each other*. But there are some propositions that are self-known only to the wise, those who understand the meaning of the terms of these propositions. Thus, to one who understands that an angel is not a body, it is self-known that an angel is

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not present circumscriptively in place. This is not obvious to uninstructed people, who fail to grasp this point.

A definite order is found among items that fall under the apprehension of men. For, that which first falls under apprehension is *being* [*ens*]: the understanding of it is included in all things whatsoever that one apprehends. So, the first indemonstrable principle is: *It is not proper at once to affirm and to deny.* This is based on the intelligible meaning of being and nonbeing. On this principle all others are founded, as is said in the *Metaphysics* (III, 3, 1005b29).

Now, just as "being" is the first item that falls within apprehension without any qualification, so "good" is the first that falls within the apprehension of practical reason, which is directed toward work: *for every agent acts for the sake of an end*, which has the intelligible meaning of good. Thus, the first principle in the practical reason is what is based on the meaning of "good"; and it is: *The good is what all desire.* This is, then, the first principle of law: *Good is to be done and sought after, evil is to be avoided.* On this all the other precepts of the law of nature are based, in the sense that all things to be done or avoided belong to the precepts of the law of nature, if practical reason apprehends them as human goods.

Now, since the good has the rational character of an end, and evil has the contrary meaning, as a consequence reason naturally apprehends all things to which man has a natural inclination as goods and, therefore, as things to be sought after in working, and their contraries are apprehended as evils and as things to be avoided.

OUR NATURAL MORAL INCLINATIONS

So, the order of the precepts of the law of nature is in accord with the order of natural inclinations. First, there is present in man the inclination toward the good on the level of the nature which he shares with all substances, inasmuch as each substance desires the preservation of its own existence according to its own nature. Now, those things whereby the life of man is preserved, and whereby its contrary is impeded, pertain to the natural law according to this inclination.

Second, there is present in man an inclination toward some more special things, on the level of the nature which he shares with other animals. And on this level, those things are said to belong to natural law "which nature teaches to all animals" (*Corpus Juris Civilis, Digesta*, I, tit. 1, leg. 1), as, for instance, the union of male and female, the upbringing of offspring, and similar things.

Third, there is present in man an inclination toward the good that is in accord with the nature of reason, and this is proper to him. Thus, man has a natural inclination toward knowing the truth about God, and toward living in society. On this level, those things within the scope of this inclination pertain to the natural law; for instance, that man should avoid ignorance, that he should not offend those with whom he must associate, and others of this kind that are concerned with this level.

[The difficulties mentioned at the beginning of the article boil down to this: Why are there many precepts of natural law, when man's nature is one and so is his reason?]

1. All these precepts of the law of nature, insofar as they are referred to one first precept, do have the rational character [*ratio*] of one natural law.
2. All inclinations of this kind, of whatsoever parts of human nature, for instance, of the concupiscible or irascible powers, belong to the natural law inasmuch as they are regulated by reason, and they are reduced to one first precept, as has been said. According to this, there are many precepts in themselves of the law of nature but they share in one common root.
3. Although reason is one in itself, it is directive of all things that pertain to men. For this reason, all things that can be regulated by reason are contained under the law of reason. . . .

Moral rules are concerned with those matters that essentially pertain to good behavior. Now, since human morals are spoken of in relation to reason (for it is the proper principle of human acts), those customs that are in conformity with reason are called good, and those

that are in discord with reason are deemed bad. Just as every judgment of speculative reason proceeds from the natural knowledge of first principles, so, too, does every judgment of practical reason issue from certain naturally known principles, as we have explained before.

HOW THESE INCLINATIONS GUIDE US

Now, it is possible to proceed in different ways from these principles in making judgments on different problems. There are some cases in human actions that are so explicit that they can be approved or condemned at once, with very little thought, by reference to those general and primary principles. Then, there are other problems for the judgment of which a good deal of thinking on the different circumstances is required. Careful consideration of such problems is not the prerogative of just any person but of the wise. In the same way, it is not the function of all men to consider the conclusions of the sciences but only of the philosophers. Again, there are still other matters for the judgment of which man stands in need of help by divine instruction, as is so in the case of items of belief.

And so, it becomes evident that since moral precepts belong among the matters that pertain to

good behavior, and since these are items that are in conformity with reason, and since every judgment of human reason is derived in some fashion from natural reason, it must be true that all moral rules belong to the law of nature, but not all in the same way.

For, there are some things that the natural reason of every man judges immediately and essentially as things to be done or not done; for example, *Honour thy father and mother*, and *Thou shalt not kill*; *Thou shalt not steal*. Precepts of this kind belong in an unqualified way to the law of nature.

Then, there are other things that are judged by a more subtle rational consideration, on the part of the wise men, to be matters of obligation. Now, these belong to the law of nature in this way: they of course require instruction, by which less favored people are taught by those who are wise; for example, *Rise up before the hoary head, and honor the person of the aged man* (Lev. 19:32), and other injunctions of this kind.

Finally, there are other matters for the judgment of which human reason needs divine instruction, whereby we are taught concerning matters of divinity; for example, *Thou shalt not make to thyself a graven thing, nor the likeness of any thing. . . . Thou shalt not take the name of thy God in vain* (Exod. 20:4, 7).

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Aquinas believes that all of us “just know” that some actions—for example, killing innocent people—are wrong. Do you agree? If so, list some actions or behaviors that you think fit into this category.
2. Aquinas does not make reference to the influence of culture and experience on moral beliefs. To what extent do you think moral beliefs are influenced by these factors?