

**PETER J. BUSSEY****Natural Law – ‘God’s Law in our Hearts’**

---

*Human beings possess a sense of basic morality that is found to be similar in many cultures. It has often been termed ‘Natural Law’, and St Paul in his Epistles referred to even the gentiles as having ‘God’s Law in their hearts’. C. S. Lewis gave a broad basic justification for the existence of Natural Law, emphasising that a society that loses this will experience moral decay. The standard western presentation of the subject was given in the thirteenth century by Thomas Aquinas, and is used as the basis for our present discussion, amplified by some recent teachings of Pope John Paul II. There are two major challenges to these ideas. One concerns the objective validity of moral law of any kind. An examination of this question leads to the familiar conclusion that God’s authority is required as a basis for absolute moral values and obligations. The second major challenge comes from the modern scientific picture of human beings emerging from an amoral animal kingdom – but we are moral beings. The issues that arise here are discussed with reference to evolutionary theory, palaeontology and anthropology. It is suggested that the key questions are resolved best if God acted directly in human history at some point in time, perhaps at the Middle/Upper Palaeolithic transition. Some implications of Natural Law in human affairs are finally examined.*

Keywords: Moral value, duty, obligation, human rights, Natural Law, C. S. Lewis, Thomas Aquinas, John Paul II, evolution, palaeontology, culture, anthropology, kibbutz.

---

**Introduction**

In a celebrated passage, the Roman philosopher and politician Marcus Tullius Cicero wrote:<sup>1</sup>

There is a true law, a right reason, conformable to nature, universal, unchangeable, eternal, whose commands urge us to duty and whose prohibitions restrain us from evil. It needs no other expositor and interpreter than our own conscience. It is not one thing in Rome and another in Athens; one thing today and another tomorrow; but in all times and nations must for ever reign.... God himself is its author, – its promulgator, – its enforcer. He who obeys it not flies from himself, and does violence to the very nature of man.

---

1 Cicero, Marcus Tullius *The Republic*, bk. III, from *The Political Works of Marcus Tullius Cicero*, Barham, F. (trans.), London: Edmund Spettigue (1841-42), cited with modern spelling from Laing, J.A. & Wilcox, R. (eds.) *The Natural Law Reader*, London: Wiley-Blackwell (2014), which gives many of the other passages referred to here.

These words, written outside the Judaic tradition, express a basic belief that we are creatures with an intrinsic moral nature, a perception that has been echoed in many ways by others. There is a set of inbuilt ethical principles that apply to us and guide us. These principles are part of our human nature, they provide us with a basic knowledge of right and wrong, and we disobey them at the risk of harm to our personal integrity and social relationships.

St Paul wrote in a similar way a century later, in his Epistle to the Romans: 'For when the Gentiles, who do not have the [Jewish] law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts.'<sup>2</sup> Their consciences, he continues, will be a witness for or against them. Both St Paul and St Peter in their Epistles<sup>3</sup> instructed the early Christians to be respectful and obedient to the Roman governing authorities. These rulers, Paul wrote, are God's servants. Their mission is to affirm those who do good and to punish those who do evil. Again, this presupposes a genuine moral awareness, even in rulers and people who were pagans and had no explicit teaching in God's law.

In more modern language, the claim is that human beings are 'programmed' with directive principles towards certain kinds of awareness and behaviour which can represent moral values and obligations. These principles are known as Natural Law, and they form part of our common human nature. They are not unconscious drives, or mechanical: we are rationally aware of them and can voluntarily follow them. Natural Law, then, is not to be considered as if it were an abstract idea or a conceptual proposal. It is a phenomenological reality about us that we should recognise, characterise and understand.

The aim of this study is to investigate the subject of Natural Law. We first consider a justification for the existence of Natural Law given by C. S. Lewis, and examine the basic teachings of Thomas Aquinas on this subject, amplified by some more recent teachings of Pope John Paul II. We then consider two major challenges to these proposals, one arising from doubt as to whether objective moral law exists at all, and the other from the scientific view of our race as emerging out of an amoral animal kingdom. The challenge presented by modern science requires an examination of evolutionary, paleontological and anthropological points of view. It will be argued that contact with God was needed in human history, and some ideas on this subject will be discussed. Finally, some practical consequences will be outlined.

## **C. S. Lewis – a basic case for Natural Law**

C. S. Lewis was one of the past century's most prominent Christian writers.

---

<sup>2</sup> Rom. 2 (ESV).

<sup>3</sup> Rom. 13; 1 Pet. 2.

In his short book *The Abolition of Man*,<sup>4</sup> he gave a concise defence of the existence and importance of Natural Law (later gaining seventh place in the U.S *National Review*’s list of the ‘hundred greatest non-fiction books of the twentieth century’).<sup>5</sup> He argued that values and obligations are absolute and objective elements of human existence,<sup>6</sup> and to deny this is to abandon a factor that is crucial to human integrity and well-being, both individually and corporately.

Lewis pointed out that human societies across the world have normally applied and upheld a set of basic moral principles that are seen as self-evidently right, rational and sensible to follow. An appendix to his book lists over a hundred expressions of these ethical principles, taken from around the world and from the course of human history. They have marked similarities to each other and they include the social laws given in the Ten Commandments,<sup>7</sup> namely to honour parents, not to commit violence, to tell the truth, to respect the marital relationship and to respect personal property. Other commonly found principles include rules of general and specific goodwill to others, honesty, care for children, mercifulness and magnanimity. Lewis’s listed principles come from a wide variety of historical and geographical sources, from ancient Egypt onwards and from North America, through Europe and the Middle East, to China. No doubt he could have listed more; his argument was that similar moral principles appear sufficiently ubiquitously to reflect a common underlying source in human nature.

A society that lives by these inbuilt ways, he argued, will have citizens who have considerate social habits and a nature of being truthful, open and generously disposed towards others. Lewis called those who do not possess this kind of character ‘men without chests’. In them the brain is there and so is the stomach, signifying the presence of intellectual powers and of appetites. But the ‘chest’, denoting the seat of higher personal qualities, is undeveloped or atrophied. Without the ‘chest’, either the appetites will rule the person’s life or else the brain will declare independence, resulting in a cold, impersonal rationalist. In his novel *That Hideous Strength*, Lewis portrayed such an individual in the form of a monomaniac ‘evil scientist’. Integral and genuinely personal qualities are what the ‘men without chests’ are lacking. We may equally well say they have no ‘heart’, which is what lies at the centre of the chest.

For Lewis, all the higher human qualities require following the presence of Natural Law in people’s lives. In his book he called it the *Tao*, or ‘way’, to em-

---

4 Lewis, C.S. *The Abolition of Man*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (1943).

5 See Dyer, J.B. & Watson, M.J. *C. S. Lewis on Politics and the Natural Law*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2017), p. 84.

6 Here we use ‘absolute’ to mean the same for everyone and the opposite of relativist; ‘objective’ means real rather than merely imagined, perceived, or subjective. To make sense, anything referred to as ‘law’ or ‘universal’ has to be both absolute and objective.

7 Exod. 20: 12-17.

pharise that this is something to be lived by and not just known about. It is in accord with a wide variety of religious traditions, but Lewis did not try to link it specifically to any of them, since he believed that its presence is acknowledged as a general part of human experience. Most people in 'normal' societies tend to have a sense of right and wrong that is based on Natural Law.

## Natural Law according to Thomas Aquinas

Writing in thirteenth-century Italy, Thomas Aquinas is widely viewed as Europe's most distinguished medieval philosopher. In his classic account of Christian theology and philosophy, *Summa Theologica*, he presented a theory of Natural Law and ethics that has remained enormously influential.<sup>8</sup> His teaching in this area is based on the statement that there are three levels of law in nature: the laws of physical nature, the laws of animal nature and laws of human nature.<sup>9</sup> All of these derive from God as Creator, and at all three levels, whatever exists has inclinations to follow the laws of its particular nature. Physical and animal behaviour is governed by their inbuilt laws in a clearly determined way, but human beings have both an animal nature and a rational nature, which distinguishes us from lower animals. For us Natural Law operates in the distinctively human areas of rational thinking and society while extending also into the areas of our nature that we share with lower animals. Certain aspects of lower animal behaviour are appropriate for us, while others are unsuitable or must be modified.<sup>10</sup>

Natural Law is about our moral sense of direction, of right and wrong. In the light of its presence in us, we can distinguish between good and evil courses of action<sup>11</sup> and choose the good – both as individuals and in social organisation. Instincts are present in us,<sup>12</sup> but our moral choices are also influenced by good desires, intelligent practical considerations ('practical reason' or 'prudence') and the promptings of conscience.<sup>13</sup> Conscience gives us an awareness of moral obligation, to do the good and avoid the evil. All this is built into our

---

8 Natural Law was of concern to many medieval scholars. Jean Porter quotes a good summary of the concepts of reason and Natural Law by the earlier writer Huguccio of Ferrara, in Porter, J. *Nature as Reason*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans (2005), pp. 14-15, as part of a comprehensive survey and presentation of Natural Law as expounded chiefly by Aquinas.

9 Aquinas *Summa Theol.* I-II, q. 94, art. 2.

10 Aquinas *Summa Theol.* I-II, q. 91, art. 6.

11 Aquinas *Summa Theol.* I-II q. 91, art. 2.

12 Here is a modern example. A man in east London was woken early one morning to see that the house opposite was on fire and an elderly neighbour was in danger. He immediately rushed out in his underwear and saved her. He said, 'I looked out and saw the flames and instinct took over. I just ran out and kicked the door in. I had to act ... when you see someone in trouble it's just human instinct to help them.' (London *Evening Standard*, 1 Feb. 2019).

13 Aquinas connects conscience with the faculty of reason, *Summa Theol.* I-II, q. 19, art. 5.

rational human nature, says Aquinas, although its detailed applications need to be worked out in varying human circumstances. A selection of the important consequences of this for us was indicated by C. S. Lewis, as we have seen.

Several important claims are being made. One is that of universality: the principles of Natural Law apply to all people at all times and to our complete human nature. A second is of its basically rational character in human beings – it is not an animal drive. A third concerns its obligatory character: we *ought* to follow the directions of Natural Law, because it is good, and we ought to do what is good. In fact we are ‘inclined’ to do what is good; this is in our created nature. All this comes from God and is Law for us in an objective and absolute sense.

Aquinas had an essentially optimistic view of human nature. Natural Law is God’s eternal law and reason imprinted on us; this is God’s good will and purpose for us, aimed at our ultimate happiness.<sup>14</sup> So our inclinations to follow its directions are rational and right. We tend to desire what is good, and so our inclinations are morally positive. There is a traditional theological question which asks: are God’s commands good because God follows what is good, or are they good because God commands them? The answer is both, because goodness is in God’s nature. It is similar with ourselves: do we desire the good because it is good, or is it good *because* we find it desirable? Again the answer is in principle both, because human nature in its intended condition is good.<sup>15</sup> It is evident that Aquinas had in mind a concept of *well-functioning human nature*, essentially as God had created it.<sup>16</sup> It may be seen as our ‘proper natural condition’.

In practice, however, we exist in a fallen condition, which makes for serious problems. Our condition is marred by the damaging effects of sinful passions,<sup>17</sup> and our perceptions, desires and inclinations are not always right. One can add

---

14 Aquinas *Summa Theol.* I-II, q. 94, art. 2.

15 Finnis, J. *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (1980) and Grisez, G. *The Way of the Lord Jesus*, Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press (1, 1983 & 2, 1993) assert that we will always find the good attractive and act towards it because it is in our nature to do this, although difficult rational prioritisations are often needed. This is plausible up to a point, but it is only part of the story, and they construct a somewhat complex rational system to deal with life’s complexities. This theory has generated controversy; e.g. Porter *op. cit.*, (8), p. 129f is sceptical and cites further references. There is particular difficulty in their suggestion that anything that is good should never be acted against, since there are conflicts in practice.

16 For further discussion see Porter *op. cit.*, (8), chap. 3 sec. 1. As she later stresses (chap. 5 sec. 1), this does not mean that all human beings should be alike. There is room in the world for a goodly variety of human qualities and social customs, and there is no unique ideal of the ‘truly human’. To adapt her argument a little, all the members of a football team must be good footballers and play by the rules, but they will have individual skills, and teams can have different match-play strategies. (Of course, St Paul wrote similarly about different spiritual gifts.)

17 Aquinas *Summa Theol.* I-II q. 77, art. 2, q. 93, art. 6.

to this the effects of bad social environments and of serious biological malfunctions. Even so, we can still correctly perceive and act on Natural Law much of the time. From the Christian point of view, since we do not always perceive Natural Law correctly, we also need scriptural guidance.<sup>18</sup> Of course, a strong correlation is present between Natural Law and God's teachings through the scriptures.

The Reformation scholars on the whole accepted the Thomist view of Natural Law. There have been many further evaluations, criticisms and elaborations of the subject over the centuries, some of the more recent of which are noted below,<sup>19</sup> with indications of their authors' various positions. The discussion here is based on the position of Aquinas, but with certain qualifications that will become apparent.

## John Paul II – the human person

One particularly important aspect of Aquinas' teaching that needs to be filled out a little is his view of basic human nature. Pope John Paul II (Karol Wojtyła) wrote extensively on Natural Law in his encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* and in

---

18 Aquinas *Summa Theol.* I-II q. 94, art. 6. See also I-II q. 99, art. 2, in which Aquinas points out that human sin and ignorance, together with the limits of reason on its own, make scriptural teaching necessary.

19 Maritain, J. *Man and the State*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press (1951), pp. 84-94, presented a brief but much acclaimed interpretation of Aquinas' teaching. He placed emphasis on human inner promptings, and proposed that Natural Law has always existed in human nature but our knowledge of it has developed over the ages. His proposals include the idea that morality is associated with 'social patterns'. Boyd, C.A. *A Shared Morality*, Grand Rapids: Brazos Press (2007), presents a comparison of Natural Law ethics with other formulations of ethical belief. He argues that Natural Law, based on Aristotle and Aquinas, provides a superior account and is consistent with modern biology and genetics, which are insufficient on their own. Mizzoni, J. *Evolution and the Foundation of Ethics*, Langham: Lexington Books (2017), gives a thorough comparison of several viewpoints on evolutionary theory with a number of different theories of ethics, finding that there are no real inconsistencies among any of these but that evolutionary theory, again, is not enough. Even so, 'ethics has roots in our evolved biology'. The one ethical concept that seems hard to accommodate with evolutionary ideas is that of altruism when practised by a group towards other groups (p. 236). Pope, S.J. *Human Evolution and Christian Ethics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2007), writing from a Christian standpoint, concludes that an evolutionary human history is compatible with Natural Law in the Thomist understanding, emphasising that it is essential to include our relationship with God in the picture, since the morally disordered state of the human race reflects an alienation from God. Arnhart, L. *Darwinian Natural Right: the biological ethics of human nature*, New York: State University of New York Press (1998), argues that Aristotle's view of ethics is entirely compatible with the requirements of human biology, especially from a Darwinian perspective. Writing from outside a Christian standpoint, for him what is lacking in Aristotle is supplied by the ethical thinking of David Hume to provide a kind of Natural Law. He is sympathetic with the more naturalistic aspects of Aquinas' teachings.

earlier writings. Discussing John Paul’s teaching, Peter Bristow<sup>20</sup> brings out the point that ordinary human thinking is marked by a tendency towards dualism. That is to say, a human being is considered to be mind and body, with the essence of our identity taken to be in the mind. The body is then our personal servant, to be managed, controlled and used as we choose. John Paul emphasises that the human person is to be identified in a holistic way as a *union* of body and mind, or spirit (he tended to use ‘spirit’ to encompass ‘mind’), which means that the body has a full place as part of the whole human person.

In opposition to the materialist view that the body comprises *all* that there is about us, John Paul gives the body essential respect while acknowledging the spiritual side of the person. The latter ‘transcends’ the world of material things<sup>21</sup> but is still in union with the body, which is ‘spiritualised matter’.<sup>22</sup> We cannot separate ourselves from our biological nature, and the Natural Law in us applies to our entire nature as a personal whole. Dualism, it may be said, gives rise to precisely what C. S. Lewis was warning against, a defective personal view symbolised by ‘head’ and ‘stomach’ separated. There exists a danger that Aquinas’ theology, with its very strong emphasis on ‘reason’, if taken incorrectly, will simply ‘baptise the brain’ unless the whole person is given proper recognition. John Paul’s writings seek to amend this potential misunderstanding.<sup>23</sup>

## The objectivity of morality

In discussing Natural Law, we have made the usual assumption that our moral awareness has a real and objective reference. We perceive that the sky is blue, and it is true: the sky is blue. We perceive that a rational argument is valid, and it is true: the argument is valid. We might be mistaken, but the issue is objective and not just a matter of opinion. In a similar way we perceive matters of good and evil and of obligation. These, again, are matters of objective truth.<sup>24</sup> This is despite the fact that our human sense of value and obligation, like our sense of rationality, may be limited and error-prone. Lewis’s collection of moral obligations culled from all parts of the world was primarily intended to demonstrate plausibly the objective *existence* of the category of natural moral law in the

---

20 Bristow, P. *Christian Ethics and the Human Person*, Leominster: Gracewing (2013), pp. 22, 114ff. See also Pope *op. cit.*, (19), p. 45f.

21 Bristow *op. cit.*, (20), p. 125.

22 Bristow *op. cit.*, (20), p. 117.

23 The contemporary philosopher Roger Scruton has argued very powerfully for regarding human nature as essentially personal, Scruton, R. *On Human Nature*, Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press (2017). Starting from the scientific picture, he moves unavoidably to a view that sees human beings in relation to the ‘transcendent’, which is to be interpreted as a divine presence in the world.

24 Of course, there are private values too, but these do not normally carry moral obligation.

human race. At the same time, the wide agreement in content between different societies' moral perceptions gives support to the interpretation that their content corresponds to objective and absolute standards.

In short, moral categories are more than just subjective personal preferences, feelings and evaluations, or social customs. But if values and obligations can form objectively real categories, how is a meaningful framework to be assigned for this? For Christians and other theists, genuine moral categories rest on the existence of God, and their authority on God's authority. People without definite religious beliefs have sometimes proposed a 'higher nature' where moral reality resides, but even the sceptical Richard Dawkins has conceded that 'it is pretty hard to defend absolutist morals on grounds other than religious ones'.<sup>25</sup>

A common non-religious proposal is that our moral impressions derive from feelings and impulses that have evolved in human beings, as social animals, to facilitate their well-being and survival.<sup>26</sup> To this it may first be replied that moral sentiments may indeed have these beneficial effects, and so a well-disposed Creator might well wish to implant them in our human nature, just as Aquinas said. However, if they are essentially no more than subjective sentiments we have problems, because even if they are widely shared, subjective sentiments as such have no morally obligatory binding power. They may *seem* compelling, but this is an illusion. All this is in accord with Lewis's message, which he expressed in detail in his essay *The Poison of Subjectivity*.<sup>27</sup> In practice it would seem that most people, even when they do not have a framework of religious belief, still act and speak as if values and obligations have a real and objective status.

An opposite position would be that 'Nothing is good and nothing is bad; nothing is right and nothing is wrong.' Amoralism such as this leaves a dangerous moral vacuum, however. It can easily lead to cynicism or worse, such as anarchy or power exploitation, and its adherents themselves are left in a vulnerable position. They might make debatable claims about being 'honest', but how can honesty now be said to be 'good'? *In extremis*, the moral believers might even decide to lock up or exterminate the amoralists, on the grounds that they are a grave danger to society! The amoralists can hardly protest, 'You should not do that to us, it is *wrong*,' for this is precisely what they have disqualified themselves from saying.<sup>28</sup>

---

25 Dawkins, R. *The God Delusion*, London: Transworld/Black Swan (2007), p. 266. But although Dawkins is a well-known supporter of geneticism, he employs the notion of 'Darwinian' in this chapter in a more general sense than pure genetic selection, to try to account for the existence of altruism and other societally helpful behaviour patterns (p. 251).

26 A view known as 'sentimentalism' and proposed especially by David Hume

27 Lewis, C.S. *Christian Reflections*, Reading: Cox and Wyman (1967), p. 72; (later reissued under the title *The Seeing Eye*).

28 Do amoralists really exist? Machiavelli was widely seen as an amoralist. A prominent



No doubt a more common attitude is illustrated by Richard Holloway, who was episcopal Bishop of Edinburgh when he proposed in his *Godless Morality*<sup>29</sup> that morality is best discussed without reference to God. This is a book that could well have been written by a humanist. In so far as his thesis is that common sense and rationality are reliable guides for moral discussion, Holloway might have been advocating a form of Natural Law. However, his view of morality as a set of pragmatic, flexible and pluralistic social conventions provides little more than a tolerant form of social management, with absolute moral obligation replaced by agreements and pressures. This does not fit in with the idea of Natural Law, which is considered as having an absolute and prescriptive basis and as possessing *authority*, because it derives from God. Holloway’s ethic is to some extent natural, but it is not Law. Indeed, if morals are non-objective and you as an individual can get away without following them, why not do just that? Run your own life! The liberal ethic also has no objective counter-argument to extremist groups who assert their own morality, such as jihadist movements – other than by simply banning them.

Our discussion does not provide concrete proof that there exist objective and absolute values and obligations, but it does make plain some of the dangers and problems if this is denied.<sup>30</sup> It is a significant social fact that many religious unbelievers, including for example some who are political activists or humanists, hold to strict moral values which they believe have absolute validity. Atheists can certainly have a moral sense and conviction, but a Christian can say that this derives, as in other people, from God’s Natural Law within them. It can operate without being recognised for what it is, and the atheists (like others) can correctly perceive its precepts, to within their own limited viewpoints. Rationally, they have no clear reason to regard their morality as objectively real and binding, even though they do think of it this way. In fact, they are following their heart. Christians may well agree with their moral opinions and would say that God’s law is acting in their heart without their realising whose law it is.

The question of human rights also comes into play. At one level, rights are

---

twentieth-century example would be G. B. Chisholm, who became the first general secretary of the World Health Organisation in 1946, despite advocating ‘the eradication of the concept of right and wrong’ and of ‘moralities’, and wishing to free our race from the ‘crippling burden of good and evil’. (‘The re-establishment of peacetime society’, *Psychiatry* (1946) IX (3), quoted from I. Eibl-Eibesfeldt, cited below, p. 710). Chisholm believed that rational thinking and psychotherapy would solve it all. Even so, he was very effective in the WHO and may have been more moral than he thought. Most amoralists probably live quietly and cynically in the suburbs without publicity. A few become sociopathic criminals such as drug cartel leaders.

29 Holloway, R. *Godless Morality: keeping religion out of ethics*, Edinburgh: Canongate Books (1999).

30 A useful critique of several modern ethical theories has been given by Ritchie, A. *From Morality to Metaphysics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2012). As in the present paper, he considers objective moral values to be a human necessity, and they must be linked to God in order to make any real sense.

simply permissions granted by those in power, such as to put up a market stall on Tuesdays or to sell alcohol. At a deeper level, a widespread conviction exists among us that human beings possess some basic inbuilt rights which should be acknowledged by everyone. The United States Declaration of Independence stated as 'self-evident' that all people have certain 'inalienable' rights, namely life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness; fifteen years later a Bill of Rights added more to this list.<sup>31</sup> It may be that not all claimed rights are self-evident, or even valid, but Natural Rights can in most cases be regarded as an alternative viewpoint on Natural Law.<sup>32</sup> A right to life means that no one may murder me, a right to property means that no one may steal from me. Many of the moral laws that derive from statements of human rights refer to how individuals should behave towards each other, while others concern how governments should legislate, and they can often be argued equally well from Natural Law.

We cannot attempt here a full examination of Natural Rights. However, if Natural Law does not exist in an objective and absolute sense, then neither do natural human rights, given the strong interconnection between the two. In that case, laws and rights alike are just expressions of human conventions, powers and permissions, and the American founding fathers were wrong: no rights are self-evident or inalienable at all.

### **Natural moral relativism?**

In the previous section we argued for moral objectivity. This denies moral subjectivism, in which morality is something that one can think up or choose for oneself. But there are theories of 'moral relativism' that assert that morality is different for different individuals and groups but can still be real, that is, real for each, while not being absolute. Could it then be that different individuals and groups may possess within themselves different versions of Natural Law?

A big problem with that proposal is that it ends up compromising the concept of a common humanity. It becomes hard to make life work at the individual level: relationships are very difficult if Natural Law is not shared law. Also, it tends to imply that 'whatever is, is right', and there are surely individuals whose nature is definitely not right. 'I am a natural born sadist – I love causing and seeing suffering', may be a true statement of someone's private nature, but it is surely unacceptable as a basis for any moral law at all. Similar problems occur if different groups can have different Natural Laws: we end up with 'moral ghettos'. This opens the door for Nazi philosophy, for example, that if one race is

---

31 At the same time, the revolutionary French National Assembly made a Declaration of Rights saying that the 'natural and imprescriptible rights of man' included 'liberty, property, security, and resistance to oppression'.

32 Here again there have been sceptical viewpoints, such as that of Jeremy Bentham (1823) who considered the entire idea of human rights to be 'nonsense', even 'nonsense on stilts'!

sufficiently different in culture from another, then the ‘superior’ race can claim to be ‘naturally entitled’ to enslave the ‘inferior’. If we protest, they reply, ‘Our Natural Law is different from your Natural Law!’

We surely do not wish to go down these paths. The answer has to be that there is indeed a prescriptive concept of ‘well-functioning human nature’. This does not mean we are all identical – individuals vary, and we are also male and female – but within the limits of variation that are compatible with good functioning, we are all bound by the same God-given Natural Law. Aquinas firmly stressed the universality of the basic principles of Natural Law.<sup>33</sup>

## The scientific challenge

### *Central questions*

Serious challenges to the concept of Natural Law arise from the very different historical outlooks of Aquinas and of modern science. Aquinas wrote in an age that believed that at a fairly recent point in historical time, as indicated by the book of Genesis, God created the world and everything was created in good order. When Satan successfully tempted the first humans, Adam and Eve, into disobedience, evil entered the world. Evil consists of nothing substantive in itself, but is rather a deficiency or a distortion of the original good order.<sup>34</sup> Human beings are in effect ‘perfect creations with something gone wrong’, and Natural Law is about living in accord with an unfallen human condition. From this perspective, it was possible to have a relatively optimistic view of the world, humanity and people’s natural inclinations, in so far as the latter are not too degraded.

Such a portrayal seems very different from the scientific picture of our race as having evolved from animal ancestors, which makes it difficult to envision the existence of an original perfect natural human state.<sup>35</sup> The Thomist picture also seems to underestimate the serious condition of what St Paul and others referred to as the ‘flesh’, which is broader than simple animal appetites and desires and denotes our earthly nature as a whole.<sup>36</sup> Can the two pictures be brought together?

A central task here is to decide how human beings essentially differ from non-human animals. Our species is highly intelligent, but other species also

---

33 Aquinas *Summa Theol.* I-II, q. 94, art. 4. See also Boyd *op. cit.*, (19), p. 89f.

34 Aquinas *Summa Theol.*, I, q. 48, art. 1.

35 Certain writers, from Rousseau to the more recent anthropologist Margaret Mead, sought to portray our early ancestors as ‘noble savages’ living lives of primitive innocence. This view is now almost completely discredited.

36 Rom. 7:18-23.

possess significant intelligence. We have advanced language skills and tool-making abilities, but other species exhibit some of these. Certainly, our overall faculty of reason is much more advanced than that of other species, but a particularly critical issue is that human beings have moral awareness and moral responsibility.<sup>37</sup> We do not attribute morality to animals; their behaviour may sometimes be extremely aggressive or otherwise unpleasant, but they are not to be *blamed* for this. Charles Darwin wrote: 'I fully subscribe to the judgement...that of all the differences between man and the lower animals, the moral sense or conscience is the most important.'<sup>38</sup> Lower animals may often behave cooperatively, sometimes even generously, but we do not feel that this constitutes in itself a true moral quality, and we do not say a chimpanzee is behaving *immorally* if, for example, he eats the offspring of another chimpanzee.<sup>39</sup> Darwin considered that the acquisition of sufficient mental powers by humans eventually generated sensitivity to the interests of the social group, together with feelings of sympathy for others, and this was able to develop into something that we might acknowledge as morality.

While reasonable as far as it goes, this does not seem sufficient. Moral values and obligations are not just a matter of intellectual abilities combined with emotions,<sup>40</sup> and group loyalty does not necessarily imply morality, since groups as well as individuals can practise bad things. Darwin's argument can support a *potential* for morality, but the moral categories are a priori and therefore cannot be established by extrapolating from something else. They represent a qualitatively different type of personal awareness, and at some stage our species acquired this.

---

37 The psychologist Jerome Kagan has listed 'four uniquely human qualities' (*Daedalus*(2004) 133 (4), 77-88), namely awareness of others' thoughts and feelings, advanced language skills, moral awareness and advanced self-awareness. This is a very interesting area, although controversial, but for present purposes we focus on moral awareness. Curiously, Kagan fails to mention religion as a human characteristic.

38 Darwin, C. *The Descent of Man*, 2nd edn., London: John Murray (1875), pp. 97-111.

39 The primatologist Frans de Waal has argued somewhat differently in, e.g., *Good Natured, the origins of right and wrong in humans and other animals*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press (1997). Even so, while animals can be *observed* to show cooperation, altruism, even 'normative' behaviour that we may be tempted to call 'moral', it is easy to project our own evaluations on to all this, and the questions asked in the present pages still apply. Kagan *op. cit.*, (37), remarks that de Waal concedes that he has never seen a guilty chimpanzee. More can be found in Macedo, S. & Ober, J. (eds.) *Primates and Philosophers, how morality evolved*, Princeton: Princeton University Press (2006), in which de Waal enters dialogue with several philosophers, illustrating the variety of views held on this subject. None of these contributors denies objective morality in humans, but de Waal would ascribe it also to chimpanzees.

40 The sceptic David Hume made a similar proposal, but it is intrinsically subjective and seems unable to embrace moral values in an absolute sense, or their real meaning for us.

### *The evolutionary process*

In the standard evolutionary picture, all living species developed over many millions of years by processes of genetic mutation, whereby those mutations that proved more effective in assisting survival and reproduction became prevalent in the population of a given species, and new species became formed when sufficiently major changes had accrued. Traditional Darwinism of this kind has been augmented in recent years by the realisation that epigenetic changes can be important, that changes in environment may favour harmless genetic variations that have already occurred, and that ‘cultural’ effects within a species may be important. For example, birds genetically inherit the ability to build nests and to sing songs, but the nature of the song is something a young bird has to learn from older birds. Various primates of the same species, such as chimpanzees, are observed to have certain behavioural practices that are universal to the species, while other practices are group-dependent and have been acquired, copied and passed down within a particular group. An up-to-date account of these complex issues has been given by Denis Alexander.<sup>41</sup>

It has become increasingly evident that biological and cultural developments can be interconnected, a realisation that supersedes older and simpler ideas about natural selection (although Darwin himself was well aware of most of the issues). Environmental and cultural effects can turn on and off various genes. The adoption of cultural practices can influence genetic developments. (For example, in humans the keeping of sheep and cattle made lactose tolerance a valuable asset so that older children and adults could improve their nutrition by digesting milk, and many of us now have a gene for this.) There have been claims in the past that the human brain at birth is a ‘blank slate’ whose contents are filled by the upbringing and education the child receives.<sup>42</sup> There is a certain amount of truth here, since this is how cultural influences are transmitted, but genetically inherited content can also be present. As well as general human behavioural characteristics, infants and young children are observed to have individual temperaments and even rudimentary moral attitudes.<sup>43</sup> The opposite claim is that human behaviour is predominantly genetically determined, including altruism and social practices; this too is now not so widely believed.<sup>44</sup>

---

41 Alexander, D. *Genes, Determinism and God*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2017).

42 The modern ‘blank slate’ viewpoint is usually attributed to the seventeenth century philosopher John Locke, but it was also Aquinas’ stated position, taken over from Aristotle (Aquinas *Summa Theol.* I, q. 79, art. 2). However, animals do not have ‘blank slate’ brains; they possess inbuilt instincts, and humans share in animal nature (I-II, q. 94, art. 2). Also, the human being has ‘an inclination to the good, according to the nature of his reason’ (*ibid.*). This does not sound like a blank slate, and all this needs serious clarification. Maritain’s argument can be seen as an attempt in this direction, although not from genetic or biological considerations.

43 Steven Pinker has argued strongly against the ‘blank slate’ position in *The Blank Slate: the modern denial of human nature*, London: BCA/Penguin (2002).

44 Wilson, E.O. wrote an influential work, *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*, Cambridge, MA:

In short, although opinions differ about the details, there is a wide consensus that the correct characterisation of many advanced animal species, including our own, must include not only genetic and other biologically inherited factors, but also 'cultural' factors that are passed down by the young learning from older members of their group. These two contributions are inseparable, and both are essential for a correct understanding of our own human nature.<sup>45</sup> Individual factors and societal factors must both be taken into account.<sup>46</sup>

### *Palaeontological history*

It is now known that there were a number of human-like species on our planet before our own species, *homo sapiens*, became dominant. In particular, Neanderthals and Denisovans have been studied, and it has been shown that they interbred to a limited degree with humans. Recent paleontological research has now extended the time-scales over which *homo sapiens* may have evolved, most likely starting in Africa.<sup>47</sup> There are believed to have been two major episodes, occurring over periods starting around 130,000<sup>48</sup> and 60,000 years ago, during which modern human beings migrated out of Africa, in the first phase mainly to the Middle East and in the later phase to wide regions of the planet. The existence of our species within Africa dates from older periods than this, which are a matter of debate and of continuing scientific discovery.

The archaeologist Steven Mithen has proposed an account of the historical development of advanced mental faculties in human beings.<sup>49</sup> The period around 60,000 years ago is of special interest because around this time many humans who had previously just used stone and wooden tools began to produce a variety of more sophisticated artefacts, giving evidence of the development of more elaborate ways of thinking than before. These include the production of body adornments such as necklaces, other works of art, and signs of religious awareness. This new development is referred to as the 'Middle/Upper Palaeo-

---

Harvard University Press (1975) which inspired in the 1990s a series of books developing the concept of 'Evolutionary Psychology'. These ideas proclaim an evolutionary origin for much or all of human nature and social practice and had a strong popular appeal, since they appear to exonerate us from moral responsibility. They were strongly attacked in a series of essays edited by Hilary Rose & Steven Rose *Alas Poor Darwin*, London: Vintage/ Jonathan Cape (2001). Another thorough critique of this position was given by Farber, P.L. in his *The Temptations of Evolutionary Ethics*, Berkeley: University of California Press (1998).

45 Perhaps surprisingly, Richard Dawkins stressed both sides of the situation in his badly-titled *The Selfish Gene*, 30th Anniversary edn., Oxford: Oxford University Press (2006).

46 More can be found in de Waal, F.B.M. & Tyack, P.L. (eds.) *Animal Social Complexity: intelligence, culture and individualised societies*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press (2005).

47 Lee, S-H. *Close Encounters with Humankind*, London: Norton (2018), provides a recent update aimed at a popular readership.

48 An earlier figure of 180,000 years has sometimes been advocated.

49 Mithen, S. *The Prehistory of Mind*, London: Thames and Hudson (1996).

lithic transition’; Mithen calls it a ‘big bang of human culture’ and believes that this is when the final major redesign of the human mind took place, possibly at slightly different times in different parts of the world.<sup>50</sup> If similar mental developments really occurred in disconnected branches of the same species for no obvious reason, this would certainly seem remarkable. Another possibility might be that significant developments occurred before the widespread human dispersal.

Knowledge of our species in ancient times is limited to inferences from surviving remains, paintings, artefacts and, recently, DNA studies.<sup>51</sup> Accessing moral ways of thinking from these sources is difficult, and for further information we must examine historical periods and cultures and those of the modern world. Nevertheless, given that social practices are found both in animal groups and in the earliest human societies for which we have evidence, it is hard to argue against the presence of social norms within our species at all times. The questions to be asked concern whether sufficiently universal features can be attributed to human beings to justify the term ‘human nature’ and, for our present inquiry, whether some set of these may provide support for the idea of Natural Law. In this, it should be noted that when discussing ‘social norms’, anthropological discourse can sometimes be a little vague in distinguishing between practices that are merely customs and those that may have a moral component.

### *Anthropological studies*

Human universals, as characterised by the anthropologist Christoph Antweiler, are ‘phenomena that occur regularly in all or almost all known societies’.<sup>52</sup> In his comprehensive general survey of this subject, Antweiler diverges from those anthropologists who have considered biology as providing universals while culture gives diversity, since there are cultural universals too. Universals in this discussion form a very broad collection of features that include aspects of language and conceptualisation, kin groups, music, poetry, rights and obligations, etiquette, rituals, taboos, moral sentiments, property, and many other items. Lists of these universals have been published, notably by the anthropologist Donald Brown,<sup>53</sup> and some of them are potentially relevant in the con-

---

50 Mithen, *S. op. cit.*, (49), p. 152.

51 Reich, D. *Who We Are and How We Got Here*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2018).

52 Antweiler, C. *Our Common Denominator: human universals revisited*, English edn., New York: Berghahn (2016), pp. 38, 255. Antweiler concentrates on generalities and methods of approach to the subject, without trying to explain the causes of universals. His approach encompasses both biological and cultural factors (p. 36ff). While acknowledging the relevance of religious practices (p. 21ff), he does not concentrate greatly on this area but emphasises diversity (p. 124ff). Of course, the Bible never states that everyone follows the same religion!

53 Brown, D.E. *Human Universals*, New York: McGraw-Hill (1991). Brown’s list, with further

text of Natural Law. Brown considers that up to a certain broad extent, 'innate human universals continuously and pervasively structure human nature';<sup>54</sup> and that there are hundreds of them. Social psychologists Jonathan Haidt and Craig Joseph have proposed that humans are equipped with an innate set of *intuitive ethics* (their italics) which affect patterns of social approval and disapproval, and for which the evidence is best for those surrounding 'suffering, hierarchy, reciprocity, and purity. These intuitions undergird the moral systems that cultures develop...'<sup>55</sup> While Haidt and Joseph's examples of today's 'cultural virtues' include some items of a very particular nature – such as concern for the suffering of baby seals – they seem generally capable of encompassing the usually accepted elements of Natural Law.

A magisterial presentation of common behavioural themes observed among different modern peoples worldwide has been given by the ethologist Irenäus Eibl-Eibesfeldt.<sup>56</sup> He considers that human beings have evolved biological features ('phylogenetic adaptations') that affect their conduct, but that some of these are more suited to the Stone Age than today. Many of these biologically-based norms, such as to do with possessions, marriage attachments, sincerity, loyalty and obedience, are reflected in biblical commandments and remain relevant, but our more aggressive natural tendencies need to be reined in.<sup>57</sup> Unlike some other anthropologists, he opposes ethical relativism and believes that the biological factors are present and cannot be ignored.

There is therefore reasonable anthropological support for a concept of human nature that includes moral tendencies. The existence of social norms is certainly universal, and in practice societies usually have norms relating to honesty, marriage and respect for other people and their property. Whether genetic or cultural in origin, or both, these can form a basis for morality and may be plausibly seen as part of human nature, both individually and communally, with the proviso that localised cultural factors may sometimes override the standard pattern, producing societies that are anomalous in some respect or other.<sup>58</sup> Within any society, of course, there are antisocial individuals who often act contrary to the norm, as no doubt most of us do from time to time. This does not invalidate the norm as such, for normatively perfect people – social

---

additions, has been reproduced in Pinker, *S. op. cit.*, (43), p. 435ff.

54 Brown, D.E. 'Human universals, human nature and human culture', *Daedalus* (2004) 133 (4), 47.

55 Haidt, J. & Joseph, C. 'Intuitive ethics: how innately prepared intuitions generate culturally variable virtues', *Daedalus* (2004) 133 (4), 55.

56 Eibl-Eibesfeldt, I. *Human Ethology*, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers (1989), 3rd paperback printing (2012).

57 *ibid.*, p. 711f.

58 The evaluation of unusual cultural practices is clearly tricky. How much weight should we give to a very small tribal group doing something highly exceptional?



saints, we might call them – are always likely to be exceptional.

### *Human moral awakening*

To align a selection of human universals, as noted by anthropologists, with Natural Law as understood by Aquinas and others, some further constraining principles would seem to be necessary. In addition to having norms that are consistent with Natural Law, many societies have considered other practices, such as xenophobia, honour killings, revenge and abduction of young women, to be both natural and laudable. These would also have been present in our evolved ancestors. We would surely now say that such activities, along with quite a wide variety of other potentially harmful evolved human tendencies and inclinations, need to be forbidden or controlled, but (reflecting the view of Eibl-Eibesfeldt) it is hard to see that evolved human nature on its own was adequately able to achieve this regulatory capability.

Evolved human nature, we have said, had a potential for morality. But it is not clear how far a knowledge of good values and practices (as we now see it) would emerge from the mixture of universals that biological human nature seems to present, and neither is it evident that our ancestors had the capability to act accordingly. How and at what point then did human beings acquire authentic moral discernment, capability and conscience? A ‘moral transformation’ was required, which would promote the evolved human nature into a higher condition. In fact a new personal status is implied.

From a Christian standpoint, the following might be suggested. It would be helpful if external assistance had been given to elevate humanity to a new level of personal functioning and at the same time to support this new ‘well-functioning human nature’ with moral awareness and conscience, together with personal and communal enablement to enhance good tendencies and control potentially harmful ones. In short, we might hope and expect that God, as the Author of nature, would act so as to fulfil and perfect nature’s work. It is at this stage that true human Natural Law would be imprinted in human beings.<sup>59</sup>

Denis Alexander has outlined several different models of how God might have established spiritual contact with our early ancestors in order to bring them into a special relationship.<sup>60</sup> His preferred suggestion is that such an event may have occurred some 8000 years ago, in which God made contact with a particular human couple in the Middle East, corresponding to Adam and Eve in the Genesis account. Another possibility would be to have this primal contact occur in Africa some 200,000 years ago. Alexander discusses other options, but

---

59 For a biblical example of a sudden human spiritual ‘enablement’, see 1 Sam. 16:13.

60 Alexander, D. *Creation or Evolution, do we have to choose?*, 2nd edn., Oxford: Monarch (2014), chap. 10.

from what has been said above it may be even better to imagine God as touching all of the limited number of *homo sapiens*, or at least a substantial group of them, when they were living in Africa before the Middle/ Upper Palaeolithic transition. The spiritual energy that these humans received could have given rise to the remarkable developments that occurred at that time, including the further dispersal of humans around the globe. 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the Earth!'<sup>61</sup> On the basis of DNA studies, the genetic analyst David Reich has tentatively identified a small present-day Tanzanian tribe as direct descendants of the ancient African population in which the Middle/ Upper Palaeolithic transition happened.<sup>62</sup>

The first spiritually awakened people<sup>63</sup> may be seen as represented by the Genesis figures of Adam and Eve. We imagine that God brought people into a new relationship with himself, thereby perfecting the work of biological evolution with a new Natural Law, but that this relationship became damaged by the intrusion of sin and evil into human society – a diabolical incursion cannot be excluded. What we call the Fall signifies that contact with God has been seriously impaired.<sup>64</sup> The original contact had the effect of partnering human nature with God's nature. If this contact is broken, the animal nature tends to reassert its dominance, so as to act as what New Testament writers term the 'flesh'. But we remain human, and God's Law has remained present in human beings as Natural Law. We often lose sight of it, but it is still discernible and represents a good mode of personal and social existence that corresponds to 'well-functioning human nature'.<sup>65</sup>

The above inevitably contains a great deal of speculation, and it is beyond

---

61 Gen. 1:28.

62 Reich, D. *op. cit.*, (51), p. 221. It would be interesting to study the Hadza further. Eibl-Eibesfeldt *op. cit.*, (56), p. 324, cites reports that they have fought over territory, just like many other human groups.

63 This is in surprising concordance with the view of the Stoic-influenced Cicero: 'We believe that in the long course of ages and the uninterrupted succession of celestial revolutions, the seed of the human race was sown on our planet, and being scattered over the earth, was animated by the divine gift of souls. Thus men retained from their terrestrial origin, their perishable and mortal bodies, while their immortal spirits were ingenerated by Deity.' Cicero, Barham, F. (trans.) *op. cit.*, (1).

64 That is to say, just as evil is a distortion or 'privation' of the good, so 'original sin' should be seen as the degradation of an original good relationship with God.

65 A person's human nature can be affected by biological malfunction which is not to be attributed directly to alienation from God. Thus, Pinker *op. cit.*, (43), pp. 261-263, gives an outline of psychopathy, an apparently biological condition that can have terrible consequences. In the human context, it is evident that physical nature sometimes does not 'function well', with repercussions on personal nature. Despite the obstacles, however, moral training and accountability still have to be applied. It is an error to say, 'Whatever is, is right.' Human society needs to find ways of dealing with such situations.

our present scope to engage further with the Genesis story.<sup>66</sup> However a ‘gradualist’ approach to human moral awareness seems problematic. One is either morally accountable or not, obligation is there or not, and this defines a relationship with divine authority which is there or not. Partnership is there or not. This central relationship is surely something that God would have wished to provide in a definitive way in the first instance. It is also reasonable to imagine that an enhanced spiritual life could also result in an enrichment of human life in general ways, such as in artistic and cultural works, and not just in moral principles.

Much more debate is needed on this challenging topic and, despite what has just been said, it is worth examining one gradualist approach, namely that of Maritain.<sup>67</sup> Following on from Aquinas, he considered that the Natural Law is an ‘ideal order’ that is ‘grounded on the human essence and its unchangeable structure’ which ‘exists...in every human being’. Gradually over the ages, people have gained greater knowledge of it, notably through developing inclinations to follow it and through a process of social learning. But Maritain’s ideas need to be made more precise. How did this unchangeable ‘essence’ come to be in every human being, and when did this first happen? What exactly is it? It would seem that our ancestors had inclinations of many kinds – how do we associate some of them with our essence? This is an interesting proposal, but it leaves many open questions.

### **A modern case study – the kibbutz movement**

If human beings have built-in natural living patterns, then a society that violates them in a serious way cannot be expected to function well. An instructive example of this is provided by the kibbutz movement in Israel, and has been commented on by a number of writers.<sup>68</sup>

The original thinking and aspiration behind a kibbutz were that it should be a perfect example of communism in miniature – a few hundred people in a completely equal community. Family structures were minimal; babies were taken from their mothers a few weeks after birth and placed in community nurseries; children were likewise raised communally and slept in dormitories. Marriage was still allowed, if only for the production of children, but eating was in communal dining-halls. Nearly all property was communal.

---

66 Some further points of view can be found in Barrett, M. & Caneday, A. (eds.) *Four Views on the Historical Adam*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan (2013). The view sketched in this paper comes closest to that of John Walton, with the proviso that historically, Adam and Eve may have been more than just a single couple.

67 Maritain, J. *op. cit.*, (19).

68 Information used here has been taken from Arnhart *op. cit.*, (19), pp.95-99 and Pinker *op. cit.*, (43), pp. 246, 257.

The following issues and problems developed, however:

young people who had been brought up together in the same kibbutz did not usually wish to marry each other. This can be interpreted as reflecting an inbuilt aversion to incest in our species;<sup>69</sup>

mothers wanted to care for their own babies and children;

teenage girls did not want to shower or share bathrooms with teenage boys;

individual families eventually gathered together for afternoon tea, this being the only private opportunity for them to eat and drink together;

people wanted to own their own clothing and more of their other possessions.

Changes therefore had to be made. (For various reasons, the kibbutz movement eventually came to an end.) The obvious conclusion is that forcing too many anti-natural practices on people is liable to have negative effects on the well-being of the society concerned. Family bonds can be seen as constituting a factor that is particularly essential to well-functioning human societal nature, a point that needs to be stressed in any account of Natural Law and one which Aquinas perhaps underplays. (Of course, families can sometimes break down, making other reasonable arrangements necessary.) Could one dilute the moral side of Natural Law and say that nature just makes *recommendations*? The reply would be that we are talking about human well-being, individual and communal, short-term and long-term, and these are indeed moral issues. All lifestyles are not equally good.

## Implications of Natural Law

Natural Law is acclaimed as 'God's Law in our hearts'. Although the scriptures provide more explicit moral guidance, there is an obvious need to consider how the concepts of Natural Law may work out in practice. Three important areas can be identified: society, personal behaviour and physical integrity.

### (a) *Natural Law in society*

There is general agreement that a society should be run according to morally acceptable principles, which means that there should be honest and good human relationships and government with justice. A traditional definition of justice is that it consists of 'giving every person their due'. However, justice is a much-argued concept; the Bible does not give a precise recipe for achieving it, and not all rulers are Christian believers. This means that Natural Law often

---

<sup>69</sup> See e.g. Boyd, C. *op. cit.*, (19), p. 93f; Hauser, M.D. *Moral Minds*, London: Little, Brown/ Abacus (2006), p. 217.

has to be employed as a source of operational guidance, and if the principles that are followed are genuinely right and just, they will be recognised as such, at least by many.

The alternative would be government by pragmatism, by an imposed set of human principles (such as Marxism-Leninism), or indeed, as C. S. Lewis feared, by tyranny of some kind. But even the Marxists, when they were in power, felt the need to argue that their policies were just. The Bible sets out some important central principles, such as rewarding those who do good, punishing wrongdoers, honesty in commerce, unbiased law-courts, and treating the poor and the weak humanely. These almost universally held principles, Christians would say, are also applications of Natural Law and are generally accepted standards of justice. Given the inevitable human disagreements about practical details, dialogue is also needed. Natural moral perceptions, biblical principles and intelligent discussion must work together.

Interpersonal relations are also subject to Natural Law. These include honesty, keeping of promises, generosity, and indeed all the personal qualities that C.S. Lewis stressed that ‘men with chests’ should display and which are good features of well-functioning societies.

### *(b) Natural Law in individual behaviour*

Our behaviour and personal character as human individuals involves what may be called virtues and vices, and more specifically the regulation of the so-called ‘flesh’, our earthly or animal nature. The New Testament is explicit in condemning the ‘works of the flesh’, and we can list some of these in terms of the traditional so-called seven deadly sins: anger, avarice, envy, gluttony, laziness, lust and pride. Many of these tendencies may have once given evolutionary benefit, being centred on individual self-concern and advantage in reproduction.

Some of the above list of appetites and desires represent obvious character faults, while the exercise of others is appropriate at a certain level. We need to eat, and a desire for food is not in itself a problem; likewise, sexual reproduction is also a biological necessity. Difficulty comes in connection with moderation and control. Natural Law suggests that people usually know that they should not behave in ways of excess, or badly towards others, and that this knowledge comes from reasonable considerations along with a general moral sense of conscience.<sup>70</sup>

Even so, there is a strong Christian teaching that we require God’s help in our lives in order to control these things properly. The problem, as outlined above, is that what may be appropriate behaviour at the biological level on its own can often be quite inappropriate for spiritually endowed beings such as

---

70 Aquinas *Summa Theol.* I-II, q. 56, art. 4 and I-II q. 59 art. 5 illustrate Aquinas’ views.

ourselves, since our *personal* nature radically redefines the parameters of our existence relative to a purely biological natural state.

### *(c) Natural law in physical behaviour*

Natural law can contribute in a potentially important way to how we think of ourselves as human physical beings. The primary issue here, as discussed earlier, is: are we to consider ourselves as personal body-mind unities, so that moral questions apply to us physically as well as mentally? In other words, as John Paul and others have argued, is body-mind dualism to be rejected? If so, to what extent is it allowable to use our bodies in ways that diverge seriously from their natural good function? For example, the stomach is there to receive food for nutritional purposes. Would it be acceptable, as has been alleged about lavish Roman feasts, to eat a lot, vomit it up, and then return to the feast? On a very different level, what would we make of modern artificial pseudo-foods that looked, tasted and felt like real food but which had no nutritional value whatever? Would we feel that such things go too far?

Questions of a similar kind present themselves with regard to sexual behaviour which, according to a simple view of natural function, is concerned with the production of children and the bonding of the parents while the children grow up. Family planning would seem to be a reasonable practice, and Natural Law includes considerations of rational practice. But, how far is it good or reasonable to diverge from the natural pattern? There are large numbers of sexual practices which have usually been seen as inconsistent with good natural function; the book of Leviticus in the Bible lists a wide selection of these, which Christians and Jews have traditionally accepted as binding. In this matter, it is evident that almost everybody draws a line somewhere, but not always in the same place. Clearly, there is scope for discussion to clarify our understanding of these issues in the light of Natural Law.

## **Some final comments**

Although the subject matter of this paper is not new, it seemed good to collect together a general account of Natural Law that includes a scientific perspective. Some key points of the argument can be briefly summarised as follows. Human beings have a broadly shared sense of moral values and of obligations to do good and avoid wrong. The strong common factor in what has been perceived and practised in different times and places is sufficient to justify this as authentically representing an objective moral factor in us. Its basic contents can be thought of as Natural Law. It is based on a background concept of well-functioning human nature. Our individual lives reflect this imperfectly, as do our societies, but Natural Law points towards how things ought to be. It is not simply a rule-book but is about how human nature works best, and we should respond to it. We make use of Thomas Aquinas in discussing these matters.

Moral principles need to be connected to an absolute and objective source of value and obligation, applicable to each and to all. Otherwise they have no real binding power but are merely matters of convenience, personal preference and social pressure. In that case, it becomes logical for people to do whatever they may think is best, or what they can get away with, especially in a highly individualised society. A theistic or equivalent religious position gives sufficient basis for believing in the universal nature of Natural Law or, indeed, for believing in any objective or absolute moral principles at all. Natural Law is God’s Law in our hearts.

Important questions arise as to how our ancestors could have evolved from an amoral animal species into a human race with personal and moral qualities. Our animal nature, which Christian teachings refer to as the ‘flesh’, is not only inadequate but even inimical to our functioning in a good human way. As a response to these problems I have drawn on the idea that God at some point ‘lifted up’ some early humans into a new state with new personal and spiritual capabilities, but that sin entered the scene and we now live in a somewhat mixed condition. This is in accord with traditional Christian thinking, and it seems a clearer position than to say that we were elevated bit by bit and corrupted bit by bit, but any proposal in this area is bound to be speculative.

Finally, we examined some of the practical implications of the existence of Natural Law in us, in more concrete detail.

It is possible to use our basic understanding of Natural Law to work out rationally how it should be implemented in contextual social situations, but in practice further guidance from explicit teachings is very helpful, provided for Christians in the Bible. There are those who would argue that Scripture is all we need, but if its teachings do not find within us a resonance that is provided by a sense of ‘rightness’, we may fall into a potentially arid legalism. This resonance is God’s law in our hearts.

While this essay has been written from a Christian position, much of its contents is consistent with other faiths; different religious traditions tend to be largely in accord with each other on moral issues. For those without religious belief the situation is less clear, but even so, the argument on Natural Law given here suggests that the moral views of unbelievers can often be objectively correct, reflecting ‘God’s Law in their hearts’. Such moral views should be respected, with appropriate caution, even though they are held without a full personal warrant. In fact the shared presence of Natural Law may provide a point of contact between believers and non-believers as they interact with each other.

But our situation is fragile. As C. S. Lewis pointed out many years ago, Western society has been gradually and dangerously losing touch both with the personal and spiritual side of a human being and with Natural Law. As a result, people are decreasingly inclined to follow upright paths through life ‘by nature and common sense’, or maybe they wish to invent their own morality. To main-

tain order, governments see the need to legislate more and more of people's behaviour, replacing Natural Law by human and political law instead.<sup>71</sup> This is paradoxical, since a major modern rallying-cry has been for 'freedom'. One should not overvalue the social attitudes of earlier times, but it can be argued that we are now moving in the direction of an over-controlled society, as Lewis feared. In the search for freedom we lose it, along with our own true nature. In the end, there may be more freedom in God's Law in our hearts than in state-imposed penalties for every misdemeanour.

I should like to thank the anonymous referees of this paper for many helpful comments.

---

**Peter Bussey is Emeritus Reader in Physics with Glasgow University and lives in Norwich.**

---

---

71 So-called 'positive', or humanly imposed law, in the terminology of Aquinas.