

## OBLIGATION? NATURALLY!

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O *as you wish but don't get caught.* The truth of this unfortunate expression, as of so many other expressions in our language, will not stand when subjected to analysis. But that it is proposed as a rule of morality by an ever increasing multitude is no cause for astonishment. Men of the twentieth century like men of every other century, must walk amid the wreckage of defunct philosophic systems and doctrines. Only a comparatively small number are able to sift out and escape the volatile particles rising up from these dead corpses. For the rest of men, asphyxiation is almost inevitable. Nor is the danger diminished by the infiltration of germs from contemporary malignant errors, already decomposing before they fall into their unhallowed rest to harass the sons of another day.

"Do as you wish but don't get caught," may have been used first in whispers to inveigh against penal laws in England, or in protest against the extravagant legislation of Puritanism, the blemish of our early American history. If it was employed against manifestly unjust and tyrannical penal codes, the usage was valid. But whenever it originated and whatever was meant by its primitive usage, this much is certain: in our day the expression has assumed monstrous import; it has become a dogma among sophisms in that it serves as a common slogan for champions of lawlessness. The first part of the catch phrase contends that the will of man or even his sensible urges are entirely adequate determinants of the lawfulness of human action. And of course this contention is bolstered up by the plea that our nature would not have these urges and an autonomous will if it were not right to give them free reign. The ironical part about concocting any defense of this theory is that reason is employed to do the job. Whether it be rendered in a tremulous whine or with jaunty bravado, the philosophy of "don't get caught" is flaunted in the face of every despotic usurper who would dare to curtail license.

Even if some men desire to commit themselves to radical irrationality by subscribing at once to the autonomy of the will and the despotism of the senses, it is not within their power to change their

nature. Consequently they remain rational beings always. No action of man is properly a human action if reason does not enter into it. We deny, therefore, that either the rational appetite or the senses are free to follow any course they choose. There is such a thing as law. To many people, law means nothing more than social mandates or statutory legislation; and indeed, these mandates and statutes would merit to be classed only as absurdities if they were not based upon the natural moral law.

In our day, the expression *natural moral law* is one which ruffles the equanimity of many people, simply because it is terminology capable of striking a disagreeable note in their inner selves. Similarly, the words *morality* and *sanction* often set up unwelcome tympanic vibrations. Are we to conclude therefore that the burdens signified by these three expressions no longer hang over us? No. No matter how we designate it, and no matter how disturbing it shall be to our comfort, the objectivity behind the terms *moral law*, *morality*, and *sanction*, shall endure as long as the present order of this world remains.

Existence of the natural moral law has been widely and vigorously denied, but this denial cannot proceed from right reason. He who voices any such denial forcefully violates his own inescapable consciousness which attests the contrary; he is guilty of gross inconsistency; moreover, he inflicts upon himself a most unnatural self-injustice,—and this infallibly. No sane man can be totally unaware of the force within him ordering that good be done and evil avoided. It is a persistent thing, now mildly persuasive, now obstreperously imperative, but never far from consciousness. This command to do good and avoid evil—the first moral principle<sup>1</sup>—does not hang untethered in space. Advertence to it is implicit advertence to the base in which it is grounded, the natural moral law within us. Hence there is evident inconsistency if we admit its first command but refuse to admit the principle whence that command arises. That such a denial of the existence of the natural moral law is most unnatural self-abuse, scarcely needs proof. An attempt to abolish the very foundation for moral action is more irrational than any other crime which leaves the foundation of morality intact.

"Natural moral law is nothing other than man's participation in the eternal law."<sup>2</sup> In his explanation preceding this conclusion, Saint Thomas tells us that by participation we have a natural inclination to

<sup>1</sup> *Summa Theol.*, I-II, q. 94, a. 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Summa Theol.*, I-II, q. 91, a. 2.

right action and the proper end. Again in the same article, with reference to the words "the light of Thy countenance is signed upon us O Lord," he makes this comment: ". . . the light of reason by which we discern good from evil is nothing other than the impression of a divine illumination upon us." Here we have the essential elements of natural moral law. Two are mentioned explicitly, the light of reason and the natural inclinations. The third, first principles of the practical reason, follows immediately from these two.

By nature, man is a cognitive being and therefore he realizes his participation in the eternal law. It would be contradictory to say that in the human mind there is an unknown participation in the eternal law.<sup>3</sup> From the fact that the natural inclinations to right action and the proper end are innate, it must not be concluded that our idea of the moral law is also innate. Simultaneous with the inception of our nature is its inclination to make abstractions from sensible notions of the practical order and to formulate universal moral principles. Of course, this ability to make such abstractions cannot be exercised until the use of reason has been acquired. Only then are the first moral principles of the practical reason formulated and only then do they begin to serve as directive norms of moral actions. We recapitulate briefly by the following quotation, adequately demonstrated by its author: "The essence of the Natural Moral Law consists in the natural inclinations, the light of reason, and the first principles of the practical reason."<sup>4</sup>

There has been placed in all of us an inclination to act for the perfection of our being. No choice has been given us; we are not free either to retain or to reject this natural desire. It is so necessary that its deletion would postulate the annihilation of our nature. Because man is a rational creature, his most exalted act is the act of his intellect. Ultimately, it is by that act alone that man shall recognize and grasp the final good<sup>5</sup>—the good that shall transform the desire of perfection into perfection. Even here and now it is by the act of intelligence that man apprehends, though imperfectly, that same good. The intellect holds it before the will as possible of attainment, and the will necessarily goes out to it in an action which follows the natural innate desire of the human being for its perfection. From the necessity which human nature has of striving for its ultimate end, there follows its necessity and obligation to place the human actions

<sup>3</sup> Gredt, Joseph, O.S.B. *Elementa Philosophiae*, II, 338 (no. 937, 2.).

<sup>4</sup> Farrell, Walter, O.P. *Natural Moral Law*, p. 141.

<sup>5</sup> Gredt, *ibid.*, p. 314 f. (no. 900 f.).

conducive to that end. Because it belongs to reason not only to indicate the ultimate end but also to point out the actions without which that end is impossible of attainment, there follows the obligation of our nature to follow the dictate of reason. This obligation is the obligation of the natural moral law. Consequently, when the practical reason issues its command, "Do good and avoid evil," our nature is obliged to comply, because this command is simply a specialized formulation of the universal imperium, "every nature must act for its end." From this it is evident that obligation arises not from orders imposed by a superior's will, but from the necessary relation between moral action and its reference to the last end.

Contained under these two general precepts and reducible to them, are the special precepts which derive their power to bind from the natural law as manifested in the special inclinations of our nature. "The order of precepts of the natural law is according to the order of natural inclinations."<sup>6</sup> Human beings have inclinations to preserve themselves, to perpetuate the human species, to discover truth and to live socially. The first two are held in common with the brute kingdom; the last two are proper to man; but as found in man, all of them come under the dominion of reason because man is rational by nature. The inclinations are not the precepts. Just as it belongs to reason alone to apprehend the ultimate good of our being, so it belongs only to reason to formulate the precepts which will order the inclinations of our nature to that good.

At this point it is fitting to say a word about sanctions. Whether the natural law is observed or transgressed, sanctions must follow. In the former case, sanction consists in reward; in the latter case, it consists in punishment. If man observes the precepts of the natural moral law, natural perfection shall accrue to his being; if he transgresses the precepts, the natural desire of his being for its perfection will be frustrated. The tragic consequence of moral evil is evident. To disregard the obligation induced by the natural moral law or to perform actions which violate precepts of that law, is irrational. Radically, it is self-attempted destruction of our nature. For disregard of moral obligation—moral delinquency—is the negation of orderly action towards the ultimate end of our nature, that is, towards its final good. If man does not engage himself in the pursuit of that good, he frustrates the very reason for his being.

Although the obligation of the natural moral law flows from the necessary ordination of human nature to its last end, it must not be

<sup>6</sup> *Summa Theol.*, I-II, q. 94, a. 2.

forgotten that this law is participated. If (to posit a ridiculous hypothesis) non-existence of the eternal law could be demonstrated, the inescapable corollary would follow that there is no natural moral law, and consequently that its obligation is a mere fiction. It is in the eternal law that we find the primary source of the obligation imposed by the created natural law, but actual knowledge of the former is not required to place us under the yoke of the latter. Even if a man may not have heard about the "reason of the divine wisdom, according as it is directive of all actions and movements"<sup>7</sup> (which is the eternal law), he does know of the effect of that right reason within himself, manifested in the necessary inclinations of his rational nature towards its rational ultimate good. Knowledge of this effect is entirely adequate to serve as a base from whence we can conclude to the obligation imposed by the natural moral law.

While it is true that men's attitudes towards morality will be influenced by their attitudes towards ultimate reality, the right order demands that men seek that reality first and then place their moral actions. The reverse of that process, however, is much in vogue to-day. Commonly enough, the atrocities are performed first and justified afterwards by the "my tenet" theory. Needless to remark, tenets are readily invented to explain away every fresh species of crime.

Against the inclination and precept requiring self-preservation, is suicide. (Obviously, we are spared the boredom of listening to the *post factum* tenets of those who indulge.) Against the inclination and precept requiring conservation of the species, are all the orgies of carnal profligacy and the countless submissions to self-mutilation. As their natural consequence, these perversions demand the deterioration and extinction of the human species. Opposed to the inclination and precept requiring acquisition of truth, are divers sins by which distinct cycles of human progression or retrogression may be recognized. Future generations will identify this present age as an age filled with observations, but barren of thought. When thought comes to be considered an eccentricity instead of a commonplace, the social life demanded by natural inclination and precept is supplanted by mere bestial communism. In the individual who permits his senses and blind will to usurp the hegemony of reason, human nature reaches its lowest point of degeneracy. But even in the gradual descent to that insufferable state, the inclinations continue and nature retains its natural desire for the true ultimate good. Even though the flame of reason wavers uncertainly in the dense atmos-

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<sup>7</sup> *Summa Theol.*, I-II, q. 93, a. 1.

phere of unnaturalism, the waning energy of its puny flickers will be spent to set up a counter-revolution. Remorse is the opening gun. If that gun is permanently silenced, the human individual in whom the conflict has taken place must accept the sanction of the natural moral law. He is compelled to resign himself to the irrevocable frustration of his nature.

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## THE SINNER-SAINT

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She knelt beneath the Cross. While blackened sky  
 In tumult rolled, she heeded not though strong  
 And burly soldiers quailed with fear. Love's song  
 Was in her heart while they with taunt and cry  
 To Calvary's peak had led her God to die  
 Bathed in His blood, jeered by a fiendish throng—  
 The Christ, for Whom the world had waited long,  
 To loose its bond of sin and grace supply.

As rent the Temple veil, so too her heart.  
 Hot tears once more bathed feet she loved to kiss,  
 While sacred blood poured forth from every part  
 Reclaiming self-turned souls from sin's abyss.  
 And though the world from Him had fled in fear,  
 Transfixed by love the Sinner-Saint pressed near.