

Personal Morality

The concept of a “natural law,” which Roman Catholic Church officials constantly invoke, was always problematic. It presumed that a whole body of law could be drawn from knowledge of human nature. In areas such as protection of the environment or human sexuality it is now evident to most people that the human race has been sorely lacking in relevant information. That is not the same as claiming that we now know the definitive truth and that past generations were completely lacking in knowledge.

The principle on which the Roman Catholic Church could credibly make a moral stand is that what is natural should not be violated. This principle would serve well in today’s opposition to environmental destruction, in opposition to war, violence, and the inhuman treatment of prisoners, in support of refugees, and in almost every area of moral choices.

This principle does not of itself generate a moral code. There is always a gap between principle and behavior that needs to be filled in with the best of today’s knowledge. Even after the teachers in an institution provide a definite direction, individuals must responsibly act on the basis of their conscience.

By claiming to be the defender of natural law, church officials invite all men and women to join in the defense of humanity. The paradoxical result of that invitation has been to drive away possible allies who do not accept any set of moral rules called natural law.

Perhaps much of the world stubbornly refuses to see the obvious truth. But the current connotations of “natural law” are indicated by a *New York Times* comment on the government’s plan to examine human rights in relation to natural law. “When the term natural law has been thrown about, it’s often by people concerned with what they think is unnatural – homosexuality, transgender rights, reproductive choice and sexual equality.”¹ Perhaps that is not a fair assessment of natural law but it is probably an accurate reading of who uses “natural law” today and what their interest is. Roman Catholic Church officials are the main users of the term, usually in condemning some sexual practice, but the embarrassing fact for officials is that a very large part of the church’s membership cannot make any sense of natural law.

In preparation for the 2014 synod, the paper that summarized responses to a widely circulated questionnaire concluded: “In a vast majority of responses and

observations, the concept of natural law today turns out to be, in different cultural contexts, highly problematic, if not completely incomprehensible.”² Do the bishops know what they mean by natural law or are they simply repeating formulas which they learned in the seminary many years ago.

The idea of natural law was not part of the Christian movement’s Jewish inheritance. As the church moved out from its place of origin it was inevitably influenced by philosophical concepts that were ready at hand. “Natural law” intruded into Christian teaching when the Greek and Latin languages helped to shape Christian teaching.

The Church’s great thinkers showed how employing such concepts could be a help to spread the Christian message to a multiplicity of cultures. Some of the language and the concepts that the Church adopted have proven to be permanently valuable. But ancient ideas are sometimes in need of examination so as to clarify them for contemporary people or replace them with language more appropriate for today.

The concept of natural law, which church officials so casually invoke, has a long and complicated history. There is no simple way to determine whether this concept makes any sense for today’s church, and if it does, how to explain it to ordinary church goers who are not content to accept this idea “on faith.” I will try to keep the history as simple as I can, but genuine simplicity here can only be reached on the other side of complexity.

“Nature”

Before one can understand the idea of natural law one should examine the word nature. It is a simple fact that “nature” was invented by some human beings at one moment in the past. A group of Greek philosophers/scientists came up with the idea and the word *phasic* that is translated into Latin as *natura* and into English as “nature.” What followed from that invention was not simple.

The term nature did not correspond to any being outside the human mind. That is a fact that should not be forgotten in any discussion of “nature.” Nature does not exist, but it was and remains a useful concept for thinking abstractly about the world of living beings. Nature was said to be the source of self-movement in living beings. From there it became the name for each kind of thing which acts according to the powers of its “nature.”

Ancient Hebrew did not have the words nature and natural. It is not that the Hebrew Bible is unconcerned with what we call the “natural world.” But Hebrew speakers, not being philosophically inclined, found no need for “nature.” The ancient Israelites used concrete terms; they spoke of flesh and blood, earth and water, forests and deserts – not to mention sex – without invoking the words nature and natural.

The authors of the first three Christian gospels also had no need to speak of nature; they did not have the term in their language. “Nature” entered Christian tradition mainly through the epistles of St. Paul who, writing in Greek, had assimilated the term nature into his vocabulary. Paul, however, used “nature” and “natural” in an unsystematic way. His haphazard use of the terms natural and unnatural has been the source of unfortunate confusion in the history of Christian ethical thinking and in the secular culture that developed from it.

In criticizing the pagan culture around him, Paul wrote in Rom. I: 26-27 that “their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural, and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another.” Paul says in I Cor. 11:14, “Does not nature teach you that for a man to wear long hair is degrading but if a woman has long hair it is her pride?” In both passages Paul uses the word natural as something good and unnatural as something bad. The two uses, however, do not seem of equal seriousness. Is hair style as important as sexual relations?

Paul was not even consistent in claiming that what is natural is good and what is unnatural is bad. He says in Rom. 11:24: “If you have been cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and grafted contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these natural branches be grafted back into their own olive tree.” In this case, the church is the recipient of God’s action that “is contrary to nature,” and that the Jews will also be saved by the same process of being grafted into the living olive tree.

This inconsistent use of “nature” is not surprising. By Paul’s time, the word had acquired many meanings. He was not writing philosophical treatises. He was using the words nature and natural in letters which were written in a variety of contexts. Some of the sexual practices that Paul encountered shocked him. He called them unnatural, meaning that they were not normal in his experience. Romans I: 26-27 on unnatural relations is used by contemporary Christians for condemning homosexuality even though Paul had neither the idea nor a word for homosexuality.

Even hair styles surprised Paul although today's Christians are not likely to cite I Cor. 11:14 for determining what length of hair on a man might be sinful. In the important passage relating the church and Judaism, Paul expresses his great appreciation of Judaism by saying that God had to change the natural course of things to graft Christianity into the fruitful tradition of Jewish history. And if God acted "contrary to nature" to save Christians, he will surely do the same for the Jews.

Influenced by St. Paul and with their own personal prejudices, fathers of the church condemned numerous practices as being opposed to nature, including lending at interest, sexual intercourse during menstruation, wearing jewelry, shaving, regular bathing, wearing wigs, eating kosher food, and circumcision.³ Every generation has been inclined to call practices "unnatural" that were contrary to their own experience. This revulsion at cultural practices that differ from one's own practices continues today.

A book in the 1930s by two great scholars, Arthur Lovejoy and Franz Boas, identified sixty-six meanings of the term nature. The authors said that forty-four of those meanings were already present at the beginning of the Common Era.⁴ Did they get a correct count? Someone might argue that there are only twenty-six or six meanings. But that claim would not help us in how to use the word nature; it would simply confirm that there has been and continues to be an extraordinary confusion in the use of the term nature.

As a start for trying to manage this diversity of meanings, one might point to perhaps the simplest and most important distinction in the meaning of "nature." This contrast of meanings was already present in the ancient Greek term, *phusis*. And both meanings are present in European languages of today.

The first meaning is the one that Aristotle made central to his philosophy: He writes: "Some things exist or come into existence by nature...the common feature that characterizes them all seems to be that they have within them a principle of movement and rest."⁵ Aristotle, who was mainly a biologist, identified an inner principle of living things which he called "nature."

The second most important meaning of nature was as a collective or abstract noun to talk about the whole cosmos.⁶ The "natural world" was everything that humans encounter and that was not made by them. All the individual natures taken together can be called nature. This meaning had come to exist by the time of Aristotle but

interestingly he does not list it when he provides seven possible meanings of *phusis* in his *Metaphysics*.⁷

This abstract meaning of “nature” had come to the forefront by the time of Christianity’s origin. Stoic, Epicurean, Neoplatonic and other philosophies had an important place for “nature” as something more encompassing than the human being. Christian writers, not surprisingly, absorbed both meanings of nature: an inner principle of living beings and the totality of those beings under a single principle of life.

Cicero is not regarded as a major philosopher, but he had a great influence on philosophy by his translation of Greek philosophical terms. Aristotle had thought that there was an etymological connection between “nature” and birth. Cicero chose the word *natura* as the Latin translation of *phusis* because of its connection to birth (*natus*). Nature is what we are born with; it is an inner principle of living beings.

Cicero was somewhat eclectic, but he was especially influenced by a philosophy known as Stoicism. Our word stoic reflects an aspect of Stoic philosophy, namely, control of one’s emotions in difficult situations, especially in confronting suffering and death. But this attitude is only one aspect of Stoicism that follows from its view of nature. Stoic philosophers absorbed both meanings of nature. Human nature was thought to be a part of cosmic nature and subject to it.⁸ Reflecting on old age, Cicero writes: “I regard nature as our best guide. I follow and obey her as a divine being.”⁹

In Stoic philosophy nature is generous, but she is also a stern authority. Chrissipus, one of the founders of Stoicism, compared man to a dog that is attached to a cart. The dog can trot along next to the cart and all will be well, or the dog can dig in its heels and resist the movement of the cart, but then it will be dragged along by the cart. Man can either obey nature or he can resist nature; either way, nature eventually wins, as every man’s death testifies.¹⁰

The attraction of Stoicism can be seen in the fact that it was represented by all parts of society, from Marcus Aurelius, one of the ruling class in Rome to Epictetus, a Greek-speaking slave. Both men composed treatises on the attitude one should take in confronting life’s difficulties, including death.

Marcus Aurelius was a man of sterling character. In a reflection on death, he wrote: “Spend therefore those fleeting moments on earth as Nature would have you

spend them, and then go to your rest with good grace, as an olive falls in its season, with a blessing for the earth that bore it and a thanksgiving to the tree that gave it life.”¹¹ This image of a ripening of fruit and its fall to the earth was used by several other Stoic thinkers.¹²

Epictetus wrote that “men are not disturbed by the things that happen, but by the opinion about things. Death is nothing terrible; the opinion about death that it is terrible, is the terrible thing.”¹³ Human beings have to be content to follow the ways of nature. Even death, as Epictetus says, is not something to be mourned. If a human being does not become attached to anything, including friends and family, death will simply be accepted as a natural part of life. Nature can do no wrong.

Stoicism is especially important because it intersected with Jewish religion at the beginning of the Common Era. The contact of Stoicism with the prophets of Israel was of great historical consequence; it provided a basis for “the unity of the human race, the natural right to peace, formal democracy, and mutual aid.”¹⁴

Christianity was a way of life that competed with Stoicism which also provided a way of life. Each of them supplied an understanding of the universe that gave a direction to one’s life. Christianity even offered hope for something beyond the grave. Christianity won this competition with Stoicism, at least temporarily, when Christianity was able to spread its glad tidings to many peoples. Stoicism would return in modern times and once again compete with Christianity for interpreting the universe.

As regularly happens in such competitions, the victor was influenced by the vanquished more than was immediately evident. That process especially happens because the winner adopts some of the loser’s language. Christians admired Stoic philosophy and its strict ordering of human life, even as they insisted that the church was a different and better way of life. Plato seemed to be the philosopher in tune with the metaphysics of Christianity, but Stoicism provided a moral code that offered direction for Christian practice.

Christians adopted many Stoic terms starting with “religion” for the true worship of God and “moral” for describing what is good and bad in human action. “Virtue” was a name for the good life; many words for virtues, such as “pious,” were also picked up. Many of these Stoic terms were taken over without significant change. However, a word such as sacrament had to be baptized from its Latin meaning as a military oath to name central practices of Christian life. The most consequential term that the church adopted from Stoic philosophy was “nature.”

The Aristotelian meaning of nature was more compatible philosophically with the Christian outlook than was the Stoic meaning of nature. But the Stoic influence was not through philosophers deciding which concepts best fit Christian metaphysics. The practical use of “nature” in Stoicism was absorbed by Christians. The two meanings of “nature,” – an inner principle of living things and a name for the cosmos – became part of European languages.

Nature and Person

From early in its history, the Christian Church was confronted with the problem of how to talk about Jesus in relation to God. Controversies abounded as the discussion moved between Greek and Latin vocabularies. What emerged from discussions of the Blessed Trinity and the Incarnation was a distinction between nature and a new word, person. It was a brilliant creation of language that proved helpful, not only in speaking of God and Jesus, but as applicable to every human being.

The Greeks had invented “nature” as a useful concept for differentiating one kind of thing from another. Christianity’s coining of “person” went further in creating a sense of individuality. It made possible the recognition of a difference between what I am and who I am. Nature longer provided the ultimate law to which the humans must submit. Human-nature is not simply a part of nature; it is a special instance of (cosmic) nature. Human-nature is at the service of the person.

The person, while preserving his or her nature, has the possibility of going beyond what is given by its human-nature. Person and freedom imply one another. Although the Stoics had introduced the idea of human choice, their version of choice was limited to either challenging nature or submitting to nature. To be free was to be able to say yes or no to what nature dictates. With the invention of “person,” Christianity transformed the meanings of both nature and freedom. To be free meant finding a path to something novel.

Augustine was perhaps the first person to see clearly the implications of distinguishing between a person with the capacity for choice and a nature that each person carries from birth. Our choices form a “second nature” that shapes our given nature for good or for ill. A good personal choice is one that does not violate nature but does not necessarily conform to or submit to nature. Augustine also saw the need for a “supernatural grace” – a gift beyond nature – because the human race has made a mess of its own history.

Augustine is blamed for introducing the badly named doctrine of “original sin” as a burden and limitation on our freedom. What he is not usually credited with is his contribution to the idea of freedom itself, the idea of the human will as the ability to choose among several possibilities. “Original sin” was Augustine’s recognition that the human race and its members have been failing badly as far back as we can trace. The failures are inexplicable if one looks only at an individual and his or her intention to act for what is good. Humans are the tragic animals whose great gift of freedom is consistently used in ways that destroy their own best interests. Each of us is born into a society that carries the burden of past human failures.

Augustine might be called the first modern psychologist. Many of the great modern thinkers, including Rousseau, Freud, and Wittgenstein, carried on a dialogue across the centuries with Augustine. They realized that he had insights into the human condition that were mostly unknown in the ancient world and are rare even today. His *Confessions* is often called the first autobiography, the moment when a person could stand outside himself and view his life as a spectator. He saw that seemingly minor choices could lead to disaster in one’s life. But he also saw that, if open to help from God, human beings can overcome the distractions that society poses and can accomplish great things.

Augustine as an admirer of Cicero, did not intend to contradict Cicero. But in fact, Augustine presents a more complex picture of the person than the human being submitting to nature. Unfortunately, Augustine’s great insights were lost for centuries on people who did not start from the rich classical base that Augustine had assimilated. To this day, Augustine is often dismissed as someone obsessed with sin, especially sexual sins. But as Garry Wills points out, if one reads the sermons that Augustine preached, one finds far more concern with the injustices of the social order than with sexual failings.¹⁵

The philosopher who could appreciate Augustine was Thomas Aquinas. Thomas tries never to contradict Augustine. But there is no denying that Thomas shifts the perspective of the Christian story to a more positive note. Yes, the story of human history is one of constant failure and the need for redemption, but first it is a story of a glorious creation which is entrusted to human care. Sin is a constant problem but the way to oppose sin is not with scalpel and scissors but with an increase of goodness, mercy and kindness.

In Greek philosophy, the good is that which men seek. To reach that good the individual should follow nature to its proper end. In Thomas’s *personal* morality,

the human being does not achieve the good by the keeping of rules. The natural is not to be violated but the natural is at the service of personal life. The good life is one which overflows with a generous influence on other lives. The central principle of a personal morality is: *omne bonum diffusivum sui est*: the good is that which is diffusive of itself. Notice that the principle states not that a person should do what is good but that a person's goodness is what overflows into other lives.

Like many Christian thinkers before him, Thomas distinguished between nature and person; in his case he made this distinction the center of his teaching. According to Thomas, there is nothing greater in the universe than the person; thus, sin is a violation of personhood. "God is only offended when we act against our own being."¹⁶

"Self-deception" is a central category of Thomas's thought; it is an idea that is unimaginable without the distinction between nature and person. Thomas was heir to the brilliant psychological insights of Augustine. We always act for our own good; the question is whether we perceive accurately the self that we serve. A selfish person is mistaken about his or her self. The alternative to selfishness is a better understanding of the self and a healing of the split inherent to human life.

In the nineteenth century, ethicists opposed acting selfishly with acting selflessly. They coined the word "altruistic," meaning to act for the good of others rather than the good for oneself. This choice still dominates much of moral discussion. But a person cannot act selflessly; the self is always present and active. An opposition between the self and others is a hopeless basis for trying to sustain a moral life. As Alasdair MacIntyre states: "Altruism becomes at once socially necessary and yet apparently impossible and, if and when it occurs, inexplicable."¹⁷

In a personal morality, morally good actions affirm the mutual relation of one's own self and the neighbor's self in response to the love of God. Each of us is called to share our life with others. There is a competitive element in human life, especially when goods are scarce. But we are called to maintain a community with a common good that is the context of our individual good. The knowledge of what is our genuine good is always obscured by the split in the human psyche that must be struggled with throughout our lives.

Nature and Modern Science

Modern science adopted for its underlying philosophy a variation of Stoicism. Thus, nature as the ultimate power that controls human life made its return as a

competitor to a Christian interpretation of the universe in which nature is subordinate to person and to God. Robert Boyle is explicit in tracing the idea of nature back to ancient Stoic thinkers.¹⁸ Nature was a word for everything – except the human mind that perceives nature. In the Stoic image, which was described in the parable above, man is a small dog whose vocation is to trot alongside the large cart which is nature. In the new world of mathematical science, the dog has grown up and it now can direct the cart's movement.

A strong tension was present within this “nature” of modern science. Is nature as the mother of life deserving of reverence or is nature a force that confronts “man” and deserves to be overcome. The second meaning tended to predominate. Nature was an unimaginably large object, but one which “man” can master by his mind and with his instruments. Modern scientists made a claim to discover “laws of nature,” that is, the order of the whole universe

The new scientists, however, were cautioned to act with humility in their attempt to subdue nature. In Francis Bacon's language, man was a lover who should penetrate the mysteries of nature as in a marriage bed.¹⁹ Bacon cautioned that man demands answers from nature but “we must command nature by obeying her laws.”²⁰ This view of nature proved to be immensely fruitful for improving human lives. Until the mid-twentieth century, “man” kept making progress in his battle against nature and the scourges of hunger, illness, and death. Freud expressed the outlook of his generation in saying: “The principal task of civilization is to defend us against nature.”²¹

While modern science mainly conceived of nature as objects that need to be conquered, it could not eliminate “nature” as the ultimate source of whatever exists. The qualities that Christianity had attributed to God were now seen as belonging to nature. When the authors of the French *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* looked for the source of “natural rights,” they found that source not in God but in nature. In the British-American *Declaration of Independence*, Thomas Jefferson fudged the choice between nature and God by referring to “nature and nature's God.”

The French and the British Americans were dismissive of the fact that a concept of “natural right” had been discussed by Christian theologians and canonists for many centuries. Thomas Jefferson pronounced these rights to be “self-evident” although they did not seem evident to most people. Jefferson's deism retained a pale reflection of the Christian God. The unmoved mover of deism was reduced to giving nature a fillip to get the world started. After that, the world was on its own.

Nature was both a loving mother, bestowing natural rights on man, but also an evil stepmother who could bring on natural disasters and human suffering. This latter side of nature justified man's overpowering of nature to produce the marvels of "technology," a nineteenth-century term.

In the middle of the twentieth century there occurred what at first seems to be a breathtaking reversal in meaning: from nature as our enemy to nature as our ultimate benefactor. The change is not as inexplicable as it might seem. Mother Nature had never died. The mother of all life emerged from the shadow of the evil stepmother.

A passage from a 1948 book by C.S. Lewis brilliantly captures what was about to occur to the term nature. Lewis writes: "Man's conquest of Nature turns out, in the moment of its consummation, to be Nature's conquest of Man. Every victory we seemed to win has led us, step by step, to this conclusion. All Nature's apparent reverses have been tactical withdrawals. We thought we were beating her back when she was leading us on. What looked like hands held high in surrender was really the opening of arms to enfold us forever."²²

In this quotation the capitalization and the feminine pronoun for Nature are integral to the view of the relation between "Man and Nature." Man is being led into Nature's arms and She will enfold him forever. This embrace is not entirely benign. We are told to revere Nature as the Goddess who bestows on us all good things, but to do so we need to block from our minds that in the end Nature brings death to each of us.

For the last half century there has been an attempt to glorify "natural death" but when most people are confronted with their own or a loved one's death, it does not seem to be part of a loving mother's bounty. However much we are encouraged to love and revere Nature, we still have good reason to think that Nature is out to kill us.

Natural Law

The above summary of the conflicts built into the words nature and natural suggests that there would be ambiguity in the phrase "natural law." Consider these two narratives concerning natural law's origin and its influence on Christianity.

In most Christian accounts, “natural law” arose from Aristotle’s philosophy in which each being has a final cause toward which its powers are directed. The proper order in any society is for each thing to find its fulfillment by realizing its proper end. This law is simply the way things are and a reasonable person can see that the proper exercise of each human power is imprinted in human nature. Thomas Aquinas was the successor to Aristotle in the development of a philosophy of natural law. This idea of natural law gave support to the church’s moral code of conduct and until the last century it provided guidance to society. The contemporary world’s neglect or denial of natural law is the reason for the confusion of people today and a lack of moral standards in society.

An alternative narrative contends that the above story leaves out far too much. The Christian understanding of the moral life developed during more than a millennium before Thomas Aquinas. Not until Thomas was there extensive use of the work of Aristotle in providing principles of Christian morality. Aristotle had a powerful influence on Christian thinking, especially in the later Middle Ages. Aristotle does have a kind of natural law implied in his philosophy according to which each thing is directed toward an end or final cause. But the idea of a natural *law* was articulated by the jurist Cicero, not the biologist, Aristotle. And Cicero’s meaning of nature, which was drawn from Stoic philosophy and implied in his natural law, profoundly influenced early Christianity.

Cicero says that “law is right reason in agreement with nature, universal, unwavering and everlasting.”²³ Cicero had three kinds of law. In addition to natural law, there were civil law and the law of nations.²⁴ This threefold division of law was regularly cited by authors, including Christian authors. Civil laws that are the product of a legislature are the template for the meaning of law. For Cicero and the Stoics there was something analogous to civil law in the rules which nature lays down for men if they wish to find happiness. Natural law was the product of Mother Nature’s legislation.

The third kind of law, called by Cicero the “law of nations,” was comprised of laws that were found in most nations. In the late eighteenth century, the “law of nations” was replaced by “international law,” when Cicero’s third kind of law was found to be not precise enough for referring to laws between nations and laws that encompass all nations.²⁵ His idea of a natural law was also being replaced by laws of nature that were based on empirical studies of nature.

Despite Cicero being a pagan, many Christians saw him as a near Christian because of his views on morality. Through Cicero, Stoicism became a major

influence on the development of Christianity. The third-century Christian writer, Lactantius, “forms the connecting link between the Stoics and the medieval theories of natural law.”²⁶ Augustine of Hippo is another link not so much for any commentary on natural law but because he considered Cicero to be among his greatest teachers.

It is difficult to trace Cicero’s influence on Christianity in the centuries between Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. But the best-known authors, such as Isidore of Seville and Boethius, routinely refer to Cicero’s threefold division of law. Gratian, in the twelfth-century work, *Decretum*, which was the basis of canon law, begins from Cicero’s three kinds of law. The canonists who commented on Gratian’s *Decretum*, tried to shift the meaning of natural law away from Stoicism. Brian Tierney, based on his extensive study of the era, writes: “Stoic authors, when they wrote of *jus naturale* [natural law], were thinking in terms of cosmic determinism; the canonists were thinking more in terms of human free will.”²⁷

Thomas Aquinas’s moral writing is often described as a natural law morality. But that misses the point of his morality of the person. Thomas is ultimately not an Aristotelian in morality. He does accept the term “natural law” but he confines most of his discussion of the term to a single question of the *Summa theologiae*. For Thomas, natural law is not a law in any usual sense of the term law. It is “manifested” only in the human mind as *principles* of action.

In answer to the question whether natural law can be changed, Thomas says “nothing hinders the natural law from being changed since many things for the benefit of human life have been added over and above the natural law.” He uses as an example that “to be naked is from nature; it did not give him clothes, but art invented them.”²⁸ Human life is a combination of nature and art.

Only with what Thomas calls “determinations” can the principles of natural law be a guide to action. Today those determinations would be found in the study of history, in conclusions from scientific research, and in testimonies by people who have experience of the issue in question. One point of progress for the human race is that groups who in the past could not get their voices heard now have a chance to make their case in worldwide liberation movements. The diversity within the idea of human nature is still being revealed.

Instead of a natural law, Thomas has natural laws. He distinguishes between 1) laws that apply to all natures, 2) laws for animal natures, 3) laws for human-nature.²⁹ The humans have some built-in restraints insofar as they participate in an

animal nature, but they can also choose to make novel and imaginative use of natures, including their own. It would have been clearer if Thomas had used “personal law” for what governs human life and if he had restricted “natural law” to other animals. The sexual life of humans, for example, should not be governed by the natural law that applies to animals but by the personal law that includes the inventiveness and developments of human history.

Thomas Aquinas, like Augustine, would be a terrible guide on matters of sexual practice. He lacked the experience and the human testimonies to bring together principles and sexual behavior. But a principle such as respect for each person is as true today as ever and needs to be applied more widely. Roman Catholic Church officials ought not to cite Thomas’ work as a catechism of answers for today’s moral questions. The way to respect the work of Thomas Aquinas is to continue his work by filling out the principles that he called “natural law” with the best of today’s knowledge of laws of nature, and testimonies on the deepest inclinations of the human self.

The Confusions of “Natural Law”

The confusion in the meaning of “nature” was compounded when the idea of a “natural law” was introduced. Looking back at the history of the term natural law, one might wonder whether joining “law” to “nature” was a good idea for a Christian morality. Natural law could mean confining Christian moral life to obeying a law instead of seeing the natural at the service of a morality of care, love, and justice.

Church officials often refer to the need for behavior to “conform to natural law.” Does that phrase mean that actions should not violate (human) nature or that actions must be subservient to a (cosmic) law of nature? The danger in invoking “natural law” is that it may be taken to imply rejection of human artistry’s attempt to make life better or at least reduce the suffering of people. Technology can be destructive, but its existence is not a contradiction of nature.

Church officials seem to invoke natural law only in reference to sex. Why not natural law in reference to torture, drone strikes, execution of prisoners, separation of children from their parents, pollution of rivers? All of these and many other human practices would seem to involve a human violation of the natural. At its best, the Christian defense of the natural can mean that God’s creation should be preserved from greed, thoughtlessness, and uncontrolled passion.

A main failure of the church's official teachers has been their unwillingness to learn what a *personal* law of sexuality would entail. On sexual matters the church has followed a medieval assumption that natural law dictates that a proper use of sexual activity is for the process of reproduction. Anything that interferes with the "finality of the act" is judged to be a violation of natural law.

Under this meaning of natural law, homosexuality is immediately judged to be "unnatural." For some Christian groups homosexuality almost defines the term unnatural. The Roman Catholic Church invokes "natural law" in condemning "artificial" birth control. When the church endorsed a form of birth control called the rhythm method, it thereby admitted that birth control is not wrong, but that some methods of controlling births are. It is not difficult to think of ways to control birth that would be "unnatural" and therefore wrong. Anything that would do violence to one party would deserve to be condemned.

At issue here is an assumption by church officials that the human being is subject to a law governing all nature, instead of being governed by its own human-nature. The natural is a gift from the Creator; and so are human artifice and the practical arts (technology). There is a need to study the limits of human-nature and to have rules for not going beyond those limits.

Throughout most of history there had seemed to be a stable set of rules for the moral life. Such rules were assumed to be based on the proper way for things to be. Some of the rules were the result of one group having the power to control everyone else. Some of the rules were based on what people assumed to be natural or normal for human beings. Any foreign practices that ran counter to those rules were pronounced unnatural.

It was widely thought that each society had the same moral rules until each group's rules were compared to the rules of other groups. The modern meaning of "culture" was invented to describe the differences between groups. Anthropologists spoke of "cultural relativity" but they did not deny that there was something common across the human race.³⁰ Other people picked up this theme and drew the conclusion of moral relativism. The modern mantra became one of tolerating differences. My people has its morality, your people can have its morality, and no one is in a position to be "judgmental" about what is the right morality.

Moral relativism was a lazy way to avoid the task of sorting out human differences, some that are tolerable and even desirable, and others that would be impossible for

the human race to sustain. The first half of the twentieth century should have provided plenty of material for reflection on what is intolerable, but it was only toward the end of the century that environmental destruction posed the problem directly.

There remain many people who are unconvinced by scientific claims about the ongoing human destruction of the environment, but even they must admit that if there are human practices that make the air unbreathable, the water undrinkable, and the land uninhabitable, the practices are wrong no matter how prevalent they are. Polluting a river is an unnatural act; it violates the environment which sustains human-nature. It also does violence to the natures of other animals and plants.

The revolution in communication is bringing home the fact that a group of people in one part of the world cannot be tolerated as merely having its own local morality if they can wreak widespread destruction. That principle applies to the Middle East, but it also applies to the United States of America with its capacity to do violence in any place that it wishes to do so. There are no easily established moral laws that everyone is ready to accept. Nonetheless, the dismissal of all moral laws as merely local custom has become untenable.

Natural Law and Laws of Nature

In the modern world there is a failure to realize what was lost when nature as meaning the inner life of humans, was excluded from the sciences. In biology, humans were seen as one species along an evolutionary line. In his study of the origin of modern racism, Justin Smith describes the seventeenth century “collapse of a certain universalism about human nature, which had been sustained by a belief in the transcendent essence of the human soul.” He concludes that racial difference “was made possible by the rejection of human nature, and the parallel insertion of humans into nature.”³¹

The “subjective” became a name for what is misleading, and human emotion became an interference in reaching the truth. Science through the instruments of mathematics and experiments established “laws of nature” which included the human being as one object among the millions of things that make up the cosmos of material beings.³²

Copernicus and Galileo showed that the sun does not revolve around the earth. The change was first said to be from an earth-centered to a helio-centered world, but in a world of endless universes there is no center. “The change from a geocentric to a

heliocentric system was far less momentous than the change from a heliocentric to an eccentric one.”³³ “Man” was a minor player in this great new world. Back on earth, however, this “man” was using the resources of “nature” with no accountability.

There were several movements which began early in the twentieth century that recognized a growing problem in the relation between human activity and the earth’s resources. The “conservation” movement, as the name suggests, tried to conserve the “natural world” by protecting it from human use. There was also an “ecological” movement among scientists who worked to understand the interrelation of systems that sustain life on earth. Was nature to be protected from human activity and preserved in its pristine state? Or was nature to be managed responsibly by humans who needed some of the raw materials of nature for human progress?

These early environmentalists recognized Jewish and Christian traditions as their possible allies. The most famous work of the period, Aldo Leopold’s 1948 book, *Sand County Almanac*, cites Ezekiel and Isaiah as protesting the despoliation of the land.³⁴ Leopold and other authors of the time were conversant with the Bible and the concern in the Hebrew scripture for land and the land’s produce.

The environmental movement that started in the 1970s was caught in a conflict related to the two meanings of nature, nature as the universe of objects including humans or nature as the inner principle of living beings, including human-nature. Are humans a minor player in nature’s game as science had been saying for centuries? Or are humans with their nature doing damage to the earth and are the players who must change their behavior to save the planet.

As a result of this conflict there seemed to be a competition for dollars between environmental concerns and “social concerns.” The people who were working with the urban poor reacted negatively to the sudden concern, reflected in the *Endangered Species Act* in 1973 which protects, among others, nature’s snail darter and golden throated warbler. The socially concerned workers felt that economically comfortable people could afford to use their time and money to protect nature, but first there should be help for the poor.

There was a problem of language on both sides of this conflict. The term “social,” since its rise in the nineteenth century, has meant a collection of people, a meaning that implicitly excluded the environment of humans. On the other side,

“environment” was nature excluding “man.” Thus, there appeared to be a direct contradiction between social and environmental concerns.

I doubt that “social” or “society” can be enlarged much in meaning. Karl Marx tried to encompass the political and economic within the social.³⁵ Social scientists not surprisingly tend to extend the area that the “social” covers. Throughout its history the term has resisted an extension of meaning beyond human groups. There is nothing wrong with that meaning, but people who talk of “social needs” or “social justice” should be aware of the limitations of their language.

“Environment” is different; it is often used for the world of nature apart from the human. But as the word suggests, environment can quite properly refer to what surrounds and what interacts with the human. Environmental questions are about the human relation to the physical world. Animals, plants and rivers, besides having their own natures, are also the wrap-around of human beings.

On the first Earth Day in 1970, Senator Edmund Muskie gave a remarkable speech in which he connected the “social” and the “environmental.” Muskie said “man’s environment includes the shape of the communities in which he lives and the only kind of society that has a chance is a society that will not tolerate slums for some and decent houses for others, rats for some and playgrounds for others, clean air for some and filth for others.”³⁶

People today who deny climate change are simply employing the assumption of modern science that nature is incomparably greater than “man.” Fifty years ago, they were told to reverse their thinking because humans are destroying the environment. But the idea of nature has not been rethought.

Nature is still assumed to be the main player and an all-powerful force outside “man.” The obliviousness in much of environmental writing to gender-inclusive language is a sign that “nature” is still being thought of as an abstraction outside of “man,” instead of environment being the natural and artificial world that men and women constantly interact with.

Is Christianity the Culprit?

In the 1970s an ideology was developed as the platform for the environmental movement. Since everyone seemed to be in favor of taking care of the earth, the puzzling question was where does the environmental problem come from? The stock answer was something called “the Judeo-Christian tradition.”³⁷

The phrase “Judeo-Christian” was invented in the 1890s by people who did not know much about either Jewish tradition or Christian tradition(s).³⁸ At that time, religion was assumed to be on the decline, but some secular thinkers thought that an ideology called the “Judeo-Christian tradition” was worth saving because it had given rise to the independent individual, human freedom and natural science.

“Judeo-Christian” brushes out the important differences between Christians and Jews. The phrase was seldom used in the early twentieth century. Today, right-wing political groups love the phrase. When someone makes a reference to “Judeo-Christian civilization” it is usually to bemoan what is being destroyed by policies on the political left.³⁹

What helped to establish the phrase in contemporary language was the environmental movement. Environmentalists needed an enemy and they decided on the “Judeo-Christian tradition.” What the 1890s thought was the valuable contribution of this “tradition” was now seen as the culprit for the environmental problem. The tradition was thought to be summed up in Genesis 1:28: “God said: ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’”

I think if one is going to sum up the Bible it would be helpful to get as far as the second chapter of Genesis where “The Lord planted a garden in Eden in the east and there he put the man whom he had formed.” (Gen. 2:8). The man named all the animals (he did not kill and eat them) after which God provided a helpmate for the man so that the couple could till the garden.

The Hebrew scriptures include numerous passages on taking care of the earth and the creatures on it. The rabbinic phrase for the humans was “guardians of the garden.”⁴⁰ The two biblical accounts taken together “tell us that humankind is both the periphery and the center, that the universe is both incomprehensively vast and intimate.”⁴¹ Precisely this combination of images is what the environmental movement needs.

If one wishes to understand the Christian attitude implied in the creation stories it would be helpful to consult the numerous commentaries on Genesis that were written by the fathers of the Christian Church. I cannot recall a single reference to those commentaries by a critic when attacking Christianity as the source of environmental problems. Much of what the environmental movement ascribes to

Christianity is what Christianity sees as human failure. The claim that Christianity assigned to "man" limitless power over all creation is inaccurate.⁴²

Francis of Assisi is said to be the only Christian who escaped the “Judeo-Christian tradition.” He has been called the patron saint of nature by many people in the environmental movement. The ironic fact is that Francis never used the term nature in any of his writings, despite the fact that the Latin and Italian terms for nature were ready at hand. He is celebrated as someone who spoke glowingly of nature and whose life reflected a dedication to nature. But like a figure out of the Hebrew Bible or the Christian gospel, he managed to get along without the term nature. Francis, not being philosophically inclined, found no need to deal in abstractions. “He did not call nature his mother; he called a particular donkey his brother or a particular sparrow his sister. He was a man who refused to see the wood from the trees.”⁴³

Francis Assisi recognized not only humans as brother and sister, but also the donkey and the sparrow share in the same metaphor. The sun and the moon, the wind and the sea and the earth and all its inhabitants were all part of his concern in *The Canticle of the Sun*. He was not interested in nature as the collective name for all these natures. He is therefore an inadequate model for our world today because we are forced to consider the wood as well as the trees. But he is a good reminder that the natures of men, women, animals and trees are the realities at issue in talk about the environment.

Pope Francis and *Laudato si*

When Pope Francis took the name Francis, he indicated that he would act in the spirit of Francis of Assisi. *Laudato si*, an encyclical on the environment, was a greatly anticipated document. The only question seemed to be whether or not the Pope would endorse the science of climate change. The news media responded to the publication of *Laudato si* by saying Francis had voted yes. But why take 37,000 words to say yes? The Pope’s main theme was an attempt to link the environmental movement and the problem of world poverty.

Pope Francis was either unaware of or chose to be silent about the environmental movement’s anti-Christian history. The Pope, far from criticizing the term “Judeo-Christian tradition,” uses it three times.⁴⁴ He does push back on the interpretation of the text of Genesis I: 28 that supposedly sums up the “Judeo-Christian” attitude of exploiting the earth.

One of the linguistic giveaways of environmental literature's opposition to "Judeo-Christian tradition" is the term "anthropocentrism" which means seeing the humans at the center of the world. That view is thought to have created the environmental problem. I have argued that putting humans at the center of the world is not the problem but the solution. The modern picture of nature is "eccentric"; it lacks a center. The human being is what is needed at the center of the intelligible world.⁴⁵ The Pope gives the term anthropocentrism his own twist without acknowledging the negative meaning that it has had when referring to Christianity.

Many people probably saw Pope Francis's linking of world poverty and climate change as too big a stretch. But the Pope was aiming at the heart of the problem. The ideology of the 1970s which opposed social problems and environmental problems prepared the way for isolating the great wealth of a few people from the ecological disaster. As Bruno Latour describes today's situation, the rich people have perceived that there are not enough resources for nine or ten billion people, and they have been grabbing up all the resources they can. There is not enough land for the migrating masses so the rich live behind walls in the vain hope that walls can save them. Or they don't care because the disaster will come after they are dead.⁴⁶

The problem with most scientific warnings about the coming environmental disaster is that science offers "objective" data that make "Man" subservient to Nature. Man has been destroying the world around him and the solution is that he should go back to his proper place as an obedient player in Nature's game. He should follow the laws that Mother Nature laid down long before this troublesome speck of matter called humanity began strutting on earth.

This view of nature, as an object separate from the human being, obstructs actions which can fix the environment. What surely exist are men and women who interact daily with the things of their environment. Their willingness to change their behavior depends upon their feeling a connection to their landscape, to the passage of time, to their deaths, and to the lives of their children and grandchildren.

This connection involves a religious sensibility. The story that religions offer which involves a creator god, a centrality of human life to existence, a meaning that connects each person to an overall purpose of the world, involves some fanciful myths. The religious story nonetheless is more compelling than the story climatologists and evolutionary biologists tell when they keep insisting that

everything that they say is fact while in fact their facts are embedded in the myth of Nature.

Unless the environmental movement can tap into the attitude of humble gratitude for all creation and to a story with humans rather than Nature at the center, their preaching that warns of coming doom will not succeed.

Conclusion

On the topic of natural law, the tragedy is that there is something valuable in the church's attempt to defend a principle on which to build moral teaching. But at this point in history, "natural law" has the wrong connotations. Bishops might try abstaining for a while from all uses of the term natural law. That should not be very difficult. There are no references in the Bible to natural law so why is it necessary to use this abstract concept instead of the concrete teaching of the prophets of Israel and Jesus of Nazareth. While the bishops are talking about the Sermon on the Mount, academics could be exploring the historical meaning of natural law, natural rights, and the duties entailed by these concepts.

Violence is a sure sign of the violation of the natural. A useful question to ask about any practice is what harm does the practice do to human beings? The answer may be immediately obvious, or history might have to be called upon to provide a wider lens. Telling a lie to escape from an embarrassing situation may seem harmless, but if lying were allowed to go unchecked it would destroy the trust which is necessary in any society. Throwing a piece of garbage into a river may seem insignificant but even the oceans cannot deal with the waste of seven billion people. On the other hand, varieties of sexual practice that have existed for millennia do not seem to have been destructive of human nature. The human race is still trying to understand the force of human sexuality and how to integrate that force into a healthy human existence.

The bishops would have some credibility in denouncing harm to the natural world in wars, human trafficking, the oppression of the poor, environmental destruction, greed, and many other practices that can be placed up against the teaching of the gospel. Defending the nature of humans and the natures of all God's creatures is a worthy mission for the church.

¹ *New York Times*, June 24, 20'9, A24.

² Clifford Longley, "The Church Ill at Ease with Itself, *The Tablet*, July 5, 2014, 4-5.

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- ⁴ Arthur Lovejoy and George Boas, *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1935)
- ⁵ Aristotle, *Physics*, 192b.
- ⁶ R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of Nature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), 44.
- ⁷ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1014b-1015a.
- ⁸ Gregory Lopez and Massimo Pigliucci, *A Handbook for New Stoics: How to Thrive in a World Out of Control* (New York: The Experiment, 2019).
- ⁹ Cicero, "On Old Age," in *Cicero: Selected Works* (London: Penguin, 1971), 215.
- ¹⁰ Zeno founder of Stoicism: R. W. Sharples, *Stoics, Epicureans and Skeptics* (New York: Routledge, 1996). 77.
- ¹¹ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* (London: Penguin, 1964), Book IV, 74.
- ¹² Cicero, "On Old Age," 215.
- ¹³ Epictetus, *Enchiridion* (New York: Dover Books, 2004), par 5.
- ¹⁴ Ernst Bloch, *Natural Law and Human Dignity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), 14.
- ¹⁵ Garry Wills, *Saint Augustine: A Life* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 135.
- ¹⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, III, 122.
- ¹⁷ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 228.
- ¹⁸ Robert Boyle, *Selected Philosophical Papers* (New York: Hackett Publishing, 1991), 179-80.
- ¹⁹ Francis Bacon, *The Organon and Related Writings* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1960).
- ²⁰ Bacon, *Novum Organon, Aphorism cxxix*.
- ²¹ Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (New York: Norton, 1961), 36.
- ²² C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Harper, 2009(1944)), 80.
- ²³ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *On Moral Ends* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 3:31.
- ²⁴ Cicero, *The Republic and The Laws* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998)
- ²⁵ Jeremy Bentham, *The Principles of Morals and Legislation* (New York: Prometheus, 1988), xxv.
- ²⁶ Ernst Bloch, *Natural Law and Human Dignity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), 14.
- ²⁷ Brian Tierney, *The Idea of Natural Rights* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 65-66.
- ²⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, II, 94.
- ²⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, II, q. 94, art. 2; 1a, q.29. art. 4.
- ³⁰ Charles King, *Gods of the Upper Air: How a Circle of Renegade Anthropologists Reinvented Race, Sex, and Gender in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Random House, 2019).
- ³¹ Justin Smith, *Nature, Human Nature and Human Difference: Race in Early Modern Philosophy* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 6.
- ³² Edward O. Wilson, *The Meaning of Human Existence* (New York: Liveright, 2015), chap. 4.
- ³³ Arthur Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976). 109.
- ³⁴ Aldo Leopold. *A Sand County Almanac* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1949).
- ³⁵ For example, Karl Marx, *On The Jewish Question* (New York: Blurb, 2019), 241.
- ³⁶ Edmund Muskie, quoted by Jedediah Britton-Purdy, in *The New York Times*, Feb 16, 2019
- ³⁷ Lynn White., "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis," 155(*Science*, March 10, 1967). 1203-07.
- ³⁸ Arthur Cohen, *Myth of the Judeo-Christian Tradition* (New York: Harper and Row), 1970; Mark Silk, "Notes on the Judeo-Christian Tradition in America," *American Quarterly*, 36(1984).
- ³⁹ For example, Ben Shapiro, *The Right Side of History: How Reason and Moral Purpose Made the West Great* (New York: Broadside, 2019) makes prolific use of the term.
- ⁴⁰ Eric Freudenstein, "Ecology," in Milton Konvitz, *Judaism and Human Rights*, (New York: Transaction Press, 2001), 273.

⁴¹ Regina Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 173,

⁴² White, “The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis,”

⁴³ G.K. Chesterton, *St. Francis of Assisi* (Garden City: Image Books, 1959), 87.

⁴⁴ Pope Francis, *Laudato si*, par. 15,76,78.

⁴⁵ Roderick Nash, *The Rights of Nature: The History of Environmental Ethics* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press 1989), 80, criticizes Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* because of its “traditional anthropocentrism” in “keeping the balance of nature tilted in our favor.” The title of Nash’s book seems to be unintelligible while Carson’s book remains a great classic on care of the environment.

⁴⁶ Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime* (New York: Polity, 2018),73.