

Natural Law

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Looking to spend more time in prayer this Lent, but not sure how to fit it in?

In English this term is frequently employed as equivalent to the laws of nature, meaning the order which governs the activities of the material universe. Among the Roman jurists natural law designated those instincts and emotions common to man and the lower animals, such as the instinct of self-preservation and love of offspring. In its strictly ethical application—the sense in which this article treats it—the natural law is the rule of conduct which is prescribed to us by the Creator in the constitution of the nature with which He has endowed us.

According to St. Thomas, the natural law is "nothing else than the rational creature's participation in the eternal law" (I-II.94). The eternal law is God's wisdom, inasmuch as it is the directive norm of all movement and action. When God willed to give existence to creatures, He willed to ordain and direct them to an end. In the case of inanimate things, this Divine direction is provided for in the nature which God has given to each; in them determinism reigns. Like all the rest of creation, man is destined by God to an end, and receives from Him a direction towards this end. This ordination is of a character in harmony with his free intelligent nature. In virtue of his intelligence and free will, man is master of his conduct. Unlike the things of the mere material world he can vary his action, act, or abstain from action, as he pleases. Yet he is not a lawless being in an ordered universe. In the very constitution of his nature, he too has a law laid down for him, reflecting that ordination and direction of all things, which is the eternal law. The rule, then, which God has prescribed for our conduct, is found in our nature itself. Those actions which conform with its tendencies, lead to our destined end, and are thereby constituted right and morally good; those at variance with our nature are wrong and immoral.

The norm, however, of conduct is not some particular element or aspect of our nature. The standard is our whole human nature with its manifold relationships, considered as a creature destined to a special end. Actions are wrong if, though subserving the satisfaction of some particular need or tendency, they are at the same time incompatible with that rational harmonious subordination of the lower to the higher which reason should maintain among our conflicting tendencies and desires (see *GOOD*). For example, to nourish our bodies is right; but to indulge our appetite for food to the detriment of our corporal or spiritual life is wrong. Self-preservation is right, but to refuse to expose our life when the well-being of society requires it, is wrong. It is wrong to drink to intoxication, for, besides being injurious to health, such indulgence deprives one of the use of reason, which is intended by God to be the guide and dictator of conduct. Theft is wrong, because it subverts the basis of social life; and man's nature requires for its proper development that he live in a state of society. There is, then, a double reason for calling this law of conduct natural: first, because it is set up concretely in our very nature itself, and second, because it is manifested to us by the purely natural medium of reason. In both respects it is distinguished from the Divine positive law, which contains precepts not arising from the nature of things as God has constituted them by the creative act, but from the arbitrary will of God. This law we learn not through the unaided operation of reason, but through the light of supernatural revelation.

We may now analyse the natural law into three constituents: the discriminating norm, the binding norm (*norma obligans*), and the manifesting norm. The discriminating norm is, as we have just seen, human nature itself, objectively considered. It is, so to speak, the book in which is written the text of the law, and the classification of human actions into good and bad. Strictly speaking, our nature is the *proximate* discriminating norm or standard.

