

The Natural Law

- It is not sufficient to examine human nature from a purely physical or biological perspective. There is more to us than physics. Human nature is the nature of a person.

‘The natural law expresses and lays down the purposes, rights and duties, which are based upon the bodily and spiritual nature of the human person. Therefore this law cannot be thought of as simply a set of norms on the biological level; rather it must be defined as the rational order whereby human beings are called by the Creator to direct and regulate their lives and actions.’

(JPII Splendour of Truth §50)

‘Some have posited a complete sovereignty of reason in the domain of moral norms regarding the right ordering of life in this world’(JPII Splendour of Truth §36). This ignores the effects of sin upon reason, and ignoring also the primary submission to God which is essential to the proper exercise of reason.

Behaviour that is of its essence morally bad

‘There are kinds of behaviour which can never, in any situation, be a proper response – a response which is in conformity with the dignity of the person’(JPII Splendour of Truth §52).

‘Whatever is hostile to life itself, such as any kind of homicide, genocide, abortion, euthanasia and voluntary suicide; whatever violates the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, physical and mental torture and attempts to coerce the spirit; whatever is offensive to human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution and trafficking in women and children.’

(JPII Splendour of Truth §80 quote from G&S §27).

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‘degrading conditions of work which treat labourers as mere instruments of profit, and not as free, responsible persons: all these and the like are a disgrace, and so long as they infect human civilisation they contaminate those who inflict them more than those who suffer injustice, and they are a negation of the honour due to the Creator’(JPII Splendour of Truth §80 quote from G&S §27).

- Reason does not create values, moral norms or truth; it discovers them. We must act according to the judgment of reason; reason must be open to divine enlightenment.

‘You will know the truth
and the truth will set you free’(John 8:32).

‘Who will cause us to see good?
Let the light of your face shine on us, O Lord’ (Psalm 4:6).

‘Blessed is the person who walks not in the counsel of the wicked ... but whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law day and night’(Psalm 1:1-2).

‘The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul;
the testimony of the Lord is sure,
making wise the simple;
the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the Lord is pure,
enlightening the eyes’(Psalm 19:8-9).

‘Who can discern his errors?

Cleanse me from hidden faults’(Psalm 19:12).

God's will revealed in the Old Testament ('Torah', 'Law')

People's understanding of God's will prior to Jesus was necessarily imperfect. Paul insists that where observance of the Law comes into conflict with behaviour inspired by the Spirit of Jesus, it is the Law that must give way. In this he is following Jesus who said: 'It was said to you of old, but I say to you ...'(Matthew 5 numerous times).

At its best the Law instructs us as to what God wants or does not want. This is good in that it demonstrates how sinful our behaviour is when we contradict the Law, and it can bring us to the point of crying out for mercy. But the Law does not give us the power to obey it. Jesus is God's answer to that cry, and we live a truly moral life by following his example and the promptings of his Spirit, strengthened by his grace.

When we act on faith in Jesus we will not contradict what is right in the Law. Rather we will fulfil it and go beyond it in love. The Law is 'holy, just and good' (Romans 7:12), but it is no substitute for communion with Jesus.

Law: Hebrew words in Psalm 119

1. torah [תּוֹרָה] ‘law’ occurs 24 times, perhaps with the nuance of ‘the way we are to respond to God’s hesed as revealed by God’.
2. mitswot [מִצְוֹת] ‘commandments’ occurs 22 times
3. mishpatim [מִשְׁפָּטִים] ‘judgments’ occurs 23 times, perhaps expressing the idea of an oral verdict resulting from a judgment.
4. huqqim [חֻקִּים] ‘statutes’ occurs 22 times, perhaps retaining something of the etymology of ‘engraved’: God’s will fixed in writing.

Law: Hebrew words in Psalm 119

5. piqqıdim [פְּקֻדִים] ‘precepts’ occurs 22 times, perhaps with the nuance of obligations to which God wants us to pay special attention.
6. ‘edut [עֵדוּת] ‘decrees’ occurs 23 times, with the nuance that these are decrees backed by God’s testimony.
7. dabar [דְּבַר] ‘word’ occurs 23 times, perhaps with the nuance of God’s will as revealed by what God has done in history and in creation.
8. ’imrah [אִמְרָה] ‘promise’ occurs 19 times: ‘what God has said’.
9. derek [דֶּרֶךְ] ‘way’ occurs 13 times.

God's will revealed in the New Testament

Jesus is God's perfect Word. In Jesus we see who God is and what God wills for us. His disciples saw Jesus fulfilling the Law.

‘The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah; not like the covenant that I made with their ancestors, on the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; for they did not continue in my covenant, and so I had no concern for them, says the Lord. This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people’(Hebrews 8:8-10 = Jeremiah 31:31-34).

The 'law of Christ' (Galatians 6:2) is that the perfection for which we strive is the perfection we see in God = the perfection of love. We are called to 'love as Jesus loves'; to love with his love poured into our hearts by God's Spirit.

In the NT texts abound that reveal how we are to live as disciples of Jesus

‘Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.’(Romans 12:9-13)

Jesus commands certain behaviour (precepts). Other behaviour he suggests (counsels). These latter are invitations of grace.

‘The precepts are intended to remove whatever is incompatible with charity. The aim of the counsels is to remove whatever hinders the development of charity, even if it is not contrary to it.’

‘God does not want each person to keep all the counsels, but only those appropriate to the diversity of persons, times, opportunities, and strengths, as charity requires; for it is charity, as queen of all virtues, all commandments, all counsels, and, in short, of all laws and all Christian actions, that gives to all of them their rank, order, time and value.’

(Francis de Sales Love of God 8.6).