

the Divine Command Theory is not only untenable but impious. And, in fact, some of the greatest theologians have rejected the theory for just these reasons. Such thinkers as Saint Thomas Aquinas connect morality with religion in a different way.

4.3. The Theory of Natural Law

In the history of Christian thought, the dominant theory of ethics is not the Divine Command Theory. That honor instead goes to the Theory of Natural Law. This theory has three main parts.

1. The Theory of Natural Law rests on a particular view of the world. On this view, the world has a rational order, with values and purposes built into its very nature. This idea comes from the Greeks, whose worldview dominated Western thinking for over 1,700 years. The Greeks believed that *everything in nature has a purpose*.

Aristotle (384–322 BC) built this idea into his system of thought. To understand anything, he said, four questions must be asked: What is it? What is it made of? How did it come to be? And what is it for? The answers might be: This is a knife; it is made of metal; it was made by a craftsman; and it is used for cutting. Aristotle assumed that the last question—What is it for?—could be asked of anything whatever. “Nature,” he said, “belongs to the class of causes which act for the sake of something.”

Obviously, knives have a purpose, because craftsmen build them with a purpose in mind. But what about natural objects that we do not make? Aristotle believed that they have purposes, too. One of his examples was that we have teeth so that we can chew. Biological examples are quite persuasive; each part of our bodies does seem, intuitively, to have a special purpose—our eyes are for seeing, our ears are for hearing, our skin exists to protect us, and so on. But Aristotle’s claim was not limited to organic beings. According to him, *everything* has a purpose. To take a different sort of example, he thought that rain falls so that plants can grow. He considered alternatives. For example, he asked whether the rain might fall “of necessity,” which helps the plants only “by coincidence.” However, he considered that unlikely.

from Rachels, J.
edited by: Rachels, S.

The Elements of Moral Philosophy

(2015)

The world, Aristotle thought, is an orderly, rational system in which each thing has a proper place and serves its own special purpose. There is a neat hierarchy: The rain exists for the sake of the plants, the plants exist for the sake of the animals, and the animals exist—of course—for the sake of people. Aristotle says: "If then we are right in believing that nature makes nothing without some end in view, nothing to no purpose, it must be that nature has made all things specifically for the sake of man." This worldview is stunningly anthropocentric, or human-centered. But Aristotle was hardly alone in having such thoughts; almost every important thinker in human history has advanced such a thesis. Humans are a remarkably vain species.

The Christian thinkers who came later found this worldview appealing. Only one thing was missing: God. Thus, the Christian thinkers said that the rain falls to help the plants *because that is what God intended*, and the animals are for human use *because that is what God made them for*. Values and purposes were thus seen as part of God's plan.

2. A corollary to this way of thinking is that the "laws of nature" describe not only how things *are* but also how things *ought to be*. The world is in harmony when things serve their natural purposes. When they do not, or cannot, things have gone wrong. Eyes that cannot see are defective, and drought is a natural evil; the badness of both is explained by reference to natural law. But there are also implications for human conduct. Moral rules are now viewed as deriving from the laws of nature. Some ways of behaving are said to be "natural" while others are regarded as "unnatural"; and "unnatural" acts are seen as morally wrong.

Consider, for example, the duty of beneficence. We are morally required to care about our neighbors. Why? According to the Theory of Natural Law, beneficence is natural for us, given the kind of creatures we are. We are by nature social and need the company of other people. Someone who does not care at all about others—who really does not care, through and through—is seen as deranged. Modern psychiatry says that such people suffer from *antisocial personality disorder*, and such people are commonly called *psychopaths* or *sociopaths*. A callous personality is defective, just as eyes are defective if they cannot see. And, it may be added, this is true because we were

created by God, with a specific "human" nature, as part of his overall plan.

The endorsement of beneficence is relatively uncontroversial. Natural-law theory has also been used, however, to support more questionable ideas. Religious thinkers often condemn "deviant" sexual practices, and they usually justify this by appealing to the Theory of Natural Law. If everything has a purpose, what is the purpose of sex? The obvious answer is procreation. Sexual activity that is not connected with making babies can therefore be seen as "unnatural," and practices like masturbation and gay sex may be condemned for this reason. This view of sex dates back at least to Saint Augustine (A.D. 354–430) and is explicit in the writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274). The moral theology of the Catholic Church is based on natural-law theory.

3. The third part concerns moral knowledge. How can we tell right from wrong? On the Divine Command Theory, we must consult God's commandments. On the Theory of Natural Law, however, the "natural laws" of morality are just laws of reason; so, what's right is what's supported by the best arguments. On this view, we can figure out what's right because God has given us the ability to reason. Moreover, God has given this ability to everyone, putting the believer and nonbeliever in the same position.

Outside the Catholic Church, the Theory of Natural Law has few advocates today. It is generally rejected for three reasons.

First, the idea that "what's natural is good" seems open to obvious counterexamples. Sometimes what's natural is bad. People naturally care much more about themselves than about strangers, but this is regrettable. Disease occurs naturally, but disease is bad. Children are naturally self-centered, but parents don't think this is a good thing.

Second, the Theory of Natural Law seems to confuse "is" and "ought." In the 18th century, David Hume pointed out that *what is the case* and *what ought to be the case* are logically different notions, and no conclusion about one follows from the other. We can say that people are naturally disposed to be beneficent, but it does not follow that they *ought* to

be beneficent. Similarly, it may be true that sex produces babies, but it does not follow that sex *ought* or *ought not* to be engaged in only for that purpose. Facts are one thing; values are another.

Third, the Theory of Natural Law is now widely rejected because its view of the world conflicts with modern science. The world as described by Galileo, Newton, and Darwin has no need for "facts" about right and wrong. Their explanations of nature make no reference to values or purposes. What happens just happens, due to the laws of cause and effect. If the rain benefits the plants, this is because the plants have evolved by the laws of natural selection in a rainy climate.

Thus, modern science gives us a picture of the world as a realm of facts, where the only "natural laws" are the laws of physics, chemistry, and biology, working blindly and without purpose. Whatever values may be, they are not part of the natural order. As for the idea that "nature has made all things specifically for the sake of man," well, that is only vanity. To the extent that one accepts the worldview of modern science, one will reject the worldview of natural-law theory. That theory was a product, not of modern thought, but of the Middle Ages.

4.4. Religion and Particular Moral Issues

Some religious people will find the preceding discussion unsatisfying. It will seem too abstract to have any bearing on their actual lives. For them, the connection between morality and religion is an immediate, practical matter that centers on particular moral issues. It doesn't matter whether right and wrong are understood in terms of God's will or whether moral laws are laws of nature. What matters are the moral teachings of one's religion. The Scriptures and the church leaders are regarded as authorities; if one is truly faithful, one must accept what they say. Many Christians, for example, believe that they must oppose abortion because the church condemns it and because (they assume) the Scriptures do too.

Are there distinctively religious positions on major moral issues that believers must accept? The rhetoric of the pulpit suggests so. But there is good reason to think otherwise.

For one thing, it is often difficult to find specific moral guidance in the Scriptures. We face different problems than our ancestors faced 2,000 years ago; thus, the Scriptures may be silent on matters that seem pressing to us. The Bible does contain a number of general precepts—for example, to love one's neighbor and to treat others as one wishes to be treated. And those are fine principles, which have practical application in our lives. However, it is not clear what they imply about the rights of workers, or the extinction of species, or the funding of medical research, and so on.

Another problem is that the Scriptures and church tradition are often ambiguous. Authorities disagree, leaving the believer in the awkward position of having to choose which part of the tradition to accept. For instance, the New Testament condemns being rich, and there is a long tradition of self-denial and charitable giving that affirms this teaching. But there is also an obscure Old Testament figure named Jabez who asked God to "enlarge my territories" (1 Chronicles 4:10), and God did. A recent book urging Christians to adopt Jabez as their model became a best-seller.

Thus, when people say that their moral views come from their religion, they are often mistaken. Really, they are making up their own minds about the issues and then interpreting the Scriptures, or church tradition, in a way that supports the conclusions they've already reached. Of course, this does not happen in every case, but it seems fair to say that it happens a lot. The question of wealth is one example; abortion is another.

In the debate over abortion, religious issues are never far from the discussion. Religious conservatives hold that the fetus is a person from the moment of conception, and so abortion is murder. The fetus, they believe, is not merely a *potential* person but is an *actual* person, possessing a full-fledged right to life. Liberals, of course, deny this—they say that the fetus is something less than that, at least early in the pregnancy.

The abortion issue is complex, but we are concerned only with how it relates to religion. Conservatives sometimes say that fetal life is sacred. Is that the Christian view? *Must* Christians condemn abortion? To answer those questions, one might look to the Scriptures or to church tradition.

The Scriptures. It is difficult to derive a prohibition against abortion from either the Jewish or the Christian Scriptures. The Scriptures never condemn abortion by name. However, conservatives sometimes quote certain passages that seem to suggest that fetuses have full human status. One of the most frequently cited passages is from the first chapter of Jeremiah, in which Jeremiah quotes God as saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you." These words are presented as though they were God's endorsement of the conservative position: it is wrong to kill the unborn because the unborn are consecrated to God.

In context, however, these words obviously mean something different. Suppose we read the whole passage in which they occur:

Now the word of the Lord came to me, saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations."

Then I said, "Ah, Lord God! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth." But the Lord said to me,

"Do not say, 'I am only a youth'; for to all to whom I send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you, you shall speak. Be not afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you."

This passage has nothing to do with abortion. Instead, Jeremiah is asserting his authority as a prophet. He is saying, in effect, "God told me to speak for him. I tried to say no, but he insisted." However, Jeremiah puts this point poetically; he says that God selected him to be a prophet even before he was born.

The pattern here is familiar: someone who is advocating a moral position quotes a few words from the Bible, out of context, and then interprets them in a way that supports their position; yet those words suggest something else entirely when read in context. When this happens, is it accurate to say that the person is "following the moral teachings of the Bible"? Or is it accurate to say that he has searched the Bible to find support for something he already believes, and has interpreted the Bible with this in mind? The latter, when true, suggests

an especially arrogant attitude—the attitude that God himself must share one's opinions!

Other biblical passages support a *liberal* view of abortion. Three times the death penalty is recommended for women who have had sex out of wedlock, even though killing the woman would also kill her fetus (Genesis 38:24; Leviticus 21:9; Deuteronomy 22:20–21). This suggests that the fetus has no right to life. Also, in Exodus 21, God tells Moses that the penalty for murder is death; however, the penalty for causing a woman to miscarry is only a fine. The Law of Israel seemed to regard the fetus as something less than a person.

Church Tradition. Today, the Catholic Church strongly opposes abortion. In many Protestant churches, too, abortion is routinely denounced from the pulpit. It is no surprise, then, that many people feel that they must condemn abortion "for religious reasons," regardless of how Scripture is interpreted. What lies behind the Church's current position on abortion?

To some extent, the Vatican has always opposed abortion for the same reason that it condemns condoms, birth control pills, and other forms of contraception: All of these activities thwart natural processes. According to natural-law theory, sex is supposed to lead to the birth of a healthy baby. Condoms and birth control pills prevent this from happening by preventing pregnancy; abortion prevents it by killing the fetus. Thus, by the lights of traditional Catholic thinking, abortion is wrong because it disrupts a natural process. This type of argument, however, can hardly show that Christians "must" oppose abortion. The argument depends on natural-law theory, and, as we have seen, natural-law theory is based on a worldview that predates modern science. Christians today need not reject modern science—even the Catholic Church dropped its opposition to Charles Darwin's theory of evolution back in 1950. Thus, Christians are not required to oppose abortion based on natural-law considerations.

At any rate, to say that abortion disrupts a natural process is to say nothing about the moral status of the fetus. The pope does not merely believe that abortion is immoral, like

using a condom; he believes that abortion is *murder*. How did this position become dominant within the Catholic Church? Have Church leaders always regarded the fetus as enjoying a special moral status?

For most of the Church's history—until around A.D. 1200—little of relevance is known. Back then, there were no universities, and the Church was not especially intellectual. People believed all kinds of things, for all kinds of reasons. But in the 13th century, Saint Thomas Aquinas constructed a philosophical system that became the bedrock of later Catholic thought. The key question, Aquinas believed, is whether the fetus has a soul: if it does, then abortion is murder; if it doesn't, then abortion is not murder. Does the fetus have a soul? Aquinas accepted Aristotle's idea that the soul is the "substantial form" of man. Let's not worry about what that means, exactly; what's important is that human beings are supposed to acquire a "substantial form" only when their bodies take on human shape. So now the key question is: When do human beings first look human?

When a baby is born, anyone can see that it has a human shape. In Aquinas's day, however, nobody knew when fetuses begin to look human—after all, fetal development occurs in the mother's womb, out of sight. Aristotle had believed, for no good reason, that males acquire a soul 40 days after conception and females do after 90 days. Presumably, many Christians accepted his view. At any rate, for the next several centuries, it was natural for Catholics to strongly oppose abortion at any stage of pregnancy, because the fetus *might* have already acquired a human form, and so abortion *might* be murder.

Contrary to popular belief, the Catholic Church has never officially maintained that the fetus acquires a soul at the moment of conception. Around 1600, however, some theologians began to say that the soul enters the body a few days after conception, and so abortion is murder even at an early stage. This monumentally important change in Catholic thinking occurred without extended theological debate. Perhaps it seemed unimportant because the Church already opposed early-term abortions. Yet we understand little about why the Church adopted this position.

Today we know a lot about fetal development. We know, through microscopes and ultrasounds, that fetuses do not look human until several weeks into the pregnancy. Thus, a follower of Aquinas should now say that fetuses do not have a soul during the first month or two of pregnancy. However, there has been no movement inside the Catholic Church to adopt that position. For reasons that remain murky, the Church adopted a conservative view of the status of the fetus in the 1600s, and it has held fast to that view ever since.

The purpose of reviewing this history is not to suggest that the contemporary church's position is wrong. For all I have said, it may be right. The point, rather, is this: every generation interprets its traditions to support its favored moral views. Abortion is but one example of this. We could also have discussed the church's shifting views on slavery, or the status of women, or capital punishment. In each case, the moral stance taken by the Church seems not to be derived from the Bible so much as imposed on it.

The arguments in this chapter point to a common conclusion: Right and wrong are not to be understood in terms of God's will; morality is a matter of reason and conscience, not religious faith; and, in any case, religious considerations do not provide definitive solutions to most of the moral problems that we face. Morality and religion are, in a word, different. Of course, religious beliefs do sometimes bear on moral issues. Consider, for example, the doctrine of eternal life. If some people go to heaven when they die—so that dying is a good thing for them—then this might affect the morality of killing these people. Or suppose we believe, upon studying ancient prophecies, that the world is about to end. This might diminish our fear of climate change. The relationship between morality and religion is complicated, but it is a relationship between two different subjects.

This conclusion may seem antireligious. However, it has not been reached by questioning the validity of religion. The arguments we have considered do not assume that Christianity or any other theological system is false; they merely show that, even if such a system is true, morality remains a separate matter.