

Of Man and Beast and Law Nature and the Natural as Norms

— Thomas Storck —

In our ordinary language we often appeal to nature as a norm. Thus “unnatural” and “contrary to nature” are still terms of abuse or criticism. We say “nature teaches thus and such” or “nature forbids thus and such” or “naturally we should do such and such.” The American Declaration of Independence appeals confidently to the “laws of nature and of nature’s God.” During the 1960s it was widely believed that society had become artificial and that to return to the natural was obviously a good. So in some vague way we think of nature as an ethical norm. But why do we do so and what exactly do we mean by nature when we make such appeals?

At first glance what most people mean by *nature* would not seem to be an ethical norm at all. In ordinary speech, nature refers to everything in the world except man and his works, especially the animal and plant kingdoms. But what sort of moral norm do we discern there? Tennyson in his poem *In Memoriam* speaks of “Nature, red in tooth and claw” (LVI, stanza 4), that is, the endless and seemingly meaningless violence of the animal kingdom. If nature is simply what rocks, plants and beasts do all day, then how could it be any kind of ethical norm? What sort of lesson could we find in it? Probably, in fact, each of us could find any lesson he wanted there, from an imperative to work for the survival of the fittest to a demand to preserve each species for the sake of biological diversity. We could find wonderful examples of harmony and interdependence or lessons on how to prey on the weak and preserve one’s own life at all costs. In fact, nature conceived in this way offers nothing by way of a moral lesson, because the *fact* that certain behavior occurs can never tell us that we *ought* to imitate it or that it ought to occur.

On the other hand, nature conceived as an ethical norm does have a venerable history. Long ago Aristotle wrote, “nothing which is contrary to nature is good” (*Politics*, bk. VII, chap. 3). But what does this mean? If we look at the animal kingdom, at some time or the other nearly *everything* is both according to nature and also contrary to nature: fidelity, treachery, mutual help, ruthless preying upon others, etc. As I said, if we are looking to this meaning of nature we will not find much in the way of authoritative moral guidance. To escape our difficulty, let us consider a statement from another writer, who, broadly speaking, is in the same philosophical tradition as Aristotle. A twentieth-century moral theologian, Fr. Francis J. Connell, has written, “...an analysis

of man’s very nature furnishes the basic norm of what is right and wrong.” If we look more closely at this statement we may begin to make some progress toward understanding why nature can be appealed to as an ethical norm.

Every *thing* (as distinguished from a composite made up of many things) that exists has a basic *whatness*, that is, a something that answers the question: What is that thing? The fact that a cow (say) is brown or big or sick is not relevant when we are asked, What is that thing? We reply, “A cow.” This *whatness* we also call its nature. Things can differ in such qualities as color or size or weight without differing in what they are, that is, they still have the same whatness or nature despite accidental (or unessential) differences. Now, a rule of being (if I may call it that) is that everything, *insofar as it is what it is*, is good. How, you might ask, can anything not be what it is? Could anything be other than what it is? Take (say) a bottle as an example. If the bottle has a hole in its side so that liquid will drain out, to that extent it is not what we mean when we say it is a bottle, that is, a closed container capable of holding liquid. It has a defect in its being, so we say to that degree it is not a good bottle. Insofar as it deviates from what its *whatness* proclaims it to be, to that extent it is not good. Take another example, the first such example that ever existed and the weightiest: the Devil. He was created as a magnificent archangel. As long as he remained simply that, he was good. But now his basic archangelical nature remains as a kind of tragic reminder of what he was supposed to be. To the extent that he is evil, he no longer is what he is, that is, his radical choice against God by means of his free will has enabled him to act against his own nature and produce a defect in that nature. But if we want to understand Satan and his powers we must see him as a failed archangel, just as if we want to understand the glass object in front of us, with juice dripping out of its side onto the floor, we must see it as a failed bottle, not as some kind of newfangled pump. If someone were to ask us, “What is the Devil?”, we would have to reply, “A failed archangel.” When he fell he did not become a new kind of creature nor did he acquire a new whatness or nature. As an earlier philosophical writer, the Capuchin Celestine Bittle, put it, “[The evil spirits] did not lose this nature and essence when they sinned; they still possess the same nature and essence which they received from the hand of God in their creation.”

Now what does this have to do with nature as an ethical

norm? In what I quoted above from Fr. Connell, he refers to man's nature as a norm of right and wrong. Why? Because we, just as the devils, were created with a certain whatness, and only by following that whatness can we act as we were meant to. That is why I said that anything, insofar as it is what it is, is good. If we exist and act according to our own nature, then we are good. We can see this in numerous ways. The distinguishing thing about man, about our nature, what distinguishes us from the other animals, is that we have reason or understanding. Thus if we fail to act according to our reason, we fail to act humanly. Now "reason" here does not mean the mere ability to link arguments together or make plans regardless of one's aim. A murderer can do that when he is planning a murder. No, I mean by reason or understanding, for example, that which a drunken person deprives himself of while he is drunk. Getting drunk is wrong because it deprives us of that part of us that makes us what we are, our reason. The fact that we can misuse our reason to plot murders or invent atom bombs is neither here nor there. God did not give us our reason for that purpose, just as he did not give Satan his tremendous strength so that he could tempt men to Hell. Another example is contraception. Our nature, which of course includes all of our being, body and soul, is clearly set up so that genital acts have a purpose inherent in them. Our sexual faculty would not exist were it not a reproductive faculty. Thus it frustrates a part of our nature if we use that faculty but at the same time and *by our own will* make it impossible for the natural consequences of using the faculty to take place.

It turns out, then, that when we appeal to nature as a norm, we are really appealing to, or should be appealing to, our own nature, our human nature. This is the nature that is a moral norm for us, not what bears and wolves do in the woods. Just as we judge a faulty bottle by how it was intended to function according to *what* it is, so we must judge our behavior by what we are, rational creatures, whose reason and understanding were intended to rule over all the other parts of us, and in turn, were to be ruled by none other than God.

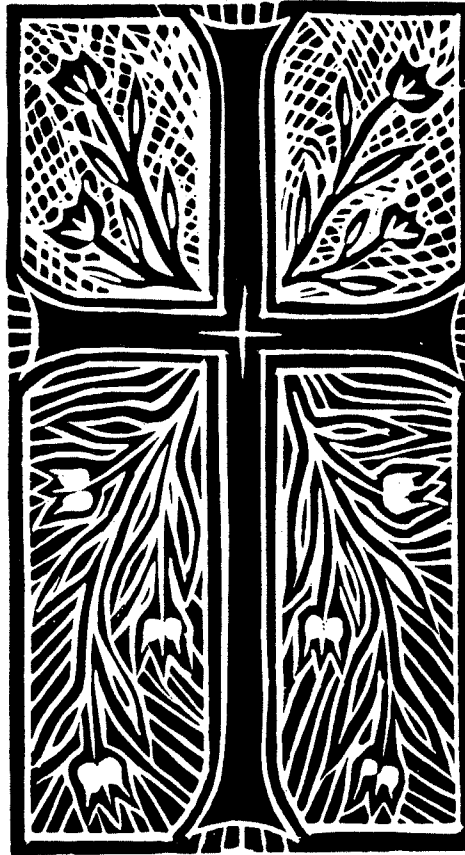
There are two other questions that are connected with what I have said, and that I think could profitably be discussed. In the first place, most Christians are neither accustomed to nor perhaps comfortable with the idea of appealing to man's nature as a guide of right and wrong. A Protestant might

complain that the Bible is meant to be our guide to right and wrong. How, he might inquire, could depraved and sinful fallen human nature possibly be a norm for right conduct? And many Catholics would similarly object that it is the law of God as revealed through His infallible teaching Church that is our standard of right and wrong. Even a passing glance

at human behavior shows us that evil is abundant, and if most of us look honestly at our own conduct and motives, we see a nest of evils, even if not manifested in terrible sins or crimes. Protestant theology itself has generally not looked favorably on the notion of human nature as a moral norm. For example, Martin Luther wrote in his *Small Catechism* that original sin brought about "the *total corruption* of our *whole human nature*" [emphasis in original]. He further says that man since the Fall "is inclined only to evil...." John Calvin in turn says in his *Institutes* that "whatever is in man, from intellect to will, from the soul to the flesh, is all defiled...." Unfortunately many people think that such teaching is universally held by all Christians, Catholics as well as Protestants, and reacting against it, they reject Catholicism without even giving it a hearing. And too many Catholics do not seem to know better either. But even as basic a source as the *Baltimore Catechism* says unequivocally, "Although we have a strong

inclination to evil as a result of original sin, our nature is not evil in itself; it can perform some good actions in the natural order without the aid of grace." Thus Catholics ought to have had a firm grasp of the fact that human nature is still a norm of morality and of why it can be appealed to as such. Instead, though most everyone has a vague notion that to violate nature is wrong, in fact what is wrong is to violate our own nature. "Nature" is simply a system of interconnected *natures*, which God created and placed on the earth. Of course, it is true that because of the weakness of human nature we cannot rely on our ability to discern right and wrong from our own examination of our nature, and thus we need the Church and her magisterium to provide actual concrete direction for us. But nonetheless the principle remains that our human nature is an ethical norm for human conduct.

The Protestant notion of the corruption of human nature is widespread and deeply-rooted in the soul of America. Can this have had a part in the alienating of man from himself, from his soul as well as his body, that likewise seems widespread and deeply-rooted in America and is, I think, one



cause of so much of the strange hedonism that afflicts us? Were the words of Aquinas, "Every being, as being, is good,"—were these words, I say, as deeply-rooted in our soul—would they have produced different results in our culture than the utterances of Luther and Calvin have? Of course, neither Aquinas nor the Church denies the horrible reality of sin nor the real corruption and evil in mankind. But it seems to me there is a difference between seeing my flesh and my soul as in themselves loathsome and acceptable only when clothed with the external and forensic justification of Christ and, on the other hand, seeing myself as a sinner, yes, but one whose body and soul are not be regarded as disgusting objects, but rather as sanctified by incorporation in Christ's Mystical Body. Perhaps these sentiments of Luther and Calvin are part of the reason some so easily abandon their bodies to such extremes as drug injections or homosexual practices. After all, if my flesh is inherently vile, why should I hesitate to do vile things to it? The sanity of Thomas' teaching on human nature both affirms the body's goodness and at the same time restrains its most macabre excesses.

I said before that we should look to human nature for a norm, not to the behavior of beasts in the woods. But in saying this I was not meaning to be dismissive about our responsibility toward animals nor to the respect we should have for *their* natures. But how does the Faith and its teaching and tradition look at look at our relations with our brother beasts?

Thou makest springs gush forth in the valleys;
 they flow between the hills,
 they give drink to every beast of the field;
 the wild asses quench their thirst.
 By them the birds of the air have their habitation;
 they sing among the branches.
 From thy lofty abode thou waterest the mountains;
 the earth is satisfied with the fruit of thy work.
 (Psalm 104:10-13)

In the face of such passages from scripture, it would be hard for anyone to maintain that the Judeo-Christian religious tradition was not interested in the beasts or plants or in the earth itself. The new Catechism says, "Man's dominion over inanimate and other living beings...is not absolute; it is limited by concern for the quality of life of his neighbor, including generations to come; it requires a religious respect for the integrity of creation" (no. 2415). I would call the reader's attention to the next clause in the Catechism's declaration; we must have "a religious respect for the integrity of creation." When we speak of the *integrity* of something we are speaking of the thing in itself, of its wholeness, thus of its *whatness* or nature. So while we may use plants and animals for food or clothing, we must still have regard for their own individual natures or whatnesses. John Paul II, in *Centesimus Annus*, (no. 37) teaches:

People think that they can make arbitrary use of the earth, subjecting it without restraint to their wills, as though the earth did not have its own requisites and a prior God-given purpose, which human beings can indeed develop but must not betray.

In our use of the earth, of plants and especially of animals, we must try to see the difference between *exploitation* and what the Holy Father terms *development*. Perhaps we can say that our treatment of these fellow creatures of ours should be connected with their own lives according to their own natures. To ride on a horse is to develop a capacity it already has, namely, to move about. To cut it up for gruesome experiments is another matter. I grant, of course, that it is difficult to work this out in every case—how is eating a pig or a cow connected with their own "requisites and...prior God-given purposes" which "human beings can indeed develop but must not betray?" Obviously more work is required here to understand and sort out what is the proper and improper use of animals, plants, and even minerals. There is scope here for much interesting and fruitful philosophical and theological discussion. But we can surely start by affirming the general principles about our treatment of the lower parts of creation, as expressed in the new Catechism and in *Centesimus Annus*, and else where. And in doing this we can begin to develop not just Christian thinking, but Christian acting, toward our fellow creatures.

I began this essay by looking at some uses of the word "nature" and of our appeals to nature as a standard. It turns out that when we appeal to nature we are really appealing to some particular nature—to the rule that violating a nature is wrong. But this rule can be extended very far. Even composite things such as nations or schools or economic systems have quasi-natures of their own; they have principles inherent in them that should be respected and purposes that are properly theirs. We should make an effort in our thinking about all matters to try to discern what are the natures involved, and thereby what is demanded in order to restore wholeness. We will never succeed in bringing health to anything, be it man or beast or institution, unless we discover and respect, nay learn to love, its *whatness*. Then surely indeed nature will be our ethical norm, a source of wholeness for ourselves as well as for that creation we are called to oversee and protect. ☩

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