

What Is God's Law For Man?

Moral Principles in Outline: Part 4.

By Rev J. C. Houpert, S.J.

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After fixing for us our journey's end, God also draws us along the road towards it. (See the pamphlet by the same author entitled 'What is Man's Destiny?') He teaches us by His Law and He helps us by giving light to our mind and strength to our will. We shall deal now with the divine Law, which may be called the rule of life or the exemplary cause of our moral conduct. We have to consider –

1. its nature and elements –

and

2. its effects.

The Moral Law in Itself.

In physics and other sciences, they speak of 'the laws of nature', namely; the uniform way in which all irrational beings necessarily act. These laws are the expression of God's will concerning these creatures. But when applied to beings intelligent and free, laws are general commands issued by the legitimate ruler defining the conduct of the ruled for the common good. These are called moral laws, whereas physical laws are of a lower order.

(a) In Irrational Nature things proceed under the action and reaction of forces which reside in the things themselves, and work automatically and necessarily; given the cause and conditions necessary for work, the cause will surely act and the effect will follow.

So a natural physical law is really a statement of facts which are found from experience to happen in a fixed, regular manner and under fixed conditions, the stability and regularity of their occurrence being due to the regular, permanent and necessary bent of natural forces, for example, a heavy body, if dropped, falls to the ground; all chemical combinations take place under fixed conditions of temperature and pressure.

(b) In Rational Beings there is free will, and for this will there can be no law in the sense of physical law, stating a physically necessary sequence of facts, since the human will is free from any predetermination in its elections about finite goods.

All there can be is a rule stating what is expected from a free but responsible agent: a rule of conduct, directing his actions, so that they may seek the true and the good, which are the objects of the specific human faculties, that is, a rule directing human acts.

Thus, rational and irrational beings are equally subject to the law of their nature, but in different ways: we fulfil the law by self-determination; the laws are imposed on our intellect but only proposed to our free will; it is a moral law of our nature. All other beings in the world fulfil the law

by a necessity within them, which they cannot resist; it is the physical law of their nature. One of the consequences is that only man may fail to attain his natural end, the rest of the universe cannot. But the relations of origin and subjection with regard to God are the same in man as in the universe. The Creator's will bears down irresistibly on all irrational nature, and no less so, although otherwise, on all rational beings by the sanctions of which we speak later.

There exists a Natural Law commanding us to keep the order of things and forbidding us to disturb it. The Maker of the world is also the great Lawgiver of the world. He governs equally the course of Heaven, the pit of Hell, and the visible universe, which is under our observation. That universe is an organised whole, resplendent with order. That order betokens a law, a pre-conceived plan; and that general plan is called God's Eternal Law. It finds its origin in God's, wisdom; it is accepted by His will and it extends to all creatures and all their activities. Now that part of the Eternal Law, which applies to free agents, is called the Natural Law, the Moral Law, the Law of Nature par excellence.

PROOFS

- (a) Since God is infinitely righteous, He cannot but impose on men the obligation to do good and avoid evil, and He must also have this obligation sufficiently made known to men.
- (b) Without that law, Nature would be defective with regard to the highest and most representative being, man. But this is inadmissible because nature never fails in what is necessary.
- (c) The Natural Law is based on nature, the order of which must be preserved and must not be disturbed.

But the Author of Nature and of its order is the First Cause, which, being Infinite Wisdom, cannot approve of the disturbance of the order it has established, nor approve moral evil. Therefore, the binding force of Moral Law comes from the Author of Nature, the Supreme Lawgiver.

Some illustrations: –

It is in the very nature of things that

- (1) Parents must bring up their children, children must respect and love their parents; man must reverence, praise and serve God.
- (2) Inferiors must obey their superiors; moral good must be preferred to physical or material good; moral evil must be avoided even at the cost of physical evil.
- (3) A free agent must follow reason; therefore, he must not extinguish his reason, for example, by drink or passion. Therefore, drunkenness is bad. The object of mind is truth, and that of the will, good; therefore, these must be the objects also of those faculties of men which subserve his mind and will. The power of speech is one of them; therefore, speech must be, by nature ordered to truth; therefore, it is bad, immoral to lie.
- (4) The powers of generation are given for the purpose of giving life to children, who must be brought up as men. Therefore, any use of these powers and the organs connected with them outside lawful marriage is against the intention of nature and therefore morally bad. – Pleasure accompanies the performance of natural functions to which it is a help. Therefore, pleasure is only a means, not an end. Therefore, mere pleasure seeking is bad, because it turns a means to an end.

(5) Man has got a right to life, to the means of life for himself and his dependents, to bodily and to personal integrity, to freedom, et cetera. Therefore, no person can take away an innocent man's life, wound him, starve him, rob him of his own or slander him.

Positive Laws. –

The Natural Law is universal, that is, for all men, and immutable. The essence of things cannot change; nor can God or man make good what is intrinsically evil. However, the dictates of that Law can be made more definite and extensive by positive laws, as experience shows. In fact, the course of action imposed by the Natural Law is either

- (1) clear at once, for example, theft is evil,
- (2) clear only on reflection, for example, the law of monogamy,

or (3) insufficiently clear, and then we need further direction for the good of civil society, to save quarrels or to determine rights. This direction is given by positive laws, namely, ordinances of reason that emanate from the free will of the lawgiver and are added to the Natural Law. That lawgiver may be God Himself or men in authority, since all true authority comes from God.

When the positive laws of God-about belief and practice go beyond the Natural Law, we cannot know them without divine revelation. On their part, civil authorities can make laws only in dependence on God, Whom they represent. It follows that transgressors of civil laws indirectly transgress the Natural Law, which enjoins obedience to all legitimate authority.

Effects of the Natural Law.

All genuine laws create obligations and impose sanctions. So also the Natural Law bids us do certain things and avoid other things, for example, honour your parents, don't steal. That obligation is either fulfilled or transgressed. Hence, we shall see –

1. the obligations of the law –

2. its sanction –

and 3. its fulfilment or transgression.

The Obligation of the Natural Law.

Notice first a dual basis for all our conduct.

1. Our last end being God's glory, and our highest good being the possession of God, our reason tells us it is good for us to plan and act on principle so as to reach our end. This is the 'reasonable service that we owe to God'. It is also but common sense to employ the means necessary for the end we have in view. This we may call the fundamental obligation.
2. But the same becomes explicit and unavoidable by the Will of the Lawgiver. The moral law transforms reasonable good into bounden Duty and changes mere evil into sin. It lays down what we must do (or avoid) under pain of sin.

Secondly, the remote purpose of the law is to make men better, but the immediate end or direct effect is to bind them to a certain line of action.

The binding force of the Natural Law consists in the moral necessity, which God the Lawgiver causes in men, His subjects, to make them do or omit certain acts.

Obligation is a moral necessity in the subject, not a physical one, since he can resist it; yet it is absolute or unconditional, because the law is the expression of the holy and immutable will of the Creator; it is also universal in the sense that it applies to all human beings and to all their free actions, which it either commands, forbids or allows.

PROOFS:

1. No law is a perfect law unless it binds the person subject to it to its fulfilment. Now the Natural Law, as part of God's Eternal Law, is perfect. Therefore, it cannot lack that attribute of paramount importance, which is 'obligation', or binding force.
2. From analogy – Every lawgiver wants something done or not done, for the well-being of his subjects, and he makes a rule directing his subjects to do or not to do that particular thing. He takes means to influence their will, to get them to obey his law. He may call on their nobler feelings, on their good sense, on love and hope. But in case these motives are not sufficient, he may use the motive of fear, he may threaten punishment – the penalty of the law – to get them to conform to his will.
3. The natural law commands or forbids certain actions because they are good or bad in themselves or by their very nature. This nature is based on the Divine Essence.

Therefore, the will of God cannot but enforce the obligation of the Natural Law.

Extent of the obligation. –

To create duties in the subject is the natural effect of every law. All genuine laws bind in conscience, that is, to transgress them is evil; but they may bind us in different ways: the Natural Law and some civil laws bind by way of an absolute imperative: 'Do this,... avoid that'. Other civil laws bind by way of a disjunctive, 'Do this or else submit to the penalty'; they are merely penal laws, for example, the law prohibiting speed exceeding 30 miles an hour – alternative a fine. There is no moral evil or moral turpitude in speed exceeding 30 miles. No prudent legislator would attach a severe penalty to what was not already wrong.

Note also further that

- (a) Certain things are commanded because they are good, whereas others are good because they are commanded.
- (b) Again, certain things are forbidden because they are intrinsically bad and can never be good or be made good, for example, blasphemy. Other things are bad because they are forbidden, for example, to fail to keep the fasting or abstinence rules on Friday – to eat meat on Friday.
- (c) Similarly, some things, in themselves indifferent, are good because commanded, for example, to pay a certain tax, to observe the legal forms of contracts; or become bad, when forbidden by a positive law.

Objections Answered –

1. 'Public opinion, ancient custom and civil law dictate our code of morals'.

Answer. 1. This is sheer despotism, the glorification of man and the vilification of the Supreme Lawgiver. No civil law, custom or opinion can change the nature of what is intrinsically good or

evil. No parliament can sanction divorce, polygamy, birth prevention, false worship or unjust confiscation of goods. All human laws are binding only in so far as they agree with the laws of God.

2. 'Obey the law solely, because it is the law.' Actions to be moral must be determined only from within, by the agent himself, such is the principle of moral autonomy proclaimed by Kant. Heteronomy or determination of one's action by another is in this view against man's dignity and, therefore, intrinsically wrong.

But such ethics are one-sided, contrary to human nature and devoid of a rational foundation. The most sacred duties of man, those of his religious life, have no room in Kant's system. According to him, the notions of goodness, duty, obligation, are, merely subjective, depending on each man's psychology – a variable quantity. Again, obedience to the law is not the ultimate good and we are not told by Kant from whence this supremacy of the law is derived.

Again the categorical imperative of 'Duty for Duty's sake', – the absolute right intuitively apprehended, to which action ought to conform without regard either to an end in view or to its consequences – may look a lofty norm of conduct as propounded by Kant, yet it is only Ethics stiffened into legalism; in which law is not embraced as the pattern of the proper perfection of things, but is imagined as an 'arbitrary essence dictated to and imposed on things and always remaining external to them.' After all, to do good 'for a reward' is only a picturesque way of saying 'for a reason or result or purpose'. To act without hope of reward may sound grand, yet it only means to work for no purpose, that is, unreasonably.

We rightly conclude that the obligation imposed on man is not of his own making, nor the work of any mere man, but must come from the Will of the Creator. By violating it, man offends God Himself, the author of the natural moral order and becomes amenable to His Justice. Truly, God Himself is the guardian and protector of that order and cannot allow the contempt of it to go unpunished.

Hence, again to divorce morality from religion or all reference to God is to rob it of its Sanctity and Inviolability, its Obligation and its Transcendence of all earthly consideration.

The Sanctions of the Natural Law.

The Moral Law is provided with sanctions that are proportionate and adequate.

A sanction is a penalty or reward attached to a law; more fully, it is the disposition in virtue of which, by the lawgiver's will, submission to the law brings about happiness in the subject but rebellion against the law, unhappiness. The perfect obligation of the Natural Law can be derived only from the acknowledgement of a personal God and so also are the perfect sanctions of that law.

It is not enough that God should have made known His will to bind us to lead an orderly life; His wisdom also requires that He should enforce His will by suitable rewards and punishments.

PROOFS.

1. No legislator can be indifferent in the matter of the laws he has made, – he wants to see them carried out. Indifference on his part would imply either that his laws are foolish and their enforcement of no use, or that his will lacks firmness and stability. Now, this holds still more for the all-wise and perfect legislator who is God.

2. Sanctions are of great utility. The knowledge of the good or evil consequences for the subject is a powerful motive for keeping the law, or making him law-abiding.

3. The fulfilment of the moral law benefits both the general order, which the law serves, and the person who obeys the law. Contrariwise, the violation of the moral law is detrimental to both the general order and the violator.

Now, the Lawgiver is infinitely just and holy.

Therefore, the good or evil consequences for the subject must be in perfect keeping with the importance of the general good and with the merit or the guilt of the subject performing the act.

(a) The sanctions must be proportionate: divine justice demands that the reward promised or punishment threatened be measured by the objective importance and subjective perfection of the act in question.

(b) And they must be adequate: God's holiness demands that these rewards and punishments be able to induce all men in all circumstances to obey the moral law.

(c) In this life, the divine sanctions cannot be applied to the full: the pains which God may inflict for wrong done are 'prospective' namely, to amend the offender and deter him and others; but in the next life they will be retrospective, namely, dealing only with the past. The violated order must be vindicated and God's will must finally prevail. Wrong, it has been truly said, is a contradiction of right. Punishment is a contradiction of that contradiction.

The twofold sanction, natural and divine. – The punishment for final, persistent breach of the Natural Law is failure to attain our last end, which is happiness and a consequent state of utter misery. This is at once a natural result and a divine infliction: the natural result of a soul being corrupted by sin and unable to see and love God who composes our happiness; and also a divine infliction: whoso has withdrawn from God, from him God withdraws. Our happiness (in the natural order) consists in seeing the Creator through the veil of His works, but God will not show Himself to those who spurn His commands.

Conversely, we might argue the final happiness, which attaches to the observance of the Law. No true happiness but must be endless. But is punishment also to be everlasting?

Solid reasons point to the conclusion that the state of misery for the wicked should be everlasting and beyond repair.

Proofs. – 1. As we have seen, the natural sequel of making oneself unfit for endless happiness is the loss of that happiness; but also behind the natural law stands God the Lawgiver and the state of endless misery must be reckoned as a punishment.

Now, this punishment must be final and unending. If we assume hell to be only temporal, then heaven itself is no reward for loyal service: it would sooner or later be the possession of all; in the end, the just and the wicked would find themselves in the same state of blessedness; God's holiness and justice would in the end be overcome by evil.

2. Successive rebirths and probations are against all experience. Even if they happened, our previous argument remains.

3. In the next life, the sinner has no more God's help; he can no longer repent and, therefore, cannot get rid of his state of misery.

4. God is infinite goodness but also justice and holiness. No man will be damned who does not deserve it and none will be punished more than they deserve. It is all their own doing, their own choice, their own fault.

5. If it were possible to repent of and to expiate the sins of this life in another life, then man would be induced to put off the practice of virtue and to make little of God's commands and sanctions. The mere thought of a conversion being possible would deprive the authority of the Moral Law of all its efficacy: The perspective of a short term of punishment, followed by conversion, is no sufficient deterrent of evil. Only an absolute sanction, one in keeping with the hopes and fears of man about his final destiny, is able to keep man away from moral evil and check his inclination to evil.

The eternity of hell, the endless state of utter misery for the reprobate, devoured with remorse and overwhelmed with despair, should act as a great deterrent from sin in the storm of temptation.

Hell is not only everlasting, but invariable, with no glimmer of hope. Just as the blessed are confirmed in grace, in love and holiness, so the lost are confirmed or rather abandoned, in guilt, in hate and wickedness. The eternity of Heaven is the actual total simultaneous possession of an endless life of bliss and glory, while the eternity of Hell is the actual total, simultaneous infliction of an endless agony – both physical and spiritual.

Just as Heaven is in this life beyond our mental grasp, so is Hell. We easily understand that a soul passing out of this world substantially good may still have to expiate minor faults before it is received in Heaven. But it is also reasonable that a man who at the end of his probation has voluntarily turned away from God should be forever excluded from the happiness of Heaven.

Keeping or Breaking the Law.

1. To keep the law implies the use of the ordinary means

a.

of knowing its import

and b.

of executing what it orders.

It implies also that we avoid the immediate impediments to its fulfilment. When a law imposes a personal duty, for example, to worship God, it requires from us a personal human act. If the duty deals with objects, for example, the payment of debts, the mere fact of paying is enough. In both cases, the will not to obey the law would be a transgression.

2. To transgress the law is an abuse of our freedom. As we have seen, all beings inferior to man are driven by an internal impulse or instinct against which there is no resistance possible; but man's free will is drawn by, an extrinsic attraction against which there may be resistance. The verdict of conscience is presented to the will, which may accept or reject it. Such is the awful responsibility attached to our freedom that we can upset, as far as we are concerned, the divine plan in the government of the universe by deliberately refusing to obey.

We have now to see –

1. the wickedness of sins –
2. the temptations to sin –

3. the evil consequences –
and 4. repentance and forgiveness.

Sin is any wilful disobedience to the law of God by doing what it forbids or neglecting what it commands.

1. We call sin any violation of the moral law, but formal sin is any wilful violation. For a grievous violation of the divine law, the matter must be grave and there must be full knowledge and consent, for example, murder in cold blood is a grievous sin. If one of the three elements is absent, the sin is not grievous, for example, stealing two pence.

Whatever obscures our judgment, such as ignorance, prejudice, mental distraction or emotional excitement also lessens our freedom of decision and consequently our guilt.

There are sins of thought, word and deed (or sins of commission) but also sins of omission; they too suppose a wilful act of disobedience.

The wickedness of sin is manifold. To violate the moral order established and sanctioned by God is

- (1). an act of rebellion against the Divine Majesty,
- (2). and desecration of the Divine Dignity expressed and reflected in the moral order;
- (3). a desecration of man's own dignity. Man, the lord and king of creation, makes himself, by sin, the slave of inferior beings;

(4) a source of evil and harm to the sinner and often to many others both in this life and the next, for example, parents setting bad example to their children start an ever-widening circle of evils which spreads beyond our horizon: Vice is contagious; one bad man can pervert many. It follows that sin or moral evil is the greatest and in a sense the only evil on earth.

2. Temptations and occasions to sin are many. The law of God which sin contravenes comprises not only the Natural Law but also the just Precepts of all legitimately constituted authority which make up positive laws. Now, temptation is a solicitation to transgress a law, whether by persuasion or by the offer of some pleasure. Temptations may come from our own bad thoughts, feelings or desires. Other people also may set us bad example, or encourage, persuade; even drive us to sin. But there is no sin without our consent; we may be attacked, but we cannot be forced to surrender. Certain evil inclinations, called the seven capital sins or vices, are a fertile source of temptations – pride, covetousness, lust, gluttony, anger, envy and sloth. The movements of the sensitive appetites, called passions, often mislead into sin. Love for what is pleasant but forbidden, dislike or fear of what is unpleasant but commanded, make us shirk our duty and disobey the law. By giving way to passions, we become their slaves. 'Passion is a good servant but a bad Master', says a proverb. However, no matter how strong the inclination to sin, as long as there is no deliberate consent of the will, there is no fault; on the other hand, merit is won by resistance. There is no temptation, which, by God's help, we cannot conquer. Even smaller sins must be avoided, because they are bad and prepare the way for grievous falls.

Occasions of sin are external circumstances, which by themselves or because of our own frailty incline and lead us to sin. Occasions are called proximate if the danger of sinning is certain or probable. There is a positive obligation to avoid them.

3. The evil effects of sin.

We notice first that every infringement of order is followed by a penalty. The evil of wrong-doing entails the evil of punishment.

(1) If I put my finger into the fire it gets burnt. I have challenged a physical law and suffer in consequence. To violate the laws of health entails debility, disease and death, Nature always takes her revenge.

(2) If I violate the laws of logic, I land in ignorance, in error or in sophistry.

(3) And if I violate the moral order, if I sin against the law of God, I suffer the loss of God's favour and help, which depend on the maintenance of harmony between God's nature and will and my own actions.

In all the three cases, the harmony of the universal order is reestablished by some punishment, suffering or loss. What we may call the mechanical law of compensation in the physical sphere is rightly called in the moral order the work of divine Justice, which regulates the personal relations between my Maker and myself. Of all transgressions, those of the moral order are evidently the most serious.

A grievous sin makes us hateful to God and robs us of His friendship; it spoils our nature and breaks the condition on which final happiness is offered to us. To die in a state of rebellion against God makes the soul incapable of loving God in the next world; therefore, incapable of happiness and therefore supremely unhappy; it is deprived of its natural destiny and this privation must have a terrifying and extremely saddening effect. This state of soul is called damnation, or final reprobation.

Not all transgressions are grave; some may be light, for example, stealing a penny is not so bad as stealing a pound. So also will the punishment be apportioned to the fault.

4. Can sorrow and reparation for sin undo the harm done? God does not forgive offences without receiving satisfaction. On the other hand, no man can make adequate amends for the contempt, which a deliberate, grave and flagrant violation of the moral law puts on God. The offence is in the offended person, the guilt in the offender. Here the offended Person is God of infinite majesty, so that the guilt is of extreme gravity. The first thing then which revelation has to teach us is whether, and on what terms, God is ready to pardon grievous sins.

Even granted that true repentance and acts of reparation for rebellion against God's sovereignty may draw His mercy on the sinner, several things in sin remain irreparable. Even if we repair the moral order which we have violated, it will always be only a repaired, not an unviolated order. Likewise, there is a vast difference between the forgiven sinner and the innocent person. The sinner cannot forget that he has dishonoured God and debased himself.

If then we have fallen into sin, we must tell God we are sorry and ask Him to forgive us. We must also resolve not to sin again, do some penance and be more careful in future. If we are sincerely disposed to fulfil all that God requires to grant forgiveness, if our contrition is perfect, we may hope He will forgive our guilt although some punishment may follow. God's justice and wisdom, require some penalty for sin as a reparation for the past and a deterrent for the future. We should, after every sin we commit, repent. Otherwise, each sin may lead to many others, and produce a deeply-rooted vice or bad habit from which recovery is very hard. Some sins form an ever widening circle of evils, the extent of which is lost to the eye of man but not lost to the eye of the Sovereign Judge.
