

# Questions About Morality

## Questions addressed to a Catholic Priest. From “Radio Replies”.

By Rev Dr Leslie Rumble, M.S.C.  
Catholic Truth Society of Manila No.apol046 (1956)

Natural Moral Law.

What is meant by the moral law?

A law is an appointed rule imposing a certain kind of action. We speak of the physical laws of the universe, such as that of gravitation. In social life there are positive laws enacted by human authorities for the common good. Now a moral law is one, which a rational human being experiences as a sense of obligation within his conscience. If he neglects to do what it tells him he ought to do, or if he does what it tells him he ought not to do, he experiences a guilty sense of violation of duty; and this is quite independent of whether his fellow human beings know about it or not.

Is a knowledge of it arrived at by physical observation?

Knowledge of natural physical laws is got by reasonable deduction based on physical observation and experiment. In the physical order, we study the activities of things around us. In the moral order, however, we observe human behavior and analyze human experience. We ask what conduct is in accordance with our rational moral nature, and what is a violation of it. The former is good, and it is the natural moral law that we should behave in such a way; the latter is evil, and it is the natural moral law that we avoid such conduct.

Is the idea of the moral law a purely theological or religious concept?

No. Reason alone would be enough to establish its existence. Ancient Greek and Roman philosophers argued that the existence of the human conscience proves man's moral nature, and that that in turn proves the existence of the natural moral law. The German philosopher, Immanuel Kant, taught the same thing in our own times by his doctrine of what he called the "Categorical Imperative"; that is, man's innate conviction that he is morally obliged to conform to standards of behavior not of his own making, but imposed upon him by the very nature he has been given.

I read recently a statement by an American non-Catholic Professor of philosophy, Dr. Mortimer J. Adler, who said that peace will never be possible until government is based on the natural law instead of on positive laws only. What did he mean by that?

By "positive laws only" he meant legislation made by any men who happened to be in power just because they are in power. This theory supposes that there is no higher law anywhere to which all men are subject, even rulers. Granted such a theory, men in power could impose any laws they pleased upon others. Might would be right. On the other hand, by "natural law" Dr. Adler meant the

Will of the Creator who has not only endowed man with a certain nature but obliges him in conscience to live in accordance with natural moral principles of justice. This means that there are certain rights and duties not originated by men themselves, which men cannot abolish, and which all are obliged to observe. Might is not right, but must be subordinated to what is right and used only to maintain and defend it.

How could this natural law be defined?

Cicero, who died in 43 B.C. and knew nothing of the Christian religion, gives in his "De Republica," 3, 22, a definition of it as right reason in agreement with nature. Here are his words: "True law is right reason in agreement with nature. It is of universal application, unchanging, everlasting. It is a sin to try to alter this law; and it is impossible to abolish it entirely. We cannot be freed from it by Senate or people; and we need not look outside ourselves for an expounder or interpreter of it. This law is not one thing at Rome and another at Athens, but is eternal and immutable, valid for all nations and for all times. God is the Author of this law, its promulgator, and its enforcing judge. Whoever is disobedient to it is fleeing from his true self and denying his own nature." Thus wrote Cicero. Each creature in the universe has been given its own nature by the Creator, in accordance with which it is intended to live. Brute animals are impelled to do so by the instincts the Creator has implanted in them. But men, endowed with reason and free will, are moral beings who are obliged voluntarily to conform their lives to the natural law of God as manifested by their own intelligence and enforced by conscience. It should be clear from this that if there were positive laws only, for which men are answerable only to themselves, then any law would be as good as any other law, provided those in authority chose to enact it; justice would be non-existent; and talk of human rights as opposed to brute force would be meaningless. If, however, there be a natural moral law appointed by the Creator of mankind, the case is very different.

Can every man know the natural moral law?

Every man can know that there is a natural moral law, which men should observe. One does not have to be a Christian to know that. But whilst all men can know that such a law exists, not everyone is equally able to see all its implications. Understanding of the range and of the various applications of the natural moral law will vary according to the degree of ability and the amount of time devoted to the study of the subject.

Could you give some examples of the natural law?

Here are two principles of that law which everybody who has come to the use of reason can know. Firstly, there is an obligation to do good and avoid what is wrong and evil. Secondly, since reason is man's highest power, he should behave in accordance with reason and not allow blind and lower passions to lead him into unreasonable conduct. Whilst, however, all people can know these two basic principles, difficulty can arise in deciding what is good and what is evil, or what is reasonable and what is unreasonable, in particular cases. Some things that I would say that most people could know to be opposed to the natural moral law, if they used their reason as they should, are these: to ignore all religious duties to God; to take one's own life by suicide, or that of another by murder; to steal, to tell deliberate lies; to indulge in unchaste actions alone or in promiscuous sex-relations; to violate the just rights of other people. Only those who are willfully blind, and bent on doing evil, can deny those things to be violations of the natural moral law. Beyond those matters, however, and in complex situations, the correct application of the natural moral law could probably be discerned only by those of more than ordinary knowledge and wisdom. But the ordinary man would at least

know in such circumstances that he ought to consult those better informed than himself. Christian principles of morality. Is there a religious as well as an empirical, social and psychological basis of ethics?

There is. And any merely empirical, or merely social, or merely psychological basis of ethics is simply left in mid-air, and devoid of any solid foundation without it. If so, what is this basis?

The only sound and ultimate basis is the Will of God, whether known naturally by analysis of the rational nature with which God has endowed man, or known supernaturally by divine revelation. Why must there be such a basis?

Because morality, of its very nature, supposes a duty to do one thing rather than another. If there be no duty, if one ought not to do this or abstain from doing that, then there is neither morality or immorality. The choice would not be a matter of conscience at all. But once we raise the question of duty, the problem arises: Duty to whom? In the end, we come to the Will of God that the moral law should be observed, or there is no sufficient reason for morality. I cannot here explain and refute all substitute foundations suggested by men who say they want morality without God. I can but state the reason why God must be the ultimate basis and that means a religious basis if morality is to stand at all. The same thing holds for sin. Sin is an immoral act. It is defined as any voluntary offense against the Will or Law of God in thought, word, deed or omission. The Law of God, of course, covers duties to Himself personally, duties to ourselves in our own individual conduct, and duties to our neighbors in social conduct. But once the idea of God and the religious basis of ethics are abandoned, the word sin loses its meaning. That is why irreligious men quite logically end by denying that there is any such thing as sin. What is your definition of right and wrong?

That is morally right which is in conformity with the Will of God. The Will of God is manifested in three different ways. Firstly, by the natural moral law. Thus, things are right if they are in accordance with the true purpose of our rational human nature. Things are morally wrong if they are opposed to the true good of the rational nature God has given us. Secondly, over and above this natural moral law, which a well-trained reason can formulate for itself, God has given us additional laws of conduct by revelation. It is morally right that we should observe these also, and morally wrong to violate them. Thirdly, God has instituted the Catholic Church, giving that Church authority to legislate in His name. Thus, Christ said to the Apostles: "Whatsoever you bind on earth shall be bound also in Heaven; and whatsoever you loose on earth shall be loosed also in Heaven." Matthew 18:18. It is morally right, therefore, to obey the Will of God as manifested by the legislation of the Catholic Church; morally wrong to violate it. To justify the claims of the Catholic Church to speak with the authority of God I must refer you to earlier answers given to other listeners. (See Radio Replies, Volume 4 at <http://www.radioreplies.info/radio-replies-vol-4.php> ) To my mind, morality should not be based on any alleged divine "fiats".

That God imposes moral obligations upon us both by the natural moral law and by His positively revealed law is not merely an allegation. There is more than sufficient evidence for the manifestation of divine authority, and it is not so easily swept aside as you imagine. In the meantime, if morality is not based upon the authority of God as the Author of the moral law, then there is no real foundation for morality at all. It should be based upon an enlightened humanism and an intelligent appreciation that certain actions are anti-social, injurious to health, and ungentlemanly.

Those considerations do not explain why there should be any morality at all, based on anything. Nor will they pass muster as tests of morality. By the time you have defined what you mean by "enlightened humanism", you will find multitudes who regard it as neither enlightened nor human. Your talk of an intelligent appreciation that certain actions are anti-social invites the retort that morality often demands the stand of an individual against what may be socially expedient. Expediency, whether individual or social, is no necessary indication of what is morally right. Nor is the health of an individual or of a nation a reliable test of morality, as if that only was morally wrong which is deleterious to health. As for making the "ungentlemanly" the test of what is morally wrong, you there appeal to variable conventions which can afford no sound guidance as to what is or is not right in itself. According to the accepted standards of a cannibal tribe, it might not be in the least "ungentlemanly" to murder and eat your rival in love. Yet objectively such conduct is not morally justifiable. Those who reject the authority of God cannot explain the fact of moral obligation experienced by men; they cannot give any sound reason why men should heed their sense of moral obligation; and they cannot declare with any certainty what should be regarded as morally right or morally wrong. The logical result of ethics without God is simply the absence of morals. It all comes to this, that the basis of right and wrong lies in conduct towards one's fellows.

Social relationships are not the basis of morality. They afford one field in which morality must be exercised. The basis of morality must be sought elsewhere. And it is to be found in the natural moral law antecedent to all social organization – a natural law which is the Will of God for man both as an individual and as a social being. Without that basis, there is no sound foundation for morality at all, and the suggestion that a man ought to be moral is meaningless.

The moral sense or conscience is the outcome of social relations, themselves the outcome of the need of living.

Social relations are the outcome of the need of living, in so far man's very nature impels him not only to live but to live as a social being. Man did not give himself that nature. He was given it by the God who made him. But besides this physical and psychological law of our being, God has imposed a moral law, manifested by conscience and dictating proper behavior in our personal lives and in our social relationships. Proper social relationships are the outcome of the moral sense, which is therefore antecedent to social relationships of its very nature. The ultimate criterion of moral conduct cannot be merely social expediency. Were it so it would be quite moral for a man to murder his aging parents as soon as he decided that they were no longer of use to society. Where there is no society, there can be no sin.

Surely, you can see the falsity of that. For society is merely a multitude of human beings. Morality cannot be based on the mere fact of multitude. It is based on the fact that human beings make up that multitude. And it is due to the human nature possessed by each of the individuals concerned. A man spending his entire life without social contact could only be un-moral, never immoral.

Do you really mean that such an isolated individual would be subject to no moral law at all, and that nothing he did or omitted to do would be virtuous or vicious, morally right or morally wrong? You would probably not be impressed by my referring to any religious duties to God, though I maintain that he would be obliged to fulfill those. But what of the moral law dictating duties towards his own rational nature? It would be immoral for your isolated individual to take his own life by suicide. But even short of that, would you maintain that it would not be immoral for him to ruin his health by gluttony or drunkenness? Previously you said that conduct deleterious to health would violate

morality. Or again, would you admit that your isolated individual could sin by yielding to lust, solitary vice, or even bestiality? Your theories really will not bear rational analysis. I would say that the happy man is the one whose sense of duty or conscience - his inner ethical guide - runs smoothly on the lines of the old-fashioned virtues, with or without religion.

In a sense that is true. But even to speak of ordinary civic and Christian virtues as "old-fashioned" is a sad admission of the moral breakdown in modern society. That moral breakdown has followed upon the driftage from religion and has arisen from it. Dr. Alexis Carrel says, in his book, "Man the Unknown," that unbelief is destroying civilization. And he writes: "Unintelligence is becoming more and more widespread in spite of the courses given in the schools, colleges and universities. Strange to say, it often exists with advanced scientific knowledge. The moral sense is almost completely ignored by modern society." That is the fruit of irreligion, fostered by only too many agnostic university professors.

If a school of ethical research were established on a basis of a reasoned approach to the subject, it might remove the objections of critical philosophy to the system of Christian morals.

A school of ethical research should examine the teachings of modern critical philosophy, expose its moral bankruptcy and its logical fallacies, and establish sound principles of moral science. There is no reason why we should uncritically accept the verdict of destructive modern philosophers who happen to be popular in a degenerate age. Such a school should establish the truth that not hedonism, or pleasure-seeking; not utilitarianism, or mere expediency; but the right, the honest and the good as approved by right reason, constitute the true and natural criterion of moral conduct. And it should refute the nonsense that sound moral philosophy is necessarily or in any way opposed to the Christian religion. The world today seems to have reached an all-time high for licentiousness and moral indifference; and a large section has grown up in total ignorance of the law of God.

That could possibly be admitted as regards the revealed law of God; but I do not think total ignorance of the natural moral law could be admitted. Every human being has at least a natural conscience and is made conscious in some things that he is violating the moral law, however inadequate may be his knowledge of all that should be classed as immoral. Pope Pius XII said in a broadcast in the 1950's that perhaps "the greatest sin in the world today is that men have begun to lose their sense of sin." But if they lose their sense of sin, they cannot distinguish between right and wrong.

If the Pope meant merely that men are losing their sensitiveness to sin, so that they just do not care whether a thing be right or wrong, it would not follow that men could not distinguish between right and wrong. In that case, they could, but would not bother trying to do so; and that would mean bad faith on their part. If, however, the Pope meant that men are losing their knowledge of what is right and wrong, then in the degree in which people do lose that knowledge they would be unable to distinguish between right and wrong. But the Pope's words certainly do not mean that people are entirely without such knowledge. If people are unable to distinguish between right and wrong, then they are not responsible for their actions.

That would follow if it were through no fault of their own that they were unable to distinguish between right and wrong. It would not follow, if they themselves were to blame for arriving at such a state. There is such a thing as guilty ignorance. People cannot escape responsibility for their actions against the moral law on the plea that they did not know their actions to be morally wrong, if the moral law was one which they could have known and should have known. If they do not

know such actions to be morally wrong, it is because they have deliberately chosen to be ignorant lest knowledge of the law should interfere with what, in their bad will, they have determined to do. That this is blameworthy before God is evident from Holy Scripture, which declares: "Woe to you that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter." Isaiah 5:20.

In deciding between right and wrong, philosophy, which wants everything proved by reason, is naturally antagonistic towards faith.

Some professors of philosophy who have no faith may be antagonistic towards it; but genuine philosophy is not. The methods of philosophy and faith differ, in so far as philosophy requires the demonstration of its conclusions by reason, whilst faith accepts what God reveals because God has revealed it. But reason and faith are in no way antagonistic. They complete each other. In fact, without the help of revelation, fallible human reason often goes astray in its own field; and it is always inadequate without religion, which directly relates us to the God who made us. The subject matter of ethics, therefore, is common both to philosophy and religion, the one contributing truth as discovered by reason, the other contributing truth as made known by revelation. How can one distinguish between God's laws and man's laws?

God's laws are known, either by a study of the natural moral law, or by a study of divine revelation. All laws apart from those, could be called man-made laws. But man-made laws can indirectly be God's laws also, in so far as God Himself sanctions the authority of human legislation within its own proper limits. Thus, indirectly, children obey God's law when they obey their parents in the home; citizens when they obey civil authorities in social life. If, however, any human being commands us to do what we know God positively forbids, then we have a man-made law which has no authority and which we are bound to ignore. In such cases, we must obey God rather than man. As regards the observance of the moral law, religion introduces the dogma of original sin.

The Catholic Church certainly teaches that our first parents sinned against God's express commands, and earned for themselves and their posterity a legacy of inherent unruliness and disorder. This doctrine of inherited original sin means that we are a guilty race, needing redemption, and constantly needing the help of divine grace if we are to overcome the additional difficulties our warped human nature finds in its efforts to observe the moral law. I maintain that all children are born good.

They are certainly born without any personally acquired bad habits. But to maintain that children are born with human nature as it ought to be, and without any innate tendency or liability to perversity, is to maintain a theory quite opposed to experience. The fact is that everybody, with growing consciousness, finds all kinds of desires opposed to reason awakened and making rebellious demands. As soon as a child is capable of choice, it again and again finds itself choosing evil rather than good. G. K. Chesterton was right in retorting to a friend who denied original sin: "Well, old man, the only thing you know about original innocence is that you never had it." Man's innate tendency is to do the right thing.

That is not his only innate tendency. He also has a tendency to do the wrong thing. Saint Paul wrote: "I see another law in my members fighting against the law of my mind." Romans 7:23. His experience of the existence in himself of the two laws, the law of good and the law of evil, is the experience of every man. The pagan poet Ovid bore testimony to the fact when he wrote: "I see the

better things and approve of them; yet I do the worse." Man is more and more coming to realize that badly regulated conduct is not morally evil or sinful, but simply stupid.

Not man, but some men who have abandoned religion in favor of sheer materialism try to persuade themselves and others that no conduct is wicked, but at worst only a mistake. That, however, is their form of wishful-thinking. There is such a thing as morally evil conduct. Men frequently and deliberately choose such conduct, under the influence of temptations from the devil, or from other evil men, or from their own unruly passions and desires. And they know that they are guilty in making such a choice, however they may try to deceive themselves into believing otherwise. To account for evil, side by side with the dogma of original sin, the mediaeval Church invented the existence of a devil running riot in our midst.

The New Testament was not composed by the mediaeval Church. It was written in the first century. It records the assertion of Christ Himself, again and again, that the devil is an existent evil personality. It records Saint Paul's warning to the Ephesians to put on the armor of God in order to resist the wiles of the devil; and also Saint Peter's warning: "Your adversary the devil goes about seeking whom he may devour." You may refuse to believe in this teaching of Christ and the Apostles; but you are not justified in treating it as an invention of the mediaeval Church. I have read that the idea of torturing people in the Inquisition was to cleanse them of their sins.

You may dismiss that as so much nonsense. In fact, you should dismiss as false about 90% of anything you read about the Spanish Inquisition in novels, and at least 50% of what you read in history books written in the Protestant tradition. More imaginative rubbish has been written about the Spanish Inquisition than about any other theme in history. Putting aside all exaggerations, we have to get down to the basic facts. They will often seem in these days ugly enough, and there is no need either to whitewash them or attempt to justify them. But there is need to try to understand them and make sure that we do not distort them. Will you agree with the definition of immorality and sin as the inflicting of suffering on others to gain one's private ends?

No. It is of course immoral and sinful to inflict suffering on others in order to gain one's private ends. But that is an instance of immorality and sin, not a definition. To define immorality and sin you must say what those things are in themselves. It is useless to offer as a definition: "I think this thing is immoral," or "I think that action is sinful." If I am asked to define crime, I would say that crime is the violating of the law of the land. All deliberate violations of the law of the land, in varying degrees, come under that. But I would not have defined crime by saying: "I define crime as the robbing of a taxi-driver." Of course, if I thought that robbing a taxi-driver was the only possible form of crime, then my definition would be adequate; but I would in fact be wrong. The infliction of suffering on others to gain one's private ends is not the only possible form of immorality and sin. To tell a deliberate lie is immoral, although far from being prompted by cruelty it could be prompted by kindness. To indulge in solitary personal vice is a sin, even though it inflicts no suffering on others in order to gain one's private ends. Sin is a deliberate violation of God's Law in thought, word, deed or omission. Must a sinner intend consciously to flaunt his proposed act in the face of God before it can be a sin?

No. It is enough that a person deliberately and knowingly decides to do what his conscience tells him to be morally wrong. He has not consciously to resolve to offend God. Most people, when they sin, are thinking of the wrong thing they intend to do, not precisely of the wrong they are doing to

God. Catholicism versus the world. I admit an enormous gap between what is expected of a Christian by the Catholic Church and the attitude of society in general.

That is because the maxims of the Catholic Church are the maxims of the Gospel, maxims, which cannot be reconciled with the maxims of the world, the accepted standards of a corrupt society. That brings you to the cross-roads where you yourself must choose between them. The Catholic Church, though you may not know it, has terrific opposition. One has only to listen to everyday conversation. It is quite impossible to reconcile the general outlook of the world with Catholic standards.

To that, I would say: "So much the worse for the world, at least ultimately." I am well aware of the opposition you mention; and I agree that to live a thoroughly Catholic life in the environment of today is almost as difficult as the early Christians found it in the pagan atmosphere of ancient pagan Rome. But we must beware of exaggerations. Most people know instinctively that murder, unchastity and stealing are wrong; but what of other sins common today such as those of divorce and remarriage, birth control, abortion, dishonesty in business, materialism, neglect of religion and even the denial of God? These things are now regarded as normal by almost everybody except by faithful Catholics.

It is too extreme to say that almost everybody is infected by the poison of materialism, and regards the neglect of religion and even the denial of God as normal. Also, where it is a question of divorce and remarriage, or of contraceptive birth control, there are still very many non-Catholics who condemn them equally with Catholics. However, I have to admit that, with the ever-increasing driftage from religion outside the Catholic Church, the idea that there is nothing morally wrong with the abuses you mention is becoming more and more widespread. But we must keep in mind that what is morally wrong in itself does not cease to be morally wrong in itself merely because it becomes widespread and popular. Business is full of evil and corruption.

That is too sweeping. That there are a lot of unscrupulous men in the business world who would allow no moral principles to interfere with their schemes for gain, I admit. But they do not constitute the whole of the business world by any means. If a business man is to survive, he must be as immoral as his rivals.

If that were true, then I would have to agree that no man could be a good Catholic, yet survive in the business world. Rather than adopt the immoral methods of his rivals he would have to close down. And there are individual cases where good Catholic men have gone out of business rather than resort to immoral and dishonest practices. But I could quote case after case where good Catholic men, who have positively refused to forsake sound Christian principles, have succeeded in their professional and business lives – certainly sufficiently well for all practical purposes. It may be that they have had to watch unscrupulous rivals attain to a more spectacular success; but they have remained quite contented with their own lot, feeling more than compensated by peace of conscience in the religious fidelity to the law of God. Thus, we find in modern society people doing much as they please, while the enlightened Catholic has to remain faithful to what he knows to be right, even though it means sacrifice and suffering.

That is true in certain cases and to a certain degree; although we must not take it for granted that all who do as they please without regard to the moral law are not guilty. Many are conscious that they are doing wrong. Many, not so clear about things, half-suspect that their conduct is wrong but refuse to think about it, yet they are as obliged before God as are Catholics to do what is right, even though

it means sacrifice and suffering. They lack the will to serve God, as they should; but no good Catholic could envy them that! You may say that since Catholics have the truth it is their duty to live up to it, whatever others may do. But it seems to me that there is still a certain amount of injustice in it.

That idea is based on a wrong outlook altogether. If a person loves God, he desires to know and to do God's will, even though it involves self-denial. He does not envy those who do not know God's will, who do not do it, and who give themselves up to self-indulgence of all kinds; without scruple. Again, such an outlook is based only on thoughts of the obligations of the Catholic religion, forgetting the privileges and consolations attached to its fervent practice. One cannot envy those who have freed themselves from the obligations of the Catholic religion at the expense of forfeiting its privileges. Thirdly, in his Epistle to the Romans, Saint Paul declares that the penalty of irreligion is to be delivered up to darkness of mind and a reprobate sense which no longer esteems the moral law; and this he describes as God's just punishment of such irreligion. (Romans 1:18-24). Where is the injustice that those who try to be faithful to God are not also delivered up to that darkness of mind and indifference to moral obligations?

If you say that, whilst Catholics cannot do so, other people can sin with impunity, one can only ask who wants to be able to sin with impunity? A genuine Christian is not one who wants to live like a pagan but who refrains from doing so only through fear, and because he cannot do so with impunity. He is one who wants to do God's will, and who is therefore happy both to know that will and to make the self-sacrifice necessary to fulfill it. For the rest, where others seem to be able to sin with impunity, if they do sin it will not be with impunity; whilst in particular items, in which ignorance of the moral law excuses their wrong-doing they will have to account to God for their ignorance itself. And even if they are not blameworthy for their ignorance, their comfortable non-observance of God's law will forfeit the eternal merit and reward, very great in heaven according to Our Lord, due to those who have heard the Word of God and kept it. You can safely leave it to God to see that all the requirements of justice will be fulfilled. If I became a Catholic, I would want to do it properly, living right up to the ideals of the Catholic religion.

You would become a Catholic properly if you received due instruction, attained to genuine faith in the Catholic religion, and were duly received into the Catholic Church by any priest. Then it would be for you to try to live up to the ideals of the Catholic religion in practice. You should, of course, have the intention of doing so to the very best of your ability, although you would soon find that success does not come all at once. But you would also find a definite and sure moral and spiritual guidance which would leave you in no doubt as to what God wants you to do. You would also find put at your disposal means of assistance in your efforts of which you have not hitherto had experience. And you would realize that the dogmatic authority of the Catholic Church in matters of faith and morals, to which so many ill-informed people object, is indeed one of the greatest blessings God has ever bestowed upon humanity.

---