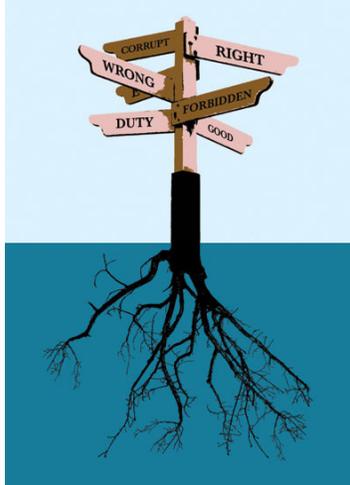


Human Nature as the Basis for Morality

Peter Kreeft



I. Human nature is the basis for morality

There are two very different ideas in the world today about the basis for morality. The typically modern idea is that moral laws are man-made rules like the laws of a game such as tennis: created by human will and therefore changeable by human will. The traditional idea, on the other hand, taught not only by the Catholic Church but by all the world's major religions and nearly all pre-modern philosophies, is that the laws of morality are not rules that we make but principles that we discover, like the laws of a science such as anatomy: they are based on human nature, and human nature is essentially unchanging, and therefore the laws of morality are also essentially unchanging, like the laws of anatomy. Just as our anatomical nature makes it necessary for us to eat certain foods and to breathe oxygen for our bodies to be healthy, our moral nature makes certain virtues necessary for our souls to be healthy. There are universal principles, based on human nature, for bodily health and for mental health – and also for moral health.

Because our human nature is composed of body and soul, with powers of intellect, will, and feelings, and because it is our nature to love the good but also to be tempted by evil, it is necessary for us to cultivate such virtues as self-control, wisdom, courage, and honesty. Catholic morality follows the classical Greek philosophers Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle in deriving the essential principles of morality from unchanging human nature and its real, objective needs rather than from the changing subjective feelings and desires of individuals. Thus its essential principles are 1) universal (the same for everyone), 2) objective (discovered, not invented; real, not just mental), and 3) unchangeable.

2. The meaning of the “natural law”

Such a morality is often called a morality of “natural law.” This means two things: 1) that moral laws are based on human nature, derived from human nature; and 2) that they are naturally and instinctively known by human reason. (“Reason” means more than just “reasoning;” it includes an intuitive awareness of our obligation to “do good and avoid evil,” and of what “good” and “evil” mean.)

- a) Moral laws are based on human nature. That is, what we ought to do is based on what we are. “Thou shalt not kill,” for instance, is based on the real value of human life and the need to preserve it. “Thou shalt not commit adultery” is based on the real value of marriage and family, the value of mutual self-giving love, and children’s need for trust and stability.
- b) The natural law is also naturally known, by natural human reason and experience. We do not need religious faith or supernatural divine revelation to know that we are morally obligated to choose good and avoid evil, or what “good” and “evil” mean. Every culture in history has had some version of the Ten Commandments. No culture in history has thought that love, kindness, justice, honesty, courage, wisdom, or self-control were evil or thought that hate, cruelty, injustice, dishonesty, cowardice, folly, or uncontrolled addiction were good. Speaking of pagans, St. Paul says that “they show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness” (Romans 2:15).

The term “natural law” is sometimes misunderstood. “This law is called ‘natural,’ not in reference to the nature of irrational beings, [i.e. animals – it is not a law of biology] but because reason which decrees it properly belongs to human nature” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC] 1955). For example, the Church teaches that artificial contraception is against the natural law not because it is a rational human intervention rather than an irrational biological process, but because it is contrary to right reason. It violates the integrity of human nature by divorcing the two naturally-united aspects of the essence of the sexual act, “the unitive and the procreative,” that is, personal intimacy and reproduction. “Test tube babies” do the same thing.

3. The characteristics of the natural law

- a) “The natural law, present in the heart of each man and established by reason, is universal in its precepts and its authority extends to all men” (CCC 1956). It is not universally obeyed, or even universally admitted, but it is universally binding and authoritative.
- b) “Even when it is rejected in its very principles, it cannot be destroyed or removed from the heart of man. It always rises again in the life of individuals and societies” (CCC 1958).

- c) “The natural law is immutable and permanent throughout the variations of history” (CCC 1958), because it is based on God-made essential human nature, which does not change with time or place, rather than man-made accidental developments, which do.
- d) Because man’s essence does not change but his accidental features do (i.e. his circumstances and situations), “application of the natural law varies greatly” (CCC 1957). For instance, capital punishment may be morally necessary in a primitive society, but needlessly barbaric in a society with secure laws and prisons; and the moral restrictions on warfare today, with its weapons of mass destruction, must be far stricter than those in the past.
- e) “It provides the necessary basis for the civil law” (CCC 1959), for civil law forbids some acts, such as rape and torture and slavery, because they are morally wrong and harmful to human nature’s health and flourishing. Without a natural law basis for civil law, civil law becomes based on power, whether collective or individual. The French Revolutionary slogan, “the voice of the people is the voice of God,” is just as idolatrous, and proved to be just as totalitarian as “the divine right of kings,” which it replaced.

4. How is a “natural law” morality Christian?

Since human nature finds its perfection and ultimate meaning in Christ, the one perfect man, and since morality is based on human nature, therefore morality finds its perfection and ultimate meaning in Christ. “The moral law finds its fullness...in Christ. Jesus Christ is in person the way of perfection” (CCC 1953). The ultimate end of all morality is to become Christ-like, to be able to say, with St. Paul, “for me to live is Christ” (Philippians 1:21).

Like the rest of the faith, Christian morality is all about Christ. It is about his perfect human nature, not his divine nature. That is just as much a part of Christ as his divine nature. To be fully human is an essential part of being fully Christian.

5. Four kinds of law

Catholic tradition, following Saint Thomas Aquinas, distinguishes four kinds of law.

- a) *Human laws* are laws made by communities of men, and are therefore changeable or revocable by men. Many of these are conventions with no intrinsic moral rightness or wrongness, such as traffic rules. But many of them are based on the moral law, if they are good laws, such as requiring the just payment of debts, or are in violation of the moral law if they are bad laws, such as laws that deny essential human rights to Jews (Nazi Germany), or to black slaves (America, *Dred Scott*), or to unborn children (America, *Roe v. Wade*).

- b) The *natural law*, as we have seen, should be the basis of human (civil) laws. It is the law of human nature.
- c) The natural law, in turn is “man’s participation in the *eternal law*” of God. This “law” refers to the moral character of God, the ultimate reason why we must be moral: “Be ye holy for I the Lord your God am holy.” This formula is repeated many times in Scripture (e.g. Leviticus 11:44).

The natural law points to the eternal law; it is strong evidence for the existence of God. “This command of human reason [natural law] would not have the force of law if it were not the voice and interpreter of a higher reason [eternal law] to which our spirit and our freedom must be submitted”(CCC 1954).

- d) *Divine law* means laws supernaturally revealed by God, whether for all (the Ten Commandments) or for one people (ancient Israel’s liturgical laws) or to one individual (a command to one of his prophets). “The eternal law” derives from the eternal nature or character of God himself; a “divine law” is God’s choice to intervene at a certain time to reveal a command or establish a covenant.

The *Catechism* sums up the four kinds of law as follows: “There are different expressions of the moral law, all of them interrelated: eternal law — the source, in God, of all law; natural law; revealed law, comprising the Old Law and the New Law, or Law of the Gospel; finally, civil and ecclesiastical laws” (CCC 1952).

The summary above adds the important distinction within divine, revealed law between the Old Law (Old Testament) and New Law (New Testament). The purpose of the two is different. Speaking of the Old Law, the *Catechism* says, “The Law is holy, spiritual, and good, yet still imperfect. Like a tutor it shows what must be done, but does not of itself give the strength, the grace of the Spirit, to fulfill it. Because of sin, which it cannot remove [only Christ can], it remains a law of bondage. According to Saint Paul, its special function is to denounce and *disclose sin*” (CCC 1963) – like an x-ray, to move us to go to Christ the surgeon.

6. Morality is a science

Morality is obviously not an empirical science (good and evil have no shape or color) or a mathematical science. But it is a science in the broader, earlier meaning of the word.

- a) It is a rationally organized body of knowledge.
- b) Like all sciences, it consists of universal laws. In morality, these are not laws of how things really do in fact behave, as in physics, but laws of how people really ought to behave.

- c) It is about objective truths, not subjective opinions or feelings. (Note the word “really” in the preceding paragraph: it characterizes both kinds of sciences.)
- d) It has data: human nature.
- e) And it is discoverable by natural human reason.

7. The relation between morality as a science of natural reason and divinely revealed Catholic morality

- a) Divine revelation, in the Catholic religion, includes this naturally-knowable morality, reminds us of it, formulates it, clarifies it, defends it, and gives it a divine sanction.
- b) It also refines and deepens it. From divine revelation, we learn more about morality than we know by reason alone.
- c) But this supernatural knowledge never contradicts the morality we know by our natural reason, since it comes from the same source, the same Teacher: God, who is Truth. Truth never contradicts truth. And God never contradicts himself – though he increases his demands and expectations as his children mature, just as good human parents do.

8. Morality and man's place in the universe

Human nature is not isolated. Man is defined by his place in the created order of things, the cosmic hierarchy. He is on the highest level of the visible, material world, which includes minerals, vegetables, and animals below him, and he is also on the lowest level of the invisible, spiritual world, which includes angels (created pure spirits) above him.

Since man is neither angel nor animal, moral law for man is not the same as moral law for angels or animals. Angels have no bodies and therefore no temptations to things like lust, greed, or gluttony. And there is no moral law for animals, who do not have self-conscious reason, free will, or conscience. Catholic morality takes account of this two-sidedness of man and is neither “angelistic” (ignoring our animality) nor “animalistic” (ignoring our spirituality and rationality).

9. The basis for Catholic morality in the origin of man

Morality is about human persons in their relationships with other human persons, with themselves, and with God. Therefore the nature and dignity of human persons is a fundamental basis for morality. If human persons were only animals, morality would be impossible and unnecessary.

So what is the basis for the dignity of human persons? Is that basis something uncertain, changeable, and fallible, such as the state, or popular consensus, or one's own opinions and feelings and desires?

No, "the dignity of the human person is rooted in his creation in the image and likeness of God" (CCC 1700). This is one of the most important sentences in the *Catechism*. The real basis for natural morality is this supernatural fact. It is also the ultimate basis for social and political order, for "human law" (social and political law) rests on "natural law" (moral law), and natural law rests on eternal law. We outlaw things because they are wrong, and they are wrong by their own nature ultimately because that nature is opposed to the nature and character of God.

However, this ultimate basis need not be explicitly known or believed by people before they can be moral; even atheists can respect persons as ends and obey their own conscience.

10. The basis for morality in the destiny of man

A second basis for the dignity of man, and thus for morality, is man's ultimate end. "The dignity of the human person is...fulfilled in his vocation to divine beatitude" (CCC 1700).

Since man's end is to share God's own beatitude, man is a high and holy mystery, not a thing to be used. "The human person is 'the only creature on earth that God has willed for its own sake'" (CCC 1703). And we must do the same: love persons for their own sake, not use them for the sake of anything else – in other words, *love persons* as ends and *use things* as means rather than using persons as means and loving things as ends. This rule is rooted in the fact that God created man to be an end, like himself, and all other things to be means for man (1 Corinthians 3:22-23).

This "religious" fact makes great "secular" differences. For instance:

- a) We have a responsibility to take good care of the earth, the environment, and the ecology – not for their own sake but for the sake of humanity and a better human life on earth. Material things are means, not ends; persons are ends, not means. The material world is precious, not as an end in itself but as a means to the good of persons. The good of persons must never be sacrificed for the good of the natural environment.
- b) Humans must not be harmed by being used as "guinea pigs" for scientific experiments, however important the purpose of those experiments may be.
- c) Politicians and businesses must recognize that the ruling purpose of the economy is not power or profit but human welfare. Economic policies must be judged by that qualitative standard, not just the standard of quantitative efficiency.

II. An outline of the basis of Catholic morality in reality

Catholic morality is based on reality. The basic outline of reality is the reason behind the basic principles of morality, the reason for labeling some things right and some things wrong:

- a) Because the Creator is not a creature and no creature is the Creator, we should not worship any creature as our end, or try to use the Creator as a means.
- b) Because spirit is greater than matter, we should not value material things like money above spiritual things like wisdom and virtue. Yet matter is God-created and good. Our goal is not “liberation” from matter but proper use of it.
- c) Because man is not an animal but has a rational soul, he should not be treated as an animal, whether by being forced to slave labor or by being euthanized. Because animals are not persons, they should not be loved like persons but as animals – that is, they may be used as pets or clothing, or even as food. But persons may not.
- d) Because the soul is more than the body, the body should serve the soul. The body should not be served as a lord, but it should be respected as a good.
- e) Reason ought to guide, since it alone has understanding of truth.
- f) Will ought to obey reason and guide emotions, since it is free and, therefore, responsible.
- g) The emotions ought to be neither served nor avoided, but formed, since they are the raw material for the work of the will guided by reason.

Each *ought* is based on what *is*.

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