

TRANSCENDENT NATURAL LAW IN C.S. LEWIS' *ON ETHICS*

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Introduction

C.S. Lewis addresses the nature of morality in a number of his works, notably *Mere Christianity*, *The Abolition of Man*, and several essays. Most notable is Lewis' use of discussions of morality as an apologetic tool, the best known being his treatment in Part I of *Mere Christianity*, *Right and Wrong as a Clue to the Meaning of the Universe*. *On Ethics* is a short essay which follows some of the main themes in Lewis' *Abolition of Man* and probably anticipated *Abolition* by about a year, according to Walter Hooper who published *On Ethics* for the first time in the volume *Christian Reflections*.¹

At the beginning of this work, Lewis notes that, "It is often asserted in modern England that the world must return to Christian ethics in order to preserve civilization, or even in order to save the human species from destruction." (44) He sees this sort of statement hinging on two propositions that he then goes on to refute. The first proposition Lewis seeks to refute is, "That Christian Ethics is one among several alternative bodies of injunctions...clearly distinct from one another." (46) The second proposition is that we are able to stand "outside all these systems in a sort of ethical vacuum, ready to enter whichever of them is most convincingly recommended to us." (46) In this short essay I do not hope to cover all aspects of Lewis' mature view of morality, but rather to briefly address the following points. Are Lewis' arguments against the first proposition cogent and what distinctions does he use in his argument? Does Lewis' apologetic from morality fall into the trap of the "naturalistic fallacy?" Does Lewis provide convincing evidence against the second proposition and does the alternative not lead to a form of cultural relativism? What is the role of "nature" in Lewis' form of "natural law?" And, finally, what is the ground, in Lewis' view, for the objectivity of morality? At stake in all of these questions is Lewis' defense of the objectivity of morality as opposed to its subjectivity. Moral principles are discovered not created (*Lex invenitur, non fit*).² Finally, I will present an analysis of

¹ C.S. Lewis, "On Ethics," in *Christian Reflections*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1967), p.47f1. References referred to in text hereafter.

² Even our term "legislator" implies a discovery of moral law, not a "law-maker." *Legis* is from the gen. of *lex* for "law." *Lator* means "mover" or "translator." Hence, a "legislator" is literally one who moves laws from heaven into the earthly law books.

Lewis' views from a Reformed Protestant perspective.

Exposition of Lewis' Argument

First, Lewis observes that Christian ethics is not one among several alternative bodies of injunctions clearly distinct from one another:

A Christian who understands his own religion laughs when unbelievers expect to trouble him by the assertion that Jesus uttered no command which had not been anticipated by the Rabbis—few, indeed, which cannot be paralleled in classical, ancient Egyptian, Ninevite, Babylonian or Chinese texts. We have long recognized that truth with rejoicing. Our faith is not pinned on a crank.(47)

For Lewis it is the "theology" behind the injunctions, not the injunctions themselves, that is at stake. In this sense, and this sense only, is Christian ethics primarily an apologetic enterprise.

One argument against Lewis' observation is the different cultures have many ethical differences. Lewis believes that these differences have been seriously exaggerated in modern thought. This comes about from confusion between ethical ideologies and ethical practices, a distinction crucial to Lewis' thesis. The word ideology suggests that "the whole moral and philosophical outlook of a people can be explained without remainder in terms of their method of production, their economic organization, and their geographical position." (54) Are they really different? Lewis replies,

I would suggest that the appearance is somewhat illusory. It seems to me to result from a concentration on those very elements in each culture which are most variable (sexual practice and religious ritual) and also from a concentration on the savage. I have even found a tendency in some thinkers to treat the savage as the normal or archetypal man. But surely he is the exceptional man. It may indeed be true that we were all savages once, as it is certainly true that were all babies once. But we do not treat as normal man the imbecile who remains in adult life what we all were (intellectually) in the cradle...

And if we turn to civilized man, I claim that we shall find far fewer difference of

ethical injunction than is now popularly believed. In triumphant monotony the same indispensable platitudes will meet us in culture after culture. The idea that any of the new moralities now offered us would be simply one more addition to a variety already almost infinite, is not in accordance with the facts.(54,55)

Thus, one must make a distinction between the ethical ideologies and how those ideologies are put into practice. These practices can be culturally dependent and take on different forms (social values, principles of decency, customs, etc.) that may appear contradictory. Yet ideologies do remain and remain, generally, in universal form across all cultures.

Another important distinction to make, in support of Lewis' claim, is that these ideologies can be perverted by the isolation of a single maxim of traditional morality from the rest and erect it into a *unum necessarium*. In *Out of the Silent Planet* Oyarsa of Malacandra tells Dr. Weston,

I see now how the lord of the silent world has bent you. There are laws that all hnau know, of pity and straight dealing and shame and the like, and one of these is the love of kindred. He has taught you to break all of them except this one, which is not one of the greatest laws; this one he has bent until it becomes folly and has set it up, thus bent, to be a little, blind Oyarsa in your brain. And now you can do nothing but obey it, though if we ask you why it is a law you can give no other reason for it than for al the other and greater laws which it drives you to disobey.³

Here the universal remains, but is elevated out-of-proportion and turned into a perverted form of that universal. The universal remains, none-the-less.

A mere surface reading of works such as *Mere Christianity* and *On Ethics* may lead one to the conclusion that Lewis uses the general observation of universal moral practices to claim an objective universal truth for certain moral principles. For instance, Lewis notes that forms of moral practice such as "do not kill," "do not lie," "honor your relatives," etc. can be found to varying degrees in almost all cultures and civilizations. Does this not lead us then to conclude that these are therefore objective moral principles? The moving

³ C.S. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), p. 138-9.

from a non-moral, empirical observation to a moral conclusion, in other words implying an "ought" from an "is," is termed the "naturalistic fallacy" by G.E. Moore⁴ and is one of the major stumbling blocks to most forms of natural law.

But not only is this not a part of Lewis' argument, Lewis himself strongly refutes this himself. In *The Abolition of Man*, Lewis maintains that judgments such as "society ought to be preserved" is an observable part of the moral knowledge of man, and not merely an attitude we express or a position we choose to adopt. But, at the same time, he holds that from the premise "this will preserve society" we cannot conclude, "do this." To reach that conclusion we need the additional premise, "society ought to be preserved"—a premise which cannot itself be claimed to be a statement of fact alone.⁵ For Lewis, "neutral" empirical observations of man's behavior are inadequate for formulating a universal ethic of "ought." Not only does universal sin and the distinction between norms and practices confuse things, but one cannot rationally move from a-moral observations to moral conclusions. Summing up Lewis' own views, Meilaender says, "If we begin outside the sphere of inherited values which we bring to experience, we will never work our way back into the realm of values. We will never discover genuine moral knowledge by studying man as a physiological or psychological object. Either we bring value to experience or we find none."⁶

For Lewis, values are the inescapable first principles (the universal Tao of human nature) that are necessary for any judgments to be made. In other words, no one stands outside of all ethical systems in a sort of "ethical vacuum," ready to enter whichever of them is more convincingly recommended to us or which is observed in human behavior. "A man with no ethical allegiance can have no ethical motive for adopting one. If he had, it would prove that he was not really in the vacuum at all." (48) In this manner, Lewis is anticipating the arguments of Alasdair MacIntyre.⁷ Rational argument regarding morality is possible and fruitful within a tradition and between traditions. What is possible and fruitful is neither as a-historical as

⁴ G.E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959) pp. 9ff.

⁵ C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1947), p. 43.

⁶ G. Meilaender, *The Taste for the Other: The Social and Ethical Thought of C.S. Lewis* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1978), p. 187.

⁷ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984) and Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).

Enlightenment figures maintain nor as devoid of methods and principles to which appeal can be made as Nietzsche and his followers suppose. Conceptions of rationality are internal to traditions. The hope that we will reach moral agreement only when, and as soon as, we free ourselves from “external constraints” is chimerical. “To be outside all traditions is to be a stranger to enquiry; it is to be in a state of intellectual and moral destitution.”⁸ One cannot make a practical step out of the ethical vacuum. It is to make knowledge something which cannot be related to the world of practice.

Lewis does not mean to say that people committed to such a theory will act immorally. Rather, it is that they forget. “That is their glory.” Holding on to their rationalist philosophy, they move ahead in an irrational way. “At the sight of injustice they throw all their Naturalism to the winds and speak like men and like men of genius. They know far better than they think they know.”⁹

Does tradition-dependence, or the need to stand within an ethical framework to make ethical decisions in the first place, not lead to a relativistic or cultural-dependence commitment to truth? Some commentators see this as the only alternative available.¹⁰ Yet Lewis’ whole argument is against any form of relativism. MacIntyre, in support, does not view tradition-dependence as incompatible with an antirealist commitment to truth:

There is nothing paradoxical at all in asserting that from within particular traditions universal import may be and are made, assertions formulated within the limits set by the conceptual, linguistic and argumentative possibilities of that tradition, but assertions which involve the explicit rejection of any incompatible claim, advanced in any terms whatsoever from any rival standpoint. So within every major cultural and social tradition we find some distinctive view of human nature and some distinctive conception of the human good presented as—true.¹¹

Objective, universalizable truth claims can be made from within “traditions” and it is possible to critique other traditions from this standpoint, which is neither devoid of tradition, “neutral,” nor without first principles.¹² For Lewis, “morality stands exactly where it did; its basis has not been withdrawn for, in a sense, it never had a basis. The ultimate ethical injunctions have always been premises, never conclusions...Unless the ethical is assumed from the outset, no argument will bring you to it.” (55, 56)

Arguments that “convergence” of tradition-dependence necessarily leads to relativism already assume in the premise of argument that there are no universalizable truths to converge upon.¹³ This is precisely the point that Lewis is making in his essay *On Ethics*. It is a transcendent argument that shows the necessity for assuming these first principles (universalizable truths) of objectivity (the Tao) for any rational discussion to take place at all.

The thing which I have called for convenience the Tao, and which others may call Natural Law...is not one among a series of possible systems of value. It is the sole source of all value judgments. If it is rejected, all value is rejected. If any value is retained, it is retained. The effort to refute it and raise anew system of value in its place is self-contradictory. There never has been, and never will be, a radically new judgment of value in the history of the world. What purport to be new systems or (as they now call them) “ideologies,” all consist of fragments from the Tao itself, arbitrarily wrenched from their context in the whole and then swollen to madness in their isolation, yet still owing to the Tao and to it alone such validity as they possess...The human mind has no more power of inventing a new value than of imagining a new primary colour, or, indeed, of creating anew sun and new sky for it to move in.¹⁴

In this manner, Lewis is neither guilty of the naturalistic fallacy, nor is he proposing a purely

⁸ MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* p. 367.

⁹ C.S. Lewis, *Miracles* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1960), p. 37.

¹⁰ Peter Kreeft, *C.S. Lewis for the Third Millennium* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), p. 103.

¹¹ A. MacIntyre, “A Partial Response to My Critics,” in *After MacIntyre*, ed. John Horton and Susan Mendus (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), p. 295.

¹² MacIntyre goes to great lengths to demonstrate just this sort of argument from an analysis of the Thomistic tradition in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*

¹³ See Bernard Williams’ discussions, particularly Chapters 8 and 9 “Knowledge, Science, and Convergence” and “Relativism and Reflection” in Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985).

¹⁴ Lewis, *Abolition of Man*, p. 56, 57.

inductive/deductive natural law theory (one may label it a “transcendent” natural law). At the same time he avoids arguments that lead necessarily to any form of relativism, cultural or otherwise.

What is, then, the role of “nature” in Lewis’ version of natural law? Nature is not merely the observable facts of nature. Neither is it “the whole show”—everything that is. This is because it can have no opposite—nothing can be un-natural. This is another sense in which Lewis can say that value judgments cannot be derived from propositions about fact alone.

Factual statements, as they are commonly understood, depend on the sense in which nature has no opposite—that is, nature as perceived by an external observer who seeks only to describe what he finds there. Lewis’ position is that there is no logical way to move from that meaning of “natural” to one in which “natural” may have “unnatural” for its opposite.¹⁵

But, as Lewis notes, the word “natural” is used in many other ways in which it has a whole series of opposites. As it applies to morality, Lewis’ definition of “natural” is Aristotelian in origin. To treat something as natural is to look at its “final cause,” what it is “meant to be,” and to form a value judgment regarding it. It therefore can have an opposite; man can behave “unnaturally.” Lewis provides many examples of this use of “natural” in his writings.

If morality is truly a discoverable, objective truth, what, theologically, is the ground for this truth? One way philosophers have dealt with this question is in terms of the dilemma posed in Plato’s Euthyphro. In this dialogue Socrates makes a distinction fundamental in reasoning: Is the “good” good because the gods approve it, or do the gods approve it because it is good. In *The Problem of Pain* Lewis addresses this issue:

It has sometimes been asked whether God commands certain things because they are right, or whether certain things are right because God commands them. With Hooker, and against Dr. Johnson, I emphatically embrace the first alternative. The second might lead to the abominable conclusion...that charity is good only because God arbitrarily commanded it—that He might equally well have commanded us to hate Him and one

another and that hatred would then have been right.¹⁶

Lewis’ language in this passage appears to elevate the concept of the good to a higher station over God to avoid either the arbitrariness of God’s will and/or to preserve some form of univocal knowledge of the good. This would be a grave theological mistake, and is directly related to the nominalist controversy in the Middle Ages. Philip Blond sees this as the crucial moment in the surrender of theology to secular reason’s account of nature and corresponding understanding of natural theology.¹⁷ Blond notes that Henry of Ghent (1217-1293) maintained that any knowledge of a created thing by the human intellect was also knowledge of God. In creatures, however, being was determinable; but God’s being is indeterminate. For Duns Scotus (1266-1308) the distinction between knowing God in himself and knowing Him in a creature was not important. For this reason, according to Blond, when considering the universal science of metaphysics Scotus elevated being (ens) to a higher station over God in order that being could be distributed both to God and His creatures. Scotus did this because God could not be known naturally unless being is univocal (*univocum*) to the created and uncreated. The same is true for the knowledge of the good.

Many see these two options as a *tertium non datur*; either the good is arbitrary of God’s will or God is subject to a concept of the good that is higher than in station than He is. But there is a clear *tertium quid* that Lewis (and others) identifies. The good is neither arbitrary nor superior to God’s will but is a part of God’s very nature. In *Reflections on the Psalms* Lewis notes that,

There were in the eighteenth century terrible theologians who held that “God did not command certain things because they are right, but certain things are right because God commanded them...It is

¹⁵ Meilaender, p. 186.

¹⁶ C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1962), p. 100.

¹⁷ Philip Blond, “Introduction: Theology Before Philosophy,” in *Post-Secular Philosophy: Between Philosophy and Theology*, ed. Philip Blond (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 6. Blond notes prior to this observation that modern theologians and philosophers who have attempted to resist skepticism in theology and relativism in ethics have done so by means of natural theology, that is, they have “attempted to discern, or infer, the nature of God from a secular construal of the nature of the world.” (p. 5) To do this, a correspondence between cause and effect necessitated that some term be given due proportion to both creatures and Creator because it was assumed that mutual knowledge depends on the classical notion that “like knows like.”

better and less irreligious to believe in no God and to have no ethics than to have such an ethics and such a theology as this. The Jews of course never discuss this in abstract and philosophical terms. But at once, and completely, they assume the right view...They know that the Lord (not merely obedience to the Lord) is "righteous" and commands "righteousness" because He loves it...He enjoins what is good because it is good, because He is good. Hence His laws have emeth "truth," intrinsic validity, rock-bottom reality, being rooted in His own nature. (Italics mine)¹⁸

Lewis also addresses this controversy at some length in *The Poison of Subjectivism* where he found both sides of the dilemma "intolerable" and roots his defense in the concept of God as Trinity and not merely as a person:

When we attempt to think of a person and a law, we are compelled to think of this person either as obeying the law or as making it. And when we think of Him as making it we are compelled to think of Him either as making it in conformity to some yet more ultimate pattern of goodness...or else as making it arbitrarily...But...God neither obeys nor creates the moral law. The good is uncreated; it never could have been otherwise; it has in it no shadow of contingency; it lies, as Plato said, on the other side of existence.¹⁹

The good, and therefore the ground of the objectivity of moral truth, is rooted in the very nature and existence of God. This gives further support to the nature of Lewis' use of morality as a transcendent natural law argument, not an inductive/deductive natural law argument. Lewis states this explicitly:

You will not suspect me of trying to reintroduce in its full Stoical or medieval rigour the doctrine of Natural Law. Still less am I claiming as the source of this substantial ethical agreement

¹⁸ C.S. Lewis "Reflections on the Psalms," in *The Inspirational Writings of C.S. Lewis* (New York: Inspirational Press, 1994), p. 162.

¹⁹ C.S. Lewis, "The Poison of Subjectivism," in *Christian Reflections* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), p. 80.

anything like Intuition or Innate Ideas. Nor, Theist though I am, do I here put forward any surreptitious argument for Theism. My aim is more timid. It is even negative. I deny that we have any choice to make between clearly differentiated ethical systems. I deny that we have any power to make a new ethical system. I assert that wherever and whenever ethical discussion begins we find already before us an ethical code whose validity has to be assumed before we can even criticize it. For no ethical attack on any of the traditional precepts can be made except on the ground of some other traditional precept.(55)

In conclusion, Lewis presents a "transcendent" natural law that avoids both the naturalistic fallacy and the dangers of relativism. It is not a simple inductive/deductive argument that moves from empirical observations of nature to universal objective moral principles. Lewis is not a "rationalist" in this sense. For Lewis, moral principles are truly objective and discoverable. But the argument is much subtler, more like trying to prove the law of non-contradiction. It is not possible even to begin talking about morality (even to "invent" or "create" such a concept) without at first assuming the objective moral principles in the first place. What is truly at stake for Lewis is not the isolated injunctions of Christian ethics, but rather Christianity as a whole and the objectivity of truth itself.

Analysis of Lewis' Argument

What are Reformed Christians to make of Lewis' apologetic argument from a transcendent natural law? Surely there are "equivalents" of natural law in the Gospels²⁰ as well as more explicit teachings that would seem to support a view of natural law in the Epistles (most notably Romans chapter 2).

Within Roman Catholic theology, the existence of natural law is not very controversial. What has caused disagreement is the differing emphases theorists give to its "three foci:" natural law in the human mind, in things or nature, and in divine providence. While Thomas Aquinas emphasized that natural law is divine law and never defined its precepts, subsequent commentators have focuses increasingly on the independent power of human cognition to discern "what all men know."

²⁰ A.N. Wilder, "Equivalents of natural law in the teaching of Jesus," *Journal of Religion* 26:125-135, 1946.

Hittinger argues that this modern preoccupation with reason and certainty has tended to divorce natural law from the “divine lawgiver” and to reduce it to little more than a means for settling moral disputes and guiding personal conduct.²¹ In the recent encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, however, Pope John Paul II, according to Hittinger, “gets the problem of natural law situated just about right.”

When Martin Luther appropriated the concept of natural law from Catholicism, while he transformed it he never divorced it from divine providence. Natural law, in the Lutheran tradition—evident in the “orders of creation”—is one mode of God’s activity in the world, preparing “the way for the good news of divine grace” as revealed in the Gospel.²²

John Calvin’s use of natural law has been a disputed topic in Calvin studies during this past century. Schreiner argues that Calvin himself did not see his appeals to natural law as problematic.²³ Calvinists have questioned how the corrupted human mind and the depraved human nature can have any natural knowledge of God’s will. The answer to this conundrum, Schreiner suggests, lies in Calvin’s doctrine of divine providence, a providence that has sustained nature and society since man, through Adam’s sin, plunged the world into chaos. God has prevented complete disorder and anarchy through the restraint of the “moral law,” which Calvin defined as “that natural law and...that conscience which God has engraved upon the minds of men.”²⁴ In Calvin’s thought, the “bridle of divine providence” curbs people “lest they devour one another.” The human ability to discern the natural law through human conscience is a preserving grace whereby a semblance of order, stability, and beauty is maintained.

Westberg observes that, despite current efforts to revive natural law, some Protestants remain reluctant to “compromise with a doctrine of moral standards based on human nature or reason” that they associate with a deeply flawed tradition of Roman Catholic moral theology.²⁵ But he suggests

that while Catholic natural law theory is a “handy target,” this negative posture does not take into account “the errors and exaggerated claims for natural law that arose in later Protestant versions.”²⁶ While natural law for Calvin had been “indissolubly connected to God’s authority,” by the nineteenth century had become a “semi-autonomous principle perceivable by unaided reason” in which “social programs confuse amelioration with salvation” and becomes a form of “social Pelagianism.”²⁷ These errors explain in part the suspicion that remains among many Reformed Protestants today.

For instance, there are some that would make a strong distinction between “natural law” and “Biblical law.” Many cite Cornelius Van Til who wrote, “We wish to bring out that the real difference between Christian and non-Christian ethics goes much deeper than is often supposed...There is no alternative but that of theonomy and autonomy. It was vain to attempt to flee from God and flee to a universe in order to seek eternal law there.”²⁸ “It is this point particularly that makes it necessary for the Christian to maintain without apology and without concession that it is Scripture, and Scripture alone, in the light of which all moral questions must be answered.”²⁹ Others would see that this entails the need for taking our sociopolitical ethics from Scripture, not from a supposed interpretation of “natural law.”³⁰

Yet “Biblical law” does not command a commitment from Christians that would exclude or preempt a commitment to “natural law,” rightly understood. Furthermore, the term “God’s law” does not eliminate the occasional necessity of using the term “natural law” or some synonym. For instance, when the debate about “natural law” versus “Biblical law” is entered by conservative Protestants, the debate usually centers around questions of whether fallen man has the capacity to discern in general revelation, apart from the commands of Scripture, some law of God in creation and conscience. But I see Lewis’ transcendent version of the natural law argument as

²¹ R. Hittinger, “Natural law and Catholic moral theology,” in *A Preserving Grace: Protestants, Catholics, and Natural Law*, ed., M. Cromartie (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997).

²² C. Braaten, “A response,” in *A Preserving Grace: Protestants, Catholics, and Natural Law*, ed., M. Cromartie (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997). See also J.T. McNeill, “Natural law in the teaching of the reformers,” *Journal of Religion* 26:168-182, 1946.

²³ S.E. Schreiner, “Calvin’s use of natural theology,” in *A Preserving Grace: Protestants, Catholics, and Natural Law*, ed., M. Cromartie (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997).

²⁴ *Ibid.* See also McNeill, “Natural law in the teaching of the reformers.”

²⁵ D. Westberg, “The reformed tradition and natural law,” in *A Preserving Grace: Protestants, Catholics, and Natural Law*, ed.,

M. Cromartie (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), p. 103.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

²⁷ W. Edgar, “A Response,” in *A Preserving Grace: Protestants, Catholics, and Natural Law*, ed., M. Cromartie (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), p. 120.

²⁸ Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Theistic Ethics*, (Phillipsburg, Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 1980), p. 134.

²⁹ Cornelius Van Til, *Defense of the Faith* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1967), p. 71.

³⁰ Cf. Gary North, *Westminster’s Confession* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1991).

setting aside this question and suggesting a more fundamental issue. In philosophical terms, it is a metaphysical (ontological) question rather than an epistemological one; that is, it is concerned with matters of the nature of being, rather than with the nature of knowing.

“Natural law” is a term we must use to distinguish between those actions, on the one hand, that are right by their very nature, and those actions, on the other hand, that are right because God has commanded them. Worshipping God is right because of our nature and His. We must worship Him because He is who He is and we are who we are. That reality logically and temporally precedes God’s explicit commands (“positive law”) that we worship Him. Old Testament dietary restrictions, on the other hand, were an expression of the will of God alone. It was good for the Israelites not to eat pork because God commanded them not to eat it, and not because of some intrinsic quality of being an Israelite or of pigs (this is why God could later call all things “clean”). In other words, some moral obligations, rooted in the perfectly just and holy nature of God (and the nature of that which He has made), could not be otherwise. Concerning other obligations, God was free either to give such laws or to institute otherwise, and moral goodness or evil is not intrinsic to them, but issues from the free will of God.³¹ Francis Turretin notes that natural law refers to those “things [which] are not called just because they are commanded, but are commanded because they were just and good antecedently to the command of God, being founded on the very holiness and wisdom of God.”³²

Christians should not be afraid of the apologetic use of natural law. Telling a late-twentieth-century pagan that he has disobeyed God’s Word is likely to have little rhetorical power. Telling him that he has, in C.S. Lewis’ terms, gone “against the grain of the universe” might well “pack a bit more rhetorical punch, especially if the

inevitability of cosmic splinters is spelled out.”³³ In a culture that tends to regard all rules and all religion as merely conventional, “Biblical law” language is horribly easy to ignore. But there does remain some sympathy in our culture, however confused, for the idea that things have an essential nature. Might it not be possible to capitalize on that and argue that morality, questions of right and wrong, is at the heart of what we sometimes call the “nature” of things?

Christians insist that the moral essence of things be rooted in the person of God. The grain of the universe was placed there by a holy, just, and wise Creator. Those Christians who reject the idea of natural law are in danger of giving the impression that the creation has no intrinsic moral order, and that “God’s law” is a “rule-bookish” afterthought. Understandably, many such “theological positivists” find it necessary to regard all principles of order that cannot be rooted in clear Biblical mandates as merely matters of human convention. Questions of beauty, for example, cannot be easily adjudicated in terms of “Biblical law,” so all aesthetic judgment are regarded as arbitrary.

A commitment to natural law in the proper sense insists that the Bible does not exhaust God’s law. It can promote a consciousness that the universe is “charged” with morality. Psalm 148 calls all sorts of created things to praise God: celestial bodies, meteorological phenomena (including snow and frost), geological formations, plants, animals, and people are all alike commanded to praise by virtue of their created nature (“For He commanded and they were created. And He established them for ever and ever; He fixed their bounds which cannot be passed,” Psalm 148: 5f) and by virtue of who God is (“for His name alone is exalted; His glory is above earth and heaven,” v. 13). This Psalm and others assume a likeness between the obligation of humans to praise God and the obligation of the extra-human creation to do so. The moral responsibilities of such diverse orders of being are analogous precisely because it is their natural duty, and not just obedience to a positive law. The Bible itself assumes a moral order and “harmonious dance” in the warp and woof of creation, which is what many people mean, and which C.S. Lewis expounds so eloquently in his essays and fiction, by “natural law.”

³¹ The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in the Genesis account of man’s fall can be seen in this regard. Was there anything specific or intrinsic to that particular tree, or was it merely a point at which God could command a means to worship? C.S. Lewis addresses this issue mythically in *Perelandra* and the Green Lady’s prohibition from sleeping on the “fixed land.” (C.S. Lewis, *Perelandra* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1977). The point being, even then, that these “positive laws” are still rooted in the nature of God’s being as “God” who requires worship and obedience. In this sense they are not “arbitrary.”

³² Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology, Volume Two: Eleventh Through Seventeenth Topics*, transl. George M. Giger, ed. James T. Dennison (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 1994), p. 2.

³³ Kenneth A. Myers, “On not being ashamed of natural law,” *Mars Hill Monograph* (Mars Hill Audio, Charlottesville, VA).