

Introduction to Christian Ethics

– Catholic Approaches to Christian Ethics

HPRS4092

Dr Angus M Slater



Prifysgol Cymru
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
University of Wales
Trinity Saint David

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Catholic Approaches to Christian Ethics

In the previous section, we explored the way in which the Bible is a foundational resource not just for much ethical reasoning within the Christian tradition, but also for many of the moral valuations which underpin it, and methodologies which propel it towards conclusions.

That section hopefully gave you a firm grounding in the importance of scripture for all sorts of Christian Ethics, as well as brought about some familiarity with some key biblical texts which pertain to ethical reasoning and moral valuation.

In this section and the next, I want us to explore some other key issues in Christian ethics through the lens of two different traditions within Christianity – the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant Churches. Each have their own emphases that will help us to expand our foundational knowledge.



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University of Wales
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Catholic Approaches to Christian Ethics

So what is it that makes Catholic ethics distinct?

I want to focus on two key areas of Catholic ethics that make it distinct from many non-Catholic approaches: first, the role of tradition in ethical reasoning, and second, the role of Natural Law theory in ethical reasoning.

In each case, the Catholic tradition has a strong attachment to a particular style and form of ethical reasoning that is distinct from other traditions.

In exploring these two areas, we will be both exploring the nature of Catholicism itself, but also fleshing out some of the key moral and ethical concepts in the wider field.



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As we saw in the previous section, the biblical text (however defined) is a centrally important resource for Christians attempting to produce ethical and moral reasoning. This, as we have seen, is because the Bible offers certainty – from its divine inspiration and from its universal applicability.

However, the Bible is not the only resource used by Christians for moral reflection – as we have seen, it often requires further development, interpretation, and analysis in order to apply it to new circumstances.

Other resources include our own moral reasoning or the teachings of the tradition to which we belong.



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This idea of there being other resources for ethical reflection than just the biblical text is a tension between 'theonomous' Christian ethics (whereby the Bible alone should be used for moral reasoning) and 'heteronomous' Christian ethics (whereby other resources of moral reasoning can and should play a significant role).

Within the Roman Catholic tradition, we see a strong emphasis on heteronomous Christian ethics – particularly on the role that reason and tradition can play in guiding our moral and ethical reflection.



Catholic Approaches

In the Catholic tradition, ethics requires not just using the biblical text, but also referring to Church authority, the natural world around us, and our reasoning and conscience.

In order to understand the meaning of the text fully, it must be contextualised within and through these other sources, and through these sources, new circumstances can be reasoned about through the biblical text.

This heteronomy of sources is collectively known as the 'Natural Law' – something we will return to a little later on in this section.

Critically, this natural law, including the ability to reason etc extends beyond just the Christian community – it does not require knowing the Bible in order to know what is good or evil. As the biblical passage across states, even Gentiles are bound by the natural law.

¹³ For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous. ¹⁴ (Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law. ¹⁵ They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them.)

Romans 2:13-15



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A critical part of this heteronomous style of ethics is the role that the tradition plays within Catholic ethics – specifically the tradition as defined by the authoritative teaching of the Catholic hierarchy, including the Pope, over the centuries.

This teaching is delivered through both the Catechism of the Church (the document listing and teaching the various beliefs of the Catholic faith – you may have had catechism classes at school?) and writings of various levels of importance emerging from Church Councils (e.g. the Second Vatican Council in 1962), the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (the Vatican's doctrinal office), or papal encyclicals written and published under the Pope's authority.



Catholic Approaches to Christian Ethics

A good example of the role of these is the Papal encyclical (a letter from the Pope to the Church) called *Veritatis Splendour* written in 1996 by Pope John Paul II.

In it, JP II reasserted the centrality of reason, conscience, natural law and the Magisterium (the traditional authority) in Catholic moral theology. The Pope argued that that moral knowledge is knowable to all people as all cultures have some sense of good and evil and that our conscience awakens a person's awareness of divine law.

But people are weak and sinful and they can't rely on reason and conscience alone so the Church's role is to guide individuals in their moral conscience.



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Other forms of the tradition playing a role in the Catholic faith are pronouncements made by Church Councils, that may change Church practice, the authority of the priest to guide and minister to congregants, and the importance of doctrinal study for sacraments.

The Catholic tradition also contains a second form of connected ethical reasoning that we have touched only a little on so far – Natural Law – that helps to bind together this commitment to the Biblical text with the changing needs of a changing world.

We will now turn our attention there.



Natural Law



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Natural Law

As we have seen, the Catholic tradition places a great deal of emphasis on the idea of a 'natural law' – but what is 'natural law'?

The basis of this belief is that human nature and the nature of the created order reflect, in some way, the goodness of the creator God – we can see something of God in his creation.

Where can we see this? We can see God's plan, intentions, and design for the world imprinted throughout creation, both externally to us in nature, and internally within our hearts and minds.



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Natural Law

Due to this availability of some sense of the divine, by studying ourselves and the world around us, we can come to learn something of God's plan and design, as well as how God intends us to live.

This plan, imprinted by God in our creation, is the 'natural law' – the way things should be, which we can discern, even when things have gone somewhat astray.

As before, Romans 2:13-15 provides a scriptural basis for this reasoning – that the law can be discerned by all.

¹³ For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous. ¹⁴ (Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law. ¹⁵ They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them.)

Romans 2:13-15



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This general sense of a natural law that can be perceived pre-dates the Christian tradition, but it emerges in a fuller way in the work of Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274AD) who combines two aspects of Greek philosophy:

The Stoic idea of a cosmic law that governs the operation of the universe, alignment with which can provide for happiness and fulfilment.

The Aristotelian idea that everything in the world has a specific purpose or nature, a *telos*, which can be discerned.



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Aquinas brought these two pre-existing aspects together – calling God’s plan for creation the ‘eternal law’.

Within the eternal law, we have the laws as obeyed by inanimate matter (e.g. physics or gravity or chemistry), the laws obeyed by plants and animals (e.g. that foxes chase chickens, or that plants grow towards the sun), and the eternal law intended for humans to follow – the natural law.

Our law is distinct because, unlike animals, humans are rational and able to reason about their actions.

As Aquinas wrote in the *Summa Theologiae*:

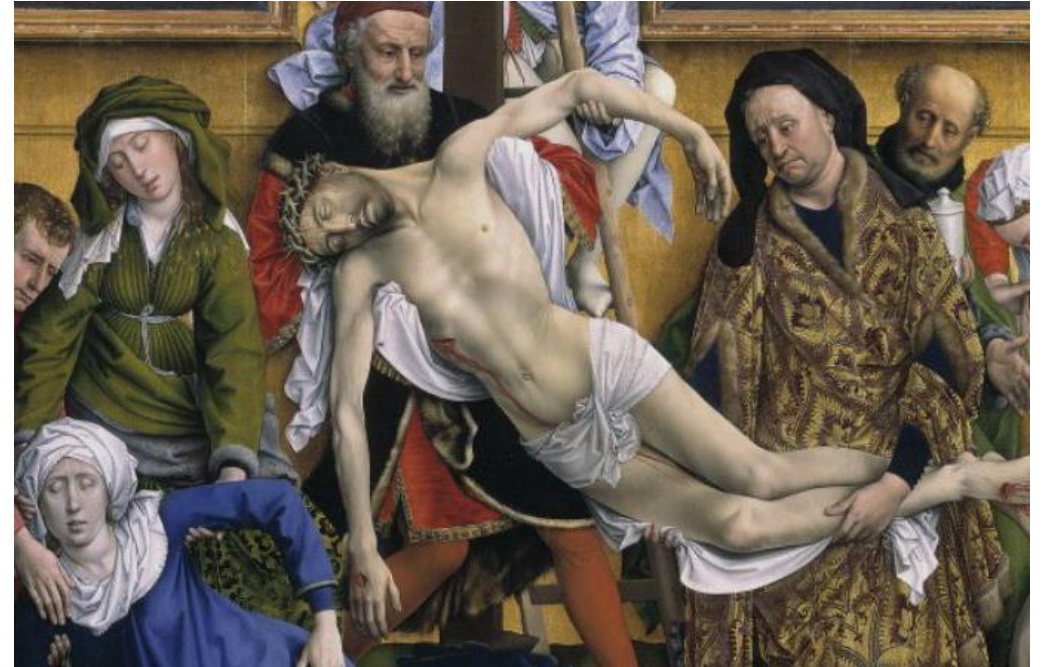
“natural law embodies nothing other than a participation of the eternal law in rational creatures”

Natural Law

This distinction between the human and the animal is important.

The non-human parts of creation reflect the 'eternal law' in a deterministic way – the *telos* of a knife is to cut, it obeys this *telos* without fail, because it has no independent will.

Humans, however, have a choice in whether to obey God's plan or not – their actions are not determined in the same way that the actions of a fox, or a knife, are but are predicated on our free will and choice.



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Natural Law

As reasoning creatures, we are able to uncover the 'natural law' and to choose whether we obey their instructions or not.

This is because God has given humans a rational nature and the ability to reason which allows us to perceive the operation of the 'eternal law' around us and also, because of being created in the *imago dei*, inclines us towards obeying the 'natural law'.

From this arises our sense of moral obligation – see opposite.

“The actions of plants and animals are determined by the law of their nature, or the original determination given to them by the fact of the Creator having endowed them with their specific natures. They must follow their natural tendencies of appetites. This fact leads us to suspect that in man also there must be a law of nature necessitating his actions in a manner consonant with his nature. If so, we shall have found a basis for moral obligation.”

(Miltner, 1933)



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This reasoning leads us to the situation where we can identify fundamental precepts of the 'natural law' such as that *good is to be done and evil avoided*, but also that it is good to seek and know the truth about God, that it is good to live in a harmonious society, it is good to have friends, or it is good to have a family.

For Aquinas, and the Catholic tradition, if we follow the natural law, we will be following God's intended plan for us, and to live in accordance with our true nature is to live in accordance with the will of God.

As Aquinas wrote in the *Summa Theologiae*:

“To the natural law belong those things to which a man is inclined naturally; and among these it is proper to man to be inclined to act according to reason. Hence this is the first precept of the law, that good is to be done and promoted, and evil is to be avoided. All other precepts of the natural law are based on this; so that all things which the practical reason naturally apprehends as man's good belong to the precepts of the natural law under the form of things to be done or avoided.”



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Natural Law

One of the critical consequences of the theory of natural law within the Catholic tradition is the ability for moral reasoning to be done beyond the confines of the biblical text and to emphasise every humans ability to perceive and recognise the ethical demands made on them by God.

Even an atheist will, in Catholic teaching, be able to discern what is morally good and bad and live according to God's will even though they will not recognise it as such.

Natural Law is therefore hugely expansive and morally important in understanding the way in which ethics operates for the Catholic tradition.



Prifysgol Cymru
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
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Reading

The reading for this section is a section from the Papal encyclical *Pacem in Terris* and a book chapter:

Pacem in Terris – PDF on Moodle.

Flannery K. (2019). The Natural Law in Catholic Ethics. In Ayres & Volpe (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Catholic Theology*

