

Our Moral Life in Christ



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Publisher: Rev. James Socias



MIDWEST THEOLOGICAL FORUM

Downers Grove, Illinois

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God has made us to seek and find happiness.

CHAPTER 1

Happiness and the Moral Law

OPENING ACTIVITY

Have the class brainstorm differences between cats and dogs, going beyond physical differences to differences of behavior and even psychology.

Discuss why virtually all cats behave the way cats behave and dogs behave the way dogs do. Is there such a thing as cat-nature and dog-nature?

BASIC QUESTIONS

This chapter attempts to answer the following basic questions:

- ✦ What is a description of human nature?
- ✦ How do human beings find happiness?
- ✦ What is the natural law?
- ✦ What does Divine Revelation contribute to our understanding of human nature?

KEY IDEAS

The key ideas of this chapter are:

- ✦ Humans are rational beings, comprised of body and soul, who are designed for happiness.
- ✦ Happiness is to be found in the fulfillment of human nature according to correct human desires.
- ✦ The natural law is the rule of right conduct or behavior for human beings. It is obscured by Original Sin.
- ✦ Divine Revelation confirms that we have reason and free will; that we find our true selves by following Christ (which includes sharing in his suffering); and that we are made to achieve Beatitude in communion with God in Heaven.



Sermon on the Mount by Olrik.

Together, reason and Divine Revelation provide us with an understanding of the natural law, by which we know the moral law.

The subject of this book is Christian morality, a collective term for the principles by which we are called to live in imitation of Christ and in keeping with our dignity as children of God. God calls us not only to avoid what is morally evil, but also to actively seek what is morally good. He asks us not only to be good, but to be completely good—that is, to be holy, even as Christ himself is holy.

God has created us with a shared human nature and a glorious final destiny. He has given us means to get from where we are now to where we should be going—where we should *want* to go. We were not made for our present and fleeting life on earth, as good, beautiful, and happy as it can be; rather, we ultimately were made for eternal life in Heaven, which promises a goodness, beauty, and happiness far beyond our wildest imagination.

Where do these Christian moral principles come from? It is important to understand at the outset that what the Church teaches about the moral law is not a matter of arbitrary rule, but instead is based upon objective truth about God and humanity.

Our Catholic Faith teaches us that there are two sources of religious truth—namely, human reason and Divine Revelation. These two sources are not opposed to one another; rather, they are complementary. Reason gives us real knowledge of God. Revelation confirms, corrects, and extends that knowledge. Together, reason and Divine Revelation provide us with an understanding of the natural law, by which we know the moral law.

The word “law” sometimes can strike us as though it has a negative connotation. To speak of “law” sounds as though something is imposed upon us, or something that is burdensome to us. But “law” also indicates something that is reliable, something that can be known and trusted. Among such examples are the laws of gravity or mathematics: If we understand the applicable laws, then we will know how fast an object will fall to the ground when dropped and how to solve a particular mathematical equation. Likewise, a knowledge of the moral law informs us of how God wants us to live our lives, and how he wants us to relate to one another.

Some fundamental truths of the moral law can be known to us through our human capacity for reason alone. God has created us with a natural knowledge of how to behave morally, a knowledge that is “written on [our] hearts” (cf. Rom 2:15). Divine Revelation—which comes to us through Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition, as mediated by the Church founded by Christ, who himself is the summary and fulfillment of all Revelation—corroborates and deepens our understanding of what we know through reason. Revelation teaches us truths that are beyond our natural capacity for reason.

HUMAN NATURE?

So the moral law is a natural law for human persons because we can arrive at many of these moral truths through human reason. The capacity for knowledge of the moral law, then, is part of our human nature. As a matter of fact, the moral law is sometimes called “the law of human nature.”

Then what is “human nature”? What kind of creature is the human being, is man? Is there really such a thing as a “human nature” that we all share? Do we really have that much in common with other human beings? Are we really so immensely distinct from all other living creatures, even chimpanzees, which share ninety-eight percent of the human genetic blueprint?

This may seem like a strange question. Some people might shrink from the idea that we share in a common human nature, with a common human dignity and common human rights, because it would seem to limit a person’s uniqueness. Others don’t like the notion of human nature because they dimly realize that if everyone possesses the same dignity and rights, then they have certain responsibilities toward other humans and can no longer justify doing whatever they choose.

We have a nature that every human being shares. By knowing this nature, we can get a better idea of what is really good for us.

So, what is a human being? Here is a definition, somewhat expanded from book one of this series:

A human person is a rational being, comprised of body and soul, who is designed for happiness.

We are rational beings. We are more than just physical beings: We are also rational. We can think and even reflect about our thinking. We can form abstract ideas and relate them. We possess language so we can communicate with one another in very complex ways. We can use reason simply to know things—we seem to have an insatiable desire to do this. We can also use reason to make good and useful things—we have done this to an amazing extent.

Although we are unique individuals, we are not independent. We have a need to be with other people. We are born totally dependent upon our mothers, both in the womb and as infants. If we are very fortunate, we grow up in

Focus Question 1:

What is the basic call God gives to each person?

Focus Question 2:

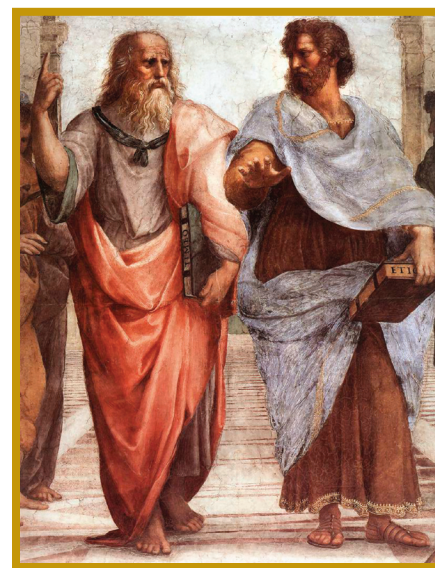
What are the two sources of religious truth?

Focus Question 3:

What does Revelation do in regard to our natural knowledge of morality?

Focus Question 4:

What is the nature of a human being?



Plato and Aristotle
(detail from *School of Athens*) by Raphael.
As rational beings, we can form abstract ideas and relate them through language to others.

GUIDED EXERCISE

Free write for a few minutes on the dimension of human nature in our definition that you think is the most important. Why is it the most important? Is there a dimension of the description you think is less important? Why?

FROM *YouCat*

Do natural laws and natural systems come from God also?

Yes. The laws of nature and natural systems are also part of God's creation. [339, 346, 354]

Man is not a blank slate. He is shaped by the order and the natural laws that God has inscribed in his creation. A Christian does not simply do "whatever he wants." He knows that he harms himself and damages his environment when he denies natural laws, uses things in ways contrary to their intrinsic order, and tries to be wiser than God, who created them. It demands too much of a person when he tries to design himself from start to finish. (*YouCat* 45)



Triumph of St. Thomas Aquinas
(detail) by Gozzoli.

In his best known work, *Summa Theologiae*, St. Thomas Aquinas asks and answers the question:
What is happiness?

a loving, nurturing family with a mother and a father who care for and educate us. Practically everything we know we learn from others. Others do now or will someday depend on us. Our work helps others and their work helps us. We will remain dependent or interdependent throughout our lives. When we are old or if we get sick or injured, we will again become dependent on others' care. To be dependent upon other people is not a bad thing: It is simply a fact of life.

We are corporeal beings. *Corporeal* means having a physical body. Like all the other animals on earth, we are living bodies. Without oxygen, water, food, protection from excessive heat and cold, and bodily integrity, we will die. We experience the world through our bodily senses: sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste. At birth we know almost nothing but learn by experience.

We are spiritual beings with immortal souls. Human persons are unique among corporeal beings not only in that we are rational, but also in that we possess an immortal soul. The soul is the "spiritual principle" of the body, and with it forms a unity. The body is not a mere disposable "shell" of the soul, but its form. Both body and soul are sacred because both are created by God. Because it is immortal and spiritual, our soul is often identified with our spirit or with our very life or existence.

We desire and seek happiness. In addition to reason, we also have limited but real freedom, which is traditionally called free will. We use free will to choose various means to happiness. Everything we do has for its aim our happiness or what we perceive to be our good. Our free will resides in what form of happiness we will seek and the means we choose to pursue it. When we choose a meal to eat, a movie to watch, a friend to spend time with, or a relationship to break off, we seek happiness.

Free will is a powerful gift. By using our freedom to do good, it can serve as a transforming force for the development of our skills and virtues, helping us grow in our ability to love as Christ loves and to experience true happiness. By the same token, misuse of our freedom in order to make poor moral choices robs us of dignity, distances us from God, and causes us to fall short of the happiness that God intends for us. Human freedom, then, is not an absolute in the sense that we can do anything we want without consequences.

God has chosen each of us for himself to share his eternal life. The freedom we have is the freedom to establish a loving relationship with Jesus Christ through the action of the Holy Spirit. Subordinating the world to the teachings of Christ is the highest use of freedom.

WHERE IS HAPPINESS TO BE FOUND?

Happiness, however, can be illusory. What we think will make us happy often disappoints us in the end. We may find a degree of pleasure, but it is short-lived or not entirely satisfying, and before long we find ourselves seeking some other form of happiness. That restaurant meal we look forward to might not meet our expectations; that movie might turn out to be a real dud; that job we so strongly desired might end up causing us more stress and burden than it is worth.

Is there anything, then, that will *actually* make us happy? The great medieval philosopher and theologian St. Thomas Aquinas asked this question. He seriously considered every answer: Whether happiness consists in wealth, in honors, in fame or glory, in power, in health and physical fitness, in carnal pleasure, in intellectual pursuits, in moral pursuits, in friendship, or in the



Sacred Heart of Jesus by Chambers.

Revelation tells us that Jesus Christ is the perfect model of moral living for holiness.

vision of God. A modern-day philosopher has divided the types of happiness we tend to pursue into four categories or levels—in pleasure; in being admirable compared to others; in serving others and making a contribution to the common good; and in connection to ultimate values, especially God.¹

What we *think* will make us happy and how we try to pursue it will have a huge effect on how we live and the value we see in others. Can we err when it comes to seeking happiness or fulfillment? Do we too often look for true happiness where it cannot be found?

Absolutely. Here are three ways.

- ✦ First, we can want *things which seem good but are not*. For example, pornography *seems* good because it gives pleasure. In reality, it is not good because it degrades both those who make it and those who use it. It reduces human beings with inherent dignity to non-personal sexual objects. It also separates sexual pleasure from procreation.
- ✦ Second, we can *choose lesser goods over greater ones*. Studying to learn and prepare for a career is good, and participating in recreational activities can also be good. However, if you fail a class because you are spending too much time in recreation and not enough time studying, then the recreation is not as good for you as it seems. Play is good, but if you want to be a scientist, you have to work at it.
- ✦ Third, we can also *choose bad means to achieve happiness*. Contrary to a popular slogan, the ends do not justify the means. Take the example of an unmarried woman who has an abortion so as not to disrupt her medical school studies: Her plans to become a doctor may objectively be very good but do not justify the killing of an innocent person—her unborn baby—to stay on course for that career.

FROM *YouCat*

Why do we yearn for happiness?

God has placed in our hearts such an infinite desire for happiness that nothing can satisfy it but God himself. All earthly fulfillment gives us only a foretaste of eternal happiness. Above and beyond that, we should be drawn to God. [1718–1719, 1725]

(*YouCat* 281)

GUIDED EXERCISE

Work with a partner to come up with an additional example of one of the three ways in which we can make errors in seeking happiness:

- ✦ Pursuing something that seems good but is not.
- ✦ Choosing a lesser good over a greater one.
- ✦ Choosing a bad means to happiness.

Share responses.

God has chosen each of us for himself to share his eternal life.

FROM *YouCat*

Why did God give us “passions” or emotions?

We have passions so that through strong emotions and distinct feelings we might be attracted to what is right and good and repelled from what is evil and bad. [1762–1766, 1771–1772]

God made man in such a way that he can love and hate, desire or despise something, be attracted by some things and afraid of others, be full of joy, sorrow, or anger. In the depths of his heart man always loves good and hates evil—or what he considers to be such. (*YouCat* 293)



The Prodigal Son by Honthorst.

We need to use wisdom and prudence in dealing with natural desires and the pursuit of pleasure.

WISE DESIRES

Focus Question 5:

Why are our natural desires good indicators of what is actually good for us?

Focus Question 6:

According to our bodily nature, what is the purpose of hunger and pleasure in eating?

All this said, however, our desires, even when they are misdirected, are basically indicators or substitutes for something that actually *is* good for us.

Let's take the example of eating and drinking. When we become hungry or thirsty, we desire food and water. So, to alleviate the pains of hunger and thirst, we eat and drink. The very act of eating and drinking brings us pleasure and happiness: It takes away hunger pangs and quenches our thirst. Not only that, but we take pleasure in the taste and texture of foods that we like. Because we are social beings, we often enjoy sharing a meal with our friends and family, whereby we can talk and enjoy their company.

So we usually look forward to our meals and find happiness in our dining experience. Eating and drinking, however, are not ends in themselves. Like all animals, we need food and water, nutrition and hydration, in order to live. The real purpose of eating and drink is for our very survival: If we go without food or water for too long, we will die. But we rarely think about that while we're looking over the menu at our favorite restaurant or carving up our meat at our dining-room table.

No human being begins life knowing this physiological purpose of eating. A baby who cries for milk only knows she is hungry and that satisfying that hunger gives comfort. We eat because we are hungry, because it is a habit, and because we enjoy it. And in the course of pursuing this basic pleasure, we actually fulfill something that is vital and good for us—our fundamental human requirement to sustain life.

Part of the wisdom by which God has designed us is that for every true human need there exists a *drive* to motivate us toward it and a *pleasure* in actually getting it. We need nutrition and feel hungry and enjoy a good meal; we need hydration and feel thirsty and enjoy drinking cold water. We need rest, so we feel sleepy and then enjoy sleeping. As a species, we need to reproduce, so we feel sexual desire and then enjoy sexual relations. We also have a need to gain intellectual knowledge, at least on subjects that interest us, and we tend to enjoy the pursuit of such knowledge through learning.

Yet we, too, need to use wisdom and prudence in dealing with these desires and pursuit of pleasure. We need to eat and drink, but we can sicken or even

The perfect happiness we seek is not to be found on earth.