

INTERNATIONAL REVIEW OF

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NATURAL FAMILY PLANNING

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**The Treatment of Infants Born with
Handicapping Conditions**
Edward M. Bryce

A Positive Solution for Achieving and Postponing Pregnancy
Evelyn L. Billings

From What Are They Dissenting?
Richard R. Roach

The Client's Right of Privacy and the NFP Teacher
James J. Pattee

**Caring for Persons:
An Introduction to Natural (Person) Law, Part I**
Robert E. Joyce

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Caring for Persons: An Introduction to Natural (Person) Law, Part I

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Editors' note: The following is Part I of a four-part series on the natural moral law, written with the natural family planning advocate in mind. The next three issues of the IRNFP will publish Parts II, III, and IV, respectively. Dr. Joyce's outline of the complete series, which follows, will assist the reader in putting Part I in perspective:

Part I: The Meaning of Morality

- 1. Why Learn about the Natural Moral Law?*
- 2. Integrating Your Personal Behavior*

Part II: The Horizons of Freedom

- 3. Basic Viewpoints on Human Action*
- 4. Choosing Well*

Part III: Being Who You Really Are

- 5. Your Absolute Responsibility*
- 6. Your Personal Goodness*

Part IV: Making Sure You Love

- 7. Necessary Conditions for a Loving Action*
- 8. How to Resolve Moral Dilemmas*

Introduction

THE CONTEMPORARY crisis in morality can be regarded as a crisis in reason and faith over whether there is any natural law for all freely-chosen human action. In general, the so-called new morality says no; and the traditional, Judeo-Christian morality says yes. In the areas of human sexuality and life-care, where the new mo-

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rality has developed wide-spread support, the natural moral law is blatantly denied or overlooked.

Persons who have responsible positions as parents, counselors, and teachers are as much in need of understanding today as the young people whom they attempt to guide. Perhaps it is time to ask ourselves seriously: just what *is* this Judeo-Christian ethic that we once thought we knew? Grass roots thinking may be necessary if we are to take effective grass roots action in teaching, counseling, and otherwise communicating.

Is there a solid basis in human nature for making responsible personal choices? Is this solid basis something common to both those who believe and those who do not believe in a supernatural source of human motivation? If so, what are the basic elements of this every-person morality or ethics, for which the primary authority is the authority of reason? I would like to share with you what I think amounts to reasonably adequate answers to these questions.

Part I: The Meaning of Morality

1. Why Learn about the Natural Moral Law?

Caring for the physical life of persons is a basic need. In providing ever more adequate attention to the physical life of others and of ourselves, we can draw upon the growing resources of a wide range of health care specialists. A contemporary movement known as holistic health gives promise of integrating disease elimination or healing activity with health enhancement or wellness programs. However much we may disagree about the values placed upon various therapies and health maintenance measures, we can agree on the critical need to develop a consistent commitment to a harmonious set of physical health values.

A similar need and variety of means presents itself in the search for mental and emotional health. The need and means for promoting psychic wellbeing are less tangible but just as real as those in physical health care. The twentieth century is the age of systematic psychology.

Spiritual and religious health care is another primary point of attention for authentic persons. The true and the good of ultimate

meaning and value in our lives warrants our keenest concerns.

But how and why should we integrate all this complex and profound human potential in our everyday lives? How and why should we care for ourselves as persons of body, psyche, and spirit? That is a primary question of morality. Underlying the natural laws of physical, mental, and emotional health—and working intimately with the laws of spiritual and religious health—are the laws of good human choice. Collectively they are called the natural moral law or natural (person) law. These overarching principles of responsible guidance and integration constitute a stable, dynamic source of true joy, and are ignored at our peril.

People who would thoughtfully dedicate their time to serving others' needs in sexuality and life-care need to understand the best general theory of ethics. In the author's judgment, this theory is a development of natural law reasoning going back to Heraclitus, Plato, and Aristotle in origins; proceeding through considerable development and refinement in the Christian Middle Ages; and receiving special focus and clarification through the contemporary work of scholars such as Jacques Maritain, Germain Grisez, John Finnis, William E. May, and Joseph Boyle.

In the past twenty years, Germain Grisez has articulated natural law ethics with uncommon good sense and exceptional analytic depth. His version of the traditional, core theory of natural law that peaked within the extraordinary philosophical and theological synthesis of Thomas Aquinas makes eminent sense to many unprejudiced seekers of truth in morality. According to many scholars, Grisez has developed the finest expression of ethics in the whole of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

My exposition of this theory is relatively simple and direct. I try to suggest complexity where necessary, without getting the reader bogged down in knotty problems that are important but are better left to later study. While the basic theory is that of Aquinas and Grisez, I do not hesitate to add my own touches. The interpretation of how natural law ethics relates to other significant approaches, such as utilitarianism and deontology, is my own.

Like other theories of natural law, what I call the Personal

Development Theory requires concentrated study even for an elementary, but firm, grasp of its principles and basic significance. While other kinds of ethical thinking, such as ethical egoism or utilitarianism, require careful study, there is simply *more to be known* about natural law. A whole, concordant metaphysics underlies traditional natural law theory—which is not necessarily the case with other theories. Also, there are various theories that claim to be “natural law” but are not such in the traditional sense. Most often these theories are distortions of the developed, core tradition rather than different approaches that simply use the same name (“natural law”).

Without having to make it explicit along the way, I hope that this brief exposition of natural moral law suggests to the reader various ways in which the Personal Development Theory is relevant to, and integrative of, some of the best-known contemporary theories in psychology, philosophy, and theology, without sacrificing its promise as a sound philosophy of moral behavior.

My special intent is to help people engaged in the everyday counseling and teaching of natural family planning who find occasions to help practitioners develop deeper meaning for what they are doing. Without a sound basis in natural (person) law, education in natural family planning is a program without a platform. But with a working knowledge of the key moral concepts, teaching and learning natural family planning can become much more natural and personal for believer and nonbeliever alike.

2. Integrating Your Personal Behavior

Tom and Lisa are married friends of yours. You get into a serious discussion of family planning methods and they ask your advice.

You know they have six children already. They are in their early thirties and have many years of fertility ahead. They tell you many significant details of their relationships including their present financial crisis—and their past history of little or no family planning.

You attempt to determine their attitudes toward children, themselves, and life's basic values. You want them to come to a

sound decision by themselves with the help of all the information and good counsel you can provide.

You discover that they have just started to use an intrauterine device. You realize the dangers of this method for the woman. But you also understand how it inevitably works as an abortion-producer. You are opposed to this method in which Tom and Lisa are beginning to trust, but you wonder just how to go about telling them.

You are faced with ethical decisions on at least two levels. The first level is one of substance: What is the best means of family planning for Tom and Lisa? The second level is one of process: What is the best way to express your views and your advice? Many voices in our society offer you many different answers to these questions. It seems that highly respected, knowledgeable people would give you conflicting advice.

You must evaluate and decide what to do. You cannot wish away the situation. Acting blindly through willful ignorance is irrational and anti-personal. You want to choose to do or say the right thing for all concerned.

In determining your choice of action, you will be examining, or will have had to examine, many facts and values. Also you will be thinking along the lines of a theory of personal or moral behavior. And whether you realize it or not you will be taking a stand for or against (perhaps for and against in various respects) the truth of responsible human action. You will be making one or more significant ethical decisions.

What is an ethical decision? What are the primary truths that can be known as a solid base for such decisions? Here I will briefly introduce ethics. In the rest of this work, I will sketch out general ethical perspectives and principles that you can apply to the widest range of ethical issues, including your response to Tom and Lisa.

What Is Ethics?

Ethics is the way we determine the principles by which our actions are evaluated as personally good or bad, loving or unloving, and the attempt to see why these principles are sound. Ethics

is like logic, medicine, and other practical studies. Logic is the work of discovering and organizing the use of principles for correct thinking. Medicine is a concentrated effort to discover and organize the use of principles for correct healing. Similarly, ethics is the practical science of correct human action in so far as the action proceeds deliberately and freely from persons, as individuals or as communities.

Considering how to act in advising Tom and Lisa, who are critically in need, you want to think logically, you want to know as much as you can about the scientific and medical facts and circumstances, and you want, above all, to direct your own action intelligently and freely by means of the principles that represent and support the dignity of persons—Tom, Lisa, yourself, their family, and others involved.

Ethics is practiced by societies as well as individuals. Communities such as your family, family planning organizations, the State, and others have a share in the responsibility for advising Tom and Lisa. They act as ethical agents in determining how Tom and Lisa are treated—with or without love. Any action that is adopted by persons, as individuals or as a group, through the deliberate use of their minds and hearts, is ethically good or bad. Of course, in a given set of circumstances, *failure* to act can also be ethically good or bad.

Ethically good or bad action is profoundly personal action, because its core is the freely willed choice of whoever is responsible. The values and the kind of thinking about those values that the ethical agent relies upon are personal, but not private. As in logic, medicine, and any other systematic study, ethics presupposes an objective truth commonly accessible to sincere and honest seekers.

Even though none of us attains the fullness of this truth about values and their applicability to specifically human behavior, we are all trying to deepen our participation in the truth. Life is not a game in which we win or lose. It is rather a form of being in which we cannot escape the challenge to participate well or poorly, through choosing our attitudes, motives, and actions. Ethics is a

concerted attempt, individually and socially, to make our choices meaningful and *being-ful*.

The study of ethics can never provide a neat set of answers to all ethical or moral questions. But, as a kind of practical wisdom, it should offer a sound perspective and a highly understandable guide for our evaluations of human acts—our own and those of others. Good ethical theory will assist you in leading a richer and more meaningful everyday life. You will gain confidence in your ability to evaluate critical moral dilemmas and come to responsible conclusions. You will come to know not simply what you *want* to do, but what you *ought* to do and why.

Ethics Depends on World Views

The particular ethical theory that we will be studying represents a mainstream application of the Judeo-Christian world view. A world view is a set of assumptions about the whole meaning of life. Who are we, where did we come from, where are we going? These and other basic questions are answered in our hearts and with our lives. No one can live consciously without a world view. Even if you answer, "I do not know," to those questions, you *have* a world view. Your world view might amount to agnosticism or skepticism, or perhaps nihilism. But it represents "where you are at" basically. And it effectively conditions all you do, including how you think ethically.

If you are a person trying to live within the Judeo-Christian world view you have some answers to these fundamental questions. Your answers are definite, even though they involve or imply great complexity, depth, and need of development. You say, "We are unique creatures of an infinitely loving, all-good, and all-powerful God. We are made in God's image and likeness, and destined to return to our Creator if we repent of our sins and give loving service to God and neighbor." You say much more, perhaps. But there are many who say nothing of the kind. Many people today are naturalists, secular humanists, atheistic existentialists, Buddhists, strict devotees of cosmic consciousness, or whatever. The way each person goes about resolving ethical problems is crucially influenced by his or her world view.

If our world view is false, we cannot expect much in the way of ethical truth, except accidentally. When certain issues are discussed, we may agree with those who do not share our world view. And we may disagree on other issues. But the basis for our agreements and for our whole ethical system will be quite diverse, and even the agreement may disintegrate later when new aspects of an issue are opened. We will have occasion to see why this is so when we analyze several ethical approaches.

The main point about the critical influence of our world views may be illustrated by the story of the eagle among the prairie chickens, told by John Powell.

A baby eagle, bereft of parents, was placed in the nest of some prairie chickens. The fledgling eagle grew up to walk the earth and fly a few feet off the ground at times, just like the chickens. One day when he was an adult eagle he saw a great bird in the sky, majestically winging its way between the mountain tops. He asked an old prairie chicken, "What is that?" The elder replied by saying that that was an eagle, and not the kind of bird "we all are." So, with a bit of wonder, the earthling eagle accepted his fate as a prairie chicken and died that way.

Today there is considerable agreement on the dignity of the human person and the need for an ethics of treating human life on that basis. But there is vast disagreement on what constitutes human dignity. Some say that humans are simply high-class animals, essentially bound to the laws of naturalistic life, while exercising a wider range of creativity and choice than other species. They will tell you, in effect, that you are essentially no better than a prairie chicken. Others say that humans are animal-like, in many ways, but are not animal in nature. Human beings, they will say, are much more God-like than animal-like. They will tell you that you can make ethical choices which let you participate in a world of inexhaustible truth, beauty, and goodness, but that you will have to work at it, practice it. They say you are an eagle.

Natural (person) law is an affirmation of your eagle status. It is the core of natural reasoning at the heart of the Judeo-Christian world view. And its development comes mainly from the insight

IRNFP

of Christian philosophers.

The particular ethical theory I will explain is philosophical, not theological. It provides critical principles for integrating personal behavior. Sincere persons who are agnostic or atheistic can appreciate and agree with much of what it includes. Traditional Christians have a vital heritage of natural ethical reasoning that offers a bridge of hope to all seekers of truth in personal behavior.

Editorial Policy

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