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A Grounded Natural Law

Benjamin German
Cedarville University, bgerman@cedarville.edu

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Abstract

For many Evangelical thinkers, natural law is an untenable ethical framework. The very phrase makes some cringe. Many Evangelicals find it irreconcilable with their conception of the totalizing effect of sin upon the human will and intellect. In his article “Natural Law and a Nihilistic Culture,” Carl Henry illustrates this deep-rooted fear of many within the movement. However, in recent years, some evangelical thinkers are reconsidering natural law. While Henry enumerates valid concerns over possible abuses of natural law, he forfeits the common denominator by which Evangelicals can engage in helpful ethical debate with the secular world.

Keywords

Ethics, natural law, evangelicals

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A Grounded Natural Law

Benjamin German
Cedarville University

For many Evangelical thinkers, natural law is an untenable ethical framework. The very phrase makes some cringe. Many Evangelicals find it irreconcilable with their conception of the totalizing effect of sin upon the human will and intellect. In his article “Natural Law and a Nihilistic Culture,” Carl Henry illustrates this deep-rooted fear of many within the movement. However, in recent years, some evangelical thinkers are reconsidering natural law. While Henry enumerates valid concerns over possible abuses of natural law, he forfeits the common denominator by which Evangelicals can engage in helpful ethical debate with the secular world.

The doctrine of total depravity espoused by John Calvin and his followers is often misunderstood. According to a theologian John Piper (2013), this doctrine maintains that humans are in total rebellion against God and are wholly unable to submit to Him on their own. It also insists that mankind still bears the image of God in some distorted fashion. Thus, humans are still capable of outwardly good actions. In the words of Piper, “such outward conformity to the revealed will of God is not righteousness in relation to God” (p. 21). This anthropology sharply contrasts with that of Thomas Aquinas.

Aquinas, the seminal formulator of a Christian understanding of natural law, had a tantalizingly different perspective on sin and its effects. His vision was intricately paradoxical, seeking to synthesize the Augustinian emphasis on deep human depravity with a more optimistic philosophical approach. (Downing, 2009). In his writings on natural law, he emphasized that humans can rationally choose what is right, proposing natural law to be “the natural light of reason by which we determine what is right and wrong” (Geisler, 1991, p. 165). This natural law is written on the heart of every person. While it is not clear how extensive Aquinas believed sin’s corrupting power to be, he was certainly more optimistic of human reason than Augustine dared to be. This is the perspective with which Carl F. H. Henry disagreed.

Carl F. H. Henry, an American Evangelical theologian, carefully led the modern movement to revitalization in the 20th century. He was a man who held a careful allegiance to Scripture, vigilantly upholding the authority of the Bible as infallible revelation. In light of this, Henry’s distrust of natural law is understandable. For Henry, the Thomistic conception of natural law could be summed up as a moral framework independent of divine revelation. It is ubiquitous to human nature and can be discovered by reason (Henry, 1995). As one might predict, Henry had serious doubts about humanity’s ability to faithfully discover such the law apart from special revelation. He drew upon the teachings of Protestant Reformers to reach his anthropological conclusions.

Because of their understanding of depravity, Henry saw the magisterial Reformers as essential to the discussion of natural law. He points to a crucial difference between their understanding of natural law and the Thomistic one. In Henry's estimation, the Reformers grounded moral law thoroughly in divine revelation. It was not based upon positivist empirics, but was rather a pre-philosophical understanding. It could not be seen holistically, but only in broken pieces due to the depravity of mankind. Henry underscored its fickle nature, writing: "It has been invoked to defend freedom and slavery, hierarchy and equality" (Henry, p. 59). Therefore, it could not have been the comprehensive system Aquinas had wanted it to be. Henry acknowledged that Aquinas fully accepted Scripture as God's revealed truth. However, he saw Aquinas as establishing natural law as autonomous revelation (Henry, 1995).

Writing in 1995, Henry was chiefly concerned that secular culture will employ natural law in an untenable way. It cannot be the ethical system for which the materialist worldview so desperately gropes because the moral law cannot stand under its own weight. Because human reason, will and conscience are devastated by sin, mankind cannot know natural law in the comprehensive and universal way necessary to be useful. Henry does not deny the existence of a mostly uniform moral sense within human beings. However, natural law lies fragmented in the hearts of mankind, and even the concerted attempts of secular humanism to reconstruct the pieces will crumble upon further reflection. Natural law is deceptively unhelpful (Henry, 1995). However, not all Evangelicals agree with Henry's assessment of natural law

J. Daryl Charles asserts that natural law may serve as an essential common ground for ethical dialogue with those outside the faith (Charles, 2008). He too finds wisdom in the Protestant Reformers. However, Charles argues that Calvin in particular had a higher respect for the utility of the natural law than Henry concedes. Calvin argued that without the seeds of just law "implanted in the hearts of men" (Charles, 2006, 36), civil society cannot function. Calvin goes so far as to say that nothing can destroy this fundamental understanding of justice. The image of God, upon which this moral law is inscribed, is marred but not erased. With this in mind, Charles proposes that the moral law inscribed in every man's heart is intelligible enough (Charles, 2006). Charles is not alone among evangelicals.

Stephen Grabill finds insight in the Reformers concerning natural law, tracing the thought of lesser-known reformer Peter Martyr Vermigli. Vermigli associated himself closely with Calvin, maintaining a pessimistic perspective on human nature. He did not believe humans have the ability to choose God of their own volition, nor could they be regenerated apart from the gospel known by special revelation. Furthermore, to truly live as godly people before God required the work of the Spirit. However, according to Grabill, the reformer also borrowed heavily from Aquinas. For the gentiles to truly be without excuse as Paul declared, Vermigli posited that they must be able to both perceive the law of God accurately and to some degree to outwardly conform to it. He believed that each individual can know the law of God through observing nature as well as through the law written on each person's heart. Though he deviated from Calvin's thought on this issue, Vermigli still maintained a position consistent with total depravity

– that man is wholly unable to do good for the sake of pleasing God (Grabill, 2006). His association with Aquinas also left the door open for more congenial ethical discussions with the unregenerate.

Conclusion

Carl Henry rightly stood on the Word of God because natural law is not accessible enough for fallen man to be accepted autonomously. Human reason alone cannot discern it purely or fully enough to make it a sustainable ethical system. Paul writes in Romans 2:15 that for sinful men, “their conscience also bears witness, while their thoughts accuse or even excuse them” (ESV Study Bible, 2008). Additionally, Paul writes in Romans 1:18 that men suppress the truth by their unrighteousness; this is a symptom of total depravity. Here the apostle maintains that the human heart can suppress natural law volitionally. Furthermore, as creatures of habit, humans can build up predispositions towards sin (1 Tim. 4:2). Therefore, humanity cannot and will not perfectly conform to the moral law. They will in no respect seek to fulfill the law with respect to God (Eph. 2:1-3) (ESV Study Bible, 2008). However, this Romans passage does acknowledge that humans can know the moral law enough to willfully resist it.

Scripture makes it equally clear that humans are capable of some outward conformity to the law of God. Christ affirms in Luke 11 that even the evil “know how to give good gifts to your children” (ESV Study Bible, 2008). The Canons of Dordt which organized and elucidated Calvin’s teaching on human depravity wrote in its formal statement: “There is, to be sure, a certain light of nature remaining in man after the fall... [which] demonstrates a certain eagerness for virtue and for good outward behavior.” Henry does not deny this. His reasons for fear are twofold: that natural law is too fragmented by the fall to be used and that it cannot stand as an autonomous ethical system. However, Henry’s preferred alternative tosses away an ethical asset.

Natural law is not as weak and comminuted as Henry would have Evangelicals to believe. Many times, the moral intuition from natural law accords with Scripture. Almost all people hold dearly to moral axioms such as the intrinsic dignity of humans or the inviolable right of justice for individuals. As Moreland and Geisler note, people may not act justly toward each other, but their expectation that justice will be done to them reveals their true belief. They know injustice when they see it (Moreland and Geisler, 1990). While some argue against the dignity of those on either extreme of the life’s continuum, proponents of abortion or euthanasia usually argue that these particular humans lack personhood, rather than that persons may sometimes lack dignity. Furthermore, as Vermigli argues, if God holds all men culpable without excuse for breaking the law, He surely must give all men enough access to the law that they could choose to obey it should they wish. While natural law does not have sufficient strength to stand alone as an ethical system, it can be grounded in a firmer source. As noted earlier, Scripture clearly attests to the value of natural law. If Evangelicals keep it rooted in the Bible, they will have a powerful tool.

One can immediately see the practical implications for grounded natural law. Because of depravity, free societies will never rely upon Scripture as their source for ethics. In daily interactions, Christians will primarily interact with those who do not share a common basis for ethics. Natural law provides a fairly level playing field for moral interactions, without a Christian having to persuade his audience of the veracity of Scripture. For example, consider the fact that most humans value the life of newborn babies to a much higher degree than the life of chimpanzees, despite that primates have higher cognitive ability. Natural law informs us that the sacredness of human life is separate from functional ability. Indeed, Charles sees intrinsic personhood as one of the essential ethical concepts for today. He believes natural moral law bears witness of this to each individual, and thus it is an invaluable tool for Christians to think ethically with the rest of the world (Charles, 2008).

The Christian must plant herself firmly on Scripture, making no apology for it as the foundation of her ethics. In this way, Henry serves as a corrective for those who would use natural law autonomously. However, natural law is not necessarily at odds mankind's depravity. Sinful humans can still do good in a horizontal sense to fellow human beings, and they can agree on basic concepts of personhood and morality. In God's mercy, the distorted nature of man can still know truth about God enough to be "without excuse." Evangelicals would be abandoning the merciful provision of God not to make use of a grounded natural law.

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