

Participation Metaphysics, The *Imago Dei*, and the Natural Law in Aquinas' Ethics

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I Natural Law and Methodological Atheism

Janine Marie Idziak has recently argued that natural law morality (hereafter NLM) is guilty of “methodological atheism.”¹ According to Idziak, NLM assumes an autonomous realm of ethics that needs no appeal to the divine. Since NLM argues that human nature provides the normative basis for ethics, God can only play a relatively minor role. For a theist this certainly seems a counter-intuitive way to do ethics. Thus, the approach is dubbed “methodological atheism.” In her critique of NLM Idziak appeals to the earlier and more detailed work of Edward Vacek, who more fully articulates the case against NLM.

In his essay “Divine-Command, Natural-Law and Mutual-Love Ethics,” Vacek weighs the relative merits of divine command theory (DCT) and NLM against his own theory of mutual love ethics.² Vacek believes that DCT places an appropriate emphasis upon the Christian themes of the sovereignty of God, human obedience and a fundamentally theocentric moral theory. However, DCT suffers from at least two defects. First, it fails to appreciate the theological significance of the creation and human nature as morally relevant categories. Second, DCT neglects human affectivity in moral matters. When questioned as to why I should love my neighbor, the advocate of DCT can only respond with, “Because God commanded it and I must obey.” Loving, or any other moral activity for that matter, is not genuine if it proceeds solely from obedience. Vacek echoes Jacques Leclercq's observation that, “To love out of obedience is not to love at all.”³

¹ Janine Marie Idziak, “Divine Commands are the Foundation of Morality” in *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Religion* eds. Michael L. Peterson and Raymond J. van Arragon. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2004), p. 298–9.

² Edward Collins Vacek, S. J., “Divine-Command, Natural-Law and Mutual-Love Ethics.” *Theological Studies* 57 (1996), pp. 633–53

³ Jacques Leclercq, *La philosophie morale de saint Thomas devant la pensee contemporaine*. (Paris: Vrin, 1955), p. 403.

In contrast to DCT, NLM seems more intuitively appealing since it corresponds to our most basic moral intuitions. It contends that there is a universally accessible moral code that does not vary in its essential characteristics. One need not be a Christian in order to know the most basic principles of human morality. Yet, if NLM can be treated as an autonomous approach to ethics, then God has little or no place. If this is the case then Vacek's objections to NLM seem justified.

But Vacek sees another problem here. His contention is that the human agent, in deciding that God can never command the morally horrific (e.g., the torture of innocent children for its own sake), has elevated her own reason above that of the divine. In so doing, she proceeds to make moral judgments upon God's moral directives and unintentionally substitutes an anthropocentric for a theocentric morality. Vacek quotes from Kai Nielsen who asks, "Is it really *hubris* or arrogance or sin on our part to wish for a life where we make our own decisions, where we follow the rules we do because we see the *point* of them and where we need not crucify our intellects?"⁴ The demand for God to give an explanation for why some actions are commanded and others prohibited is apparently an act of impiety on Vacek's view.

This substitution of an anthropocentric morality for a theocentric one seems to be a kind of moral *hubris* wherein NLM ignores the role that God should assume in any specifically Christian ethic. Vacek criticizes the Thomistic approach to NLM by charging that "When Aquinas wrote, in an oft cited line, 'We do not offend God except by doing something contrary to our own good,' he himself opened the possibility of making our relationship with God superfluous for doing ethics."⁵ He contends that the issue of "offending God" is dependent on the "prior moral question of 'our own good.'"⁶ If this is the case, then any moral question can be decided upon without the explicit appeal to God. Vacek concludes by arguing,

Since natural law is open to anyone who has reason, natural-law ethicists can discuss moral issues on an equal footing with people who do not share their religious tradition. The disadvantage is that attention to God is superfluous for the doing of ethics. Natural-law ethics can proceed under a rubric of 'methodological atheism.'⁷

Even though this characterization of NLM may be true for some contemporary thinkers, it is not the view held by Aquinas

⁴ Kai Nielsen, "God and the Basis for Morality," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 10 (1982), pp. 347–8.

⁵ Vacek, "Mutual-Love Ethics," p. 640.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 640.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 641.

himself.⁸ God plays a much greater role in Aquinas' account of NLM than Vacek admits. Aquinas' metaphysics of participation is sufficient to refute Vacek's charges of "methodological atheism" for two reasons. First, since NLM is a participation in the eternal law, there is a Christo-centric basis for NLM. Second, human knowledge of NLM is fundamentally a function of the *imago dei* and therefore we find a continuity between human reason's ability to grasp the good, on the one hand, and God's establishment of the good in creation, on the other. As a result one need not fear the charge of moral *hubris*.

II Aquinas on Natural Law

Aquinas says, in an oft-quoted text, that natural law is the "rational creature's participation in the eternal law."⁹ Initially this means the human person is able to act freely and to direct herself to goods appropriate to her nature. Unlike the rest of creation, which is governed by physical laws and instinct, humans are self directed to their proper ends. Aquinas says that, "Among all others, the rational creature is subject to divine providence in a more excellent manner, in so far as it itself *participates* in providence in providing for itself and for others. Thus, it *participates* in the eternal reason whereby it has a natural inclination to its proper act and end" (italics added for emphasis, IaIIae.91.2). This inclination Aquinas refers to is the human good and the natural law dictates that "the good should be done and pursued and evil avoided."¹⁰

Because the precepts of NLM are based upon human nature, it follows that in addition to the goods humans share with other life forms, they will also have unique goods of their own. However, the most important of these unique goods will be the goods of reason.

The order of the precepts of the natural law is according to the order of natural inclinations First, there is in humans an inclination toward the good they share in common with all substances Second, there is in humans an inclination toward those things which are in accordance with what humans have in common with other animals Third, there is in humans an inclination to the good according to the nature of their reason, which is proper to humans. Thus, humans have a natural inclination to know the truth about God, and to live in society; and in this respect, whatever pertains to this inclination belongs to the natural

⁸ For the view that God's role is secondary to moral ontology see Anthony Lisska, *Aquinas's Theory of Natural Law: An Analytic Reconstruction*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.).

⁹ IaIIae.91.2. "Et talis participatio legis aeternae in rationali creatura 'lex naturalis' dicitur." All translations from the Latin are my own. In questions 90 and 91 Aquinas uses some form of the latin word *participatio* no fewer than 24 times.

¹⁰ IaIIae.94.2. "Bonum est faciendum et prosequendum, et malum vitandum."

law: e.g. to shun ignorance, to avoid offending those among whom one has to live and so on (IaIIae.94.2.).

From the different kinds of inclinations Aquinas derives specific precepts of the natural law. Yet, it is important to note that the inclinations themselves are not *per se* moral. That is, they are necessary conditions of morality but in themselves are not sufficient. The inclinations require the regulation of reason in order to have moral implications. Stephen Pope says that Aquinas' appeal to natural inclinations "did not lead him to encourage a simple imitation of animal behaviour but to recognize that humans, like other animals, experience the divine governance through the promptings of certain natural inclinations as well as through the exigencies of reason. Essential human inclinations are to be both fulfilled and transformed in light of human intelligence."¹¹ Thus, there is no canine morality since dogs do not have the capacity to regulate their behaviour according to reason.

Since there is a natural inclination to self-preservation, Aquinas believes that there is an obligation to avoid suicide. From the inclination towards procreation, there is an obligation to monogamy and nurturing the young. Yet, humans also possess reason and this power has two functions.

First, reason has the capacity to regulate our biological impulses. We can choose how we respond to various emotions, sexual temptations and the needs of our children. Our capacity to choose is due to the rational appetite, the will. However, reason also grasps that there are goods of its own that are appropriate to humans *qua* human.

Humans do more than merely regulate their biological appetites and choose among competing desires. Since humans are rational, they possess an intellectual appetite. Aquinas says, "By the intellectual appetite we may desire the immaterial good, which is not apprehended by sense, such as knowledge, virtue, and the like" (Ia.80.2, ad2). Reason's normative capacity, which it has by nature, enables it to know the goods that are appropriate to it as an active power in the life of the human person.

Since God is the immaterial good, and end of all rational agents, it follows that God is the object of the intellectual appetite. Therefore, the desire for the truth about God is an indemonstrable first principle of Aquinas' NLM. A first attempt at rebutting Vacek's argument is by observing that God functions, at least minimally, as the ultimate *telos* of human activity.

The desire to know the truth about God is a basic desire for all rational creatures and so it follows that a first principle of the natural

¹¹ Stephen J. Pope, *The Evolution of Altruism and the Ordering of Love*. (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1994), p. 54.

law is based upon that desire: viz., humans should pursue the truth concerning God. This desire for God is not merely an addendum to an already complete moral philosophy but an integral part of Aquinas' ethics. Even though one simply cannot know the complete truth about God apart from revelation, all people possess this basic drive to know God. Considered as an essence (i.e. a formal nature) a human person has as an end a natural desire to know the truth about God. As such, this desire can no more be separated from an account from human nature than any other good which contributes to human flourishing. Furthermore, this desire obviously refers to the human search for first causes, which takes one back to an understanding of the eternal law—i.e. the source of human nature.

But Aquinas makes an interesting observation that not only is there a natural desire to know the truth about God, there is a natural love for God found in all humans. He says

We can say that there are two kinds of goods that we are able to receive from God: the good of nature and the good of grace. But the good of nature which God has given to us, serves as the foundation for the natural love by which humans, when they are in the integral state of nature, love God above all things including themselves (IIaIIae.26.4).

Aquinas argues that love (*amor*) is a human capacity established by God in creation. Yet, it is important to point out that Aquinas says that "All desire and charity is love but not the converse."¹² In creation itself God implants the desire for God which can only be completely achieved by means of grace and charity. Sin does not destroy this natural love but it cannot achieve its end apart from God's help through grace. Nature is a teleological principle, albeit in need of further assistance, that directs humans to their appropriate ends. However, these ends may, and do, exceed the natural abilities of humans on their own. Karl Rahner has said

Grace is not a second nature superimposed on natural nature; it is the opening out of the natural spiritual essential ground of man towards the immediate possession of God, the teleological orientation of man's spiritual nature towards the life of God.¹³

Nature and nature's agent, reason, act cooperatively in the moral life. Nature needs grace to attain the end that reason sees but cannot achieve, while grace needs nature to build upon and perfect.

To act against the rule of reason then is to act contrary to one's own substantial nature. This is so because God has endowed humanity with reason and demands that we act in accordance with its dictates. God

¹² IIaIIae.26.3 "Omnis enim dilectio vel caritas est amor, sed non e converso."

¹³ Karl Rahner, S. J., "Love as the Key Virtue," *Sacramentum Mundi* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), 6, p. 338.

clearly plays an important causal role in human morality, both with respect to the dictates of natural law and its teleological character—and Vacek even admits this to a certain degree. However, I believe that there are at least two other avenues of criticism that render his attack on NLM ineffectual.

III Aquinas on Eternal Law and Participation

Aquinas' claim that the "natural law is the rational creature's participation in the eternal law" expresses an often-overlooked aspect of his moral epistemology and ontology wherein the *Verbum Dei* serves the dual role as creative architect of human nature and epistemic source of natural law. The natural light of reason, which is itself a participation in the eternal law, enables the agent to know substantial forms in creation, including the substantial form of humanity as well as the moral precepts that contribute to its flourishing. This participation in the eternal law provides both an ontological and epistemological dimension to Aquinas' account of NLM. Eleonore Stump writes,

He himself explains the natural law as a certain participation on the part of a rational creature in God's eternal law, and he explains the divine eternal law as the ordering in God's mind of created things in the world. For a rational creature to participate in the eternal law is for it to have a share of the eternal divine reason and to have a natural inclination to its proper end. But to have a share in the divine reason is to have the light of human reason which enables human beings to discern what is good and what is evil.¹⁴

Stump's comment serves to point in the direction of participation metaphysics in his theory of natural law but she never develops the idea further. Yet, participation language clearly appeals to a specific relationship between creature and Creator as well as the specific person of the Trinity responsible for creation itself. Yet, we can ask how is this relationship discovered by the human intellect?

Since the virtue of wisdom is a habit that the natural law prescribes, it follows that the good person will desire to know the first causes of things. In the pursuit of the first cause of the natural law, the wise person will discover God to be the cause of human nature and human morality. But it is not simply any divine cause Aquinas claims is the architect of the natural law, but the second person of the Trinity.

Aquinas uses the terms "divine wisdom," exemplar," "Word," and "eternal law" with reference to the creative activity of the pre-incarnate Christ. Jean Porter observes, "Aquinas appropriates the eternal law to the Second Person of the Trinity, in virtue of the fact that

¹⁴ Eleonore Stump, *Aquinas*. (New York: Routledge, 2003), 88.

this is the reason, or Word, by which the universe is created and governed.”¹⁵ He says, “The Son is not subject to the divine providence or to the eternal law, but rather is Himself the eternal law” (IaIIae.93.4, ad2). That is, the Word of God is identified with the eternal law. He clarifies this further by appealing to the “word metaphor” as an explanation of the Trinity.

A spoken word is . . . that which expresses what it is meant to signify . . . So too in the life of God; the Word itself, which is conceived by the Father's intellect, is a personal term, because whatever is in the Father's knowledge, whether they refer to the essence or to the persons or to the works of God, are expressed by the Word. Among other things expressed by this Word, the eternal law is thereby expressed (IaIIae.93.1, ad2).

If we look closely at this passage we see Aquinas making the bold claim that the Word *expresses* the ideas conceived by the Father's intellect. The essences of all things in creation are *known* in the Father and *expressed* through the creative activity of the Word.¹⁶ Since the eternal law is identified with the *Verbum Dei*, what does it mean to say that the natural law is the “rational creature's participation” in it?

Although the notion of participation has been the topic of many discussions concerning Aquinas' metaphysics it has often been neglected in discussions of his theory of natural law.¹⁷ According to W. Norris Clark, this idea is basic to Aquinas' metaphysics.

It is a theory for rendering intelligible a “many” in any order in terms of a higher one, in other words, for explaining the common possession in many subjects of a given attribute, whether in the logical or the ontological order, by some reference to a higher source from which all receive or participate in some way the perfection they possess in common.¹⁸

¹⁵ Jean Porter, *Natural and Divine Law: Reclaiming the Tradition for Christian Ethics*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), p. 162; Also Fergus Kerr, *After Aquinas: Versions of Thomism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002). “Time and again, the eternal law is identified with God himself. Everything created by God is subject to the eternal law but it makes no sense to say that anything divine is either subject to the eternal law or otherwise: ‘all that is attributed to the divine essence or nature does not fall under the eternal law, in reality they are the eternal law’ (1–2.93.4). God and the eternal law are identical,” p. 107.

¹⁶ Aquinas' language clearly reflects the *logos* Christology found in the prologue to the Gospel of John, verses 1–19. For Aquinas the Latin *ratio* more closely resembles the Greek *logos* than the Enlightenment understanding of “reason.” Cf. J. Tonneau, “The Teaching of the Thomist Tract on Law,” *The Thomist* 34 (1970): pp.11–83.

¹⁷ See John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); also J. Budziszewski, *Written on the Heart: The Case for Natural Law*. (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1997).

¹⁸ W. Norris Clarke, S. J. “The Meaning of Participation in St. Thomas.” *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 26 (1952), p. 150; also cf. John F. Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas: From Finite Being to Uncreated Being*. (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2000), pp. 94–131.

In questions concerning the relation of creatures to God, participation has an ontological dimension. All created beings owe their existence, goodness, unity and specific characteristics to the creative activity of God. According to Aquinas, "To participate is to receive as it were a part; and therefore, when anything receives in a particular manner that which belongs to another in a universal [or total] manner, it is said to participate it."¹⁹ Obviously, humans receive their nature from God and "participate" in God's creative activity.

Clarke lists three essential elements in any participation structure: "(1) a source which possesses the perfection in question in a total and unrestricted manner; (2) a participant subject which possesses the same perfection in some partial or restricted way; and (3) which has received this perfection in some way from, or in dependence on, the higher source."²⁰

The relation of the natural to the eternal law certainly exhibits these three characteristics. First, the eternal law possesses the perfection of law as it is the "divine reason." Since law is a dictate of reason, and the Word is the *expressivum et operativum* of the Father, it follows that God, by means of the *Verbum Dei*, establishes the natural law in human nature (Ia.34.3).

The second requirement for participation is that there must be a participant subject that in some partial way possesses the perfection. Clearly, each and every human possesses the natural law in as much as all humans know the primary precepts of natural law through the natural light of reason. Although humans, as finite creatures, do not possess the image in its fullness or perfection they do retain the capacity to reason and govern their own activities.

The final element of participation structure is that the participant must have received the perfection from the source in question. In the case of the natural law, the perfection is reason's capacity to know and to love. That participation enables the agent to act freely and to govern her activities in accordance with reason. The intellectual and volitional powers of the human creature are a result of being created in the *imago Dei*, to which we now turn our attention.

IV The Imago Dei, Participation and Natural Law

The *imago Dei* for Aquinas bridges the ontological and epistemological gap that separates the human and the divine. He says that, "A person is called the image of God, not because one is essentially an image, but because the image of God is impressed upon one's mind;

¹⁹ Aquinas, *Commentary on the De Heptomadibus of Boethius*, lect. 2.

²⁰ Clark, "The Meaning of Participation," p. 152.

as a coin is the image of the king, as having the image of the king” (Ia.93.6, ad1).²¹ This image is such that humans imitate God by acting on the basis of knowledge and with freedom. He says, “That the human is made to the image of God . . . implies that the human agent is intelligent and free to choose and govern oneself” (IaIIae. Prologus). There is a sense in which humans imitate God—in their own finite capacity—by being responsible for their own behavior. Freedom and knowledge provide the *sine qua non* for responsible action. Since humans participate in divine reason by being created to God’s image, they are also thereby enabled to understand why God gives the commands God gives and to see the essential rationality of the natural law.

The divine image in humanity is seen most clearly in the human capacity to reason. This is what distinguishes human life from all other forms of organic life. Although these other forms also participate in the eternal law, the human creature does so in a more excellent way. By means of reason, we know, we deliberate, we choose and we engage in purposive activities. All of this is accomplished by the natural light of reason bestowed in creation.

All things are said to be seen in God, and all things are judged in Him, in as much as it is by *participation* in His light that we know and judge all things. For the very light of natural reason is a *participation* in the divine light. So also we are said to see and judge of sensible things in the sun, that is by the sun’s light . . . Just as in order to see a sensible thing it is not necessary to see the substance of the sun, so in a similar way to see something intelligible, it is not necessary to see the essence of God (Italics added for emphasis. IaIIae.12.11,ad3).

The natural light of reason is the capacity to know the formal nature of any created being. This capacity extends to various elementary truths about God as well as the natural law. This basic human capacity is fundamental to knowledge of the natural law as well. Although explicit knowledge of God is not required to understand the precepts of natural law, God makes that knowledge possible by creating humans *ad imagine Dei*. Aquinas reiterates this when he says that, “Every knowing of truth is an irradiation and *participation* in the eternal law” (IaIIae.93.2).

Since the divine Word (i.e. the pre-incarnate Christ) created all things, it follows that the creation of humans and the moral laws that govern them are also dependent upon Christ. It is for this reason that

²¹ It is important to note that Aquinas speaks of the human person being made “to the image of God” (*ad imagine Dei*) since it is only in Christ that we see the perfect image of God. Aquinas says “Primogenitus omnis creaturae est imago Dei perfecta, perfecte implens illud cuius est; et ideo dicitur ‘imago’ et nunquam ‘ad imagine’” (Ia.93.1,ad2). The idea conveyed here means that the image in human persons is a *movement toward* God, as I shall note later in the essay.

Aquinas says that natural law is the rational creature's participation in the eternal law.

There is yet another element of the image of God that deserves some attention. According to Aquinas "As the uncreated Trinity is distinguished according to the procession of the Word from the One speaking, and of Love from them both...so we may say that in rational creatures, in which is found the procession of the word in the intellect, and the procession of love from the will, there is an image of the uncreated Trinity by a certain representation of the species" (Ia.93.7). The human creature is made in the image of God due to the creative activities of the intellect and the will. A human person's mind is capable of forming a word and speaking it. But more than this, the human capacity to love. Michael Dauphinais says that

The dual procession of word and love, described here in such dynamic terms, requires the engagement of the human intellect and will. Aquinas claims that the image of the Trinity may be said secondarily to exist in the human soul in the mere capacity for understanding and willing, but the image of the Trinity is principally in the soul when the person is actively knowing and loving someone or something.²²

In more general terms we could say that the image of God in humanity refers to the dynamic relationship of the Trinity. God is the exemplar of Speaker, Spoken Word and Loving response. That is, in God the perichoretic interplay of intelligence, communication and mutual love provides a model by which we can understand that image in the human creature. In God, the Word is the *expressivum et operativum* of the Father while the Spirit is the manifestation of the love of God (Ia.37.1). The relationship of the Trinity is not merely one of *knowing* one another but of *loving* one another. Human relationships, at their best, imitate this Trinitarianism by a knowledge that issues forth in love. Aquinas says that our own intellectual and volitional operations imitate that of the Trinity, "From the knowledge which we have in thinking we form an inner word, and from this we burst forth in love" (Ia.93.7).

It may seem odd that Aquinas sees a progression from a spoken word to the "bursting forth" of love. Yet, as a word is the first act in cognition, "love is the first movement of the will and of every appetitive faculty" (Ia.20.1). All human activity, therefore, involves the intellectual apprehension of the good and the volitional desire of the good. The more perfectly we act in accordance with that which is true and good the closer we come to being conformed to the image of God.

²² Michael Dauphinais, "Loving the Lord Your God: The *Imago Dei* in Saint Thomas Aquinas," *The Thomist* 63 (1999), pp. 256–7.

Since the pre-incarnate Christ (i.e. the Word) is the eternal law, it follows that every act of cognition of the eternal law and the natural law is a participation in the creative power of God.²³ Seen in this light, it is impossible to consider Aquinas' account of NLM as an instance of "methodological atheism." What Aquinas provides is an intelligible rendering of the basic moral precepts all people know to be true that have their *raison d'être* in the divine mind. But we still have to consider the charge that it is *hubris* for humans to make judgments on what God can and cannot do. In effect, on whether what God does is good or not.

As Alasdair MacIntyre has observed, only a just God is owed obedience. Therefore, we must distinguish between the true God (i.e. the omnibenevolent God who is worthy of worship) and those that are pretenders (e.g., the ancient Roman's Jupiter or William Blake's No-bodaddy). In order to do this, we must possess at least a preliminary knowledge of the good before we can judge which God ought to be obeyed.²⁴ But how is this possible? Aquinas believes that all humans, by virtue of the natural light of reason, apprehend the good. This apprehension is made possible by the fact that humans are made *ad imagine Dei*. Yet, this apprehension of the good is not an exhaustive knowledge of the good, but a basic conception that has its basis in God.

In question 2 of the *prima pars*, Aquinas presents the famous "Five Ways." The "Fourth Way," the proof for God's existence from the degree of perfections, appeals to precisely this idea of the continuity between human and divine conceptions of goodness. Aquinas says,

Among beings there are some more or less good, true, noble, and the like. But "more" and "less" are predicated of different things according as they resemble in their different ways something which is the maximum Now the maximum in any genus is the cause of all in that genus Therefore there must also be something which is to all beings the cause of their being, goodness and every other perfection; and this we call God (Ia.2.3).

Here we see the natural light of reason at work, moving from the lower degrees of perfection found in created beings to the uncreated "maximal" perfection of goodness found in God. If there wasn't this continuity then no knowledge of God, or of the good, would be

²³ Although this may sound like an Augustinian theory of "divine illumination" it is not. Aquinas' moral epistemology includes the natural ability to see secondary causes at work in creation by means of an essentially empirical approach to the world. Even though there are obviously Platonic ontological elements in his consideration of the eternal law, the means by which one comes to know the formal nature of any being is by means of Aristotelian epistemology.

²⁴ MacIntyre, "Which God Ought We to Obey and Why?" *Faith and Philosophy* 3, (October) 1986, p. 364.

possible. Humans seem to be created with a capacity to apprehend the good that enables them to perceive the different degrees of perfection in various creatures and to posit a divine source of all that is good. Lawrence Dewan argues,

We are supposed to be able to recognize goodness, and even a hierarchy of goodness, prior to concluding the existence of God. However, it is precisely from such a vision of things that the existence of God becomes manifest, where the term "a God" means a "maximal [in the order of]being [as such,] which is the" cause of being and goodness and every perfection for all beings. Thus, the end-product of our reasoning is a vision of reality such that to deny the existence of God is to rob all else of its goodness.²⁵

Since humans are created in the *imago Dei* there is a basic continuity between what we can know by means of the creative work of the *Verbum Dei* and the redemptive work of the Incarnate Word.

Our conception of goodness determines the manner in which God can meaningfully said to be "good." An alternative to Vacek's interpretation of NLM is one that sees our conception of goodness, not as a product of our own *hubris*, but one of reflection on the nature that God has created and that is available to all who consult it. There is thus continuity between our ideas of goodness, as creatures made in the image of God, and the commands that God gives.

Just as Aquinas sees continuity between the natural and divine laws, there is also a developmental approach to how humans participate in the image of God. He contends that

Since the human is said to be the image of God by reason of the intellectual nature, a person is most perfectly like God according to that intellectual nature can most imitate God. Now the intellectual nature imitates God chiefly in this, that God understands and loves Himself . . . First, inasmuch as a person possesses a natural aptitude for understanding and loving God; and this aptitude consists in the very nature of the mind, which is common to all humans. Secondly, inasmuch as a person actually or habitually knows and loves God, though imperfectly, and this image consists in the conformity of grace. Thirdly, inasmuch as a person knows God actually and loves Him perfectly; and this image consists in the likeness of glory (Ia.93.5).

The image of God manifests itself in the human creature's capacity to understand and love, and this power is a participation in God. However, there is a further participation in the divine beyond the natural capacity to reason and love that grace bestows on the individual.

²⁵ Lawrence Dewan, O.P., "Wisdom as Foundational Ethical Theory in Thomas Aquinas." *The Bases of Ethics*, ed. William Sweet. (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2000), p. 44; Also Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, p. 474.

For Aquinas, not only is the natural law a participation in God, charity itself is the highest participation in the divine a human creature can have in this life, which can only come through grace. Accordingly, "The gift of grace surpasses every capacity of created nature, since it is nothing other than a certain *participation* in the divine nature" (IaIIae.112.1, emphasis added). Charity is the completion of the natural law's mandate to pursue the good. The highest pursuit of the good in this terrestrial life is charity. Aquinas says that, "The charity by which we formally love our neighbor is a participation in divine charity"(IIaIIae.23.2, ad1). This participation takes us beyond merely pursuing the good and avoiding evil. The natural law *directs* us to God, but the virtue of charity *unites* us to God (IIaIIae.24.4). Furthermore, this charity is given by God in addition to the natural powers we have by virtue of creation. Aquinas says, "We are not capable of possessing charity naturally or by acquisition but through the infusion of the Holy Spirit who is the love of the Father and the Son; our participation in this love is creaturely charity" (IIaIIae.24.2). What we see here is that charity is a more complete participation in God than the natural law affords us.

The image of God, like the natural law, operates in all humans by virtue of creation. Simply being created in the image of God enables humans to understand and love God, in an imperfect manner. The natural law seems to be the practical apprehension of the moral norms that guide humans initially to the love and knowledge of God. And just as the image of God does not cease to operate as one experiences the infused virtues of grace, so too the natural law does not cease to operate as an epistemic guide to human morality. Aquinas' oft-cited perspective that "Grace does not destroy nature but perfects it" applies to both the image of God and the natural law.

The difficulty Aquinas sees in humans is not one of moral knowledge but of the disorder of the will. Moral knowledge comes to humans by means of both natural and special revelation. As he says, "A person cannot even know truth without divine help... And yet, human nature is more corrupted by sin in regard to the desire for the good, than in regard to the knowledge of the truth"(IaIIae.109.3, ad3).

V Conclusion

As we have seen, God functions not only as the ultimate *telos* for humans in the precepts of natural law, but also as ontological ground of the natural law by means of the creative activity of the *Verbum Dei*. The *imago Dei* imprinted on the human soul at creation enables all people to know the basic precepts of the natural law. Seen in this

light, all human cognition of the precepts of the moral law is a direct result of God's creative activity.

Vacek's contention that NLM operates under the rubric of methodological atheism must be rejected because it does not consider the creative activity of the *Verbum Dei* in human moral cognition. Furthermore, human nature as made in the *ad imagine Dei* does not act blasphemously by judging what is good and what is evil. Rather, God so designed humans with the ability to move from more primitive apprehensions of the good to the more sophisticated, as we see in the Fourth Way. Is it possible for non-theists to subscribe to NLM? Absolutely, but the comprehension of the natural law will always be deficient if it fails to understand the divine origins of the precepts that we find binding on all human moral agents.

The fact that we can study the creation directly without immediate references to the Creator does not vitiate the validity of our moral epistemology. God has so designed human creatures to know and to act in specific ways that we can discern an ontological basis—that is, the *imago Dei*—for our epistemological capacities—our grasping of the precepts of NLM. We may know the precepts of NLM without explicitly appealing to God, and yet, we cannot know these moral truths without the rational capacities God has given us by creating humanity *ad imaginem Dei*.

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