

well-argued as it is—will certainly provoke non-identical repetition in its own right.

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**THE NATURAL LAW READER** edited by Jacqueline A. Laing and Russell Wilcox, *Wiley-Blackwell*, Oxford, 2014 pp. x + 458, £65.00, hbk

Natural law, the idea of an unwritten, immutable, moral law based on nature, has had a profound influence on the Western world over the course of more than two thousand years of history. Although the Romans first coined the term *ius naturale*, it is the Greeks who are credited with first contending that moral knowledge is possible through connaturality. It was not until the medieval period, however, that a singular contribution to this school of thought was made in the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas. His achievement consisted not only in offering new insights, but also of incorporating preceding reflections from Aristotle, St Augustine and other interlocutors.

In *The Natural Law Reader*, Jacqueline Laing and Russell Wilcox have assembled a body of texts which are unapologetically Thomist, or at least contributed to St. Thomas's thinking as precursors. Striking out with such a confident editorial policy, giving precedence to what they call a 'central natural law tradition' in which the centre of gravity is the thought of St. Thomas, facilitates the observation of a continuity of themes such as the nature of justice, without the distraction of tangential excursions, which in any case often lead to altogether different philosophies outside the tradition. For example, the editors largely exclude contractarian theorists such as Locke and Hobbes. The failure to exercise such discretion would have been likely to result in a unwieldy assemblage. Thus the decision to maintain a fairly strict Thomistic focus was a masterstroke and one that serves to make this volume hold together on a conceptual level.

In the first section of the collection, the book traces the historical development of the natural law tradition through texts from Heraclitus to Hugo Grotius, from Plato to Pinckaers – an unsung hero of the revival of interest in the natural law, if ever there was. Each period is briefly introduced by a helpful commentary which detail the particular contribution of the text to the development of the tradition and situates it in its context. Throughout the work, the editors' commentary is characterised by a judicious restraint, allowing the texts to speak for themselves.

There follows a survey of contemporary Natural Law in the second section of the book. It contains a pleasing array of essays from authors including Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, and Alasdair MacIntyre. Comparatively recent disagreements are explored in these chapters, which serve to inject the tradition, and this work, a certain freshness. Although a chapter is given to the 'New' and 'Old' Natural Law Debate, their treatment of this controversy is, to my mind, disappointingly brief. Critics of the 'new' Grisez-Finnis school such as Russell Hittinger and Henry Veatch are referred to in the introduction to the chapter but their important writings are not featured in the volume except insofar as they are characterised by Robert George who argues their objections labour under misapprehension. The resulting situation is rather akin to hearing the closing speech for the defence without having heard the prosecution's case. Inevitable pressures of space no doubt also prevented the inclusion of such classics as 'The Traditional Concept of Natural Law' by the late Columba Ryan OP as well as notable recent scholarship from Jean Porter, which is a pity. On the other hand, Martin Luther King Jr's famous defence of civil disobedience contained in his

'Letter from the Birmingham City Jail' is an inspired choice. The same could be said of excerpts of M. K. Gandhi, and Gustav Radbruch's pithy 'Five Minutes of Legal Philosophy', which serve to demonstrate the practical relevance of a way of thinking which can, at times, appear all too abstract to the general reader.

The final part of the book is given over to a detailed exploration of the application of the natural law in the fields of the family, medical ethics and human rights. Any doubt about the relevance of the principles of natural law in prevailing political debates is dispelled in this series of hard-hitting essays. Laing's own essay in this section deserves special mention as a potent critique of modern liberal autonomy from a natural law perspective in the context of English law, and it is refreshing to read an essay which refers to an English legal context as opposed to US legal references, which are more prevalent. Of further interest is Finn Bowring's contribution about 'The Cyborg Solution' in which he speculates upon the dangers of society's impoverished understanding of the human condition in the face of new biotechnologies. Thinking along natural law lines is more than merely relevant in the public square; it is urgently needed.

This volume is a fine addition to an increasing number of books on the subject. Its conception reflects the renewal of interest in the natural law tradition over the past half-century or so. In popularising and making readily accessible a vast canon of essays for the benefit of the seasoned academic as much as the newcomer in the fields of jurisprudence, ethics, and political philosophy, the editors have produced an anthology which, I am confident, will serve as an invaluable contribution to that renewal.

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