

MORAL DILEMMAS

V: What is 'Natural'?

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FEW confusions are more common, or more perplexing, today than the confusion between two quite different uses of the word 'natural'; yet both uses are valid enough if rightly understood; and the distinction between them is a very simple one.

On the one hand, we are always saying, or hearing it said, that this or that action, though not commendable, is 'natural enough' or 'only natural'. It is only natural for people to lose their tempers or their heads sometimes, only natural if occasionally they oversleep or overeat, only natural if sometimes they let this or that passion get the better of them. What does the phrase mean? It means, in effect, 'only to be expected'. And why is it to be expected? Because that, to use another common phrase, is 'only human nature' *as we know it*. But what is the human nature that we know in everyday experience? It is, in the language of Catholic theology, *fallen* human nature.

Fallen human nature means human nature, not as it was created by God, not as it was intended to be by God, but as it exists now, warped and twisted by evil. It is not wholly evil, far from it; but the evil tendencies are there, as we all know from our own experience; in our better moments we realize that we ought to be conquering them, integrating the energies which find an outlet in evil actions into the organic unity of the good life; but again and again we fail, or we forget altogether even to try, and then nature-as-we-know-it has its way.

On the other hand, we hear a great deal about the requirements of what is called the natural law; and these requirements are always running counter to what in fact we regard as natural in the first sense. Why? Because the nature we are here concerned with is not the fallen nature of man, but the nature of man *in itself*.

Before attempting to elaborate this, let us clear away another source of confusion. The word 'law', too, is ambiguous. In Britain the law bids you to drive to the left: it could perfectly

well be changed tomorrow. In Britain the law enacts that bars must be closed except at certain restricted hours: it could perfectly well be changed tomorrow—and if we were more enlightened and civilized than we are it would be. These are cases of what is called positive law: an authority *lays down* the law, creates it. No human authority, however, can lay down or create the laws of physics: all that man can do is to try to discover them. For these laws are not decisions made by man: they are statements of the way things in fact work, the way things *are*. Now the natural law is of this latter kind. It does not tell us about things which are right because they are commanded or wrong because they are forbidden: it tells us about things which are commanded or forbidden because, in themselves, they are right or wrong. And why are they right or wrong in themselves? Because that is the way things are: that is the pattern, not indeed of human nature as we know it, but of human nature in itself.

We return then to this idea of nature in itself. Let us start with an artefact, for here there is no ambiguity of terms. What is the nature of a razor? You have your answer if you can concoct a *definition*: let us say, roughly, a razor is a steel instrument with a finely sharpened edge, capable of shaving the hair from the skin. At once it becomes obvious that, if that is its nature, it would be unnatural to use a razor in order to try to hack through an iron bar. In the same way it would be unnatural to keep (or to try to keep) a cat in a pond, or alternatively, a fish in a cage. And what of man? Here we have a ready-made definition which has come down to us through the ages: man is a rational animal. Now that is not altogether a satisfactory definition of man-as-we-know-him, because man-as-we-know-him is often an extremely irrational animal. But it does give us the essentials about the nature of man in itself: man is a psychophysical being, an animal capable of rational thought. And as a razor fulfils its definition perfectly when it is a good razor and gives you a perfect shave; so man fulfils his definition, his nature, perfectly when he is a good-minded animal—a sound and healthy body expressing and obeying a wise and balanced mind.

Now it may be noticed in passing that if you have a razor which in fact has been used to hack an iron bar you have something not unlike human nature-as-we-know-it. And what the natural law tells us, states for us, is simply this: that if we use our

human nature in this way or that way we shall in fact end up like the blunt and jagged razor; whereas if we use it in these other ways we shall end up by resembling in some degree the perfect razor inasmuch as we shall have at our disposal an instrument capable of achieving the perfect fulfilment of our purpose, our destiny as rational animals.¹ (This is obvious if you think, for instance, of the coarsening and finally the disintegration which sooner or later awaits the habitual glutton or drunkard or sensualist of one sort or another. On the other hand there are the equally obvious, and equally disastrous, effects of trying to treat human nature, as the 'angelists' do, as though it were not animal at all.)

Now most people seem to be ready to agree that such things as cruelty (an 'unnatural mother'), the degrading of human beings by torture, drugs, a sort of diabolical travesty of psychiatry, and so on are unnatural: the confusion between the two uses of the term does not worry them there, though in fact these things are, alas, to be expected of fallen nature. Where the confusion seems to cause the greatest perplexity is in the realm of sexual ethics, especially in an age which bases its arguments or its prejudices so largely on statistical evidence. (What is needed is a good deal less statistics and a good deal more hard logical thinking.) 'Everybody does it', people say, fresh from their reading of this or that Report, 'so it *must* be natural.'

This, of course, is to make confusion worse confounded. All that the statistician as such can do is to tell you what is or is not *normal*: the moment he begins to tell you what is or is not *natural* he goes beyond his chosen terms of reference. The normal is a purely statistical concept: it is simply what the great majority of people do or are. It is normal to have five fingers on the hand, to have eyes of the same colour, and so on. But it is dangerous, to say the least, to try to argue from the normal to the natural. In most times and places through the world's history it has been normal for men to be heterosexual; but there have in fact been times and places in which it was normal for them to be homosexual. It is best, then, to leave statistics, to leave the normal, out of account in this context, and to concentrate on what is or is not natural.

In what sense is it 'natural' for men and women to indulge in extra-marital sexual adventures? In the sense already defined, it

1 This cannot in fact, of course, be achieved without Redemption and the Grace of God.

is only to be expected of our fallen nature. But what is interesting is this: in exactly the same way dishonesty, cowardice, lying, cruelty are equally to be expected of our fallen nature, yet no one argues that because these things are thus 'natural' they are therefore permissible or good. What is the reason? Presumably because we have got so thoroughly into the quite unchristian habit of mind which identifies immorality with sexual sin, that we feel a need to justify or excuse our sexual vagaries but not our other immoralities. (Dishonesty? the question is, can you get away with it. Cowardice? there are the conventions of course; one must not run away from the battlefield, but if I shirk a private duty because I'm a moral coward it's nobody's affair but mine.) In what sense, then, is promiscuity unnatural? Because human love, of its nature, is such that it can never reach its perfection except as the result of a long, gradual process of discovery and of fusion: a process in which sex has its essential part to play, but sex as an element in the total dedication, fidelity, loyalty, steadfastness, of the two personalities to each other.

To act in accordance with human nature means to respect human nature; but that in its turn means to respect all the various elements which go to make up human nature in its psycho-physical unity. It is this which throws light on what is perhaps the most common example, in this sort of context, of the confusion we have been considering: the question of the use of contraceptives by married people. No one with any sense or sensibility will deny that for hosts of people today, unable for one cogent reason or another to have more children, the following of the law in this respect implies a burden, a hardship, of appalling severity. Why then is it the law? It is not the Church's law, in the sense of being a law of the Church's devising: the Church states, and abides by, the natural law. Why then is it the natural law?

Here we return to the razor. When you say respect for human nature you say respect for all the elements which make up human nature. Therefore you say respect for the functions and organs of human sex. But human sex, because it is human, exists so to speak on more than one level: it is biological, as in all animals; it is personal, an instrument in the making of love, as it is not in all animals. Therefore you must respect both levels. You cannot, without being unnatural, use it as a purely animal function, a purely bodily pleasure in which the heart is in no way involved.

On the other hand, you cannot, without being unnatural, treat it purely as love-making without respect for its biological level: if you do, you are going 'against the nature' of the thing, the function, just as in maltreating the razor you are going against the nature of the razor.

There is, in this context, the old, stale gibe about the safe-period, that the Church forbids contrivances but permits contrivance. It may be a clever debating-point; but it shows a complete failure to grasp the principle of the thing. You do not maltreat the razor by not using it at all, but only by using it in a way which destroys its purpose. You do not maltreat the biological function of sex by not using it (i.e. by intercourse at a time when the biological function is probably infertile) but by using it in a way which destroys the purpose of that function. And that this latter is indeed unnatural in the strict sense is made clearer by such collateral arguments as the fact that so many people find it in practice to be aesthetically repugnant, and repugnant also in a deeply personal sense—an interference with the freedom and spontaneity and generosity of love.

You find another example of the same confusion in the question of homosexuality. People talk about 'unnatural vices': but the invert will argue—and again quite rightly if the terms are rightly understood—that what would be 'unnatural' for him would be heterosexual intercourse. (It is to be hoped that at long last a little more light is being thrown on this matter, and that the foolish and wicked advice so often given by priests and doctors alike, to 'find a good Catholic girl and marry her', is less often heard.) Homosexual intercourse of one sort or another is indeed, for the invert, according to *his-nature-as-he-knows-it*: why then should it be wrong? Because, once again, it is not according to the nature of sex as such: it destroys the biological purpose.

But, people will argue finally, there is plenty of evidence of homosexual practices among animals; and you must surely admit that the animal world is natural in your sense: animals at any rate do not sin against the natural law. No, animals do not sin; but, alas, they are not left unscathed by sin. Nature 'red in tooth and claw' is warped and twisted too; so St Paul speaks of the whole of creation groaning and in travail; you cannot expect a world in which the Mystery of Iniquity exercises such power to remain itself immune from the influence of that power.

It is a great pity that Catholics talk so much about 'moral laws' when in fact they mean these statements of the facts of human nature as such; for it too often means in practice that they think of these laws as arbitrary dispositions, which in consequence, sometimes at least, in hard cases, ought to be modified or dispensed with. There are cases where the fact that two and two make four and not five is extremely hard; but you cannot for all that change the nature of things. The same is true with these moral principles—the great fundamental principles from which all moral theorizing and all practical judgments have in the last resort to proceed. The Church cannot unsay the Ten Commandments; what is so desperately needed today is an understanding and sympathy on the part of those who represent the Church towards the often intolerable burdens which unnatural circumstances, economic and otherwise, place on the shoulders of those who are trying their best to keep the Commandments and who therefore, if they fail, need encouragement rather than censure, and who, if they succeed, must often be regarded as having achieved heroic sanctity.