



Love & Responsibility

Putting the Norms of Catholic Sexual Morality on a Firm Basis

An introduction to Karol Wojtyła's *Love and Responsibility*, whose effort is "to put the norms of Catholic sexual morality on a firm basis, a basis as definitive as possible, relying on the most elementary and incontrovertible moral truths and the most fundamental values or goods" p. 16

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Lesson I: Natural Law and the Person

Goal: To understand the Catholic teaching on love, sexuality and marriage as expounded in Karol Wojtyła's *Love and Responsibility*. *Love and Responsibility* is primarily a work of moral philosophy with some moral theology added for confirmation.

Background: The Pope's philosophical orientation is "Lublin Thomism", the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas with a particular emphasis on the person. In addition to this, Wojtyła adds his understanding of *phenomenology* to provide a subjective confirmation of traditional moral objectivity. Phenomenology is a philosophical analysis of the stuff that goes on inside your head (subjective phenomena). Traditional Catholic morality has focused on the stuff outside your head, objectivity, e.g., the natural world and its order. Wojtyła marries the two. In other words, since God is the creator of both, the subjective phenomena should harmonize with, resonate, and verify the objective reality. The experiences inside your head correspond with and reveal what is true about things outside of your head.

This subjective analysis built on objective truth is the focus of this book. Wojtyła assumes the traditional understanding of "natural law" and "person" and builds on it. You will not find a systematic treatment of them in *Love and Responsibility*. This first lesson is a brief treatment of these topics to inform you on what Wojtyła is taking for granted.

I. Achieving Natural Goals: The Natural Law Foundation

Natural Law: A participation in the Eternal Law by which human reason recognizes the goodness of the fulfilled goals of human nature and acts accordingly.

- A. **What does it mean to “do good” or to “be good”?** What is it that we mean by “good”? The “function argument” of Aristotle stated the simple observation that we call something good when it is conducive to fulfilling a particular function i.e. when it fulfills the particular role for which it is designed and hence functions well. A “good baseball player” functions well according to the rules of the game, a “good car” serves the function for which it was created in transporting one from point A to point B in a safe and reliable manner, Lennox Lewis has a “good jab” because it does what a jab is supposed to do – smash his opponents face in. *So, in determining if something is good or bad, we first must know what a thing is for (its purpose or goal) and then see how well it achieves that standard. Something is good insofar as it fulfills, perfects, and completes a given standard.* It is only when we know the goal of a thing that we have a criterion for its appraisal.
- B. **Natures have goals:** Different kinds of natural things have their “goals” too. In other words, different things have different natures that determine *what kind* of thing they are and the actions they do. They all have ends or goals towards which they develop. Insofar as these natural goals are realized, we call these things “good”. For example, a “good” tomato plant is one that flourishes, has green leaves, produces ripe tasty fruit, etc., and just does what a tomato plant is supposed to do. Ergo, we call a tomato plant “good” when it fulfills its “tomato plant nature”. The more “tomato planty” a tomato plant is, the better it is, the healthier it is, and we know from experience that there are actions we can do to either aid or hinder this development. Water will help the plant flourish while gasoline will kill it. When something does not fulfill its natural goal, we say it is *abnormal* or suffers from a *defect*. In other words, it is not doing a good job of being what it is.
- C. The same is true for humans. All human beings have a *human nature*. For example, human nature grounds certain paths of development; a human does not grow wings and fly, does not grow to be 25-feet tall, etc. There are certain goals to which all humans aim simply in virtue of being human. Based on these natural goals, we know what is good for a human being and what is bad.¹ When these natural goals are fulfilled, we have a good, thriving, and healthy human being.

¹ *Important:* It is this sense of the term “nature” to which we mean when we say something is “natural” in the context of Catholic morality. Natural inclinations stem from what we are as human beings and not from some changing majority poll or individual concupiscence. In other words, what we mean by natural inclination is not whatever someone may happen to consciously desire. The mere fact that one may want or tend toward something means nothing by itself. We must make a distinction between conscious desires and natural inclinations. Natural inclinations are the necessities to which we are inclined based upon our humanity, not merely on a subjective level. One is naturally inclined to a healthy diet, even if they actually only want to eat junk food. One is naturally oriented to a member of the opposite sex, even if they desire one of their own, etc. *One must look at the objective inclinations of human nature and not the subjective inclinations of individuals.*

D. When we understand that we ought to do the good, and then we look at human nature and see just what that “good” is, we can derive moral standards. To do evil is to somehow disrespect or stifle a natural good.

E. **Objection:** “If I have to follow every “natural” inclination, then it would be evil to say bathe, cut my hair, or brush my teeth!”

Reply: Aquinas considered a similar objection by asking if it was against the natural law for one to walk on their hands or to do with one’s feet what is normally done with the hands. However, examples such as these do not oppose what is natural because they do not violate a human good. Aquinas responds that such actions are not “unnatural” because “man’s good is not much opposed by such inordinate use.” So things like brushing your teeth and bathing do not adversely affect human goods, but on the contrary actually aid the human good of societal living.

F. **Application:** Natural law is a wonderful tool for guiding us in moral questions. Let’s apply what we have learned. When we help fulfill a natural goal we do good (i.e. giving food to the poor) and when we stifle a natural good we do evil. What, precisely, is wrong with these actions?

1. Slavery?
2. Theft?
3. Murder?

G. Based on what we have learned about natural law, we can say slavery is wrong because humans by nature are free creatures, and this natural inclination towards freedom should not be stifled. Likewise, humans by nature are needy people, they need material goods to fulfill their living requirements and hence acquire a right to property. Theft stifles this natural inclination. Murder of course, stifles a human’s built in inclination to continue existence. Let’s look at another example that is more pertinent to our topic on sexual ethics:

1. Voyeurism?
2. Rape (when the victim is not conscious of the act being perpetrated against them)?

H. These are good examples because they rid us of the notion that one has to mentally experience harm or suffering in order for something to be wrong. The victim in this case does not have any mental or physical injuries and does not even know about the crime. But yet we still, correctly, perceive these actions as wrong. But why? There must be something “special” about sexuality and persons. That “specialness” is what the rest of this course is about.

II. Persons & Personalism

- A. Persons are *individual substances of a rational nature*. This is what grounds the dignity of persons. Persons alone have the power of rationality and deliberation. We tend to regard non-persons as mere things, in other words they are instruments and objects of use because they are not capable of being anything else. Persons are different.
- B. **Persons are natural born end-choosers:** The person has free will. This volitional freedom is also called *self-determination* in that; *it is the self that determines which motive will prevail* and hence a rational being is his own master (*sui juris*). The thinking and choosing self is unable to be transferred (*alteri incommunicabilis*) and is *incommunicable* because the “I” is securely tucked away. No one can supplant the act of the will for another person because no one else has that interior, exclusive, first person perspective on conceiving and deliberating. The point here is not just that the person is unique (that can be said of any thing or animal) but that the incommunicable and the inalienable is intrinsic to the person’s inner self, to the power of free will and self-determination. *No one else can want for me, no one else can substitute their act of will for mine*. This reality means persons are by nature end-choosers and ends unto themselves, not mere instruments. To treat persons as mere instruments would be to do violence to their very nature.
- C. Every person is a *subject*, a center of personal actions. Although a subject, the person can still be an object, an entity, a something which is a “somebody”.² The person is in touch with objective visible reality, and is communicating with the visible world and the invisible world (including God). This is yet another indication of the uniqueness of persons. The person contacts the physical with the inner self and not primarily with the senses
- D. These characteristics set persons apart from every other entity in the visible world. In the words of Wojtyla, *there is a great gulf that separates persons from things*. In other words, there is a particular richness and perfection to persons. Only persons exhibit conceptual thinking. Only persons have an inner self, a cognition and a striving, and a spiritual life surrounding truth and goodness.

All of the above leaves us with an important moral question: If we are to treat things according to their nature, how are we to treat persons? In any action capable of a moral evaluation, we must ask who is it that acts and what is it that is being acted upon. In sexuality both subject and object are persons! *To what principles must a human being’s actions conform when the object of their action is another person?*

² Wojtyla uses the term “object” in two senses. One in the broad sense where “object” just means “a really existing thing”. In this sense persons are objects. In another narrower sense, he uses the term “object” to denote an instrument for use, a mere means to an end, with no respect for personhood. In this sense, a person is not an object. See note 3 on page 289 in L&R.