

## Denying What We Can't Not Know

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To know the natural moral law is one of the easiest things in the world; to get the theory of it right is one of the hardest. We can get an idea just how hard this is by considering a few remarks of Jacques Maritain, who in my opinion did get it largely right. In the famous chapter on natural rights in *Man and the State*, Maritain observes that people often make the mistake of thinking the natural law is like a *written* law which we can know and survey all at once. But that is not at all how it really is, he explained. In reality, most of it has to be learned. The only thing we all know from the beginning is that good is to be grasped and evil avoided. All the rest of our knowledge comes to us gradually, from inclination and reasoning about the matters presented to us for decision.

For example, a newborn already “knows,” not by reflection but by inclination, that there is a big difference between things to be grasped, like Mama’s breast, and things to be avoided, like loud noises—but the newborn certainly does not know that murdering a man is among the things to be avoided. He does not even know that killing a man is different than killing an animal. Aquinas, surprisingly, agrees. He would ask: How could the baby know, when he has no conception of the meanings of “man,” “animal,” “murder,” or “killing”? His mind has not yet been stocked with concepts; the raw materials necessary to frame the proposition “Murdering a man is wrong” or “Killing a man is different than killing an animal” are just not available to him. Not in the same way, but in a similar way, thinks Maritain, the human race must pass from lesser knowledge of the natural moral law to greater knowledge of the natural moral law. It will never occur to a person that genocide is wrong until he has heard of genocide; it will never occur to him that it is wrong to mix the human and chimpanzee genomes until he has learned what a genome is.

I began by saying that to know the natural moral law is one of the easiest things in the world, but that to get the theory of it right is one of the hardest. Now the reason Maritain’s remarks make such a good illustration of my point is that ironically, his correction of *one* theoretical misunderstanding has itself been widely misunderstood, or perhaps embodies a misunderstanding. He wants to emphasize

that the natural moral law is not like a written law—very well, but we take that idea too far. When ordinary people in our culture tell us that questions of right and wrong are terribly difficult, that they cannot find any blacks and whites, that all the world is shades of gray, we are all too ready to take them at their word—we are all too ready to assume that they are just as ignorant as they say they are. If Tom asks the doctor to administer a killing drug to Grandma we assume that Tom really doesn't know that euthanasia is wrong; if Martha takes the life of her unborn daughter we assume that she really doesn't know that abortion is wrong. By contrast with Aquinas, who declared that the general principles of the natural law are the same for all not only as to rectitude but as to knowledge—that is, that they are not only right for all, but also *known* to all—we suppose that although the general principles of the natural law are right for all, they are known to fewer and fewer. The former doctrine, “Right for all and known to all,” is the teaching of natural law: both ontologically and epistemologically assertive. The latter doctrine, “Right for all but *not* known to all,” is mere moral realism: ontologically assertive, but epistemologically timid.

Maritain's intention was to be not a mere moral realist, but a true natural law theorist like Aquinas. Take the natural law against murder. On the one hand both thinkers taught that if you haven't learned the meaning of “murdering a man,” you won't know that murdering a man is wrong; but on the other hand both thinkers taught that if you *have* learned the meaning of “murdering a man,” you *can't not* know that murdering a man is wrong. The knowledge of the concepts (for Aquinas) or the asking of the right question (for Maritain) is connatural with the knowledge of the precept. It is in *this* sense that the general principles of the natural moral law are not only right for all, but also known to all. They are known to all who know the concepts which are needed to frame them as propositions—or, in Maritain, who know the questions to which they can be given as answers—and that means, mind you, that they are known to every normal adult.

Reproach me not, my fellow scholars, with those ancient Germans who, according to Julius Caesar, did not know that robbing was wrong. They have become the stock example of mere moral realism. Yes, I know Aquinas mentions them. But in another place he declares that the wrong of taking what belongs to another is one of those general principles that everyone knows. If this is true, it follows that the ancient Germans must have known it too. Is Aquinas contradicting himself? No, he is merely speaking imprecisely. The problem with the Germans was not that they did not know that robbing was wrong. The problem was that they did not recognize that raiding another tribe was robbery. They hadn't connected the dots.

But is it plausible that the general principles of the natural moral law are the same for all not only as to rectitude but also as to knowledge? That would mean people do know much more than they seem to know, much more than they even claim to know. Can it be? Can it be that the hoodlum who seems to lack remorse

for blowing away the video rental clerk knows that he did wrong? Can it be that the woman who seems to lack remorse for laying her child in the razor talons of the abortionist knows that she did wrong? Can it be that the abortionist himself, who murders a dozen and then takes his wife to dinner and a show—can it be that even he knows he did wrong?

Yes, it can. The guilt of abortion, for example, is an open secret among practitioners and advocates of the abomination. That is why Naomi Wolf has recently been so roundly criticized by her fellow feminists. Like them, Miss Wolf is pro-abortion. The difference is that she has let the cat out of the bag. For years, she says, feminists have been pretending not to know that the fetus is a baby, but really they do know. For years they have been pretending not to know that abortion is murder, but really they know that too. She forthrightly declares that abortion is real sin that incurs real guilt and requires real atonement, and that she and her comrades have known it all along. The only problem is that Miss Wolf does not carry her reasoning to its conclusion. She wants women to go on aborting, but proposes that they hold candlelight vigils at abortion facilities afterward to show their sorrow.

So they really do know. And if they do, it changes everything. For what I am suggesting is that most of what we call moral ignorance is not ignorance at all, but denial. The problem is not that we don't know right from wrong, but that we rationalize and pretend that we don't.

Neglect of the phenomenon of denial has led to a series of embarrassments for the theory of natural law. The most obvious is that we find it harder to defend the doctrine of natural law than we ought to. Opponents say things like this: "You say there are moral principles which are not only right for all, but known to all. If your theory were true, then I would know them. I don't, therefore your theory is wrong." We take such deniers too seriously. Instead we ought to call their bluff. We ought to reply, "You're lying. Perhaps to yourself, more than to us, but you're lying. You know the wrong of murder, the wrong of rape, the wrong of dishonoring parents as well as we do. You only think you don't." And we ought to show how much better the hypothesis of denial accounts for the data of the inner life than the hypothesis of genuine ignorance does. What kind of data? Well, a denier does not admit to remorse, because he does not admit he has done wrong. But the gorge of suppressed remorse rises in him despite his efforts to hold it down, and this can be observed. Alas for Freud, who knew of the repression of libido but not about the repression of conscience. Some who deny their remorse find it impossible to be serious about anything, because even a moment of gravity might be enough to wake the tormenting harpies. Others suffer suicidal depressions on the anniversaries of their misdeeds—a phenomenon well known to crisis pregnancy counselors. Some even become ethical philosophers and devote all their energies to rationalizing what the rest of the world calls sin. But I suppose we know nothing about that.

A second embarrassment to which the neglect of the phenomenon of denial leads us is that it leaves us unable to make sense of the precise kind of moral confusion the people of our time suffer, or say they suffer. Consider this tissue of contradictions: Most who call abortion wrong call it killing. Most who call it killing say it kills a baby. Most who call it killing a baby decline to prohibit it altogether. Most who decline to prohibit it think it should be restricted. More and more people favor restrictions. Yet greater and greater numbers of people have had or have been involved in abortions. Or consider this one: most adults are worried about teenage sex. Yet rather than telling kids to wait until marriage, most tell kids to wait until they are "older," as we are. Most say that premarital sex between consenting adults is a normal expression of natural desires. Yet hardly any are comfortable telling anyone, especially their own children, how many people they have slept with themselves. Or consider this one: accessories to suicide often write about the act; they produce page after page to show why it is right. Yet a large part of what they write about is guilt. Author George E. Delury, jailed for poisoning and suffocating his wife, says in his written account of the affair that his guilt feelings were so strong they were "almost physical."

Isn't all this confusion fishy? As to the first example, if abortion kills a baby then it ought to be banned to everyone; why allow it? But if it doesn't kill a baby it is hard to see why we should be uneasy about it at all; why restrict it? We restrict what we allow because we know it is wrong but don't want to give it up; we feed our hearts scraps in hopes of hushing them, as cooks quiet their kitchen puppies. As to the second example, sexual promiscuity has exactly the same bad consequences among adults as it has among teenagers. But if it is just an innocent pleasure, then why not talk it up? Swinging is no longer a novelty; the sexual revolution is now gray with age. If shame persists, the only possible explanation is that guilt persists as well. And the third example speaks for itself. Delury calls the very strength of his feelings a proof that they did not express "moral" guilt, merely the "dissonance" resulting from violation of an instinctual block inherited from our primate ancestors. We might paraphrase his theory, "the stronger the guilt, the less it matters."

A third embarrassment to which neglect of the phenomenon of denial has led is an inability to explain the sheer dynamism of wickedness—for the fact that we aren't gently wafted into the abyss but violently propel ourselves into it. Sometimes people think that suppressed moral knowledge is the same as *weakened* moral knowledge with weakened power over behavior. On the contrary, pressing down one's conscience doesn't make it weak any more than pressing down a wildcat makes it docile. It only makes it violent. One woman I know about had an abortion to punish her husband for unfaithfulness. By the time she became pregnant again she was finished punishing him, yet she aborted a second time. Her reason? "I wanted to be able to hate myself more for what I did to the first baby." Outraged conscience revenged itself by driving her to repeat the sin. You see? The suppression of moral knowledge we cannot help but have doesn't just weaken our resistance to doing wrong; it hurls us into wrong. When the conscience of an individual or a

society becomes corrupted, the result is less like the erosion of an earthen dike so that it fails to hold the water back, than like the compression of a powerful spring so that it buckles savagely to the side.

By the way, this power of suppressed conscience to revenge itself is one of the reasons that when a culture turns aside from the narrow path it so swiftly gets worse and worse. The reason it plummets so quickly lies not in the weakness of conscience but in its strength, not in its shapelessness but in its shape. I spoke a moment ago of propelling ourselves into the abyss. The propulsive force is even greater in a culture like our own, for people here have more to hold down than in some places. After all, our country once had a Christian culture. Consequently, the people of our generation must hold down not only the present knowledge of natural law, but the troubling memory of special revelation. The more there is to suppress, the more monumental the energies that must be expended to hold it down, and the more violent and disruptive the side effects.

Allow me to consider these side effects. Guilt is different from guilty feelings. The knowledge of guilt always produces certain objective needs, which demand satisfaction irrespective of the state of the feelings. These needs include confession, atonement, reconciliation, and justification. Now when guilt is acknowledged, the guilty deed can be repented so that these four needs can be genuinely satisfied. But when the guilty knowledge is suppressed, they can only be displaced. That is what generates the impulse to further wrong. Taking the four needs one by one, let's see how this happens.

*The need to confess arises from transgression against what we know, at some level, to be truth.* I have already commented on the tendency of accessories to suicide to write about their acts. Besides George Delury, who killed his wife, we may mention Timothy E. Quill, who prescribed lethal pills for his patient, and Andrew Solomon, who participated in the death of his mother. Solomon, for instance, writes in *The New Yorker* that "the act of speaking or writing about your involvement is, inevitably, a plea for absolution." Many readers will remember the full-page signature advertisements feminists took out in the early days of the abortion movement, telling the world that they had killed their own unborn children. At first it seems baffling that the sacrament of confession can be inverted to serve the ends of advocacy. Only by recognizing the power of suppressed conscience can this paradox be understood.

*The need to atone arises from the knowledge of a debt that must somehow be paid.* One would think such knowledge would always lead directly to repentance, but the counselors whom I have interviewed tell a different story. This is where the story fits that I told a few minutes ago—the story of the woman who aborted a second time so that she could hate herself more for aborting the first time. It was the effort to atone without repenting that drove her to do it again.

*The need for reconciliation arises from the fact that guilt cuts us off from God and man.* Without repentance, intimacy must be simulated precisely by sharing with others in the guilty act. Andrew Solomon says that he, his brothers, and his father are united by the "weird legacy" of their implication in his mother's death, and quotes a

nurse who participated in her own mother's death as telling him, "I know some people will have trouble with my saying this but it was the most intimate time I've ever had with anyone." And no wonder. Violation of a basic human bond is so terrible that the burdened conscience must instantly establish an abnormal one to compensate; the very gravity of the transgression invests the new bond with a sense of profound significance. Naturally some will find it attractive. The reconciliation need has a public dimension, too. Isolated from the community of moral judgment, transgressors strive to gather a substitute around themselves. They don't sin privately; they recruit. The more ambitious among them go further. Refusing to go to the mountain, they require the mountain to come to them: society must be transformed so that it no longer stands in awful judgment. So it is that they change the laws, infiltrate the schools, and create intrusive social-welfare bureaucracies.

*Finally we come to the need for justification, which requires more detailed attention.* Unhooked from justice, justification becomes rationalization, which is a more dangerous game than it seems. The problem is that the ordinances written on the heart all hang together. They depend on each other in such a way that we cannot suppress one except by rearranging all the others. Think, for example, what is necessary to rationalize abortion. Because we can't not know that it is wrong to deliberately kill human beings, there are only four options. We must deny that the act is deliberate, deny that it kills, deny that its victims are human, or deny that wrong must not be done. The last option is literally nonsense. That something must not be done is what it means for it to be wrong; to deny that wrong may not be done is merely to say "wrong is not wrong," or "what must not be done may be done." The first option is hardly promising either. Abortion does not just happen; it must be performed. Its proponents not only admit there is a "choice," they boast of it. As to the second option, if it was ever promising, it is no longer. Millions of women have viewed sonograms of their babies kicking, sucking their thumbs, and turning somersaults; whatever these little ones are, they are busily alive. Even most feminists have given up calling the baby a "blood clot" or describing abortion as the "extraction of menses."

The only option even barely left is number three: to deny the humanity of the victims. It is at this point that the machinery slips out of control. For the only way to make option three work is to ignore biological nature, which tells us that from conception onward the child is as human as you or me (does anyone imagine that a dog is growing in there?)—and invent another criterion of humanity, one that makes it a matter of degree. Some of us must turn out more human, others less. This is a dicey business even for abortionists. It hardly needs to be said that no one has been able to come up with a criterion that makes babies in the womb less human but leaves everyone else as he was; the teeth of the moral gears are too finely set for that. The less fully human must yield to the interests of the more fully human; all that remains is to sort us all out.

Do we protest that the progression is too extreme? That people are not that logical? Ah, but they are; they are only logical slowly. The implication which they do not grasp today they may grasp in thirty years; if they do not grasp it even then, their children will grasp it. It is happening already. Look around.

So conscience has its revenge. We can't not know the preciousness of human life—therefore, if we tell ourselves that humanity is a matter of degree, we can't help holding those who are more human more precious than those who are less. The urge to rationalize abortion drives us inexorably to a system of moral castes more pitiless than anything the East has devised. Of course we can fiddle with the grading criteria: consciousness, self-awareness, and contribution to society have been proposed; racial purity has been tried. No such tinkering avails to change the character of our deeds. If we will a caste system, then we shall have one; if we will that some shall have their way, then in time there shall be a nobility of Those Who Have Their Way. All that our fiddling with the criteria achieves is a rearrangement of the castes.

Now what does all this imply for those of us whose vocation is to search for wisdom about these matters and teach it to others? What it implies, I think, is that most of our efforts at moral persuasion proceed backwards. If it is really true that the problem of human wrongdoing is more volitional than cognitive—if it is really true that it has more to do with the state of our will than with the state of our knowledge—if it is really true that most defenses of moral evil reflect self-deception rather than real intellectual difficulties—then our main task is not to teach people things they really don't know, but to remove the mask from their self-deceptions and bring to the surface what they know already.

We know that the mask can be stripped in private conversation. A young man proclaimed to a colleague that morality is relative, that we don't even know that murder is really wrong. My colleague asked him "Are you at this moment in any real doubt about murder being wrong for everyone?" After a long uncomfortable silence the young man simply admitted that he wasn't.

And we know that the mask can be stripped in the classroom. A student confessed to me one day that my lecture about Aristotle had frightened him, and I saw that he was trembling. All the old pagan's talk about virtue had made him realize, he said, that he had not led a virtuous life.

The task before us is to find out how to strip the mask, not just in private conversation and in the classroom, but in the academy and in the public square. In a decadent age, this seems to be our vocation. We are called to a political science that assumes the moral law which no one else avouches and asks the questions which everyone thinks but no one speaks. We are called to a public moral apologetics that connects the dots of our nation's moral consciousness and reminds people, absurdly, of what they know already. We are called to a civic rhetoric that dissipates smokescreens and disperses self-deceptions.

There is no such political science, public apologetics, or civic rhetoric today. We are a stunted generation, and the task of founding them is too high for us. Nevertheless, if we neglect it the next generation will be even shorter. So let us try.