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Love Thyself

Who doesn't love himself or herself without being told? How could this be a commandment; it's not even a helpful suggestion? Yet this is an essential part of the second of the great commandments. So does it seem that Jesus taught not only in parables, but in paradoxes as well? No paradox, no mystery, true command, true challenge to understand what it that we are commanded to do. That understanding leads right to the heart of who we are. We cannot fathom it in this world any more than we can fathom his divine nature, but that does not exempt us from exploring.

The place to begin, it seems, is to remind ourselves what it means to love. To love is to serve; to love is to put oneself last and the object of love first. Truly the first shall be last – they may be left behind entirely – and even more surely the last shall be first. That is the work of love and the logic of love.

So then, how do we place ourselves last in relation to ourselves? How do we serve ourselves, and perhaps more to the point how do we fail to serve ourselves? Ah, that question at least we can begin to understand. We see acquaintances who obviously can't or won't stop eating until they are essentially crippled by body weight, and destined for an early death. Their bodies serve them, but they do not serve their bodies well. They serve them too well, in one sense of the term, but in truth we see that they serve them poorly. Saint Paul writes of the necessary discipline of father to son, and our relation to our bodies is similar. Our will is like the father of the body, and its duty is to instruct, even painfully. So if we really loved our bodies we would not let them be abused by a lifestyle that crippled them and that would eventually take them from us. There is a fine line in this, because our bodies have truly been given to us to use. They were made finite

and limited and subject to aging and death. We are not beholden to fast and exercise them into immortality. Immortality does not come by that way, no matter how fastidious we may be. We use our bodies and enjoy them as we should, but we have to love them too.

There are no simple rules. Life is not obedience, it is more like management. Are we permitted to enjoy that fine cigar? The answer is that we are permitted anything of that sort, but we are required to serve our bodies so that they can serve us in all areas of life. What we are forbidden to do is to elevate our bodies above the whole spectrum of our lives; to ignore the call to serve god in our whole life and instead to serve the immediate pleasures of the body. Saint Thomas Aquinas died at the premature age of forty-eight years, and at his death he weighed well over 400 pounds. The two facts obviously fit together, as everyone knows. Could he have worked out more and lived to eighty? Probably; at least he could have managed his daily routine to where his life expectancy would be far beyond forty-eight years. But in his forty-eight years he was phenomenally productive. His output of philosophical speculation runs to thousands of pages, and many of the hymns he composed are still favorites at Mass and at Benediction. By no stretch of the imagination is it our place to judge him, but it is not unreasonable to ask – always bearing in mind that we are just trying to understand our own lives – whether he loved himself. He could have dined more prudently or exercised more, but would he therefore have written more brilliantly or on a wider range of topics? Would his hymns be more beautiful, or would he have gone on to whole operas and symphonies? While we naturally regret his terrible physical weight, none of us can say that his body did not serve the purposes of his life at least as well as ours do us. None of these bodies is going to live forever.

The implications of love of self for how we manage our bodies is an important matter in itself, but in the broader spectrum of our lives it is only a metaphor for everything that is comprehended in the commandment to love ourselves.

In all things, we must love ourselves as Jesus loves us; we must love what it is about us that he loves, and serve that self. While the ways to serve ourselves are infinitely varied and the accomplishment is prudence and management, there is a commandment that precedes it and that can not be ignored. The Commandments are usually thought of as rules, and they are that. Jesus is lord, and they are his commandments to us, but the

term “commandment” suggests a sort of arbitrariness, a test of will and thus of submission. His commandments are that also, but more than that. They define us. They are not arbitrary constraints; they are implications of our nature and they are imposed on us not by a remote ruler, but by the nature in which he formed us. Saint John says of him that he is the Logos, the architect of creation, so that everything that is real expresses his being and his nature. Thus, when we defy the Commandments we do not need him to judge us, we judge ourselves. He is the just judge because that is his justice: that everything he demands of us is already written indelibly on our hearts, and if we defy them we will surely die.

So this is our command: To love ourselves as he loves us; to love that about ourselves that he loves. What does he love about us? To be joyful and unafraid. Do not be afraid, he says, but rejoice. We love ourselves when we submit ourselves to joy. To be prudent and wisely connect means to ends, anticipating wherever possible the consequences of what we do. He does not ask us to be omniscient. He expects us to make mistakes and to trust that he will cover them for us if we just ask. To be grateful. This is in fact our greatest need of all, and I repeat that it is our need not because a remote master decrees it, but because it is our nature to need to be grateful. How much more valuable are we when we acknowledge in gratitude his gift in us? Gratitude is the daily working of self love. It is the recognition that we are worthy and that only when we accept the call to be worthy are we whole and complete. These three precepts are perhaps the most immediate needs of self love, but the mysteries of his human nature in us are infinitely deep, and I do not mean in any way to foreclose further investigation on this subject.

Some scholars are fond of saying that Jesus loves us unconditionally and no doubt I fail to understand them, but in the scriptures I find the most conditional love, thank god. We know that we are conceived in Original Sin and are never free of its consequences as long as we are in this world. Does he love Original Sin unconditionally? We know that he formed us in his human image and likeness. Does he love that about us that rejects that nature? He loves us with unwavering conditional love: he loves that about us that reflects himself and he tolerates or does not tolerate everything else. He hates Original Sin; he hates our Original Sin and seeks to remove it from us. The scriptures assure us that he created only life, that he made all things to exist in his life, and that death came into the

world only through the work of the Satan. So he wants all things to reflect him and he wants us to be with him. No one could be formed in the womb with a mission to die. There can be no predestination to condemnation, because he formed all of us in his holy image and likeness. So, like the father of the Prodigal Son he waits for us as long as life remains in us. But we have to come home to him. He will wait but he will not beg.

Many of the same scholars aver that our actions are useless and that, it seems, we are rather passive beneficiaries of salvation. Again, acknowledging that I may misunderstand them I must say that that saying is also reversed. Everything we do, every single little thing we do, is consequential. If that were not so, in what sense could we claim to have been fashioned in his image and likeness? Is his life also futile? This much we agree on, that we cannot define salvation for ourselves, or dictate how and when we will fashion it for ourselves. Salvation is a participation in his life and only he can grant that. Indeed, only he has even the slightest conception of what the even means. No amount of self denial, no amount of candles, no amount of free lunches for the poor can manufacture a bit of his life. We can adopt poor orphan children from Viet Nam by the dozens, but if we do not love ourselves it is all in vain.

Everything we do matters. Everything we do either expresses and exercises our life and the things about is that he loves, or it wears on that life and nature and makes us less like him. This is not a counsel of despair. He is not a stern schoolmaster watching over us with willow switch in hand. He is tolerant and even fun-loving, which is our joy. Jesus redeems us by his blood, but he does not save us. By the gift of his redemption we are called to save ourselves. We can't save ourselves our way; we can only save ourselves his way. Thus his justice is perfect and inexorable, but always patient and gentle.

Manichean Heresy

The Manichees were a religious cult in what is now Iraq who are known principally for their doctrine of dualism, the proposition that we are composed of two distinct and irreconcilable natures: a divine soul trapped in a mortal body. Like so many propositions, as long as that one remains a kind of poetic metaphor it is probably rather harmless, but when we go beyond the poetry we find in it a very dangerous implication.

Since the body, which is corrupt and mortal, and the soul are fundamentally incompatible, the actions of the body do not have an effect on the soul. The sins of the body remain with the body, which explains its mortality, but they can't corrupt the soul. Now, all actions are bodily, which implies that the soul remains sinless. To complete the account, the Manichees recognized one essential, fatal sin, which was to fail to acknowledge Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. Only the denial of belief in Jesus, being an act of the mind and will, could shatter the endowed immortality of the soul. Since only Jesus saves, it is taught them, only acknowledging him can bring us back to Paradise.

This was a cult in which what we do quite literally doesn't matter. Our sins will be consigned to the grave along with our bodies, and at that time our souls will be freed to return to Heaven from whence they descended. But if what we do does not matter, then what Jesus did on Earth did not matter either, because he was like us in all things but sin. Jesus was not an ascetic philosopher, preaching a gospel of removal from the world and denial of the physical. Just the opposite. He reveled in his physicality. When a blind man approached him asking to be healed, he made a paste by spitting on some dirt, which he spread on the man's eyes and he was healed. Dirt heals; saliva gives life. What we do matters because far from being alien to each other, our bodies and souls were made for each other. The soul has its own faculty of body, which is the imprint of our flawless bodies and is the form and model of these mortal bodies. We have that spiritual faculty because the soul is incomplete without a body, and the body is nothing but the realization of the soul. No human being can exist without a body, and even in Paradise we are embodied beings though we do not walk around there in mortal form.

The reality of our actions

Everything we do matters. Which is to say, it matters to Jesus, but we do not assert that as some mystery only. It is imprinted on our nature and on our lives in ways that even from a natural perspective becomes unmistakable.

Everything we do changes us. It is a characteristic of our physical nature – of an animal nature – that we are creatures of learned habit. We are subject to the psychological laws of operant conditioning, although we retain a high degree of freedom in our wills

and can resist or overcome conditioning. The habits we acquire always war against the freedom of our wills, making the implications of our freedom very painful at times. But nothing that we learn can extinguish that potential for freedom, and nothing at all can exempt us from the duty to be free. So everything we do changes us, sometimes for the better and sometimes for the worse. Jesus fashioned us to free our wills and to imitate him, whose will is perfectly free. Our will can usefully be described in another way. Our will is effective. What we will, will happen. Whatever we ask for we will receive. This is another way of saying that what we do matters, because it is in our actions that we express what we will. The animals have will, but their will is never free. They are like puppets manipulated by the incentives of their world and trained by habit to cope with it. Some of that training is general – behavioral rules of general application which are imprinted on their brains and preserved by natural selection – and some is particular and opportunistic. One of their most remarkable general traits is the ability to adapt their actions to their surroundings. This is not in itself a high order skill, because it is in substance nothing more than the openness to operant conditioning, but in the higher animals the complexity of learned behavior can be truly remarkable.

We are animals, and through the brain we possess all then capacities. We are never immune to incentives and never inoculated against training and conditioning. For this reason, I sometimes resist the urge to say that we have free will. More accurately, I think, is to say that we have been given the capacity and also the responsibility to free our wills. All that we possess by birth is autonomous will, which is the ability to reason and to act accordingly. It is not some much that our will is free, as that we are responsible. We can't excuse ourselves from the responsibility that comes to us from the gift of free will. We sin often and our wills are not free. Jesus picks us up again if we ask him to and if we listen to and act on his call to us, so when I write of responsibility I do not mean to suggest that we know on our own account how to free our wills. There is no other meaning to the term "free" than to be responsible. If one is not responsible, if he excuses himself by pointing to the environment of temptations, he is therefore not free. By the same token, if he is not free then he is in that sense like the animals and his actions are purely governed by rewards and incentives and conditioned responses. We can't excuse

ourselves by imitating the animals. If we deny our responsibility, we would ultimately deny our life. We have no choice but to be ourselves, as painful as that may be at times.

This is why it is impossible to love others or to love Jesus unless we love ourselves. To love ourselves does not imply that we serve our demand for rewards, although the rewards are for the most part not bad things in themselves. Cuban cigars are delicious, but it does not follow that only cigar smokers truly love themselves. The command to love ourselves cannot be confused with the urge to indulge ourselves. We love what it is that Jesus loves in us; we love his endowment of our humanity, each in the way that it appears to him or her, because in the world that gift is infinitely varied. So Paul reminds us that there are many gifts – many ways of life that each express his gift of life – but only one Spirit.

Psychology

The human brain is a remarkable instrument. Left to itself it responds to rewards and penalties, learning highly complex logic and implementing them in neural pathways. There is always present a chance, moreover, that a given neural organization will be implemented in heritable behavior – presumably being coded in the creature's genome – and become more than a learned behavior. Even the animals exhibit remarkable learning capacity, with the higher apes being of course the most proficient. Chimpanzees can learn to replicate some very advanced human tasks, like playing musical instruments. Thanks to the revolutionary work of Dr. Jeffrey Schwartz and other in the fields of neuropsychology and neuro-psychiatry we obtain a much clearer understanding of what the brain does than we ever had before. Most astonishing of all however is the faculties of human mind and will, which can lead the brain to subordinate its quest for rewards to the demands of the will.

One of the clearest characteristics of the divine promise of eternal life is that it is a reward that literally could not be selected on by any purely physical system, since while the creature is living, the quest for the reward provides no incentive, and after death the creature is incapable of learning and adapting. It might be objected that some virtuous behavior is inherently rewarding. Even the animals could learn to exercise and watch their triglycerides as long as the activities and the required foods themselves were

sufficiently pleasant. But those examples only reinforce the point, which is that the animal responds to very proximate rewards and punishments. It would not ask *why* it should exercise. We know that difference between spiritual virtue and healthy behavior precisely because in the former it is essential to ask why, whereas the latter is even for an animal its own reward. The promise of eternal life is therefore uniquely a spiritual reward that only spiritual beings – human beings – can appreciate. From the earliest human settlements, as far back as permanent records go into the prehistory of the human race, man and woman have always thought about eternal life. It is not natural for us to die; it is natural for us to envision ourselves as deathless. We were not fashioned to die, although our animal ancestors, even those nearest to us, were fashioned to die, and of course are incapable of imagining anything else.

One fact of our lives is that everything we do changes us a little bit. It changes the way we see the world around us and it changes the way we imagine ourselves. Criminals for instance not only accept criminal behavior from themselves, they are tolerant of it in others as long as it does not come at a cost to them. The crimes they participate in begin to seem a normal part of life. Ask a bank robber why he robs banks and he answers that he does it to make a living, and that he is one of those men who just can't function within the strictures of a nine-to-five job. As a commodity trader on the Board of Trade in Chicago or an equity trader on the New York Stock Exchange and he will answer the same way. We like the independence that comes from self-employment, or more precisely that comes from living by our wits.

We think, and we tell ourselves, that what we do in the privacy of our own conscience can be segregated from the place in our lives where we deal with others, but that is not true. What we accept from ourselves we will not deny to others unless it comes at a cost to us. We are very tempted to excuse ourselves as long as there is no sort of judgement imposed on us, where we might be held to account. Being then the beneficiaries of our own forgiveness, we are inclined to condone and to denigrate and revile standards of behavior that previously we had been taught to condemn. We love the preacher who commands us to forgive; we are experts at forgiveness, or is it forgetfulness? Since we love ourselves, we do not want to hear that we must love the

sinner, and be always prepared to forgive him, but we must hate the crime. A person who loves his crimes has rejected our forgiveness.

In the modern, western world there are untold examples of this weakness, but none is more nearly universal than how we use our sexuality. We were taught to be faithful to one another, husband to wife and wife to husband, as long as we live, but the world tells us not to bother. So we lower our personal standards a little. Then we are more ready to accept much more egregious lowering by others, and are very unwilling to condemn. No one enjoys condemning, I hope. It is not the way to make friends and is in fact a much better way to make enemies. Don't go there, we tell ourselves. Go along to get along. But as we act in our own lives, even in secret ways, so do we teach ourselves to judge. It is for this reason that we assert that

Guilt is a thief that steals the soul.

Our physical nature, our human brain, offers no resistance whatever to this process of rationalization. Far from it. The brain is this phenomenal learning device, always seeking to adapt in ways that fix on rewarded behavior and that avoid penalized behavior. Our mind, wielding the authority of our autonomous will, can dictate the organization of the brain even in the absence of proximate rewards, but if the mind is confused and the will itself adaptable, the brain will certainly not resist.

Culture

Morality and spirituality are not taught to us by the physical forces that are present in our bodies, but we exist in a cultural frame of reference also. It is a construct of human interactions, of learned, adaptive behavior of rewards and costs parallel to our biological environment. It is an interesting fact, though not unfortunately widely appreciated, that even the most sophisticated of the animals have not social or cultural dimension. In a sociological sense, each creature is a species unto himself, interacting with his fellows according to biological imperatives but exhibiting no sort of awareness of a community of equal types.

The difference between mankind and the animals is that we have not only a brain and a body that it manages, but mind and autonomous will which make of these parts a whole person. The difference in our capacity for empathy – our ability to recognize other persons as being like us – makes it possible to create an entirely new and more productive form of adaptation, social or cultural adaptation. Language plays of course the central role in the functioning of society, but it would be a gross distortion to ascribe to language alone, or to vocal chords or even of centers for language formation in the brain, the difference between us and chimpanzees. The essential difference is a kind of reasoned self-awareness that enables us to see each other as like us, and to internalize the ideas, goals, and needs of others. This is the basis, for instance, of our capacity to work together. Many kinds of animals work together at certain routinized tasks. Even ants do that. But that behavior is biologically predetermined. It is instinct. The difference between programmed cooperation and reasoned cooperation is clearly visible in the adaptability of our cooperation. We reason from ends and goals, so we are able to discern new forms of cooperation and to communicate them to the group. Ants, by contrast, cooperate today in precisely the way they cooperated a million years ago, and will continue in that mode until some genetic innovation provides them with a new, more effective mode. This is not to diminish the opportunity for genetic innovation among them. Every mutation that occurs in the queen has the potential to open up new avenues of cooperative behavior in her offspring, and biological systems being what they are, the resulting ant community will quickly spread and dominate its rivals.

Only as human beings do we succeed in building a mutual society of shared culture, of shared expectations, shared language, shared submission to the demand to promise and to respect promises once given, a sense of exchange of value and of incentives to elicit beneficial behavior. Animals interact with each other, and their behavior is guided by rewards and costs too, but the terms of the exchange, if it can be called by that term, are biologically defined and enforced. Only in a human society would you rent me your condominium in Vail in exchange for the imprint of my Visa card. Not only are chimpanzees not quite so advanced, the fact is that they are incapable of advancing. They interact with their environment, including other chimps, exactly the same way they did two million years ago.

One of the oldest critiques of morality and of a moral code is that it is the self-serving creation of human society, crafted by greedy and self-interested persons to benefit themselves, and without any gloss of the reality of an impartial appeal to justice or right. At the most basic level, this is represented in the Marxian critique of private property: that it is an institution created by the lucky, greedy few who have some, to be used to crush the many who have none. The broader point, which is that society is only a slightly less brutish way for men and women to interact than the ways the animals do, can't account for our behavior.

This attack is directed at the ethical or cultural basis for shared morality. The terms "ethical" and "cultural" are synonyms, the one coming from the Greek language and the other from the Latin. Thus "ethics" is not about right and wrong, per se, but about socially acceptable and unacceptable. Nonetheless, ethical standards are an important human innovation. It is as much an integral part of our nature to exercise cultural functions as it is to exercise physical ones. All are capable of serving our needs and of serving god. It is he who gave us the tools to invent them with, and they are the medium by which we regulate social behavior and by which, ideally at least, we align it with genuine standards of the right and the good.

Of course, Culture is a far broader concept than is the regulation of our human interactions. Everything from music and poetry to architecture, places of learning and the body of accumulated knowledge, the historical record of our communities, nations and world, customs and traditional ways, and clothing are all essential ingredients in our culture. It is a uniquely human gift to be able to form a common culture. The process implements another natural, or cultural, selection as disciplined as natural selection, and the selection discipline is fundamentally the same: we try everything, keeping what works and discarding everything else, but always tending to keep any element that does not directly interfere with our success. As a result of this last property, our culture tends over time to become more diverse, other things being equal. Actually, the more striking feature of cultural selection is the high degree of uniformity it imposes.

In a biological species, random mutations constantly introduce new variations on the common species genome, and generally these variations are permitted to survive. Thus, for instance, all dogs including wolves and foxes belong to the same species. The

intra-specific variation is enormous. Cultural selection introduces a new and vastly more powerful mechanism for selection: communication between individuals and empathy between them. If anyone comes up with a better widget, his contemporaries can very quickly adopt it. Similarly, when a musical composer discovers a new way to create orchestration, a great many other composers – especially the younger ones – will learn from them and add that innovation to their own tool kit. As a result, innovations replicate very rapidly across a population. The faculty of intelligence of course is what makes this possible, because it enables us to judge “success” and “failure” very quickly by contrast with ecological logic of survival, as a result not only of our ability to evaluate highly complex and conditional logic, but also because of our ability to anticipate future consequences.

Among the greatest of all cultural innovations has been the capacity to communicate remotely, both in space and time. While the choice of media is wider today than ever before, one could group all of these tools under the heading of “writing.” Now there is hardly any constraint on the speed of transmission of innovations across the globe. As a sidelight, it is fascinating how our language, which at its root consists of direct, interpersonal communication, has evolved to support two modes of statements: personal statements like “I like your hair,” which are meaningful only in the specific conversation where they are framed, and abstractions like “two plus two equals four,” which are intended to mean exactly the same thing to everyone. We have even evolved a mixed mode, called “fiction,” in which the statements are actually abstractions even though they replicate personal communication in form.

Now let us return to an earlier topic: the nature of ethics. I will use the term ethics, as contrasted with morality, because it singles out the cultural aspect, whereas “morality” is simply a scale for judging behavior as a willful act. “Moral” always refers to the will, and contemplates absolute standards of right and wrong. What sense can we make of the charge that ethics is nothing but a mechanism for manipulating other persons? The first thing to note is that it is sometimes divorced from its roots in good and evil, right and wrong. Some small human societies have developed as cults endorsing crimes against outsiders. Pirate bands and more modern Mafiosi, the Thugis of India, Vikings, Genghis Khan’s Golden Horde and perhaps many others are all examples of

societies that endorsed exploitation of outsiders in violation to the norms of right and wrong. Criteria like loyalty to the leader, proficiency with the tools of the trade, and absolute silence in the face of outsiders are ethical norms they promote, and in form they are no different from other ethical standards that we find more comfortable. So, in short, ethics is not essentially moral, though it is always a reflection of cultururation.

Ethical standards – however admirable or not – are always supported by a concept of “crime.” In biological systems nature judges and executes judgement on the wayward, but in society we need social mechanism to do this. Some are rather automatic, like shunning, while others involve more extreme and more indirect enforcement by sanctions. For the latter cases, courts and laws and legal counsel and all the trappings of investigation and enforcement are needed. The need for civil reinforcement actually marks the difference between culture and ethics, on the one hand, and morality, because moral law has no visible incentives of its own. Many of the rules of ethics are of course very moral, giving the support of public sanctions to moral behavior. Indeed, it is a wise society that respects the moral law and a dying one that rejects it, but the two never merge into one. It is a shocking fact, to say the least, the Supreme Court has ruled the opposite. In the majority decision in *Lawrence vs. Texas*, 539 U.S.558 (2003), the court ruled that making laws to conform to a particular moral view is prohibited by the Constitution. In this case, ethics – social norms – and morality – right and wrong – are placed in opposition to one another. Where the social norms are supposed to come from is left a mystery, but their authors had better not be caught reading any proscribed material smuggled into the law library after closing hours.

There is an ancient concept of natural law – the idea and the term itself come from ancient Athens – which is a moral law stated without reference to a god. Its precepts are couched instead solely in terms of the needs of human society and human beings, and the rational understanding of their true nature. The justices may have had some undeveloped idea of natural law as a god-free moral code, but it will not serve. From the beginning until the present, the natural law has always been understood as a derivative of the being of god – of his nature – and of his plan for the world. Socrates expressly refers to that understanding in his trial. So natural law is a code that we deduce from a study of the natural world, understanding that term in the broadest possible way to include all the

sciences of every kind, the necessities of law and law enforcement, and every other sort of insight that illuminates our moral duties to one another. It is god's law, but without the services of Moses.

The Lawrence decision rightly draws a distinction between what is immoral and what is illegal. In the case at hand, the defendants were charged with participating in illegal sexual acts, contrary to the Texas criminal code. The majority ruled that the law was an illegal intrusion on their privacy, and an attempt to impose moral judgements where no actual criminal behavior was involved. The implication, that we applaud, is that it is not permitted to a state to criminalize obnoxious behavior. Criminal behavior involves attacks on the wellbeing of another person, but otherwise does not regulate interactions. Whether the implementation of that precept in the case at hand was appropriate is another matter. It had the effect of delegitimizing the idea that there is an objective definition of rape. Specifically, it delegitimized laws proscribing acts between consenting adults – without addressing what actually constitutes informed consent – and as a result left the legal definition of rape purely to the question of stated consent. Apart from the specifics of this issue, the proposition that the criminal law and the moral law are separate is well understood. We the society can't make it a crime to displease us by your behavior.

But that outcome only sharpens the difference. It is now as a matter of law forbidden for either party to assert in their pleadings that what they did was right, or that what the other side did was wrong. By law we have trivialized the concept of ethics: we are forbidden to claim that it is good to be ethical or bad to be unethical. The error in the thinking that underlies Lawrence is precisely the rejection of natural law. Psychological and sociological research has documented in detail the “rightness” of moral behavior. It shows the harm caused by immoral behavior. Research on the terrible cost of family breakdown and children born out of wedlock alone shows how unfortunate it is when immorality becomes normal. If the justices of the Supreme Court do not want to listen to Moses, which they are not obligated to do, they should listen to the tales of unwed mothers and scan the clear evidence of their lives. That is the method of the natural law: to study the world and how it actually works.

The Lawrence decision is peculiar in one respect, which is that while appeal to morality and to right and wrong are forbidden, and might actually invalidate a law by themselves, various spurious appeals are validated. The state can regulate our intake of trans fats on health grounds. It can sharply regulate our use of tobacco and seat belts, also on health grounds. It can regulate the emission of carbon dioxide and other gasses into the atmosphere on extremely problematical grounds of endangering the climate. The decision therefore, in the current legal environment, expressly endorses unmoral law. The representatives of the majority have the authority to micromanage the public as long as they do not claim that it is done to further the good or to prevent some evil. Which is better, to have fat people loving their neighbors or slender ones killing them off?

The Seven Deadly Sins and the Seven Cardinal Virtues

The title given to these sins is almost astoundingly well chosen. They are deadly sins, so the title is accurate, but it is more than that. It places the focus directly on the matter of outcomes. We don't call them the forbidden sins, or the illegal sins, or the unethical sins. We go right to *deadly*. They are *Pride, Envy, Gluttony, Lust, Wrath, Greed, and Sloth*. On the other side are arrayed the seven cardinal virtues: *Faith, Hope, Charity, Prudence (i.e. Wisdom), Temperance, Courage, and Justice*. The term "Cardinal" is derived from the Latin word for a gate, so they are both the stumbling blocks and the gate to eternal life.

These are the sins against our nature, against the selves that Jesus loves, and they are therefore the quintessential failure to love ourselves. They are ways in which we reject ourselves. The corresponding virtues are correspondingly the marks of our self love. We love ourselves by practicing them.

Unlike the imperatives of our biology and the strictures of our ethics, these are not guides to action. They are not rules because they are only ways in which we love ourselves. The action is all the same, in one sense, though in another sense it is infinitely varied. How can we be free, for instance, of envy? Envy means thinking that someone else has goods or benefits of some kind that should be ours. One way to avoid envy is to be content with whatever we have. Another way is to apply ourselves more forcefully and consistently so that we will have those things that we might envy in others. The former is

temperance, the latter a kind of prudence. Both can be good as long as they are wrapped in charity, which means literally treating the wellbeing of other persons as being equal to our own wellbeing. So it is prudent to study hard in college in order to learn and to earn high grades. It is not prudent to cheat on the exams even if it raises the grade point average. The work and study enhance the value of the work we can achieve and thus raise our compensation; the latter does not improve our work, but steals from others by redirecting the rewards they deserve toward our account. That violates not only the imperative to practice charity, it is also a violation of justice. It is good to compete and it is good to win, because that sets a mark for others to attempt and it produces the greatest benefits as a byproduct. That is both just and courageous, courageous because while we are preparing we have no way of knowing whether our work will be rewarded or not. There need not be envy in competition as long as it serves only to bring out the best in us.

These examples serve to make the point that the virtues and the sins are, each in its own way, eminently practical guides to life. They are not just nostrums to meditate on or to dream about. But stepping back a step we see that the moral good is unlike both the imperatives of biology and culture, in that it is not an expression of a logic of reciprocal rewards or avoidance of imposed punishment. It is as though the virtues were their own reward, though they are not. Jesus told his disciples that whoever gives one of them just a cup of cold water on a hot summer day will have his reward. How much more reward will we have for loving ourselves? No, the difference is that they aren't proximate rewards, and the punishment is equally deferred. Until after we are dead!

No pure animal – for we too are animals – can have any conception of rewards or punishments after death. There is nothing after life for them, and they do not have an intellect capable of abstracting from the immediate experience of life to imagine anything following it. They have conditioned responses that lead them to help one another at times. Adults feed their young, for example, but that is just conditioned behavior responding to a logic of survival. The ones that refuse to feed their young, soon have no young, and therefore cease to matter in the great game of survival. They don't feed the young because they want to. They do it because it just is what they do; the specific behaviors involved are programmed into their bodies. In society, similarly, we learn to help each other in the expectation of rewards. Since the nature of the rewards is incomparably more

complex than the simple pleasures of the animals, the path by which we cooperate are equally varied and ingenious. They contemplate deferred rewards and they contemplate a process of negotiation in which the terms of the reciprocal rewards are hammered out of a universe of possibilities. The little robin young never explain to the parents that all things considered they are rather tired of worms and would rather have some fruit to lighten the fare. The farmer whose tree they occupy, by contrast, raises his crops so that he can afford to rent a condo in Florida for the winter, assuming that he likes Florida.

While the animals are lovable, we are infinitely more lovable because when we love ourselves as Jesus loves us we bring honor to his human nature and we earn a share in his eternal human life. It is not that we then leave this life behind, because this life is lovable and it is also his gift. Everything that is proper to us – every human faculty of body and spirit – is part of us, as Aquinas has emphasized. It is our duty, and it is a fruit of our self love, to perfect our selves. In a sense – perhaps only a poetical sense, but worth bearing in mind – when we adopt his life, we redeem our whole beings, body and spirit. For that reason he never expressed any dissatisfaction with the logic of reward and punishment, but only placed them beyond this life. This world too is a place of rewards; even if this were our whole life we would have to be grateful every day for that gift. But we are required to rethink the concept reward and punishment by accepting that while we live it may be hidden from us.

*4052 Niles Rd.
Saint Joseph, Michigan, 49085
Tel: 269-408-1511
E-mail: jgibbons@logisticresearch.com
Web Site: www.logisticresearch.com*