



On the Pursuit of Knowledge

by

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We know that Jesus, the Lord our god, fashioned us in his human image and likeness and respecting the human dignity that derives from that fact set us to govern the world of his making as his servants and his children by adoption, making all things submit to his will and his way. Our human dignity derives directly from his human dignity and mirrors it. It can not be separated from us. We say of him “Only god is good, and all that he does is good.” We are not good, but it is good that he fashioned us because we are capable of doing good. To do good is to do his will. It is sometimes suggested in Sunday sermons across the land that he fashioned us in his divine image, but he has no divine image. He said of his father that “No one has seen the father.” The father has no image or likeness except in the mind of his son. We do not share the divine image and likeness, but we do participate at least for a time in the divine life, because god is life. That is what Aquinas teaches: that the essence of god is to live.

He commanded us to name the creatures of the Earth. In English that command implies governance or ownership. It seems to say that the creatures are ours because it is we who name them. That is not a bad inference, if we understand that we govern not of ourselves but as his deputies in the world. The original statement in Genesis however does not refer to attaching names. In Hebrew, I am told, “to name” in this passage means to study and to come to understand. The closest our language comes to that message is to think of the Linnaean classification of the plants and animals: it names them by virtue of putting them in order of family, order, class, genus, and species, but not arbitrarily. It is based on our understanding of them and the functioning of their attributes. So we study

because it is his will that we study, and it is his will – we suppose – because it is one way in which we become more like him. Of all the studies we undertake, he loves the science of theology, and since all things are of his making one might say that any study is subsidiary to the study of him, but it is not necessary to make that connection. The dedicated economist who seeks to understand why Brazilians grow coffee is engaged in a noble pursuit whether or not he relates it directly to Jesus. Jesus is the Lord of French wines and Cuban cigars. This isn't just his world in theory; it is actually his, and whoever makes better wine does his will too. That economist is engaged in trying to understand why things have value – why and to what extent coffee has value – not only in themselves but in relation to other things. Those same Brazilians could have been making fine china or composing symphonies. Why coffee, exactly?

Most of the Commandments assert our human dignity, but the most clearly pertinent are the seventh, eighth, and ninth. The seventh tells us not to steal. Why not? Stealing is skill too. Our Irish ancestors were the best! An entire nation known for skill in piracy. The Latin slang term *Scotus* means pirate or raider. Thievery penalizes creativity and productivity and rewards dependence and sloth. It is unworthy of Jesus who fashioned everything, so it is unworthy of us. Note especially the economic implication: that where private property is not respected no one will bother to create anything that can simply be taken from him. Jesus loves economics. He probably even loves some economists. The seventh commandment enjoins us to provide for our own needs and not to seek to be dependent on others; not to accept dependency on them. To accept dependency, to accept welfare dependency for instance, is a kind of theft and is a serious sin. To teach welfare dependency, as all too many “pastors” in black churches all over America do, is an even greater sin. To fail to utilize the abilities we have been given to improve ourselves and to help others who depend on us is a serious sin. We see all around us that it is sin that punishes itself. This is beautifully logical: that the sin of ignoring the reality of economics is punished by the economy of life! Why wait for death when you can live in Purgatory right here and now?

The eighth commandment enjoins us to speak the truth. Truth matters. It is understood that our knowledge is limited and imperfect, to say the least, but if we can't know the truth, at least we can seek the truth. It is not our truth; it is his truth. He loves it,

so we must also love it. The commandment is couched especially in interpersonal terms: to commit ourselves to the truth in all dealings with other people. To treat them fairly and justly and according to what is right and true, even at cost to ourselves. Not to “bear false witness,” but to make it our pride to ensure that all are accorded every good thing that they are entitled to and are requited according to the truth. But our love of the truth has to extend further, because the truth is a good in itself. The patient biologist investigating the lifestyles of aquatic worms – thanks all the same, I’ll stick with the economics – is ablaze with a passion to find out. Just “find out.” Get to the bottom of it (literally as well as figuratively). Nothing seems more foreign to us than the worms’ little customs and ways, but we are all creatures of this world. If we understood them better we would see that they are trying to deal with the some of the same problems we deal with. They might have something to teach us. Or perhaps they are just extremely nutritious and would reward anyone who learns how to cultivate them.

We cannot be just, we cannot deal justly with the world, unless we love the truth and take advantage of every opportunity afforded us to uncover it. The Holy Father expresses this well: there is not form of caring that defies the truth of how the world actually works. Socialism was a noble-sounding dream, but it crashed to the ground like all dreams and when it did it crushed so many under its weight.

The ninth commandment tells is not to live in jealousy, by coveting and resenting. The tenth commandment applies that precept to specific things that we might be tempted to covet, but the ninth commandment puts the finger right on the problem: submitting to covetousness itself. The implication is that one cannot aggrandize himself by acquiring things or honors or any of the various ends that he might fancy in his covetousness. They things one can covet actually add nothing to oneself, they would be at best a distraction in themselves and so gaining them in unworthy ways is entirely useless. For us to lose ourselves in dreams of what life could be like “if only we had . . .” is like being lost in a world of narcotic dreams. There is no alternative life; there is only here and now. There are no other good things than the things that life affords us here and now. French wines, Cuban cigars, whatever your work and effort have brought to your table are good, but only if they are real. Dreaming about them is a sin against your dignity. Now, that is not to condemn planning. Planning for the future is a good in itself for the same reason that

working productively is a good, under the seventh commandment. But planning is the opposite of dreaming, as everyone knows. Covetousness is the just punishment for idle dreaming, and satisfaction is the reward for wise planning.

Study of the world is good not only because the fruits of it are good, but because it earns its reward in the economy of life. Like the Brazilian coffee, other people will pay us for it. That is their way of signifying that it has value to them, and all value is relative. In the economy of creation there is no absolute value; all value comes from and stand in relation to the value of other things. Life is an absolute value, which is why we cannot create life. It comes only from god. But the things we can achieve are relative goods, and there is nothing wrong with that. It is how he deigned that his world would be. He chose to make this a world that knows justice and truth. Saint John says of Paradise that “What we shall be later has not yet been revealed,” and so that is certainly true. We know that Jesus loves, and that the wonders of his home are beyond our imaging and we are not going to second-guess him. But we also know something from the Commandments that we have in our hands. They express the way we are supposed to live, and that a world – any world – where they are universally accepted and honored is good enough for us. We were made to live in the world of the Commandments, and in a very real sense we don’t need anything more than that, whether for a day only or for eternity. If we were to live the Commandments, we would already be in Paradise.

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