

Christian Ethics. How Should We Live?

5. Natural Law Ethics

Sunday, June 12, 2005

9 to 9:50 am, in the Parlor.

Everyone is welcome!

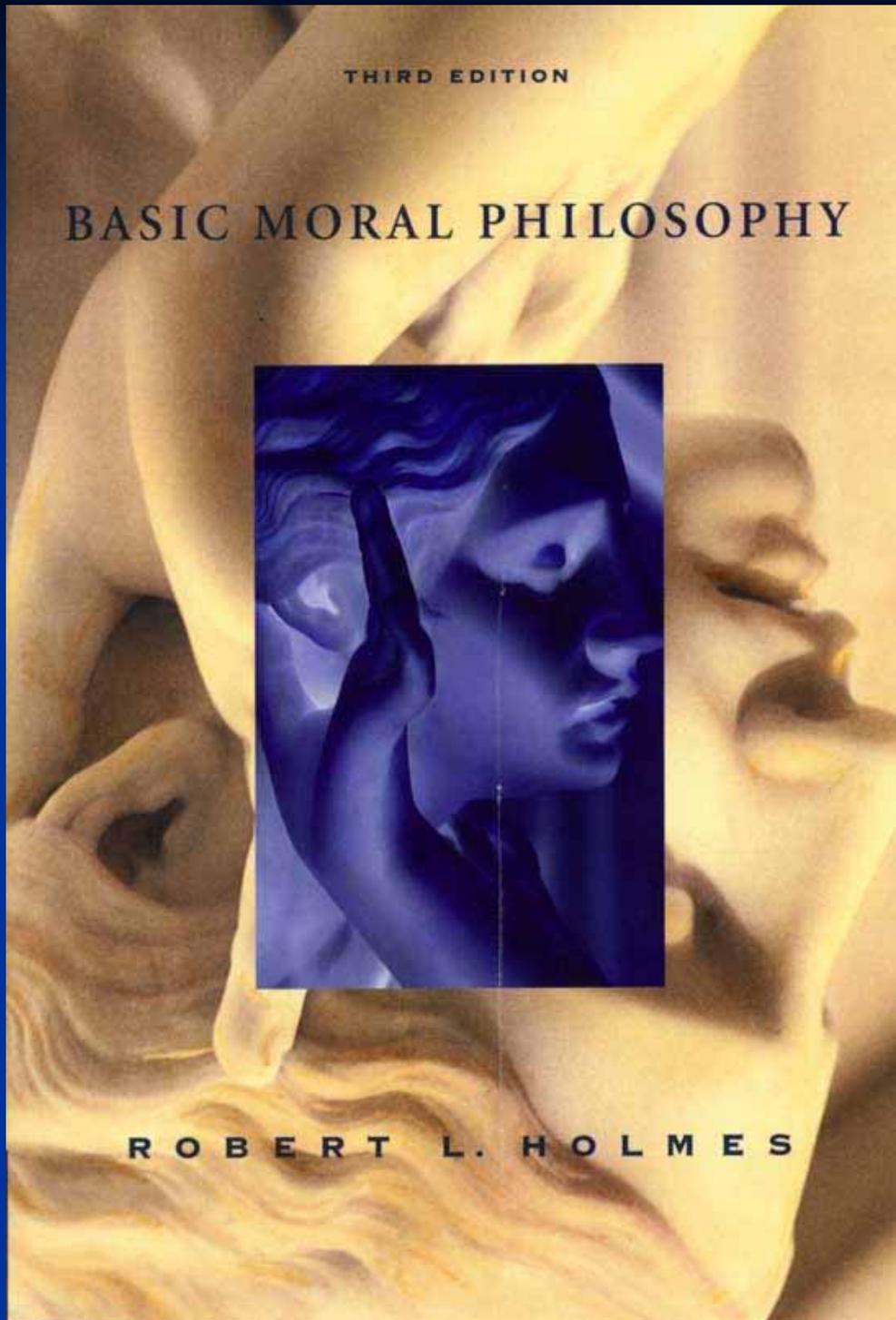
St. John in the Wilderness

**Praise to you, God, for all your work
among us.**

**Yours is the vigor in creation,
yours is the impulse in our new
discoveries.**

**Make us adventurous, yet reverent
and hopeful
in all we do.**

- A New Zealand Prayer Book, p. 612



- **Basic Moral Philosophy, Third Edition**, Robert L. Holmes. Thomson Wadsworth, 2003. ISBN 0-534-58477-2 (Chapter 7: “Natural Law Ethics”)
- Dr. Holmes is professor of philosophy at the University of Rochester.

Christian Ethics

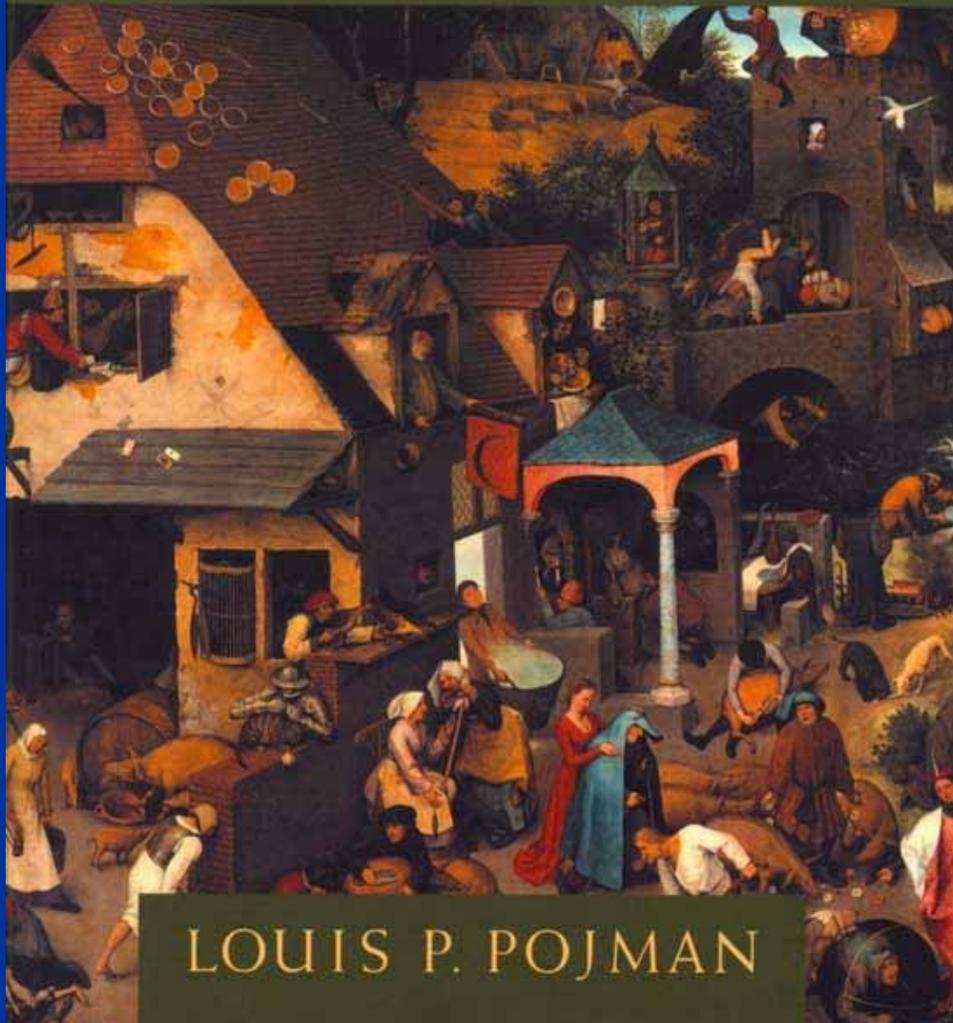
An Introduction

Edited by
Bernard Hoose

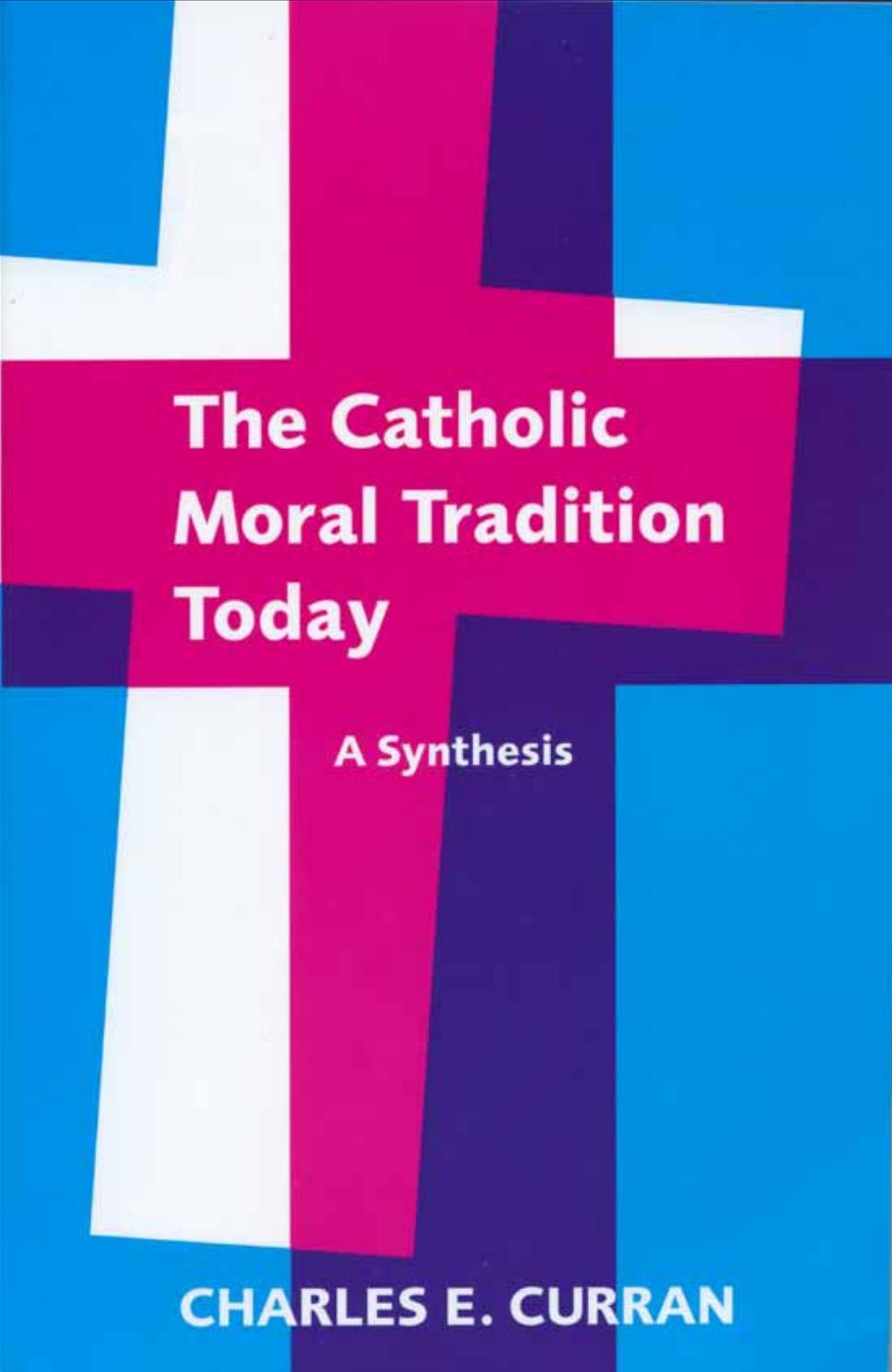
- “Natural Law” by Gerald J. Hughes, in: **Christian Ethics: An Introduction**. Edited by Bernard Hoose, A Michael Glazier Book, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN, 1998. ISBN: 0-8146-5929-2.
- Dr. Gerald J Hughes is vice principal and lecturer in philosophy at Heythrop College, University of London.

HOW SHOULD WE LIVE?

AN INTRODUCTION TO ETHICS



- **How Should We Live? An Introduction to Ethics**, Louis P. Pojman, Wadsworth Publishing, 2005. ISBN: 0-534-55657-4. (Chapter 4 “The Case for Ethical Objectivism”)
- Dr. Pojman is professor of philosophy at the United States Military Academy



**The Catholic
Moral Tradition
Today**

A Synthesis

CHARLES E. CURRAN

- **The Catholic Moral Tradition Today: A Synthesis** (Moral Traditions and Moral Arguments Series), Charles E. Curran. Georgetown University Press, 1999. ISBN: 0-878-40717-0 (Chapter 2)
- Dr. Curran is the Elizabeth Scurlock University Professor of Human Values at Southern Methodist University, and former president of the American Theological Society, The Catholic Theological Society of America, and the Society of Christian Ethics.

Introduction

Introduction

Ethics of Doing vs. Being

- There are two ways of approaching the question of what it means to be **moral** or **ethical** (= *right / good* rather than *wrong / evil*):
 - 1. **Ethics of Doing = Action-based Ethics = Ethics of Conduct.** Asks the question: *What should I do?*
 - 2. **Ethics of Being = Virtue-based Ethics = Aretaic Ethics.** Asks the question: *What should I become?*

Introduction

Ethics of Doing

- There are two major divisions in **Ethics of Doing** (= **Action-based Ethics = Ethics of Conduct**):
 - 1. **Relativism**: *all* moral principles are **relative**, and will vary from culture to culture (= Conventional Ethical Relativism or Conventionalism) or even from person to person (= Subjective Ethical Relativism or Subjectivism)
 - 2. **Objectivism, Absolutism**: there are **universal moral principles** that apply to all people, regardless of the culture, place, or time that they live.
 - **Absolutism**: the **universal moral principles** do not conflict with each other. It should (at least theoretically) be possible to find one correct answer to every moral problem.
 - **Objectivism**: some of the **universal moral principles** may override others in some situations.

Introduction

Ethics of Doing

- All Christian ethical theories of doing agree there are **universal moral principles** that apply to all people, regardless of the culture, place or time that they live.
- A Christian system of ethics may be:
 - An **Absolutist** system.
 - An **Objectivist** system.

Introduction

Ethics of Doing

- What makes an act *right* or *good*?
- There are two general answers to this question that create two approaches to the **Ethics of Doing** (= **Action-based Ethics = Ethics of Conduct**):
 - 1. **Teleological Ethics = Consequentialist Ethics**. The morality of an act is based on the *outcome* or *consequence* of the act.
 - 2. **Deontological Ethics = Nonconsequentialist Ethics**. The morality of an act is based in the *act itself*.
- Most Christian ethics of doing are *primarily* deontological or nonconsequentialist.

Introduction

Deontological Ethics

- How do we know or find out if an act is *right or wrong, good or bad*?
 - 1. Through a **revelation** from God (from Scripture, for example)
 - 2. By discerning the **Natural Law** (the topic of today's session....)

Natural Law in Christian Ethics

Natural Law

Basis

- The basis for a belief in “**natural law**:”
 - Human nature and the creation reflect the goodness of the creator God.
 - God’s plan, intentions, design for world has been “imprinted” in all that God has created – including our own hearts and minds
 - Because of this, by studying ourselves and God’s creation, we can learn something of God’s plan and design, and come to understand how God intends us to live.
 - God’s plan / intentions / design for human beings in the creation is called the **natural law**.

Natural Law

Basis

- The scriptural basis often cited for **Natural Law** is Paul, in Romans 2:14-15:

When Gentiles, who do not possess the [Jewish] law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness....” (NRSV)

Natural Law

The Thomist Tradition

- Since the time of Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), **Natural Law Ethics** has been an important part of Christian Ethics, particularly in the Roman Catholic tradition.
- Thomas Aquinas combined:
 - The Greek Stoics' idea of a *cosmic natural law* that governs the universe, and contains the principles for finding individual happiness and social harmony.
 - Aristotle's idea that everything in the world has a specific purpose, nature or *telos*.

Natural Law

The Thomist Tradition

- Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) called God's plan / intention / design for Creation the “**eternal law.**”
- The “**eternal law**” includes:
 - 1. The “eternal law” obeyed by non-human parts of creation, including:
 - The laws obeyed by inanimate matter – which we today call the laws of physics and chemistry.
 - The laws obeyed by plants and animals
 - 2. The “eternal law” intended for human beings -- **natural law.**
 - “... **natural law embodies nothing other than a participation of the eternal law in rational creatures.**”
(Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*)

Natural Law

The Thomist Tradition

- The actions of plants and animals are determined by ... the law of their nature, or the original determination given to them by the fact of the Creator having endowed them with their specific natures. They must follow their natural tendencies or appetites. This fact leads us to suspect that in man also there must be a law of nature necessitating his actions in a manner consonant with his nature. If so, we shall have found a basis for moral obligation.

- Charles C. Miltner (a 20th century “Thomist”), *Elements of Ethics*, Macmillan, 1933

Natural Law

The Thomist Tradition

- The Creator of the world has imprinted an order on the human heart that conscience reveals to us and enjoins us to obey. The laws governing the relationship between human beings and states are to be sought where the Father of all things wrote them, that is, in human nature.

- *Pacem in terris*, Pope John XXIII, nn. 1-5

Natural Law

The Thomist Tradition

- The non-human parts of creation reflect the **eternal law** by “obeying” God’s “eternal law” in a *deterministic* way.
 - The purpose or *telos* of a knife is to cut. It “obeys” its *telos* without fail. Its behavior is *deterministic*.
- Human beings have a *choice* in obeying God’s plan / intention / design for them – the **natural law**. They can *discover* the laws and *choose* to obey them because God has given human beings a rational nature (= reason) which:
 - Allows us to perceive and understand the natural law.
 - Inclines us towards obeying the natural law.

Natural Law

The Thomist Tradition

- Examples of human inclinations towards obeying the **natural law**:
 - The natural inclination for self-preservation.
 - The natural inclination to reproduce, and then care for and teach our offspring.
 - The natural inclination to act according to reason.

Natural Law

The Thomist Tradition

- Example of the ability of our reason to perceive the **natural law**:
 - The precept that *good is to be done and promoted, and evil is to be avoided* is self-evident to us.

Natural Law

The Thomist Tradition

Thomas Aquinas in *Summa Theologiae*:

- “To the natural law belong those things to which a man is inclined naturally; and among these it is proper to man to be inclined to act according to reason. Hence this is the first precept of the law, that *good is to be done and promoted, and evil is to be avoided*. All other precepts of the natural law are based on this; so that all things which the practical reason naturally apprehends as man’s good belong to the precepts of the natural law under the form of things to be done or avoided.”

Natural Law

The Thomist Tradition

- From the fundamental precept of **natural law** that *good is to be done and promoted and evil avoided*, other precepts of the natural law “naturally” appeal to our sense of reason:
 - It is good to seek and know the truth about God.
 - It is good to live in a society with one another.
 - It is good to have friends.
 - It is good to honor our father and mother.

Natural Law

The Thomist Tradition

- If we:
 - follow the natural inclinations of our reason to do good,
 - obey the principles that appeal to our reason as good,we will be living in accordance with our nature, i.e. according to **natural law**.
- But since the **natural law** is God's plan / intent / design for us, to live in accordance with our nature is also to live in accordance with the *will of God*.

Natural Law

The Thomist Tradition

- One consequence of **natural law** (= God's plan / intent / design for human beings in creation) being imprinted upon human nature is that even an atheist can discern what is morally good and live according to God's will, even though they will not recognize it as such.
 - This is what Paul was saying in Romans 2:14-15.
 - An atheist will lack however the truth given through revelation.

Problems in Natural Law Ethics

Problems

Three Problems

- Three problems in **Natural Law Ethics**:
 - 1. The effect of **Original Sin and the Fall** on our ability to discern God's plan / design / intentions, both within our sinful selves, and in the fallen creation around us.
 - 2. The **“Is” problem**. It can be difficult to determine just what *is* “natural” versus “unnatural.”
 - 3. The **“Ought” problem**. Presuming we are sure that something is “natural,” how do we then determine it should be the basis for something we *ought* to do?
 - The problem of bridging the gap between **“Is”** to **“Ought”**

Problems

Original Sin and the Fall

- The **Doctrine of Original Sin and the Fall** says that our human nature does not faithfully reflect what God planned / designed / intended.
 - In particular, we have a tendency to sin that is so profound that *all* human beings are sinners.
- To what degree has our human nature been morally distorted?

Problems

Original Sin and the Fall

- One extreme is to say our human natures have been so morally distorted that, without help, we are incapable of discerning *anything* but *our own distortions*.
- In this view, sin is a power that has profoundly affected and weakened human reason and human nature.
 - This reality makes so-called “Catholic Natural Law Optimism” untenable.

Problems

Original Sin and the Fall

- This is the view taken by many of the Protestant Reformers, who rejected the idea of Natural Law.
 - The motto of the 16th century reformers: *sola fide, sola gratia, sola Scriptura* = “only by faith, only by grace, only from Scripture.”
 - Human reason is not a reliable source of knowledge; we must rely only on revelation (*sola Scriptura*).

Problems

Original Sin and the Fall

- In modern times, the great modern Protestant theologian Karl Barth (1886 -1968) argued that:
 - we must first find God's will in *God's self-revelation*.
 - If we begin with *human reason* to try to discern God's will (the approach of natural law), we risk committing the great idolatry of making God into our own image and likeness.

Problems

Original Sin and the Fall

- Proponents of **Natural Law Ethics** argue that although Original Sin and the Fall has indeed clouded our reason and weakened our constancy to seek the good, it is nonetheless still possible, *with the help of God's grace* (= through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit), for our reason to perceive how God intends us to live.
 - They accept the Protestant reformers “*sola gratia*” (only by grace), but reject “*sola Scriptura*” (only from Scripture)

Problems

Three Problems

- Three problems in **Natural Law Ethics**:
 - 1. The effect of **Original Sin and the Fall** on our ability to discern God's plan / design / intentions, both within our sinful selves, and in the fallen creation around us.
 - 2. The **“Is” problem**. It can be difficult to determine just what *is* “natural” versus “unnatural.”
 - 3. The **“Ought” problem**. Presuming we are sure that something is “natural,” how do we then determine it should be the basis for something we *ought* to do?
 - The problem of bridging the gap from **“Is”** to **“Ought”**

Problems

The “Is” Problem

- How do we decide just what *is* and what *is not* in accordance with nature?

Problems

The “Is” Problem: Homosexuality

- Consider homosexuality. It is frequently argued that it is immoral because it is not “natural”
- What do we mean by *not* “*natural*” here?
 - 1. It is not found in nature among other animals? or
 - 2. It diverges from the human norm for sexual behavior? or
 - 3. It uses sex organs for purposes not part of their natural function? or
 - 4. It is a lifestyle preference that goes against how human beings are constituted to live?

Problems

The “Is” Problem: Homosexuality

- “1. It is not found in nature among other animals”
 - False. It is found in nature among other animals (for example, it is rampant among bonobo apes).
 - In this sense, homosexuality *is* natural.
- “2. It diverges from the human norm for sexual behavior.”
 - True. Heterosexuality is clearly the statistical norm for sexual behavior.
 - In this sense, homosexuality *is not* natural.

Problems

The “Is” Problem: Homosexuality

- “3. It uses sex organs for purposes not part of their natural function.”
 - True – if the one and only “natural” function of sex organs is procreation.
 - False – if the “natural” function of sex organs also includes the expression of love, simply enjoyment.
 - In the *latter* sense, homosexuality *is* natural, but in the *former* sense (when you hold the one and only natural function of sex organs is procreation), homosexuality *is not* natural.

Problems

The “Is” Problem: Homosexuality

- “4. It is a lifestyle preference that goes against how human beings are constituted to live.”
 - Maybe, maybe not. Some studies suggest that homosexuality is not a lifestyle preference, but a genetically determined orientation over which a person has little or no control.
 - In this sense, homosexuality may or may not be natural.

Problems

The “Is” Problem

- Deciding just what *is* and what *is not* in accordance with nature is not always straightforward.

Problems

Three Problems

- Three problems in **Natural Law Ethics**:
 - 1. The effect of **Original Sin and the Fall** on our ability to discern God's plan / design / intentions, both within our sinful selves, and in the fallen creation around us.
 - 2. The **“Is” problem**. It can be difficult to determine just what *is* “natural” versus “unnatural.”
 - 3. The **“Ought” problem**. Presuming we are sure that something is “natural,” how do we then determine it should be the basis for something we *ought* to do?
 - The problem of bridging the gap between **“Is”** to **“Ought”**

Problems

The “Ought” Problem

- Suppose you have convinced yourself that a particular action *is* natural.
- If a particular action *is* “natural” in some sense, by what criteria do we decide if its “naturalness” is a sign we *ought* to do that action?
 - How do we bridge the gap between “*is*” and “*ought*”?

Problems

The “Ought” Problem

- For example, sexual harassment, repeated unwanted sexual attention, *is* natural, in the sense that it is found in nature among many animals:
 - birds, bees, chimpanzees, sea otters, dung flies, elephant seals, and baboons
- But no one would argue that because sexual harassment *is* natural in this sense, human beings *ought* to practice sexual harassment.

Problems

The “Is” and “Ought” Problems

- Even if an action *is* natural, we still must carefully analyze and assess whether we should leap the gap between “*is*” and “*ought*,” and say we *ought* to be doing that action.

Problems

Summary

- As with the difficulty of human reason clouded by Original Sin and Fall, proponents of **Natural Law Ethics** argue that the:
 - “Is” Problem
 - “Ought” Problemcan be overcome, *with the grace of God (= inspiration of the Holy Spirit)*.
- We may also need to bring in truths from divine revelation to help decide the “is” and “ought” problems.