



Purpose in Nature?

The Moral Dimension of the Book of Nature





Outline

- I. Is nature normative? The perennial intuition and its pitfalls
- II. Laws of nature and the natural moral law: their relationship and difference
- III. Rediscovering the notions of nature and natural: a philosophical and theological reevaluation
- IV. Can the natural law be read in the book of nature? A proposal

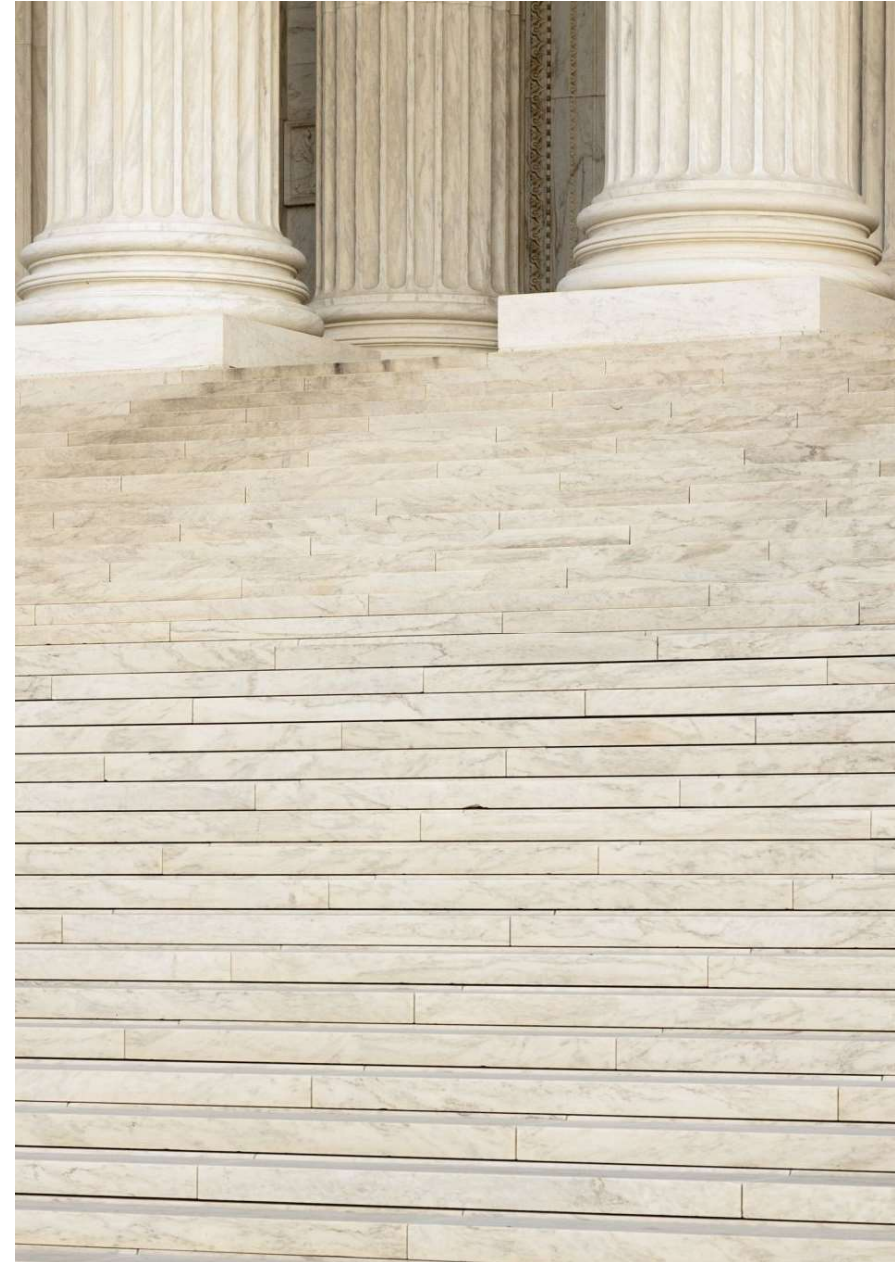
I. Is nature normative? Examples from history

- Stoic philosophers
 - The way of happiness: virtuous living = life 'in accordance with nature' (*kata fysin*) and 'in agreement with nature'
- (But see Christopher Gill, *Learning to Live Naturally: Stoic Ethics and its Modern Significance* (2022), chapter 3)



The natural law tradition

- Long history:
 - Stoics (?)
 - Philo of Alexandria
 - Church Fathers (especially Origen and Augustine)
 - Medievals, especially Thomas Aquinas
- Exact meaning may vary, but constant reference to "the law of nature" (*nomos tes fyseos, lex naturae*) and "natural law" (*lex naturalis*)



Reading the book of nature morally

- St Clement of Rome's *Letter to the Corinthians*
 - Context: sin of disobedience, sedition against ecclesiastical authority
 - Chapter 20: the harmony of nature/creation teaches us obedience to the creator and harmony among each other



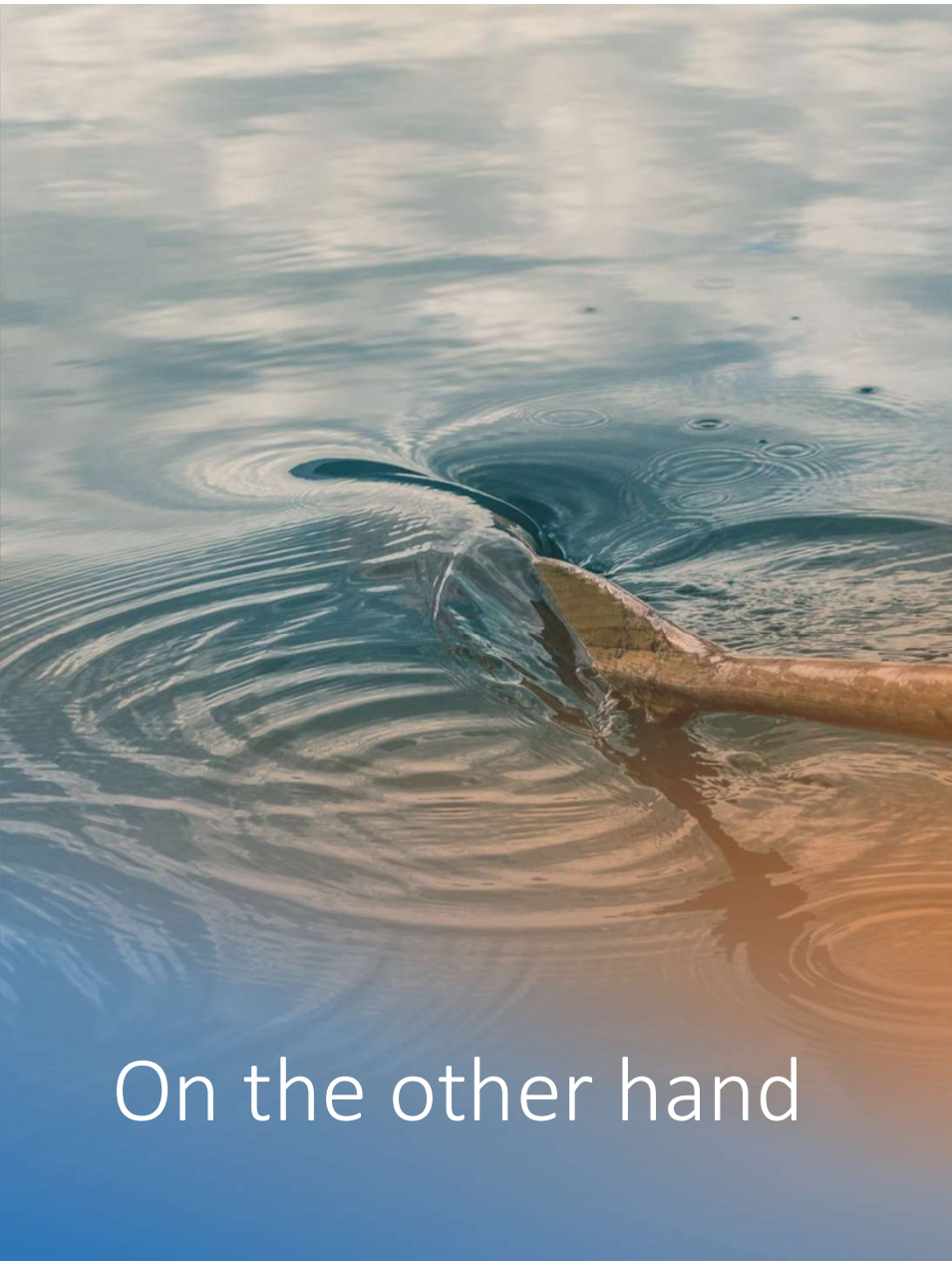


"The heavens move at His direction and are subject to Him in tranquility. Day and night complete the course assigned by Him without hindering each other. Sun and moon and the choir of stars revolve in harmony according to His command in the orbits assigned to them (...). The earth, flowering at His bidding in due seasons, brings forth abundant food for men and beasts and all the living beings on its surface, without reluctance and without altering any of His arrangements. (...) The mass of the boundless sea, gathered together in one place according to His plan, does not overrun the barriers appointed to it, but acts as He commanded it. (...) The seasons of spring, summer, fall and winter give way in turn, one to the other, in peace. (...) The very smallest of the animals come together in harmony and in peace. The great Creator and Lord of the universe commanded all these things to be at peace and in harmony..."



Hexaemeron
tradition

- Basil of Caesarea, Ambrose of Milan...
- For example:
 - "First, then, whenever you see a grassy plant or a flower, think of human nature, remembering the comparison of the wise Isaia, that 'All flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of the grass.'"
(Basil, Homily 5)



On the other hand

But nature also teaches evil... (Homily 7)

"The majority of fish eat one another, and the smaller among them are food for the larger."

"Now, what else do we men do in the oppression of our inferiors? (...) Beware, lest the same end as that of the fish awaits you - somewhere a fishhook, or a snare, or a net."

The reason:

"Since you have already perceived much wickedness and plotting in weak animals, I want you to avoid imitating the evil-doers. (...) This is the wickedness of the creatures endowed with neither reason nor voice."

Still, there's something worth imitating in the fish, too... In particular:

"You see that the divine plan fulfills all things and extends even to the smallest. A fish does not oppose the law of God, but we men do not endure the precepts of salvation."

In modern times

- Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees* (1714)
 - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Fable_of_the_Bees
 - Controversial thesis that beehives thrive when the individual bees act on their self interest...



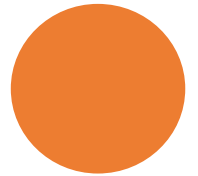
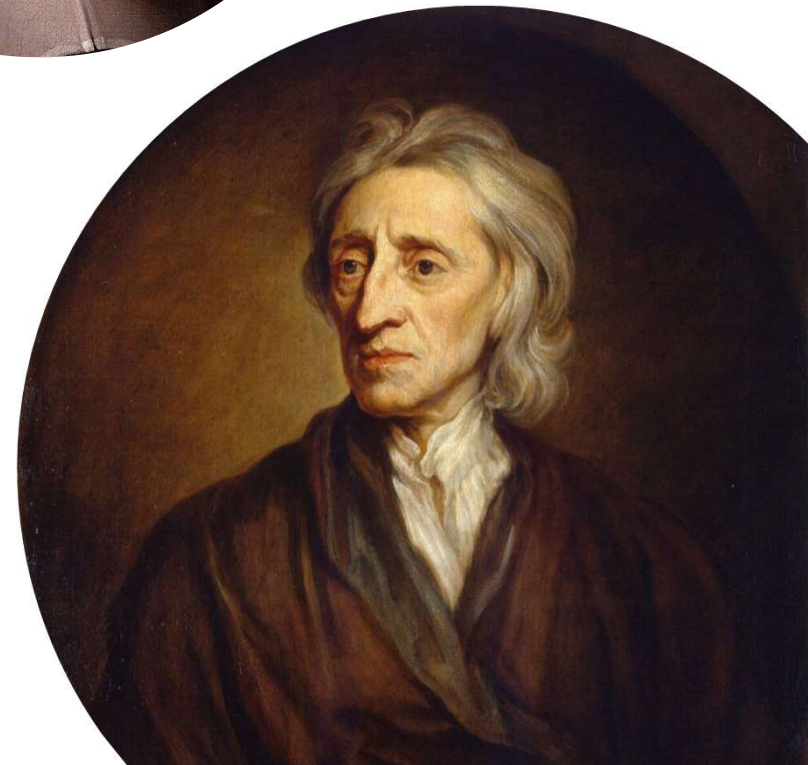
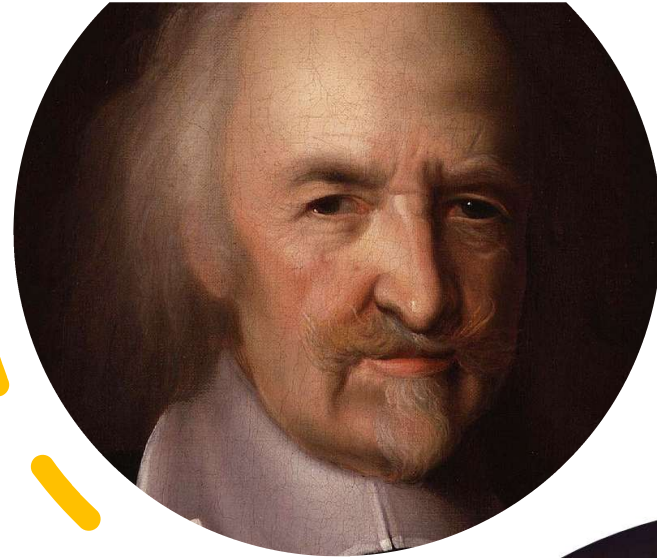
"State of nature" theories

- Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651)

"... solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short"

- John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* (1689):

"To properly understand political power and trace its origins, we must consider the state that all people are in naturally. That is a state of perfect freedom of acting and disposing of their own possessions and persons as they think fit within the bounds of the law of nature. (...) The natural state is also one of equality in which all power and jurisdiction is reciprocal and no one has more than another."



Nature as an image of moral purity?

CHAPTER I.

STATE OF THE ARGUMENT.

IN crossing a heath, suppose I pitched my foot against a stone, and were asked how the stone came to be there, I might possibly answer, that, for any thing I knew to the contrary, it had lain there for ever: nor would it perhaps be very easy to shew the absurdity of this answer. But suppose I had found a watch upon the ground, and it should be enquired how the watch happened to be in that place, I should hardly think of the answer which I had before given, that, for any thing I knew, the watch might have

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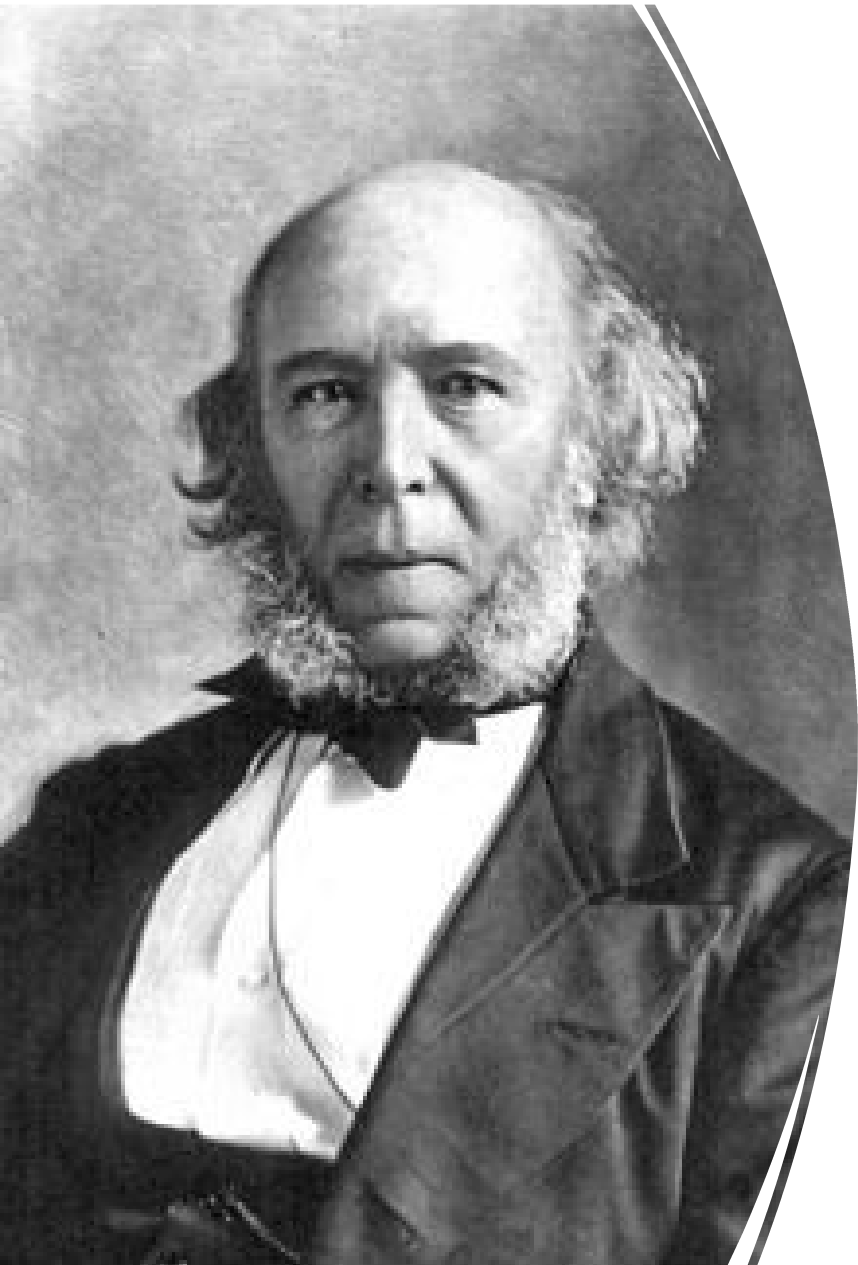
always

William Paley's *Natural Theology* (1802)

McGrath (*Open Secret*, p. 300):

"The casual reader of William Paley's *Natural Theology* encounters a paean of praise for the goodness of the natural order, deftly – though somewhat selectively – illustrated by luminous examples of the wisdom of God in establishing such an excellent creation. The darker side of nature is conspicuously absent. To be fair to Paley, this was the wisdom of his age.

"Many writers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century were enthralled by the notion of the moral purity of nature, and hailed its potential to instruct and inspire."



Darwin and evolutionary biology

- Herbert Spencer, *Social Statics* (1850) → Social Darwinism
- From https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herbert_Spencer:
 - "Spencer developed an all-embracing conception of evolution as the progressive development of the physical world, biological organisms, the human mind, and human culture and societies.
 - "... by the 1870s and 1880s Spencer had achieved an unparalleled popularity (...). He was perhaps the only philosopher in history to sell over a million copies of his works during his own lifetime. (...) As William James remarked, Spencer "enlarged the imagination, and set free the speculative mind of countless doctors, engineers, and lawyers, of many physicists and chemists, and of thoughtful laymen generally."
 - "Spencer was "the single most famous European intellectual in the closing decades of the nineteenth century" but his influence declined sharply after 1900."



More recent versions of biological ethics

Edward O. Wilson's *Sociobiology* (1975) and *On Human Nature* (1978)

Biology, especially other mammals, as key to 'reading' or understanding human behavior (aggression, sex, altruism)

Larry Arnhart, *Darwinian Natural Right: The Biological Ethics of Human Nature* (1998)

Marc D. Hauser, *Moral Minds: How Nature Designed Our Universal Sense of Right and Wrong* (2006)

Evolution has created a universal moral grammar within our brains...



A radical Christian alternative?

Nancey Murphy and George Ellis, *On the Moral Nature of the Universe: Theology, Cosmology, and Ethics* (1996)

- Stable laws of nature → a non-interventionist God
- Finding a *kenotic* God (Phil 2) in nature
- Model for us → self-sacrificial love
- Commitment to radical non-violence

—
A perennial
intuition?

Matthew Levering, *Biblical Natural Law* (2008), p. 1:

“Whereas Enlightenment thinkers generally assumed that the ‘book of Scripture’ would only mystify and distort the reading of the ‘book of nature’, more recently both ‘books’, separated from each other, have been deemed unreliable [...]. *Pace* this view, this study seeks to uncover once again the fruitfulness for moral theology of reuniting the two ‘books’.”

Reginaldo Pizzorni, *Il diritto naturale dalle origini a S. Tommaso d’Aquino* (2nd ed, 1985), 546–47:

The moral law “was written in some way into my conscience in the form of *natural law* or *implicit word* of God, a *word written* in the human being, creature and image of God, and in the great book of the universal creation.”

Listening to the language of being

- Pope Benedict XVI, speech to the German Bundestag (2011):
- What is law? Is it just the power and will of those who rule (legal positivism)?
- The lessons of the Nazi regime and other totalitarian regimes – how can we overcome this?

Early Christian theologians "acknowledged reason and nature in their interrelation as the universally valid source of law. This step had already been taken by Saint Paul in the Letter to the Romans (...): "When Gentiles who have not the Law [the Torah of Israel] do by nature what the law requires, they are a law to themselves ... they show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness ..." (Rom 2:14f.). Here we see the two fundamental concepts of nature and conscience, where conscience is nothing other than Solomon's listening heart, reason that is open to *the language of being*."





The challenge

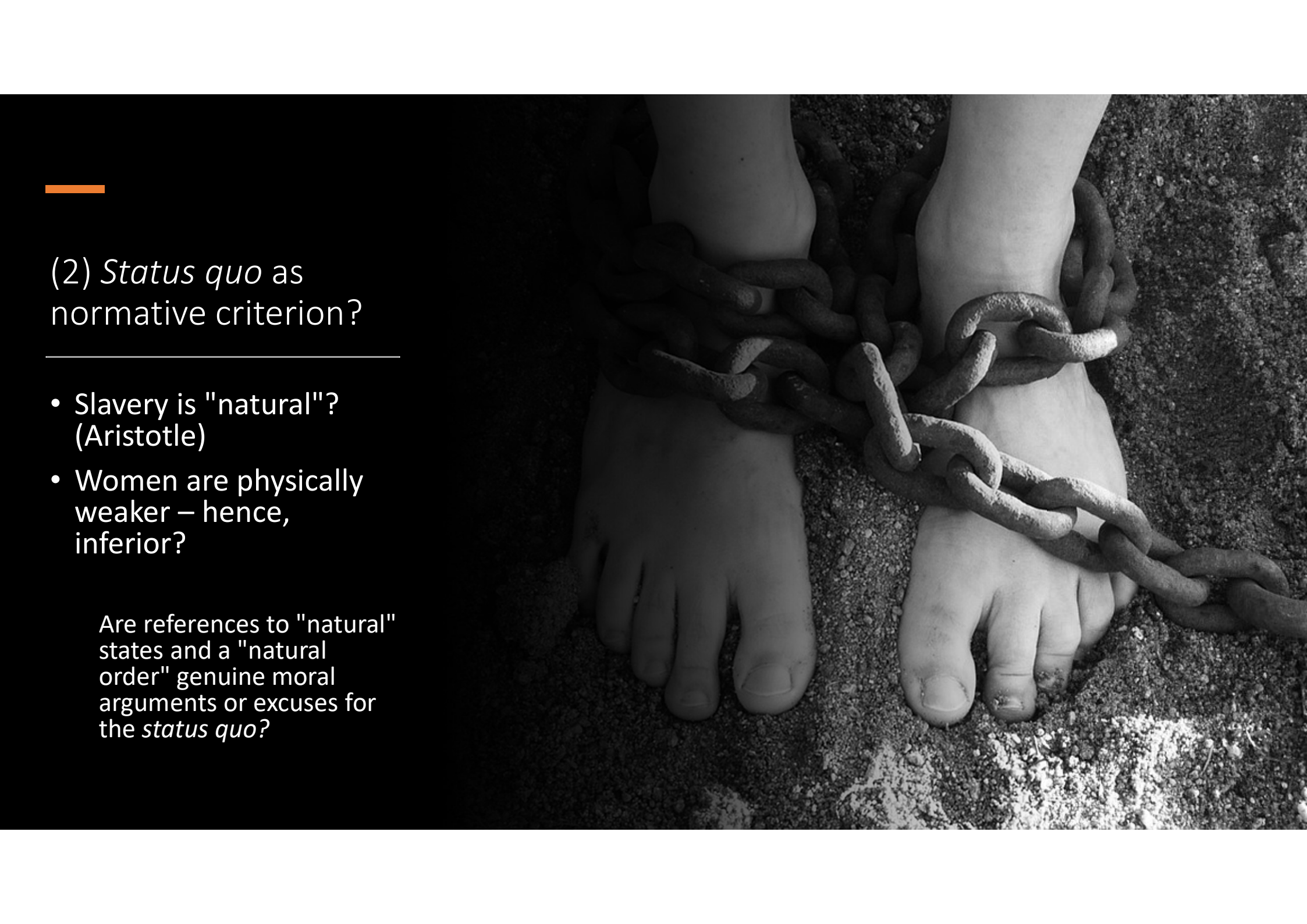
Alistair McGrath, *The Open Secret: A New Vision for Natural Theology* (2008), p. 293:

"Traditionally, any attempt to discern morality within the natural order has been categorized as "natural law." Although subject to all kinds of theoretical and practical criticisms, the notion that nature might be able to disclose an ethic independent of human *fiat* has proved remarkably resilient (...). Yet one of its most significant weaknesses is that it is ultimately dependent upon a theory of nature which nature itself cannot supply. What is "natural"?"



Its pitfalls

- (1) Confusing picture:
 - Herbert Spencer → competition and survival
→ might is right
 - Murphy and Ellis → self-sacrificial non-violence
- Which is it?
- How do we distinguish normative from non-normative aspects?



—

(2) *Status quo* as normative criterion?

- Slavery is "natural"? (Aristotle)
- Women are physically weaker – hence, inferior?

Are references to "natural" states and a "natural order" genuine moral arguments or excuses for the *status quo*?



(3) Animals as criteria for human ethics?

- Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees*
 - Bees as a model of human society?
- EO Wilson's *On Human Nature*
 - Other mammals as criteria for human aggression, sexuality and altruism?

(4) God's cosmic role as a criterion?

- Murphy and Ellis' *On the Moral Nature of the Universe*
 - God's (largely) "non-interventionist" role as criterion of human morals?
- Philip Hefner:

"Is this an adequate response to the evil of human suffering, torture and death in human history? --- I have always understood the hymn in Philippians to be describing how Christ actively works in this world, not how he refrains from working. St. Paul offers this passage as a paradigm of looking not only to our own interests but also to the interests of others (2:4)."



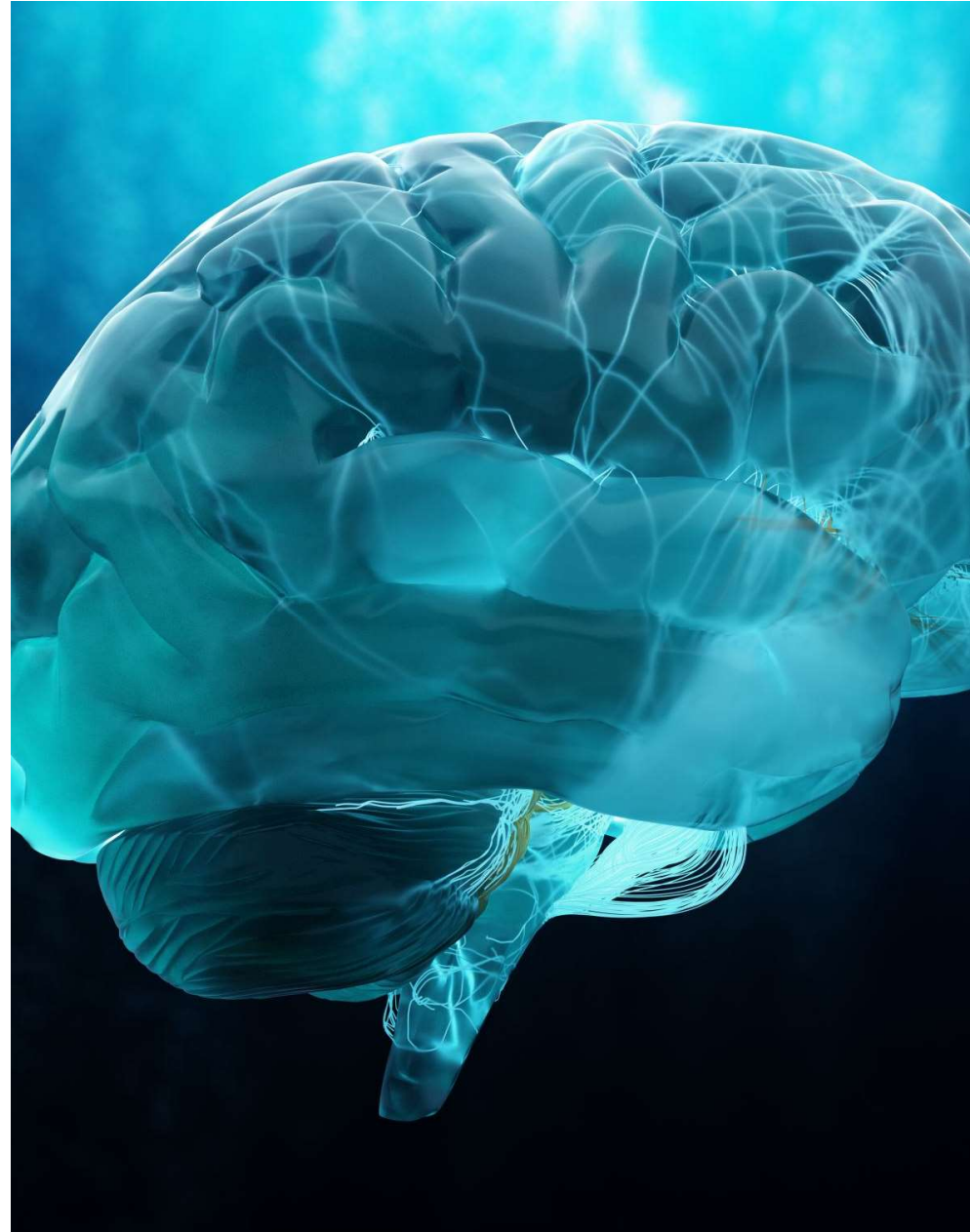


(5) Is nature simply good, anyway?

- The English poet Tennyson's famous words (*In Memoriam*, Canto 5):
"Man . . .
Who trusted God was love indeed
And love Creation's final law –
Though **Nature, red in tooth and claw**
With ravine, shrieked against his creed."
• = "the only ethic evident within nature was that of the struggle for survival" (McGrath, *The Open Secret*, p. 301)

(6) Ethics from the brain?

- Marc Hauser's *Moral Minds*
 - But are **moral instincts** a criterion of ethics, either?

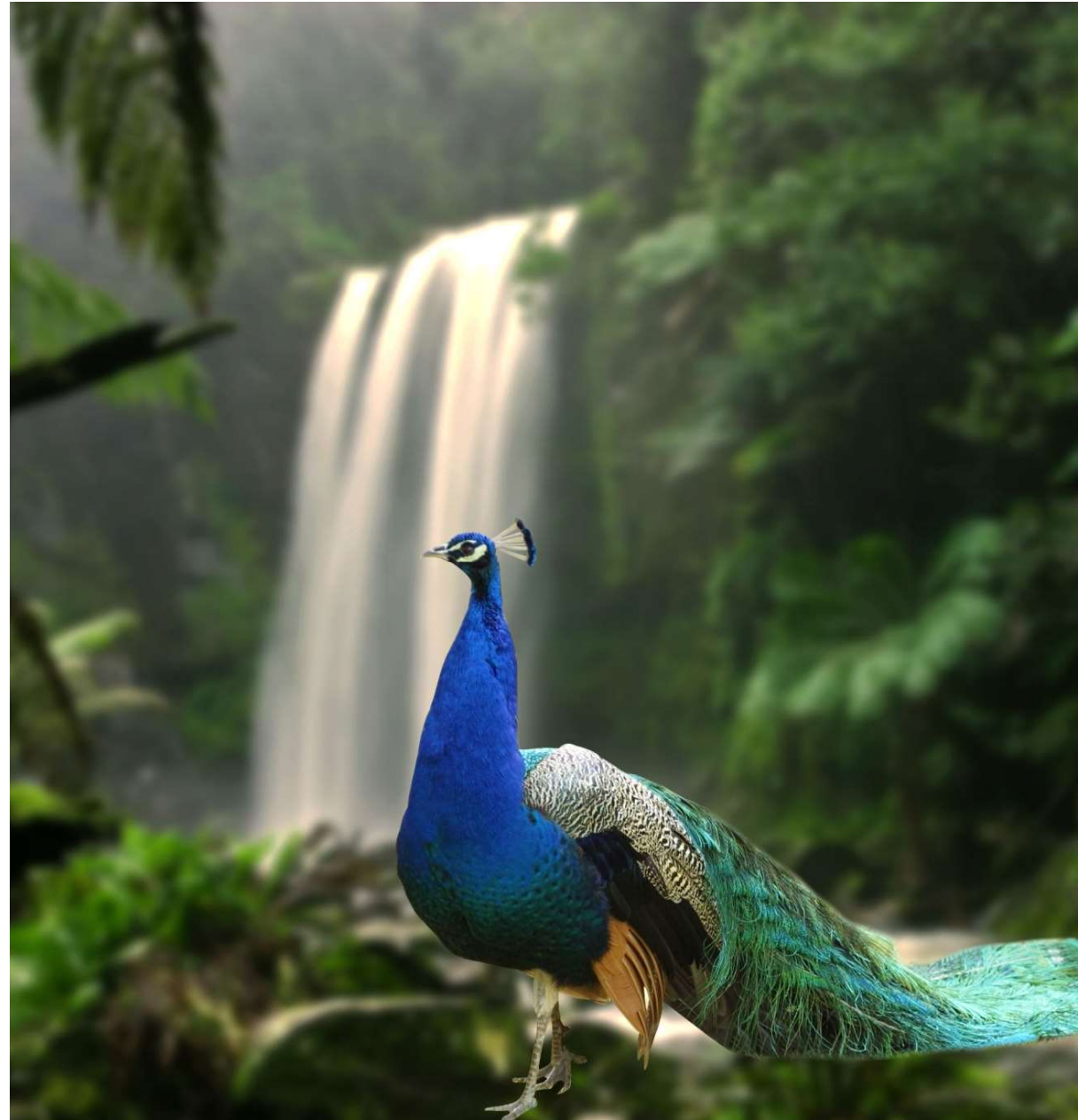


In synthesis

- Martin Rhonheimer:

“The natural law [...] is not simply a law that ‘nature’ reveals to us in some unambiguous way. Instead, it is always and only an ‘ordering of reason’ (*rationalis ordinatio*). [...] In order for natural law to lead to a concrete normativity, it cannot simply be read from the Book of Nature; ‘nature’ as such is not yet a moral or legal norm.”

(“The Secular State, Democracy, and Natural Law: Benedict XVI’s Address to the Bundestag from the Perspective of Legal Ethics and Democracy Theory”, 2015, p. 88)



Discussion question

- How would you resolve this dilemma?
 - Is "nature" still relevant for ethics?
 - Can it be invoked without these errors?
 - What do we mean by "natural" in the natural law tradition?
 - Is the "book of nature" a false lead when it comes to ethics?

Next steps

II. Laws of nature and the natural moral law: their relationship and difference

III. Rediscovering the notions of nature and natural: a philosophical and theological reevaluation

IV. Can the natural law be read in the book of nature? A proposal




II. Laws of nature and the natural law

NB – *both* words ("nature" and "law") are *highly ambiguous*

- Some contexts for **nature/natural**: philosophy, metaphysics, science, biology, ethics, ordinary life, aesthetics – often with different meanings
- Some contexts for **law**: politics, legal system, ethics, physics, economics...

Both words have undergone significant *semantic evolution*

- **Nature/natural**: from 'what something is' → to metaphysics → to the 'biological' world as a whole → to spontaneity → to that which is not man-made (artificial), etc.
- **Law**: from regularity or order → to a coercively enforced system of legislation (positive law) etc. → to mathematical formulations in science, etc.



Purpose of this section

- To reconsider **the analogy** between
 - "laws of nature" (in the world and science)
 - and the natural moral law

Suggested reading

Giuseppe Tanzella-Nitti, "Laws of Nature" (2008),
<https://inters.org/laws-of-nature>

Giuseppe Tanzella-Nitti, "The Aristotelian-Thomistic Concept of Nature and the Contemporary Debate on the Meaning of Natural Laws", *Acta Philosophica* (1997), <https://ojs-aphil.pusc.it/article/view/4214>

Slides of Lecture 4.



Science and the laws of nature – realism

- Paul Davies, *The Mind of God* (1992): laws of nature, or the regularities found by science, are really *out there*.

"The existence of regularities in nature is an objective mathematical fact. On the other hand, the statements called laws that are found in textbooks clearly are human inventions, but inventions designed to reflect, albeit imperfectly, actually existing properties of nature."



Laws of nature and ethics: a relationship?

- Possible analogies or parallelisms between legal and scientific realms:
 - Law as a 'rule' or 'dictate' → regularity in nature
 - Governance, authority → something or someone 'governs' the world
 - A norm for behavior → a rule or measure for behavior (of physical objects)
 - Natural law: principles governing all human morality → Laws of nature: principles governing natural objects

The classical notion of natural law

- *A participation* in the "eternal law" (Augustine → Aquinas)
 - **Eternal law**: God's governance and plan for all creation
 - Participation according to each creature
 - "Laws" governing **inanimate beings** → physics, chemistry
 - The dynamics of the **animate world** and of each species → biology
 - The **rational creature** (man): intellect and will → the natural *moral* law





Thomas Aquinas's definitions

Law:

‘an ordinance of reason for the common good, made by him who has care of the community, and promulgated.’

Eternal law:

‘simply the plan of divine wisdom that directs all the actions and movements of created things’.

‘His reason evidently governs the entire community in the universe’.

Natural law:

participation in the eternal law by rational creatures.

Catechism on the natural law (CCC 1954)

"Man participates in the wisdom and goodness of the Creator who gives him mastery over his acts and the ability to govern himself with a view to the true and the good.

The natural law expresses the original moral sense which enables man to discern by reason the good and the evil, the truth and the lie."

CCC 1955

*The "divine and natural" law shows man the way to follow so as to practice **the good** and attain **his end**.*

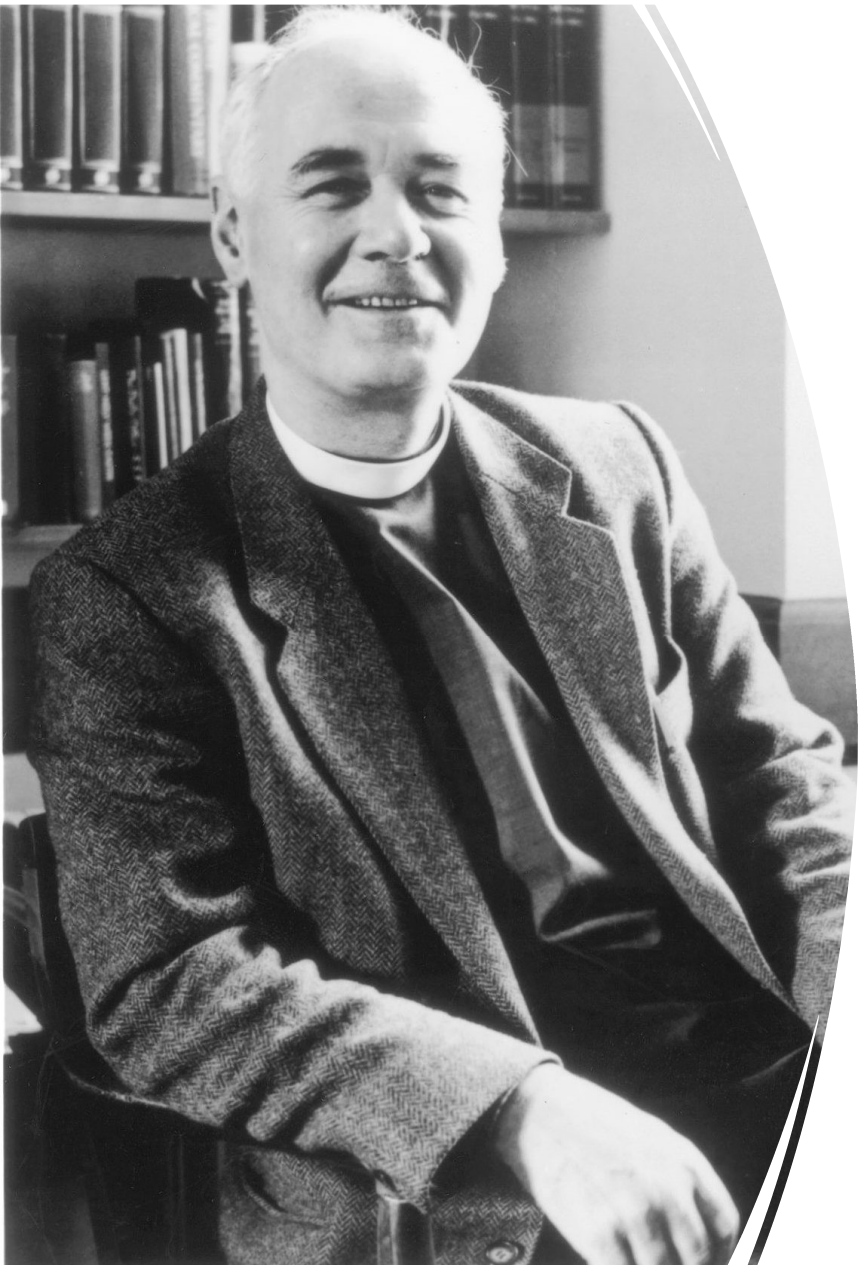
*The natural law states the **first and essential precepts** which govern the moral life.*

It hinges upon the desire for God and submission to him, who is the source and judge of all that is good, as well as upon the sense that the other is one's equal.

*Its **principal precepts** are expressed in **the Decalogue**.*

*This law is called "natural," not in reference to the nature of irrational beings, but because **reason which decrees it properly belongs to human nature**.*





Against reductionism: "layers" of reality

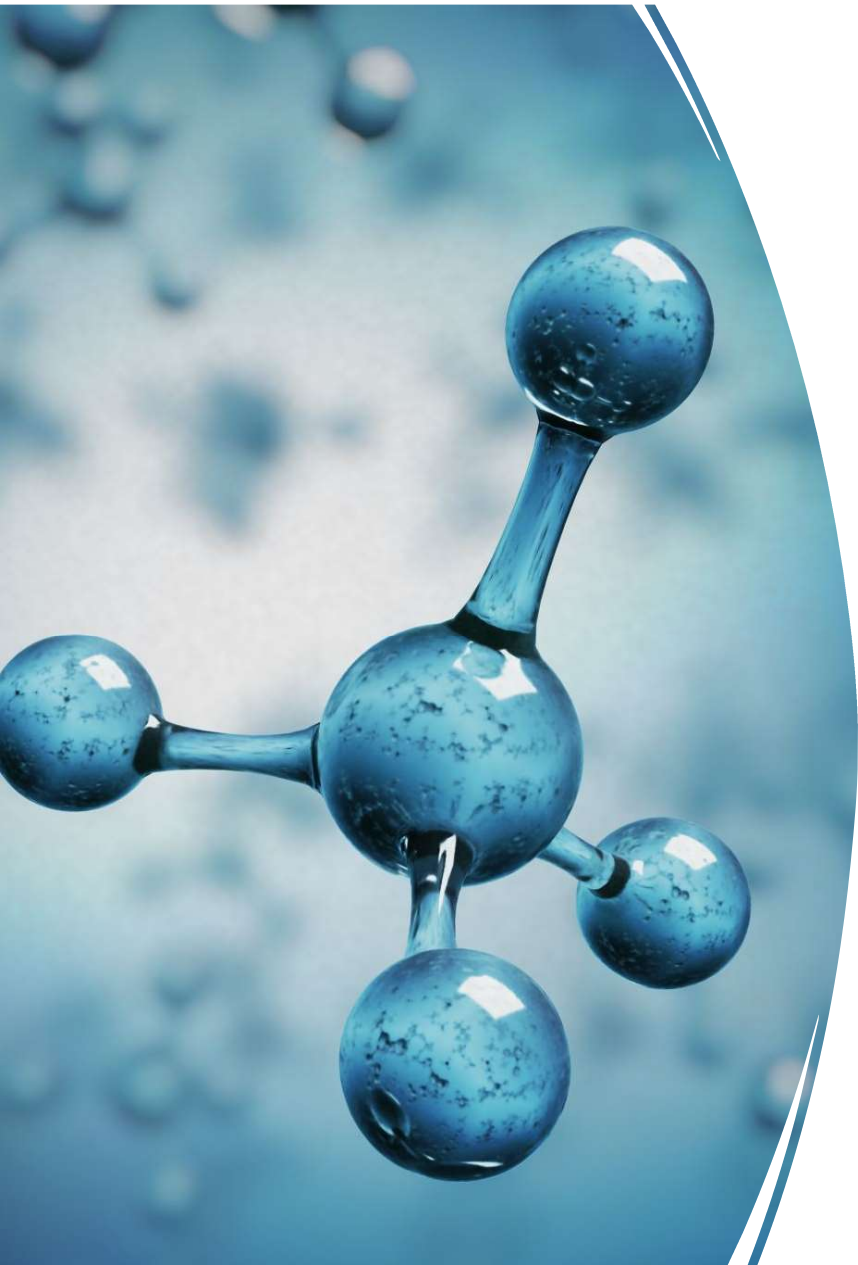
"Reality is a multi-layered unity. I can perceive another person as an aggregation of atoms, an open biochemical system in interaction with the environment, a specimen of *Homo Sapiens*, an object of beauty, someone whose needs deserve my respect and compassion, a brother for whom Christ died. All are true and all mysteriously coinhere in that one person. To deny one of these levels is to diminish both that person and myself, the perceiver; to do less than justice to the richness of reality."

John Polkinghorne, "Reductionism" (2002),
<https://inters.org/reductionism>



A layered view of reality

- **Arthur Peacocke**, the "hierarchy of the sciences"
 - The world consists of different levels of organization, each governed by its own principles or 'laws'
- Physics is different chemistry – which is different from biology etc.
- Animals share many things in common, but they also differ from each other
- Human beings participate in many layers – physical, chemical, biological (in various ways)
 - But they're also rational and spiritual – these features are not reducible to 'lower' levels



Some pointers from the analogy with science

- Discovery process
- Distinguish different levels – in science:
 - Discovery of an observable regularity
 - Its formulation, with mathematics or otherwise: "*scientific laws*" - TN
 - Its metaphysical foundations: the *specific properties* or the *formal specificity* of the beings in question
 - Cognitive challenges: testability, observability etc.

In natural law:

- **Discovery** of a distinct, rationally end-oriented being
- The **formulation** of *precepts* that govern good human behavior
 - The Decalogue
 - Virtues as precepts – or known through exemplars?
- The **metaphysical foundations** of these precepts
 - Specific form – human nature
 - Proper ends of action that fulfil humans *as* humans
 - Virtues as perfective of human beings
- **Cognitive** challenges
 - What can be known – and how it can be known (light of natural reason vs divine revelation)
 - How it can be communicated to others
 - Can moral good only be seen by those who are (minimally) virtuous?

Specifying the "content" of the natural law

a) **Precepts**

- Primary precept: good is to be done and pursued, evil to be avoided
- Secondary precepts: 'If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments... You shall not murder, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness' (Mt 19:17-18).

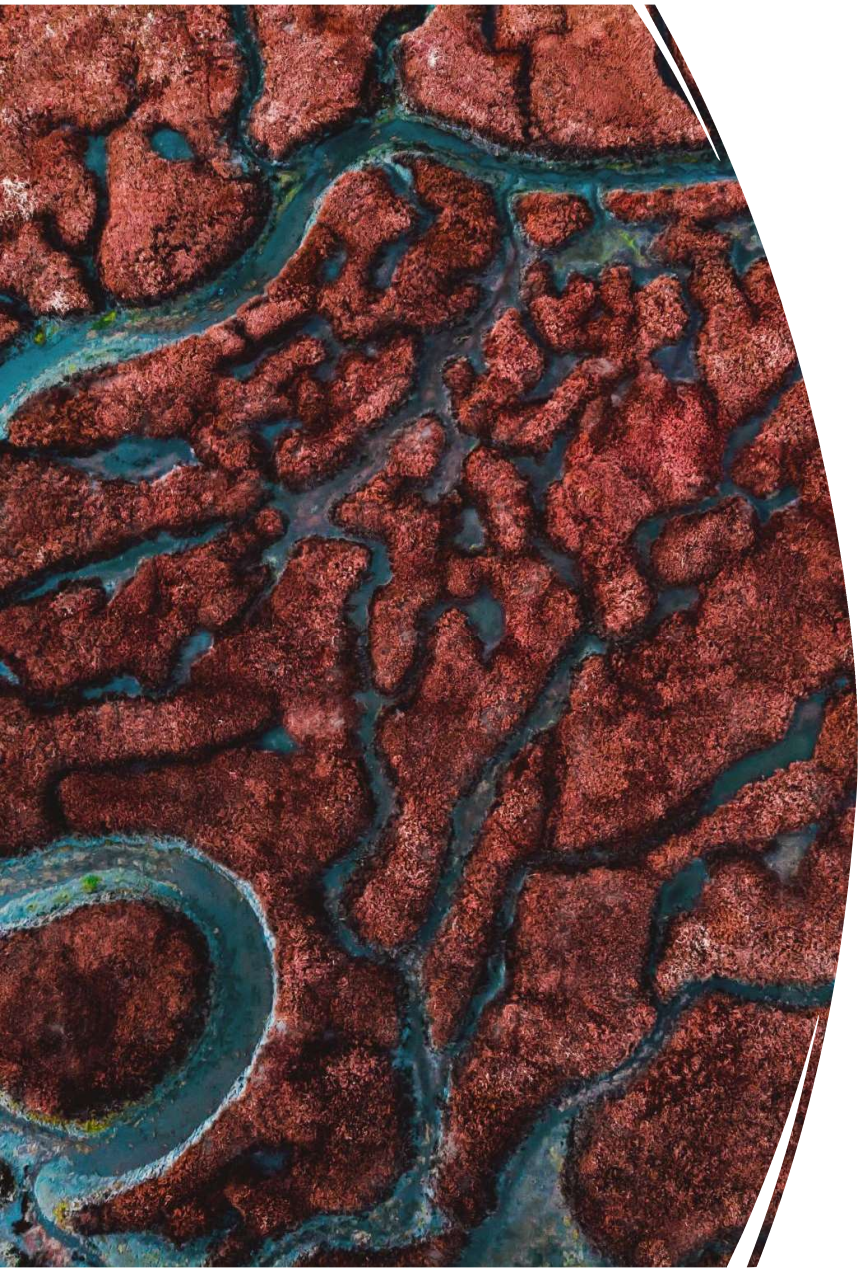
b) **Moral virtues** as the basic form of the natural law

→ Cannot be exhaustively defined in precepts/propositions!



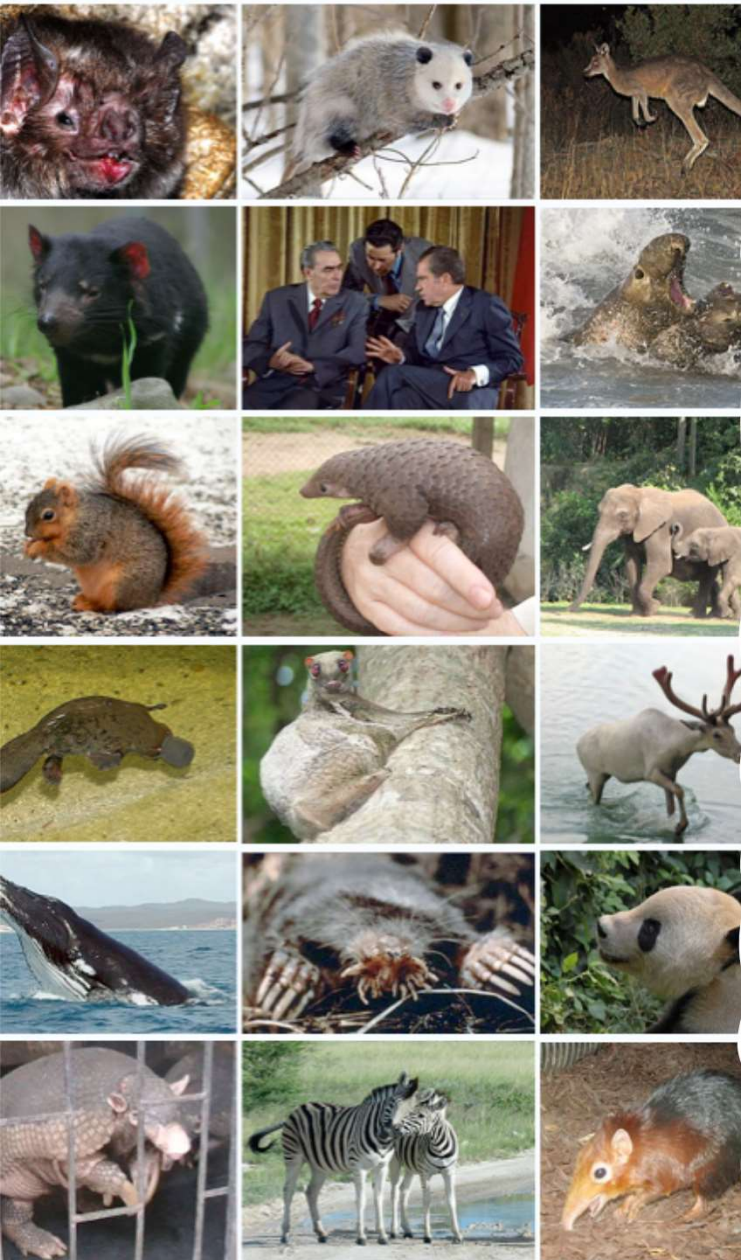
III. Rediscovering the notions of nature and natural

- CS Lewis, *Studies on Words* (1967), p. 12-14
- The "**dangerous sense**" of a word!
 - Semantic evolution: changing circumstances influence the *dominant sense*
 - Past senses: sometimes it's clearly a different meaning
 - Other times the meaning is different – but it's not easy to notice!
- Example: *What do "natural" and "human nature" mean in, say, Aristotle and Aquinas?*



The *dangerous sense* of "nature"

- What are "natural" and "human nature" for Aristotle and Aquinas?
- Modern mind and culture: biology etc.
- Slippery assumptions:
 - Aristotle was very interested in biology etc.
 - Aquinas was philosophically Aristotelian etc.
 - So, surely, "natural" means "biological" – *right?*



Possible consequences:

- "Natural law" and "natural ethics" is rooted in evolutionary biology, analogies with other mammals... (EO Wilson)
- The "naturalness" of morals is rooted in the intrinsic dynamics of the brain... (Mark Hauser)
- Perhaps also:
 - Natural law reasoning is based on **natural tendencies or appetites**, which are rooted in our biology...
 - Natural law reasoning on human sexuality is fundamentally based on the **biological functions** of bodily organs and processes... (so-called *perverted faculty argument*)



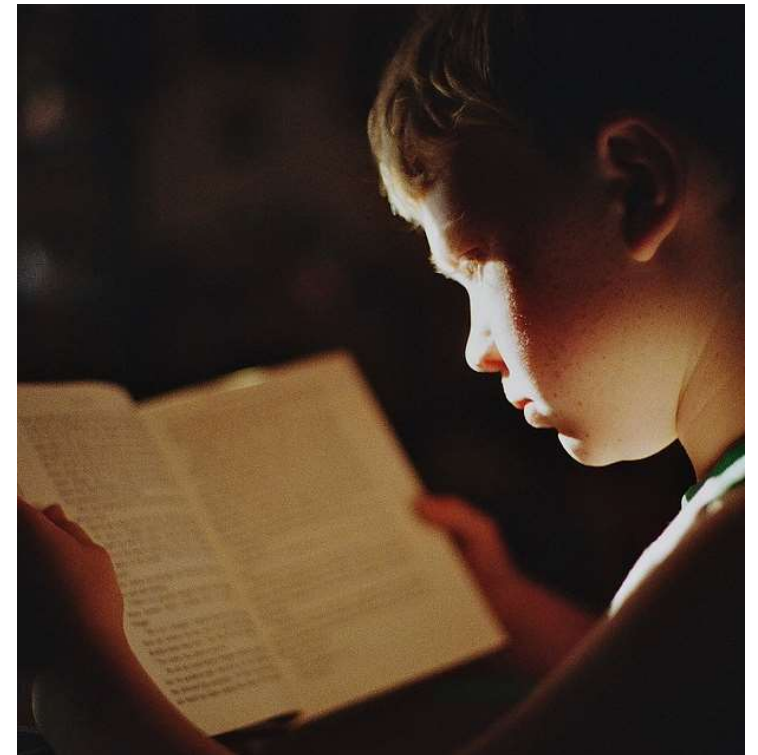
What's the problem?

- Biology is *a dimension* of human nature – but it's never decisive *on its own*
(Detailed discussion: Christopher Tollefsen, “Aquinas’s Four Orders, Normativity, and Human Nature,” *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 52 (2018): 243–256.)
- The classical definition, “rational animal” – not *an animal* with some further capabilities, but *something distinct* (even in so far as sharing features with other animals)

Three dimensions of the natural moral law

(1) Epistemic – **knowable** by human reason ('naturally')

- Natural law = the light of intelligence whereby moral realities (knowledge of the good) are accessible to all men
- *per se nota* – not always immediately known, nor by everyone down to every detail
- not infallible: error is possible and perhaps frequent (original and personal sins, bad habits, bad example, society)
- but some of it can be recognized by every upright person (e.g. prohibition of murder, and the good of the virtues in general)
- reason is aided by divine revelation and God's grace (conversion, sacraments!) – overcoming the 'law of sin' that darkens reason





Anthropological

The authentic **good of the human person**

- Intrinsic orientation according to the natural law (e.g. marital fidelity, respect for life)
- Moral virtues – growth in humanity (men are not born ‘fully human’)
- Life of grace – more supernatural implies more natural and human



Theonomic

The natural moral law is also a **divine law**

- 'Natural moral law is the rational being's participation in the eternal law'
- Man's natural autonomy is always relative, not absolute
- Natural law's intrinsic connection with both the original creation (foundation) and the new creation (goal)
- 'Natural' moral living is inseparable from one's personal relationship with God (*Veritatis Splendor*, 40-41)

So, for clarity:

- **Evolutionary biology** explains *something* about human morals – but it's not the criterion of good or evil
- **Neuroscience** explains *something* about how humans think and experience moral issues – but it doesn't say *what* is truly good or bad
- Knowledge of **biological functions** of bodily organs is relevant information – but properly moral criteria are needed to evaluate their moral relevance
- When Aquinas writes of **natural tendencies** or **appetites**, he does not mean "that which comes naturally", but those which are *in accordance with human nature* – i.e., the *proper* ends of humans (life, communion, etc.)



The mystery of sin and natural law

- Man is not only 'naturally' incomplete, but also "wounded" in his nature
- Man needs God's grace not only to reach his ultimate end, but also to overcome his weakness and to live *in accordance with his nature*
 - To know and the will the good is *natural* to man, but very often does not come "naturally" (i.e. spontaneously, without divine assistance)
- Therefore, to fully know and understand *human nature* itself, one cannot merely observe how humans behave...




Gaudium et Spes, 22

"The truth is that **only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light.**

For Adam, the first man, was a figure of Him Who was to come, namely Christ the Lord.

Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His love, **fully reveals man to man himself** and makes his supreme calling clear."



IV. Can the natural law be read in the book of nature? A proposal

Is there any role, then, for the 'book of nature' in ethics and natural law theory?



1 – Contemplations of nature

- What can we observe, perceive and discover?
 - Regularities, stability, order – intelligibility
 - Purposefulness, finality



First,

- Things have a nature – and this can be discovered
 - And at least partially understood
- There seems to be some goodness in nature
 - And personal good(ness) seems to be rooted in the nature/purpose of each being
 - (i.e. the "*logos* of the nature", St. Maximus the Confessor would say...)



Second,

Nature as a whole – something common

- Some things are common to all
- Some things are common to humans –
 - I.e. there is in nature an objectivity beyond personal preferences and tastes
 - (Cf. Paul Davies' point about the laws of nature)

Differences between species

- What am I / What are we?
- How should I/we act, choose and behave?
- ("She has a different system" – a friend of mine concerning his beloved dog)

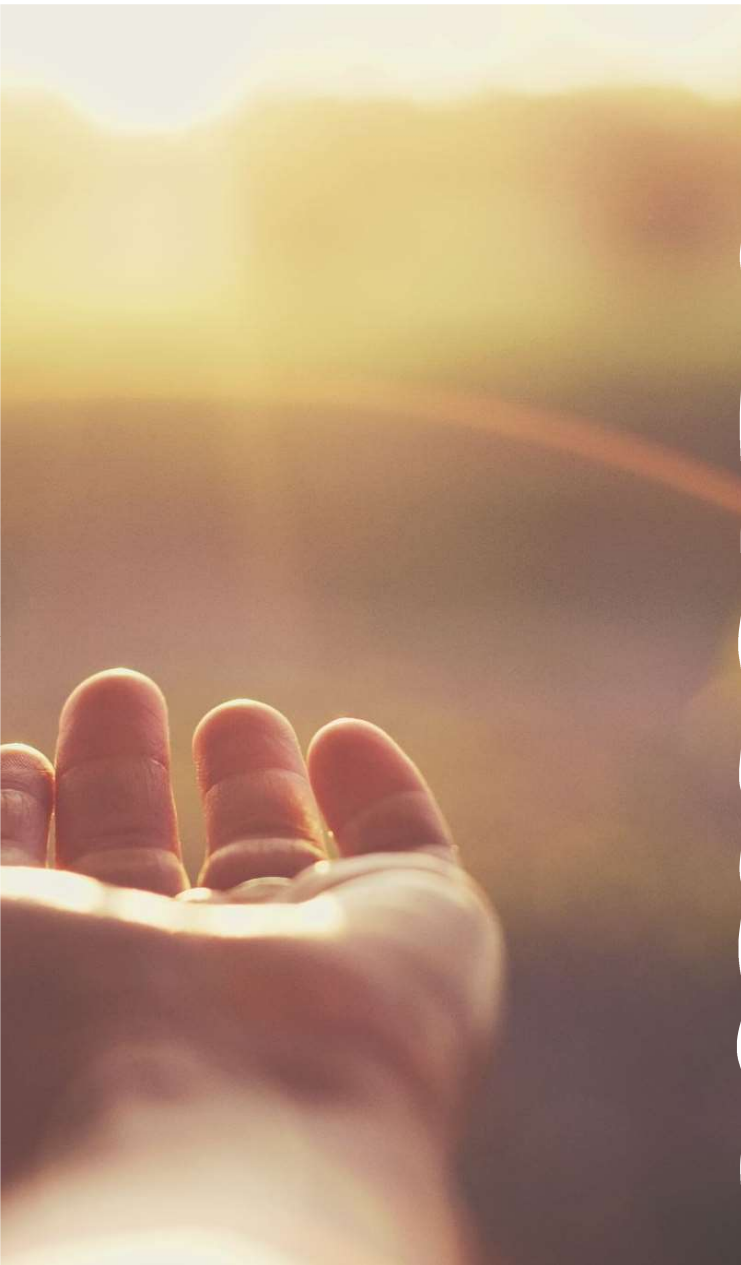


2 – Beyond nature: 'two books'

Scriptures illuminate the book of nature

But also – parallels:

- Not a mere reflections of God's goodness: both reflect *the drama of sin*
- Both speak of promise and expectation
- Both have something of an *enigmatic* character – questions, not just answers



3 – *Ex umbris et imaginibus...*

- The Christological dynamics of revelation – and of new creation
- A thought:
 - *Ex umbris* (shadows): Moral instincts? Aspects of biology and evolution?
 - *Ex imaginibus* (images): Rational reflection? Natural virtue? Basic human goods?
 - *In veritatem*: Perfection and purification in Christ – grace, charity, supernatural life



Reading the book of nature 'morally'

- Hints and suggestions
 - Analogies – not precepts and conclusions
 - This is the *Hexaemeral* tradition
- Material for further reflection and contemplation...

Suggested readings

Benedict XVI, Address to the Bundestag (Berlin, September 22, 2011),
https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2011/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20110922_reichstag-berlin.html

A. McGrath, Natural Theology and Goodness, chap. 12 in *The Open Secret: A New Vision for Natural Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008). PDF on the platform.

N. Murphy and G. Ellis, *On the Moral Nature of the Universe: Theology, Cosmology, and Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996).
<https://archive.org/details/onmoralnatureofu0000murp>

Philip Hefner's review available on the didactic platform.

CS Lewis, *Studies in Words* (2nd ed. 1967), pp. 12-14 and chapter 2 ("Nature")

Available on the platform, and fully at <https://archive.org/details/studiesinwords0000lewi>