

Morality and God

Christopher Tollefsen

This paper has three parts; in the first, I look at the question, recently discussed by Mark Murphy, of the role that God plays as an explainer of morality. I argue for a form of explanation that is different from Murphy's, though I wonder whether there is disagreement here, or simply difference of emphasis. In the second part, I ask what difference Christianity—and specifically the idea that the Kingdom of heaven is our natural ultimate end—makes to us, as practical and moral agents. I will argue that it makes both a motivational and a substantive difference. In the third part I will ask about the way normativity is related to God's communication of normative matters to us, and I will do this specifically by asking what kinds of speech acts God engages in in communicating normative matters to us. The standard view is that God communicates to us in commands; however, I will suggest some other possibilities.

I. God as Explainer of Morality

What would it mean for morality to be explained by God? On one view, common to many natural law theories, God creates human beings with rational natures; those natures specify the good for human beings. At this point, natural law theory diverges. On one branch, for example, the goods of human nature, considered through the lens of practical reason operating without error, provide sufficient justification for moral obligation. So God's explanatory relationship to morality is, as Mark Murphy has argued, mediated: God creates; human nature, human good, and human reason obligate.¹

Now Murphy objects to this line of natural law thinking that it does not give what he calls an adequate *explanans* centered explanation of morality.² A theistic *explanans* centered explanation should begin with certain characteristics of the explainer—in this case God—and show how those characteristics enter specially into the explanation in a way that cannot be gotten at simply by looking at the *explanandum* and working backward to whatever

¹ See Mark C. Murphy, *God and Moral Law: On the Theistic Explanation of Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

² Murphy articulates his account of *explanans* centered explanation in chapter one of *God and Moral Law*.

is necessary to give an adequate explanation. God's nature, put another way, makes certain demands on how we should see His entering into an adequate explanation of morality and moral obligation.

Murphy objects to what he calls the standard natural law view that God does not really enter into the explanation in the right way at all: normativity is entirely a function of human nature, human goods, and human reason. God might be responsible for the existence of these things, but that does not as such explain the normativity of morality: the relevant realities, not God, do that.

As I understand him, Murphy's solution to the problem that he has raised is to hold that God explains morality as a kind of final cause. All human goodness is a kind of likeness to, and participation in, divine goodness; thus any normativity into which human goodness enters as an explanation is such that God also enters immediately into the explanation of that normativity. Murphy also holds that goodness depends upon facts about one's kind—hence God is an immediate, but not a complete, explainer of normativity. Murphy labels his view moral concurrentism, and sees it as superior to standard natural law views due to its respect for the *explanans*-centered property of God's sovereignty.

I am interested in this question of the *explanans* centered explanation, but in a way that differs from Murphy. Maybe he will not disagree with anything I say. But I want to lay out a different way of thinking about this issue, which I think is present in some of the work that Murphy criticizes, with a view to saying something about how morality is explained by God. For me, the difference of emphasis is consequent upon a kind of dissatisfaction with the properties of God picked out by Murphy as having the most explanatory relevance: he focuses on God's goodness as such, and also God's sovereignty; I will focus on God's personhood and agency.

In *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, John Finnis wrote that the content of the natural law could be known, and known to oblige, "without needing to advert to the question of God's existence or nature of will."³ This claim has sounded stark and outrageous to many; yet Finnis himself qualifies the claim in a number of respects at the end of that book. One of those qualifications might be thought to offer a form of ontological dependence: God's existence and free creation are *necessary* conditions of the existence of man, of man's nature, and of the normativity that flows from that nature. We may know the content of the law without knowing its source in the divine, but that law would not exist, nor would anything else, but for the free acts of the divine.

³ John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 48–49.

But this claim does not suffice, Murphy holds, to show that there genuinely is an ontological dependence of the natural law on God. For the *normativity* of the natural law is not, by this observation of dependence, shown to be itself dependent on God: there is the same failure of immediacy of which Murphy complains in traditional natural law views.

But I think that the New Natural Lawyer can say more than this; and I think that this further bit raises interesting questions about how to think of morality from the first person agential perspective, and about how to construe God's communication to us. To make this point, I will first say something very briefly about the so-called "new natural law" (NNL) account of practical reason and morality.

It is well known that the NNL account takes as its starting point the claim that practical reason apprehends a number of basic and incommensurable human goods as the starting points for human action. In deliberating about a multiplicity of options, all promising some good, but in a context of incommensurability, practical reason, in considering only the directiveness of the goods, prescribes not by way of a consequentialist demand of maximization, but by way of a prescription to the agent to remain open always and only to the directiveness of the goods, and thus to resist, in any way that might deflect from that openness, any inclinational orientation at odds with the directiveness of the goods. This norm is a norm of reasonableness, for the complete responsiveness to the integral directiveness of the basic goods is precisely in contrast with the "normativity" of feeling, inclination, felt preference, sensory appetite—of all that is other than, or opposed to, practical *reason*. NNL theorists have held that this demand of reason is expressed in the First Principle of Morality: "In voluntarily acting for human goods and avoiding what is opposed to them, one ought to choose and otherwise will those and only those possibilities whose willing is compatible with a will toward integral communal fulfillment."⁴ But the demand could perhaps better be expressed as a requirement to "follow reason consistently and all out while doing everything you can to enlarge the field of practical possibilities for the pursuit of human goods."⁵

This latter expression leaves out reference to integral communal fulfillment, yet I believe that it orients us towards that fulfillment. Ultimately, practical reason charges the moral agent with the task of pursuing a dynamic

⁴ Grisez suggests that integral communal fulfillment should be willed in every choice in Germain Grisez, "The True Ultimate End of Human Beings: The Kingdom, Not God Alone," *Theological Studies* 69 (2009): 38–61.

⁵ The first principle was expressed in roughly this form by Grisez, in a discussion at Princeton on October 23, 2010. For general statements of the NNL view, see Germain Grisez, Joseph Boyle, and John Finnis, "Practical Principles, Moral Truth, and Ultimate Ends," *American Journal of Jurisprudence* 32 (1987): 99–151.

and open-ended state of harmony of all persons in the goods, in which those persons, all of whom are themselves entirely open to the directiveness of the goods, are only benefited and never harmed. This open-ended, non-static, state of affairs—integral communal fulfillment—will thus *emerge* as an object, and indeed the ultimate object, or end, of the will, and will now be available to guide an agent's will and choices. Thus, the First Principle of Morality expresses the guidance provided by practical reason's upright orientation; and the Ultimate End of Man identifies the state of affairs willed by an agent who is guided only by the First Principle.

From the perspective of natural reason, this end has the status of an ideal, since all rational agents are not co-present to one another. But from the standpoint of revelation, it is possible to identify a state of affairs in which all rational agents—including divine and angelic agents—are co-present to one another, and pursuing goods with a mutuality of good will. That state of affairs is designated by Grisez, in accordance with Scripture, as “the Kingdom.” But the Kingdom, which is for the glory of God, is our true natural ultimate end, and it is to be distinguished from the beatific vision, an end that is not the fulfillment of our human nature, but of the divine nature that we share in as a result of baptism and adoption into God's triune family. The beatific vision is thus a part of our ultimate end, but it is not the whole.

How is the human-divine relationship best understood in the context of *this* life, and in its implications for “natural law” (i.e., for the project of bringing practical reason to bear on human choice and action in the most fully reasonable way)? On the basis of the account given so far, of God as the source of our existence, and of the natural law as our participation in an eternal plan that God has for our ultimate good—a good to be realized in a human way in the Kingdom, and in a more than human way in the beatific vision—human agents should see God as both a partner and a guide in their pursuit of a fully reasonable and flourishing life. Nothing that is to be done can be done without Divine cooperation; and what is to be done has been made clear to human agents in the natural law, itself another instance of Divine cooperation, and in revelation. Thus, the entire moral life can be understood by the agent as to be carried out as part of a large scale and, from the perspective of revelation, as an unending, cooperative undertaking with God that manifests His glory. This is the verdict of the agential perspective that I will discuss at greater length in the next section.

If this is true, though, then it appears to give us an answer to the question of how God explains morality in a way that satisfies Murphy's demand for immediacy: for morality is, so to speak, the map or plan of our possible relationship to God; and action in accordance with morality—with right reason—is constitutive of that relationship with God. But then we should see “morality”—the norms that our constitutive of our fulfillment—as relat-

ed to God in something like the way any map is related to its destination: as means to an end.

I am here identifying morality from God's personal, agential standpoint as a means: a means to his purpose or end, the end of a relationship with human persons that manifests His glory.⁶ Moreover, it is the *normativity* in morality that serves this purpose, for the normativity is a function of the demands of our nature, goods, and reason in service to our well-being, and it is our well-being that is itself in a deep way constitutive of that final purpose of God. For God creates us for our good, and is displeased with us only when we act contrary to that good; our relationship with Him is thus built up by reasonable pursuit of our well-being in all its dimensions, and His purposes are thereby served.⁷ So the means is constitutively, not externally, related to God's purposes.

How does this restore immediacy to the natural law picture? Consider the relationship between a final cause understood as a purpose and that which is done for the sake of the purpose. Surely the final purpose is present and immediate to the means: that end gives the means their sense and intelligibility, and their goodness. The goodness of the end explains, to varying degrees, the goodness of the means.

One might object that this is true only where the means are themselves not intrinsically good, as the good of health explains the goodness of medicine. But since health, or knowledge, or play are goods in themselves, we seem to be back to the Murphy problem: *they* do all the work, and God is left having only created the goods without now entering into their goodness or normativity. This leads Murphy, as I understand him, to rely upon the image of participation: the normativity and desirability of the goods is a participation in God's goodness, and "all moral necessity is the pull of divine goodness specified by the nature of creatures involved." And in the same paragraph, Murphy says that human goods "demand a response...just because they are participations in the divine goodness."⁸

NNL thinkers agree, as Murphy notes, with his characterization of the relationship between the goodness of the goods and God's goodness as being one of participation. But, I take it that they would deny a claim he makes in one paper, that "the facts about the good to be explained *just are, are identical with*, certain theistic facts."⁹ As Grisez writes elsewhere, "Every par-

⁶ God's means are not limited to morality: the Church too is ordered to the Kingdom.

⁷ See Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 3.122 (henceforth, *SCG*).

⁸ Murphy, *God and Moral Law*, 162.

⁹ Mark C. Murphy, "Finnis on Nature, Reason, God," *Legal Theory* 13 (1007): 206.

ticipation is really distinct from that in which it participates....”¹⁰ And in the article that Murphy cites, they ask “whether God is not...the end of human life in a stronger sense than this....”¹¹ This suggests that the participation relationship does not play the deepest possible explanatory role.

Speaking for myself, I find Murphy’s explanation unsatisfying for two reasons: First, though I am not up to the task of articulating this properly, I am bothered by the suggestion that it is God’s goodness, as it were, shining through the goods of human nature that makes them desirable and response-worthy. That does not seem a form of cooperation as regards the *goodness* of the goods; as regards that, God seems to do all the work, even though specific natures “particularize” the good. It seems to me that we cannot really say that it is *God’s* goodness that we find desirable in the good of human life or knowledge, since that (God’s) goodness is not in fact the actualization of any aspect of our human nature. But perhaps I am simply misunderstanding what Murphy means when he uses terms like “participation” and “exemplification,” as when he says that “It is not unnatural to think of particular goods as distinct, partial, diverse exemplifications of goodness,” where the goodness in question is identified as God Himself.¹² Murphy glosses participation also as “resemblance”; maybe this should mitigate my concern.

Second, the participation approach does not take God’s personhood and purposiveness as adequately central to explaining the goodness of acting for any and all of the goods. Indeed, the participation account, whether understood as identity, or not, resembles, absent further reflection on God’s agency, a kind of neo-Platonic image of God as a source of goodness overflowing like a fountain, in which human goods, and not just human goods, participate, and towards which we are drawn as by a magnet (there is overlap here, obviously, with my first concern). There is explanation here, for God’s goodness is, as Murphy and the NNL theorists agree, the source precisely of the goodness of the goods, but it does not seem to me the deepest explanation.

So consider a different kind of explanation. Play is good for my children, and thus they are benefited by having enjoyable games that they can get involved in. If they want to enjoy a game of Dungeons and Dragons (D and D), they can choose to do so for its own sake.

Playing D and D is not really my thing; but I would like to further my relationship with them by giving them an opportunity to act in a way that

¹⁰ Germain Grisez, “The first principle of practical reason: a commentary on the *Summa Theologiae*, 1-2 Question 94, Article 2,” *Natural Law Forum*, 10 (1965): 192.

¹¹ Grisez, Boyle, and Finnis, “Practical Principles, Moral Truth, and Ultimate Ends,” 135.

¹² Murphy, *God and Moral Law*, 162.

relates their play to me, so I buy a dungeon for them, and offer them the opportunity to play it. Now the new game is a game like any other, and play is a basic good, so it might seem like nothing has changed *vis-à-vis* the goodness of the game; and one might think that it is solely with a view to their good that I have purchased the game. But this is a mistake: the goodness of *this* game cannot be fully explained without reference to me and my purposes. And because those purposes will be fulfilled in the very playing of the game, they are present in the playing and to the players in a way that seems both immediate and explanatory of goodness from the practical point of view: my kids choose to play this game both for its own sake and in order to please me, and thus foster the relationship.

The same seems true of the natural law account presented by Grisez, Finnis and others: God is present in the law because his purposes are realized in the realization of what the law prescribes. And the limitations of my game analogy serve to make the point even more effectively, for I do not create the category of games, or their goodness, but God creates the law and its goodness, as part of making possible the realization of His purposes, and He would not create these but for his purposes. So God is present in the goodness and normativity of the law insofar as His purposes are also present therein, as the ends of that goodness and normativity. Put another way: when we understand God's creating human goods as governed by His purposes, then the fact of creation really does show ontological dependence of the goodness of those goods on God.

II. The Difference the Kingdom Makes

The previous section articulated an answer to the question "Does morality depend on God?" that approached the issue from the standpoint of God's agency and purposes. In this section, I look at a different way in which the question can be construed: what difference does God make for us from our first personal agential standpoint on morality's demands?

Here is one sub-question of that investigation: What does thinking about the Kingdom as our ultimate end do for ethics? I will answer this question first by contrasting Christian ethics as oriented towards the Kingdom with Christian ethics as oriented towards the beatific vision; then by contrasting Christian ethics as oriented towards the Kingdom with secular ethics, and then finally by discussing the idea of a personal vocation. I'll then turn in the final section to the discussion of divine communication.

How does thinking about the Kingdom contrast with thinking of the beatific vision as the natural end of man? I, along with my NNL colleagues, think that the teaching that the beatific vision is the ultimate end has

not played a very salutary role in Christian ethics. That understanding is both otherworldly in its focus, and un-bodily in at least its emphasis. St. Thomas Aquinas attempted to rescue the view from the second of these problems by describing the resurrection as the *bene esse* of beatitude, while also holding that the vision of the divine satisfied all desires.¹³ But we are bodily beings, as well as social beings, and it is implausible to think that our fulfillment as humans is possible apart from the well-being of our bodies, and our relations with others. And the idea of a perfect fulfillment that can be even more perfected seems not entirely coherent. Finally, from an ordinary, and non-philosophical, agent's perspective, the beatific vision alone just does not seem that attractive.¹⁴

As for the otherworldliness, in extreme formulations, concern for the beatific vision alone tends to reduce this life to having a mere instrumental significance. Moreover, a kind of legalism about the law is encouraged, insofar as what matters is simply avoiding mortal sin so as to be able to enjoy the beatific vision. But, in light of revelation, the NNL theorists see the work of this life as itself actively preparing the materials for the Kingdom, a view that does not encourage legalism but instead an active and creative effort, through one's intention of the Kingdom, to do good works, build and maintain ever deepening relationships with all persons, and in general to begin now imperfectly what will be the eternal task of the perfecting of the communion of Christ, angels, and men in the goods which are common to these beings.

As to the contrast with secular ethics, I will put aside those ethical views constructed in outright rejection of the prescriptions of the natural law, or even those simply in significant error; whether they can be fully embraced by self-aware agents, and whether, if so, they could sustain a culture for very long, seem to me dubious. But natural lawyers typically describe the prescriptions of the natural law as generally available to be known by all agents, even in the absence of a knowledge of God's existence or will. So let us hypothesize the existence of an agent of good understanding and will, who is nevertheless unaware of the Gospel, perhaps because he lives prior to the coming of the Good News. This agent can recognize the directiveness of the basic goods, and can further recognize the need to will unconditionally as directed by those goods. He can, that is to say, come to a pretty good grasp of the demands of morality.

But, while this agent can, and, let us assume, does, will the goods, and can commit himself to an upright life, it is difficult to see how this

¹³ Aquinas, *ST* I-II, q. 4, a. 5, c.

¹⁴ For an extended criticism of Aquinas on these matters, see Grisez, "The True Ultimate End of Human Beings."

agent—unless he is a Socrates, or some similar rarity—can be consistently motivated to act as reason demands in those circumstances in which the cost of so acting is, say, his death, or the death of his loved ones, or massive social ostracization, or abandonment by his friends, or the destruction of his community. Finnis notes, in the closing pages of *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, that our participation in the goods in this life is doomed to failure, and this seems likely to have practical consequences for our hypothetical agent.¹⁵

In fact, I think the motivational limitations created by the passing of earthly goods can hardly be overcome without seeing oneself as in a cooperative relationship with a divine creator, and it appears that Socrates and Plato both saw themselves in this way. And so Socrates had the courage to resist the thirty tyrants when they insisted that he arrest, and bring to certain destruction, Leon of Salamis; even he, Socrates, surely expected to be killed as a result. But he is the exception: all non-Christian thinkers are tempted, as many Christians are as well, by their awareness of the passing of human goods, to elevate certain aspects of achievable human good to the status of an absolute; thus most non-Christians are strongly tempted to rationalize an acceptance of the view that it is better that one man die than that the community be destroyed. And the doctrine of the Kingdom makes a further difference here: for the goods—in view of which we cooperate with God—are not destined to fade away on this view, so that not only a Socrates, but more modestly heroic individuals can also find the strength to act as they ought.

A further difference from the agential standpoint is this: with the Kingdom in view, and with cooperation with God in the building up of the Kingdom as an architectonic end, all who “seek first the Kingdom” have a fundamentally changed structure of practical reason and practical willing, for every course of deliberation, and every choice in action, terminates ultimately with reference in the agent’s intention of that Kingdom. In many particular cases this will not change the nature of the object of the act; but an action is what it is by its intention, which encompasses both end and object, so a change in the ultimate end willed by an agent means that agents who will the Kingdom perform different acts with each choice they make than agents who do not will the Kingdom. And of course, agents could not do this without knowledge of the Kingdom, knowledge only available through revelation, so knowledge of the Kingdom makes a difference of content for a Christian’s ethical reflections: “Seek first the Kingdom” is a moral norm known only to Christians.

A final point about the difference God makes from an agent’s first person perspective is this: the demands of the Kingdom are, in each individual’s life, specified in the form of a personal vocation, a life to which

¹⁵ Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, chap. 13.

that individual is uniquely called, the details of which descend down to the extremely particular. What, from the standpoint of the natural law, would be an underdetermined matter for choice is, from the standpoint of personal vocation, a situation calling for discernment, for attention to the signs which God has made available for one to know what precisely God wishes of one at this time. The idea of personal vocation in this sense goes beyond the idea of a rational life plan, and thus beyond what the natural law prescribes in the absence of revelation, and introduces something new into the practical life of believing agents, something that we could say is rooted in God's will and thus generates the need to discern that will. This marks a significant difference in the moral life that a specifically Christian understanding of God makes.¹⁶

III. Divine Commands

One might ask about all this: Where do God's *commandments* enter into this picture? Divine commands are thought necessary by many for an explanation of moral obligation: while we can know the content of the natural law through our understanding of the goods and reason's relation to them, there is a residue of obligatory force that can only be explained by God's commanding the precepts of the natural law; how we know the precepts of the natural law *as* commanded is a matter of discussion. Perhaps God makes known their imperatival character through the verdicts of conscience, perhaps in some other way.

The view that the precepts of the natural law are commanded can be complemented by three further *loci* of divine command: First, God, recognizing epistemic and motivational deficiencies in human beings *vis-à-vis* the natural law, provides as a supplement to the natural law revelation of the content of the law: *that* revelation is typically understood to be in the form of commands. Second, the body of human beings preparing material for the Kingdom in cooperation with Jesus is God's Church. As a corporate body with a particular mission, this body must be constituted and directed by God's authoritative acts. So God's commands could be seen as essential to the existence of this corporate body, as the positive law is essential to the existence of a regime. And third, there is the domain of personal vocation. In addition to commands given to his Church, God might give personal commands to individuals for the sake of directing them in their vocational paths.

¹⁶ For a discussion of the norm that one should seek, accept, and carry out one's personal vocation as a norm specific to Christian faith, see Germain Grisez, *The Way of the Lord Jesus*, vol. 1, *Christian Moral Principles* (Chicago, IL: Franciscan Herald Press, 1983), chap. 25, question E.

One reason that morality might seem to require supplementation by divine commands is precisely the divide between the moral life and the ultimate end that, *inter alia*, the picture of the beatific vision as the ultimate end encourages. But the image of the Kingdom, the material for which is being prepared here and now by acts that are fully open to the human good, seems to me to discourage that thought. Commands are not needed to bridge the divide between morality and our heavenly fulfillment, for there is a kind of continuity between the two, even though heavenly fulfillment transcends anything that is available to us in this life.¹⁷

A second reason might be the Kantian idea that moral obligation or necessity must be understood as being unconditioned.¹⁸ This idea reflects something true, namely the absolute status of some norms as never to be violated. But it is an error if it takes it to be the case that the explanation of obligation is not teleological: it is reason's directiveness towards the good and goods that provides the necessity characteristic of obligation.

So morality—the natural law—should not be understood as involving divine commands. Now Murphy raises an additional issue that I cannot adequately address, but want to raise, because it is very interesting. He thinks that the natural law cannot, on Aquinas's account, even be *law* because law is a command, and a command is a speech act, but the promulgation of the natural law is not accomplished by any speech act on God's part.¹⁹

Still, the law is *communicated* by God to man, and Finnis argues that *this* is what is really central to Aquinas's understanding of why the natural law is *law*. He writes, "The central case of law is an appeal to the mind, the choice, the moral strength, and the love of those subject to the law."²⁰ Not only does this give reason to think that the natural law really is law, it also, I want to suggest below, gives us some reasons to resist the temptation to understand all communications of the law—even those which, more obviously than the natural law, are accomplished by divine speech acts—as commands.²¹

So in conclusion, let us consider those speech acts by which God communicates the law for those who are in doubt through revelation; those

¹⁷The continuity is recognized, and some of its implications acknowledged, in Yves M.J. Congar, *Lay People in the Church*, trans. Donald Attwater (Westminster, MH: Newman Press, 1956) 81–87.

¹⁸See Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. M. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

¹⁹Murphy, *God and Moral Law*, 79.

²⁰John Finnis, *Aquinas: Moral, Political and Legal Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 307.

²¹For a similar thought, articulated from the standpoint of liberal democratic political theory, see Anthony Duff, *Punishment, Communication, and Community* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

speech acts by which He communicates the norms for the guidance of the Church; and those speech acts by which He communicates to individuals that to which they are vocationally called. I find myself in a perplexity, the gist of which can be summarized as follows: why must God's authoritative and directive speech acts in these three domains be thought of as commands or imperatives?

Well, what are the other options? One might think that commands just are the form of speech act by which an authority directs as an authority. But: I have authority over my children, and while I sometimes command them, sometimes I direct without command. I say, for instance, why don't we do it this way? Or: it would please me if we were to do it this way. Or even: I've decided that we'll do it this way.

Perhaps these are disguised commands. But I want to raise the possibility that at least some of them are *authoritative invitations*. I have authority, and it is not just the authority of expertise: my decisions *constitute* in some cases what will now be the common way, and my announcement of that common way is thus an act of authority. But I take myself not to be commanding the way but announcing it as an available option for those in the family who wish, in the choice itself, to continue their cooperation with me as the head of our merry little band, and to play their part in that band.

In so acting, I announce no external sanctions for those who fail to comply, as I do on other occasions when I tell my children that they must do X or suffer some punishment. But there is an internal sanction built in, that of failing to act (a) in cooperation with me; and (b) in accordance with the common way, which is partly constitutive of our existence as a family. Because following my will is necessary to avoid these internal sanctions, we can further speak of the necessity, or virtue, of obedience for members of my family.

It seems to me that this is a good way of thinking about God's authoritative speech acts where our vocation is concerned, as even the word suggests: God calls Smith to act in a certain way, and this really is an act of authority because His choice has made this to be the way for Smith, as opposed to Jones. The claims about sanctions and obedience seem right here as well. So there seems to be a divine and authoritative invitation or proposal, but no command.

What of the first case, where God supplements the natural law with His commands? The precepts of the natural law are obligatory, I hold, not because they are commanded, but because they are necessary for our well-being with one another and with God. What is added by God's commanding them? For one thing, we now know we will be separated from God if we willingly disobey the precepts of the natural law, and this is undesirable; so an obligation to obedience is superadded to the obligations internal to the

natural law itself. But how is God's revelation of precepts of the natural law better understood here as a divine commanding, rather than, say, a divine reminding? One might say: because God's commands are backed by the threat of coercive sanction, the threat of hell. However, a more plausible view is that hell is the separation of the sinning self from God's presence; so hell is not an *imposed* punishment, and threats about hell are actually warnings. In the commandments, God reminds us what the natural law is, and what the intrinsic consequences of failure in the natural law are. And God of course also invites in his revelation of the natural law, for, as with my game of D and D, He extends an opportunity to us, His children, to do what is for our good also so as to be friends with Him and manifest His glory.

Perhaps, as Kant holds, we must, as beings whose will is not holy, experience the law as a command; yet this does not entail that the speech act itself is a command. Perhaps this is a misunderstanding on our part in consequence of our fallen nature.

Commandment seems a deeply, perhaps primarily, political concept. So it seems to play its primary role in the politics of the Old Testament, where God's commands, besides reminding of the natural law, also constitute His chosen people; and in the ecclesiology of the New, where God's commands constitute His Church as a corporate body. This seems to me the most plausible place to think that God really does issue commands; yet the language of covenant in the Old testament, and the language of Christ to his disciples after the washing of the feet in the New also push me in the direction of thinking of these authoritative divine speech acts also as more like divine invitations to cooperation, despite the similarity of the divine law here to human positive law.

All language about God is analogical, and tells us about our relationship to God rather than about God Himself. But God has endorsed a particular way of thinking about our relationship to him, one that should inform our conception of His communication to us. That special way of relating is that of Father. Now it is true that fathers relate to their children by way of command. But it is also true, I think, that in thinking of our most appropriate uses of parental authority, commanding is not really central, and in many cases, again, at least in my experience, the resort to command is a result of failure, not just on the part of my children, but of me.

God is also the giver of the law, and this in turn prompts us to think of His communications to us as commands. But as the above quotation from Finnis suggests, we can think even of the law as, in its focal instance, a communication of something best understood as "proposed": in Aquinas's words, "divine law is but a rational plan proposed by God to man."²² That

²² Aquinas, *SCG* 3.121.

human lawgivers often “propose” in the language of command might again be a deficiency, rather than an essential mark.

So perhaps what I am really trying to articulate is this: that our view of God’s communication of the law—natural, divine, and, let us say, personal—has perhaps been somewhat deformed by our relying on too close an analogy to the imperatival form of speech act associated with human positive law and to the form of speech act associated with imperfect human fathers of intransigent children. Perhaps in so doing, we miss out on a crucial aspect of God’s communication to us, its abiding love and patience, and in the process miss out on something we could learn about communication in our own lives, both familial and political.

—*University of South Carolina*