

**QUESTION 100, ARTICLE 7:
WHETHER THE PRECEPTS OF THE DECALOGUE ARE SUITABLY FORMULATED?**

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TEXT	PARAPHRASE
<i>Whether the precepts of the Decalogue are suitably formulated?</i>	Are the Ten Commandments well-composed, taken not just individually, but as a set?

In this query we go beyond whether some things that should have been in the Decalogue were left out. Now, although what is included and omitted may still come up, we are considering principles of composition that apply with equal force to *each* of the Commandments. At stake is whether the Decalogue is just a collection of good ideas, haphazardly expressed, or a clear and systematic body of principles truly sufficient to serve as the foundation of the Old Law.

Objection 1. [1] <i>It would seem that the precepts of the decalogue are unsuitably formulated. Because the affirmative precepts direct man to acts of virtue, while the negative precepts withdraw him from acts of vice. [2] But in every matter there are virtues and vices opposed to one another. [3] Therefore in whatever matter there is an ordinance of a precept of the decalogue, there should have been an affirmative and a negative precept. Therefore it was unfitting that affirmative precepts should be framed in some matters, and negative precepts in others.</i>	Objection 1. The Ten Commandments appear to be poorly composed. Concerning some matters they provide affirmative rules, commanding acts of virtue, and concerning others they provide negative rules, forbidding acts of vice. But we find that virtues and vices oppose each other in <i>every</i> matter, not just some. Therefore, for every matter which the Decalogue addresses, there should have been both an affirmative and a negative precept. Since this is not the case, the framing of the Decalogue is defective.
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[1] The affirmative precepts of the Decalogue are the third, about keeping the Sabbath day holy, and the fourth, about honoring parents: They command that something be *done*. All of the other precepts are negative, commanding that something *not* be done. Not having any other gods before God, not taking His name in vain, not killing (in the sense of murdering), not committing adultery, not stealing, and not coveting either the wife or the wealth of one's neighbor.

[2] The Objector thinks the Decalogue is arbitrary in treating some matters, such as parents, solely as objects of commands to do something, but treating others, such as property, solely as

objects of prohibition. Consider the affirmative precept to honor parents: Aren't there also things one should *not* do concerning parents? Or consider the negative precept concerning one's neighbor's property. Aren't there things one *should* do concerning one's neighbor's property.

[3] If the Objector's advice were taken, each of the ten items of the Decalogue would be a pair of Commandments – one affirmative and one negative – rather than some of them being affirmative and others negative.

<p>Objection 2. [1] <i>Further, Isidore says that every law is based on reason. [2] But all the precepts of the decalogue belong to the Divine law. [3] Therefore the reason should have been pointed out in each precept, and not only in the first and third.</i></p>	<p>Objection 2. Moreover, as Isidore reminds us, all law depends on reason. But the rules of the Decalogue are law too – Divine law. Therefore, the reason for each precept should have been included. Unfortunately, although the reason is pointed out in the first precept, about having no gods before God, and in the third, about honoring the Sabbath day, it is not pointed out in any of the others.</p>
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[1] In English, the title of Isidore of Seville's enormously important *Etymologies* makes the work sound like a history of the origins of words. Although it contains a good deal of that, actually it is more a compendium of the sources of human knowledge. Thus its title is sometimes given as *Origins*. The observation about the relation between law and reason arises in Isidore's discussion of why not only written but also unwritten norms can count as true law. He says in Book 2,

Between law and custom there is this difference, that law is written, while custom is usage (*consuetudo*) tested and found good by its antiquity, or unwritten law Custom (*mos*) is longstanding usage, taken likewise from "moral habits" (*mores*, the plural of *mos*). "Customary law" (*consuetudo*) moreover is a certain system of justice (*ius*), established by moral habits, which is received as law when law is lacking; *nor does it seem to matter whether it exists in writing or in reason, seeing that reason commends a law.*

And again in Book 5,

"Customary law" (*consuetudo*) is a certain system of justice established by moral habits, which is taken as a law when law is lacking; *nor does it matter whether it exists in writing or reasoning, since reasoning also validates law. Furthermore, if law is based on reason,*

then law will be everything that is consistent with reason -- provided that it agrees with religion, accords with orderly conduct, and is conducive to well-being.¹

In saying “if law is based on reason, then law will be everything that is consistent with reason,” it may seem at first as though Isidore has made the same mistake as someone who says, “If a cat is something with four paws, then everything with four paws will be a cat.” A dog has four paws but is not a cat; in the same way, a theorem in geometry is based on reason but is not a law. However, by “everything,” Isidore does not mean literally everything, but *every norm of conduct*, provided that certain other conditions are met. Thus, he is really saying that if the term “law” refers to a norm of conduct based on reason, then every norm of conduct based on reason, provided that these other conditions are met, will be a law. This does not involve any fallacy.

St. Thomas agrees that reason pertains to the essence of law. He has argued earlier in the *Treatise on Law* that law is “a rule and measure of acts, whereby man is induced to act or is restrained from acting,” but that since man is a rational being, the rule and measure of his acts has to be reason. As to the other conditions to be met, he holds that to be truly law, an enactment must be for the common good, made by competent public authority, and promulgated or made known.² So law is not merely the command of the sovereign, nor is it merely a system of conventional social rules, as maintained by the several varieties of legal positivists.³

[2] The Objector calls attention to the fact that the Ten Commandments are part of Divine law because Divine law is true law, and all law depends on reason. Consequently, the Ten Commandments must also depend on reason.

[3] The implied inference is that because the precepts of the Decalogue depend on reason, and because law, to be law, must be made known, the reason for each precept should also have been made known.

For the First Commandment, the reason given in both Exodus and Deuteronomy is “for I the Lord your God am a jealous God.”⁴

¹*The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, trans. Stephen A. Barney, W.J. Lewis, J.A. Beach, and Oliver Berghof (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2006). I am quoting respectively from Book 2, Chapter 10, p. 73, and Book 5, Chapter 3, page 117, emphasis added in both cases.

²I-II, Q. 90; the quotation is from Art. 1. For discussion, see my *Commentary on Thomas Aquinas’s Treatise on Law* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

³The version of positivism that holds that law is no more than the command of the sovereign is associated especially with Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651), and John Austin, *The Province of Jurisprudence Determined* (1832). The version that holds that law is no more than a system of conventional social rules is associated especially with H.L.A. Hart., *The Concept of Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961, 1994). On the Continent, positivism is most often associated with Hans Kelsen, especially his *Pure Theory of Law* (1934).

⁴Exodus 20:5b, Deuteronomy 5:9b (RSV-CE).

For the Third Commandment, the reason given in Exodus is “for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it,”⁵ and the reason given in Deuteronomy is “You shall remember that you were a servant in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out thence with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.”⁶ These two reasons are not inconsistent, but complementary. Deuteronomy’s reason makes it especially clear why servants should be included in the Sabbath rest too.

It may at first be surprising that the Second Commandment is not mentioned, because it seems to give a reason when it says “for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain.”⁷ In Objection 4, however, St. Thomas has his Objector treat this not as a reason for the Commandment, but as a threat of punishment for violating it.

Objection 3. [1] *Further, by observing the precepts man deserves to be rewarded by God.* [2] *But the Divine promises concern the rewards of the precepts.* [3] *Therefore the promise should have been included in each precept, and not only in the second and fourth.*

Objection 3. Moreover, by obeying these Commandments we merit God’s reward. Since the rewards for obedience are specified in God’s promises, each precept should have included a statement of the promise which corresponds to it. However, although the corresponding promise is included in the second rule, about not taking God’s name in vain, and in the fourth, about honoring parents, it is omitted from each of the others. This is not fitting.

[1] Holy Scripture is quite clear that God rewards good actions. Yet in view of other biblical teachings, the idea of Divine reward may seem strange. Since all of our ability to do good comes from God Himself, how can we deserve anything from Him? In one sense, we cannot, for what God gives is infinitely more than we can give back; what we do for Him is a drop in an infinite bucket, and even our ability to do anything at all for Him comes from Him. Yet in another sense, we can, for although our ability to do good works is a gift of loving grace, we freely choose whether to make a loving response to this gift; we are not marionettes on strings. Not because He is in debt to us, but of His own goodness, God condescends to recognize and honor this choice. In rewarding His children, God is not acting like an employer who pays the laborer a wage which makes the two parties square, for nothing can make us square with the

⁵These need not be taken as literal days, and the reference to rest means that God desisted from further Creation – not that the Omnipotent was literally tired.

⁶Exodus 20:11, Deuteronomy 5:15: (RSV-CE).

⁷Exodus 20:7b, Deuteronomy 5:11b (RSV-CE).

infinitely bountiful God. As has often been observed, He is acting more like a mother who praises her obedient three-year-old child for “helping” her to make dinner.

But there is still more to the paradox. Because He bestows charity upon His people and guides them with His Holy Spirit, God Himself is the ultimate source even of our ability to perform truly good deeds. In the final analysis, then, His reward gives due credit *to the very gift of His grace!* One cannot help but think of a passage in the Apocalypse of John, in which certain elders, symbolically described as seated upon thrones and wreathed with golden crowns, fall prostrate before God in adoration. Casting their crowns at His feet, they sing, “Worthy art thou, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for thou didst create all things, and by thy will they existed and were created.”⁸ God has condescended to honor them – yet they give the honor entirely back to Him.

[2] Not only does God reward obedience, but He also *promises* reward for obedience.

[3] The implied argument here is similar to the one in the previous Objection: Since the promised reward concerns the law, and because law, to be law, must be made known, the reward for obedience should have been made known in each precept, not just the second and the fourth.

Explicitly, the Second Commandment states only a punishment for false swearing: “For the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain.” Apparently the Objector is taking the reward for *not* swearing falsely to be simply that God then views us as innocent of doing so.

The reward for honoring parents, however, is explicit: Exodus says, “That your days may be long in the land which the Lord your God gives you.” A little more fully, Deuteronomy says, “that your days may be prolonged, and that it may go well with you, in the land which the Lord your God gives you.”⁹

Objection 4. **[1]** *Further, the Old Law is called “the law of fear,” in so far as it induced men to observe the precepts, by means of the threat of punishments.* **[2]** *But all the precepts of the decalogue belong to the Old Law.* **[3]** *Therefore a threat of punishment should have been included in each, and not only in the first and second.*

Objection 4. Moreover, the Old Law has rightly been called a “law of fear,” because it motivated men to obey its rules by threatening penalties for disobedience. Since all ten of the Commandments of the Decalogue are part of the Old Law, each one should have contained a statement of the associated punishment. This is done in the case of the first, about having no gods before God, and the second, about not taking His name in vain, but it is inappropriately omitted from the other eight.

⁸Apocalypse 4:11 (RSV-CE). The Apocalypse is also called the Revelation of John, or simply Revelations.

⁹Respectively Exodus 20:12b and Deuteronomy 5:16b (RSV-CE).

[1] In saying that the Old Law is called a law of fear, the Objector is no doubt thinking of St. Augustine of Hippo, who develops this theme in several passages. The first is from his book *Against Adimantus, a Disciple of Manichaeus*, where Augustine bends over backwards¹⁰ to express the difference between the Old and New Law in a pun. In my own free paraphrase:

So if even in New Testament times, when love [*caritas*] is most greatly commended, carnal fear is injected with the fear of visible Divine punishments -- how much more, in the time of the Old Testament, should this be adapted to the understanding of people who were restrained by the fear of the Law, as a child is by his master? For the shortest and most obvious difference between the two Testaments is the difference between *timor* and *amor*, fear and love. The former pertains to the old man, the latter to the new man, yet by the most merciful dispensation of the One God, these were brought forth and conjoined.¹¹

Another passage the Objector may have in mind is Augustine's explanation of Psalm 130,¹² which reads as follows:

Out of the depths I cry to thee, O Lord! Lord, hear my voice! Let thy ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications! If thou, O Lord, shouldst mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand? *But there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared.* I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; my soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen for the morning, more than watchmen for the morning. O Israel, hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with him is plenteous redemption. And he will redeem Israel from all his iniquities.¹³

About the fourth verse, which I have italicized, Augustine says,

¹⁰The bending over backwards lies in the shift from *caritas* to *amor*. The former word means love in the sense of charity. Though the latter word usually refers to the love between the sexes, here it too is used to mean charity. But perhaps the shift is not so forced, because Holy Scripture often compares the love of God for His people with the love of a husband for his betrothed.

¹¹*Si ergo tempore Novi Testamenti, quo maxime caritas commendatur, de poenis visibilibus divinitus iniectus est carnalibus timor; quanto magis tempore Veteris Testamenti hoc congruisse illi populo intellegendum est, quem timor Legis tamquam paedagogi coercebat? Nam haec est brevissima et apertissima differentia duorum Testamentorum, timor et amor: illud ad veterem, hoc ad novum hominem pertinet; utrumque tamen unius Dei misericordissima dispensatione prolatum atque coniunctum.*

¹²Numbered 129 in the Vulgate.

¹³Psalm 130:1-8 (RSV-CE), emphasis added. "His," in the last sentence, refers to Israel; the male pronoun is used because the people Israel descends from the man Israel.

A holy law was given to the Jews, a law that was just and good,¹⁴ but all it could do was convict them. No law was given them that was *capable of giving life*,¹⁵ only a law that revealed the sinner to himself. The sinner had forgotten himself and no longer kept his sins in view; he was therefore given a law to help him see himself. The law declared him guilty; only the lawgiver could set him free, for the lawgiver is the sovereign ruler of all. A law was given that can terrify us and lock us into our guilt; it does not free us but merely exposes our sins.

Perhaps it was someone bound by that law, and aware in his deep place how grievous were his transgressions of the law, who cried out in the psalm, *If you take account of our law-breaking, O Lord, Lord, who will stand?* Evidently, then, there is another law, a law of God's mercy, a law whereby God is propitiated. The old law dealt in fear; this new law is a law of charity. The law of charity grants pardon for sins, blots out the past, and cautions us with regard to the future. It keeps us company along the road and never deserts us; it makes itself our companion and leads us along the way.¹⁶

We saw earlier, in Question 91, Article 5, that St. Thomas endorses St. Augustine's contrast between the "law of fear" and the "law of love," for he mentions it to explain why the New Law was needed.¹⁷ On the other hand, he thinks that the contrast needs to be qualified, for as he writes in another place,

There were some in the state of the Old Testament who, having charity and the grace of the Holy Ghost, looked chiefly to spiritual and eternal promises: and in this respect they belonged to the New Law. In like manner in the New Testament there are some carnal men who have not yet attained to the perfection of the New Law; and these it was necessary, even under the New Testament, to lead to virtuous action by the fear of punishment and by temporal promises. But although the Old Law contained precepts of charity, nevertheless it did not confer the Holy Ghost by Whom *charity ... is spread abroad in our hearts*.¹⁸

[2] If the Old Law was a law of fear, then the Ten Commandments, the very starting points of the Old Law, are precepts of fear. The Objector is not complaining about this fact, as many contemporary people would do – the "He's not the boss of me" syndrome. He is merely pointing it out. It is not that one could not obey the Commandments for the sheer love of God,

¹⁴See Romans 7:12.

¹⁵Galatians 3:21.

¹⁶St. Augustine of Hippo, "Exposition on Psalm 129," in *Expositions of the Psalms* (121-150), trans. Maria Boulding, Volume 5 of *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2004), p. 129-130, emphasis added. Another translation, in the public domain, is available at <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1801.html>, where the psalm is numbered 130.

¹⁷See I-II, Q. 91, Art. 5.

¹⁸I-II, Q. 107, Art. 1, ad 2. The internal quotation is from Romans 5:5.

but that at the time they were first given to the people, the sheer love of God was not what moved them. Obedience was encouraged by promises of temporal benefit, and enforced by threats of temporal harm.

[3] The Objector reasons that unfortunately, the thing threatened is identified only in the case of the first two precepts of the Decalogue.

As to the First Commandment, which prohibits idolatry, the threat is that “I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.” A little later, the thousands are represented as a thousand *generations*.¹⁹

As to the Second Commandment, which prohibits the false use of God’s name, the threat is simply that “the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain.”²⁰ Guilt and remorse are often confused. Remorse is the feeling or consciousness of guilt, but guilt itself is the objective condition of being in a culpable state of wrong which separates us from Him who is our Source and our Life. A person who knows that he is guilty *ought* to feel remorse, but not all persons do.

Two points concerning First Commandment’s threat require explanation. The first is God’s description of himself as “jealous.” This adjective does not refer to the human passion of jealousy, but to the fact that God utterly abominates the self-destructive adoration of what is false as though it were true. He made us rational beings; we are fashioned for truth. It would not increase our freedom to adore lies, but destroy it. Because of His inexorable love for us, He will not tolerate our doing so.

The second puzzling point is the warning about generational penalties. Because this requires lengthier treatment, we return to it in the Discussion at the end of this Article.

Objection 5. **[1]** *Further, all the commandments of God should be retained in the memory: [2] for it is written (Prov. 3): "Write them in the tables of thy heart."* **[3]** *Therefore it was not fitting that mention of the memory should be made in the third commandment only.*

Objection 5. Besides, each of God’s Commandments should be preserved in memory. This is why the book of Proverbs instructs us to inscribe them on the tablets of our hearts. But although the Third Commandment, about honoring the Sabbath day, mentions memory, none of

¹⁹Exodus 20:5b-6, Deuteronomy 5:9b-10 (RSV-CE). The thousand generations are mentioned in Deuteronomy 7:9.

²⁰Exodus 20:7b, Deuteronomy 5:11b (RSV-CE).

Consequently it seems that the precepts of the decalogue are unsuitably formulated.

the others do. This omission was inappropriate.

[1] People strive to remember even such trivial things as the wording of their favorite jokes and limericks. Well, there is nothing wrong with that! But how much more should we remember the words of God Himself?

[2] The Objector is referring to these words of Proverbs 3:

My son, forget not my law, and let thy heart keep my commandments. For they shall add to thee length of days, and years of life and peace. Let not mercy and truth leave thee, put them about thy neck, and *write them in the tables of thy heart*: And thou shalt find grace and good understanding before God and men.²¹

He might also have referred to Proverbs 7:

My son, keep my words, and lay up my precepts with thee. Son, Keep my commandments, and thou shalt live: and my law as the apple of thy eye: Bind it upon thy fingers, *write it upon the tables of thy heart*. Say to wisdom: Thou art my sister: and call prudence thy friend.²²

Here God *exhorts* the people to write the Law on the tablets of their hearts. Holy Scripture employs the image of writing on the heart in other contexts too, to which we return in the Discussion at the end of this Article.

[3] It might seem that either:

1. *All* of the Commandments should include such an instruction, just because it is so important. Or else,
2. *None* of the Commandments should include the instruction “Remember this,” just because the importance of doing so goes without saying.

But no: The importance of remembering is not mentioned in any of the other Commandments, but only in the Third. Its wording in Deuteronomy refers to memory explicitly: “You shall remember that you were a servant in the land of Egypt.” Its wording in Exodus may be taken as referring to it implicitly, because it *reminds* the people that in six days God created and on the seventh day rested. Why should the Third Commandment be treated differently than all the others?

²¹Proverbs 3:1-4 (DRA), emphasis added.

²²Proverbs 7:1-4 (DRA), emphasis added.

On the contrary, [1] *It is written (Wis. 11) that "God made all things, in measure, number and weight."* **[2]** *Much more therefore did He observe a suitable manner in formulating His Law.*

On the other hand, we read in the book of Wisdom that God made all things in measure, number, and weight. If all the rest of Creation was fashioned so well, how much more must His Law be formulated well!

[1] We read in the Old Testament book called the Wisdom of Solomon,

Even apart from [various possibilities of calamity], men could fall at a single breath when pursued by justice and scattered by the breath of thy power. *But thou hast arranged all things by measure and number and weight.* For it is always in thy power to show great strength, and who can withstand the might of thy arm?²³

Today we tend to take the double conjunction "measure and number and weight" as merely a sonorous phrase, as though it were no more than a poetical way of saying that God did a good job. Following St. Augustine, St. Thomas takes it as saying a good deal more than that. For "in order for a thing to be perfect and good," he says, "it must have a form," but three different considerations precede and follow upon its form:

1. The *principles* of the form tell us the rule by which the thing operates and the yardstick by which it is measured.²⁴
2. *What form the thing has* is determined by its species, meaning the genus to which it belongs along with its difference from other things in that genus.
3. The form in turn determines *the end toward which the thing tends*, and therefore indicates the order which it needs to acquire so that it can reach that end.

These three things are called by various equivalent expressions, including "mode" and "measure" for the first, "species" and "number" for the second, and "order" and "weight" for the third.²⁵ So in St. Thomas's reading, the passage which the Objector quotes from the Wisdom of Solomon commends God's work in a most precise and thorough manner. God has

²³Wisdom of Solomon 11:20-21 (RSV-CE), emphasis added. Wisdom of Solomon is not to be confused with Ecclesiastes, which is also traditionally attributed to Solomon.

²⁴St. Thomas derives from Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, Book 10 (iota), the argument that the principle in any genus is the rule and measure of that genus. He develops the argument most fully in connection with law, as a rule and measure of human acts based on reason, in I-II, Q. 90, Art. 1. For discussion, see my *Commentary on Thomas Aquinas's Treatise on Law*.

²⁵See I, Q. 5, Art. 5, which draws from a passage in Augustine's *On the Nature of the Good*, and Q. 45, Art. 7, which draws from a passage in Augustine's *On the Trinity*, Book 6, Chapter 10.

arranged how things work, how they are to be measured, what forms they have, to what purposes they tend, and what they need to get there.

[2] The *sed contra* asserts that if all the rest of Creation was fashioned so well, then much more must God's Law be formulated well. Why say *much more*? Why not say merely *to the same degree*? Because God's eternal law, which His Divine law reflects, is not just another created thing. It is the pattern in His uncreated mind by which He created and governs the universe. If we do admire the universe, then we should even more admire the principles on which it is based.²⁶

I answer that, [1] The highest wisdom is contained in the precepts of the Divine law: [2] wherefore it is written (Dt. 4): "This is your wisdom and understanding in the sight of nations." [3] Now it belongs to wisdom to arrange all things in due manner and order. [4] Therefore it must be evident that the precepts of the Law are suitably set forth.

Here is my response. The precepts of Divine law express the pinnacle of wisdom. This is why the book of Deuteronomy tells the people that in the eyes of other peoples, their obedience to these precepts will be viewed as wisdom and understanding. But it behooves wisdom to dispose all things in the right manner and order. This fact should make it clear that the precepts of the law are well-framed.

[1] The brevity of the *respondeo* is possible because in this particular instance St. Thomas merely amplifies the *sed contra's* praise for the way Divine law is composed, fortifying it with an additional reference to Holy Scripture. Assuming that Divine revelation is true, we have good reason to believe that the Law is well-framed. Even if the skeptic should scorn revelation as a dreaded "argument from authority," the burden lies upon him to show exactly how the Law is *not* well-framed. This he has tried to do in the Objections -- to which St. Thomas will turn next.

[2] The quotation given here comes from an address by Moses to the people of Israel before their entrance into the Promised Land, reminding them of God's providential care:

Behold, I have taught you statutes and ordinances, as the Lord my God commanded me, that you should do them in the land which you are entering to take possession of it. *Keep them and do them; for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people."* For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is to us, whenever we call upon him? And what

²⁶On the eternal law as the pattern of God's creation and governance, see I-II, Q. 91, Art. 1, and Q. 93, Art. 1; on the natural law as the participation of the created rational mind in it, see I-II, Q. 91, Art. 2; and on the Divine law as its reflection in words, see I-II, Q. 91, Art. 4, and Q. 93, Art. 3.

great nation is there, that has statutes and ordinances so righteous as all this law which I set before you this day?²⁷

Although St. Thomas does not go into them here, this passage has interesting implications for natural law, to which we return in the Discussion at the end of this Article.

[3] The argument runs like this.

1. The other nations rightly admire the wisdom and understanding of the Israelites in keeping the Law.
2. If keeping the Law reflects wisdom, then the Law itself is a work of wisdom.
3. But if the Law is a work of wisdom, then it must deal with all things well.
4. If it deals with all things well, then its precepts must be well-framed.

Reply to Objection 1. [1] *Affirmation of one thing always leads to the denial of its opposite: but the denial of one opposite does not always lead to the affirmation of the other.* [2] *For it follows that if a thing is white, it is not black: but it does not follow that if it is not black, it is white: because negation extends further than affirmation.* [3] *And hence too, that one ought not to do harm to another, which pertains to the negative precepts, extends to more persons, as a primary dictate of reason, than that one ought to do someone a service or kindness.* [4] *Nevertheless it is a primary dictate of reason that man is a debtor in the point of rendering a service or kindness to those from whom he has received kindness, if he has not yet repaid the debt.* [5] *Now there are two whose favors no man can sufficiently repay, viz.*

Reply to Objection 1. Although affirming P always entails denying not-P, denying that it is one kind of not-P does not entail affirming that it is P. For example, if something is white, then it is not black (which is a kind of non-white); yet if it is not black, it is not necessarily white.

The observation about white and black illustrates the fact that negation extends further than affirmation – for there are other kinds of not-black than white. And for the same reason, the negative precept “Do no harm” extends to more persons as a first dictate of reason than the positive precept “Do such and such a service or favor.”

Therefore, the fact that a man owes a favor or service to anyone from whom he has received a favor is a first dictate of reason – provided that he has not already repaid him.

²⁷Deuteronomy 4:5-8 (RSV-CE), emphasis added. For “statutes and ordinances,” DRA has “ceremonies, and just judgments, and all the law.” As we saw in I-II, Q. 99, Art. 4, St. Thomas takes such expressions as referring to ceremonial, judicial, and moral precepts, respectively.

<p><i>God and man's father, [6] as stated in Ethic. viii. [7] Therefore it is that there are only two affirmative precepts; one about the honor due to parents, the other about the celebration of the Sabbath in memory of the Divine favor.</i></p>	<p>But as Aristotle points out, he can never repay what God or his father have done for him. This is why the honor due to parents and the celebration of the Sabbath day to commemorate the Divine favor are the only two affirmative precepts.</p>
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[1] Objection 1 was that for every matter which the Decalogue addresses, there should have been both an affirmative and a negative precept. St. Thomas begins by making a logical point which the Objector has overlooked.

[2] The underlying point is that for any given thing there may be more than one contrary. Consider the following table.

Colors that are black	Colors that are not black
Black	White Red Yellow Blue Orange Green Purple <i>And all other colors except black</i>

If a thing is white, then it is not black. But if it is not black, although it *may* be white, it may instead be red, yellow, blue, or any of the other colors in the right-hand column – it doesn't have to be white. St. Thomas expresses the underlying principle by saying that "is not" extends further than "is": That negation extends further than affirmation.

[3] Another illustration of the principle that negation extends further than affirmation is that "I must not" extends further than "I must." Suppose that exactly one person, Mary, has done a favor for me. Then I owe the positive duty of repayment only to Mary, but my negative duties go much further.

I must	I must not
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<p>Do something for Mary in return for what she has done for me</p>	<p>Do undeserved harm to Mary</p> <p>Do undeserved harm to Samuel</p> <p>Do undeserved harm to Olivia</p> <p>Do undeserved harm to Logan</p> <p>Do undeserved harm to Mariana</p> <p>Do undeserved harm to Sebastian</p> <p><i>Nor do undeserved harm to any other person, irrespective of what he has done or not done for me</i></p>
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Another way to think of this is that I cannot be obligated to do more than I can actually do. Good is to be done, of course – but although I can be obligated to do specific good to specific persons, it would be impossible to do *every* good to *every* person, and so I cannot have a universal duty to do good. By contrast, nothing forces me to do *any* undeserved harm to *any* person, so I certainly can have a universal duty not to do so. So again we see that negation extends further than affirmation.

[4] Although I cannot have a universal duty to do all good to all persons, I am certainly obligated to do good to those who have done good to me, and the duty lasts until the debt is repaid. In calling this a primary dictate of reason, St. Thomas means it is one of those things which “the natural reason of every man, of its own accord and at once, judges to be done or not to be done.”²⁸

[5] God is the source of our very being. Our parents may also be called the source of our being, though in a qualified sense, because the powers to beget and bear children themselves come from God. Nothing *in* existence can repay the gift of existence itself. Notice, by the way, that

²⁸His phrasing in I-II, Q. 100, Art. 1.

although in the present sentence St. Thomas says “father,” he is again using the term metonymically, for in the very next sentence he says “parents.”

[6] God creates us, but, except for the soul, He does so through secondary causes, by making the sexual union of the parents fruitful. So just as in one sense we owe our entire lives to God, so in another sense, granted God’s arrangements, we owe our entire lives to our parents. Not even the most devout worship sufficiently adores God, and not even the most reverent honor sufficiently venerates parents. Aristotle had written:

Friendship indeed asks what is possible, not what is equal in value, for not all benefits can be repaid in honor as is evident in honors due to God and parents. No one can ever repay them what they deserve, although the man who serves them to the best of his ability appears to be virtuous.²⁹

Just what is this virtue of the man who serves God and parents “to the best of his ability”? Certainly it resembles justice. However, it cannot precisely be justice, because justice is giving others what is due to them, and we cannot fully give God or our parents what is due to them. This is why St. Thomas gives the virtues of serving God and parents to the best of our ability different names than justice: The former he calls religion, and the latter he calls filial piety. We might say that although religion and filial piety are not justice, they partake of it. St. Thomas calls virtues of this sort – virtues which are connected with some principal virtue (such as justice) but which do not have its full power -- “potential parts” of the principal virtue.³⁰

[7] The precepts of the Decalogue bind us always, everywhere, and at every time. In general, the duties of repayment are not mentioned in the Decalogue because they are not of this kind; not only do they depend on whether we have received a favor, but they pass out of existence once the favor is repaid. However, there are two exceptions, for there are two debts which *everyone* has and which *no one* can fully repay: Our duties to honor God and our parents.

Now although the argument just given plainly explains the affirmative precept about honoring parents, it may not seem to explain the affirmative precept about keeping the Sabbath day holy: Isn’t *each* of the first three Commandments, not just the Sabbath day Commandment, about reverencing God in some way? Yes, but only this one specifically commemorates a Divine favor: The gift of Creation.

Reply to Objection 2. [1] *The reasons for the purely moral*

Reply to Objection 2. It would be fatuous to include the reasons for the purely moral rules, since they are

²⁹Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 8, Chapter 14. I am following the wording in Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. C.I. Litzinger (Chicago: Regnery, 1964).

³⁰For discussion, including the distinction between potential, subjective, and integral parts, see my *Commentary on Thomas Aquinas’s Virtue Ethics* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

precepts are manifest; hence there was no need to add the reason. [2] But some of the precepts include ceremonial matter, [3] or a determination of a general moral precept; [4] thus the first precept includes the determination, "Thou shalt not make a graven thing"; [5] and in the third precept the Sabbath-day is fixed. [6] Consequently there was need to state the reason in each case.

obvious. With several of the precepts in the Decalogue, however, matters stand differently, either because they address not only moral but ceremonial points, or because they “determine” or particularize the manner in which a more general moral rule is to be followed.

The First Commandment particularizes the prohibition of idolatry by forbidding the making of carven images, and the Third Commandment particularizes the duty of worship by specifying the Sabbath as the day of worship. Therefore, there really was a need to include the reasons for these two Commandments.

[1] The second Objection was that the reason for each precept should have been included in every precept, not just the first and third. St. Thomas maintains that in general, giving the reason for a precept is necessary only if otherwise the reason would have been obscure. The reason is not at all obscure in the case of the purely moral precepts; the rightness of such things as honoring parents, not murdering, and not stealing is immediately plain to every mind.

Everything, of course, can be denied. However, to deny is not the same thing as stating a cogent Objection. For example, someone might say, “It isn’t plain to *me* that I should never deliberately take innocent life. Isn’t it better to kill one innocent person and harvest his organs, if by doing so we can save four?” However, such objections are not evidence of real moral ignorance. The person who speaks in this way is shamming; he knows better.

[2] The point made just above concerns only precepts which are both *general* and *purely moral*. However, not all precepts in the Decalogue are purely moral: Some are partly moral, but also partly ceremonial. Even though the rightness of the moral part will be obvious, the reason for the ceremonial part will probably not be.

[3] Just as not every moral precept in the Decalogue is purely moral, not every one of its moral precepts is general. Some, after expressing a general duty, go on to specify the particular way in which it is to be obeyed.

[4] If the First Commandment did no more than forbid putting other gods in God’s place, then it would be entirely general – and the reason for it would be clear. However, it goes on to specify that one of the ways in which the people are to honor the Commandment is to forbear from making images. Although the general part of the precept is clear, this particularization of the precept requires explanation.

[5] If the Third Commandment did no more than command that times and places be set aside for rest and the worship of God, then it too would be entirely general. However, it goes on to specify that this should be done on the seventh day. Interestingly, in this case the “determination” of a general moral precept introduces *ceremonial* matter, so the need for explanation is doubled.

[6] As to the First Commandment, the reason given is that what is not God must not be worshipped as God; God will not tolerate the falsification of the very source of our being. As to the Third Commandment, reasons are given in both Exodus and Deuteronomy. In Exodus, the Commandment reminds the people that on the seventh day, having finished the work of Creation, God set this work aside. By doing so, it emphasizes that one reason for honoring the Sabbath is to commemorate Creation itself. In Deuteronomy, the Commandment reminds the people that God liberated them from slavery in Egypt. By doing so, it emphasizes that another reason for honoring the Sabbath is to commemorate their deliverance from bondage.

Reply to Objection 3. [1] *Generally speaking, men direct their actions to some point of utility.* [2] *Consequently in those precepts in which it seemed that there would be no useful result, or that some utility might be hindered, it was necessary to add a promise of reward.* [3] *And since parents are already on the way to depart from us, no benefit is expected from them: wherefore a promise of reward is added to the precept about honoring one's parents.* [4] *The same applies to the precept forbidding idolatry: since thereby it seemed that men were hindered from receiving the apparent benefit which they think they can get* [5] *by entering into a compact with the demons.*

Reply to Objection 3. Most men take something useful as the guide of their actions. Thus, in cases in which a Divine command seemed either useless or contrary to usefulness, it was necessary to promise a reward for obedience.

Why then is a promise attached to the Commandment about honoring parents? Because since parents are already retiring from the scene, nothing useful is further expected from them, and the motive for honoring them is therefore weak. And why is one attached to the Commandment prohibiting the worship of idols? Here the reason is much the same, for it would have seemed to men that the Commandment prevented them from receiving the illusory benefit they expected to get by bargaining with these demons.

[1] Objection 3 was that the reward promised for obedience should have been identified in every precept, not just the second and the fourth. But since a reward provides a *motive* which might otherwise be lacking, St. Thomas begins by pointing out what the usual motive for doing anything is. In general, men do things because they expect some useful result. What he is about to do is show how this motive can go wrong, so that Divine law needs to straighten it out.

The Blackfriars translation of the Latin word *utilitas* by the English word “utility” is correct, but misleads some of my students into thinking that St. Thomas is somehow endorsing utilitarianism – a doctrine which he would abominate. St. Thomas insists that we must never do evil so that good will come;³¹ by contrast, utilitarianism holds that a good enough result justifies doing anything whatsoever. There are many things wrong with utilitarianism, for example what it takes good results to be and its odd notions of how they are to be measured. Its gravest flaw, however, is that it does not recognize the possibility of an act which is *intrinsically* evil – an act which *by its nature* may not be done for the sake of any good result. For one who protests, “Not even for the sake of God?”, the reply is that such acts are incapable of serving Him. One may not lie for God, steal for God, or murder for God – but one might certainly lie, steal, and murder for what the utilitarian calls utility! The best a utilitarian can offer in favor of doing the right thing is that *usually* it produces better results. Whenever, in his account book, it doesn’t, he unhesitatingly suggests that the right thing to do is do wrong.

We see, then, that far from endorsing what we call utilitarianism in this passage, St. Thomas recognizes it as a permanent temptation.

[2] Just because human beings do keep their eye on usefulness, they are disinclined to do anything that seems to them to be useless or contrary to usefulness.

[3] With startling bluntness, St. Thomas points out that to many persons – at least many of those who lack the spiritual virtues – honoring parents seems useless, just because their parents will die soon. “I got a lot of good from them when I was growing up, but at their age I can’t expect to get much more.” Therefore it was necessary for God to motivate such people by some promise of temporal good. Some of those whom God is teaching are moral infants who cannot be expected to do what is right just because it is right.

[4] To understand the difficulty in prohibiting idolatry, we must ask why men do worship idols. The answer is that they expect to strike a bargain with these false gods, to do or give something so that they will get something in return. To people in this frame of mind, saying “Do not worship idols” seems like saying “Give up the prospect of advantages.” All of these idols are still worshipped, though we no longer carve them in stone.³² If we give up the worship of the sex god, we think, we might never have love; if we give up the worship of the god of wealth, we may end up poor. Consequently, to make up the loss of the imagined favors of false gods, the true God had to promise true favors.

St. Thomas’s language bends over backwards to emphasize the fraud of idolatry. *Videbatur* refers to what *seemed* to men to be so. *Apparens* refers to the *apparent* benefit of serving false gods. *Credunt* refers to what they *think* they can get from them. All of this is illusion.

³¹See II-II, Q. 64, Art. 5, ad 3; III, Q. 68, Art. 11, ad 3.

³²“Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.” Colossians 3:55 (RSV-CE), emphasis added.

[5] Some places in Holy Scripture suggest that the false gods had no reality whatsoever. This view is made bitinglly clear in Isaiah's satire of those who carve idols of them:

The carpenter stretches a line, he marks it out with a pencil; he fashions it with planes, and marks it with a compass; he shapes it into the figure of a man, with the beauty of a man, to dwell in a house. He cuts down cedars; or he chooses a holm tree or an oak and lets it grow strong among the trees of the forest; he plants a cedar and the rain nourishes it. Then it becomes fuel for a man; he takes a part of it and warms himself, he kindles a fire and bakes bread; also he makes a god and worships it, he makes it a graven image and falls down before it. Half of it he burns in the fire; over the half he eats flesh, he roasts meat and is satisfied; also he warms himself and says, "Aha, I am warm, I have seen the fire!" And the rest of it he makes into a god, his idol; and falls down to it and worships it; he prays to it and says, "Deliver me, for thou art my god!" They know not, nor do they discern; for he has shut their eyes, so that they cannot see, and their minds, so that they cannot understand. No one considers, nor is there knowledge or discernment to say, "Half of it I burned in the fire, I also baked bread on its coals, I roasted flesh and have eaten; and shall I make the residue of it an abomination? Shall I fall down before a block of wood?" He feeds on ashes; a deluded mind has led him astray, and he cannot deliver himself or say, "Is there not a lie in my right hand?"³³

However, other passages of Scripture suggest that the reality of idolatry is even worse, for whatever they may think they are doing, at least some of those who worship false gods are in fact adoring spirits of evil. Reminding the people of their former apostasy, Moses declares,

They stirred [God] to jealousy with strange gods; with abominable practices they provoked him to anger. They sacrificed to demons which were no gods, to gods they had never known, to new gods that had come in of late, whom your fathers had never dreaded.³⁴

The New Testament agrees. Describing a future time of catastrophe, one apocalyptic passage declares,

The rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands nor give up worshipping demons and idols of gold and silver and bronze and stone and wood, which cannot either see or hear or walk; nor did they repent of their murders or their sorceries or their immorality or their thefts.³⁵

³³Isaiah 44:13-20 (RSV-CE).

³⁴Deuteronomy 32:16-17 (RSV-CE).

³⁵Apocalypse (Revelation) 9:20-21 (RSV-CE).

Today, of course, it is considered knowing to scoff at the notion of demon worship, though in view of the revival of occultism and the widespread cultivation of disordered mental states, it may not be prudent.

Reply to Objection 4. [1] *Punishments are necessary against those who are prone to evil, [2] as stated in Ethic. x. [3] Wherefore a threat of punishment is only affixed to those precepts of the law which forbade evils to which men were prone. [4] Now men were prone to idolatry by reason of the general custom of the nations. [5] Likewise men are prone to perjury on account of the frequent use of oaths. [6] Hence it is that a threat is affixed to the first two precepts.*

Reply to Objection 4. As Aristotle points out, punishments are especially necessary against those who are prone to evil. For this reason, threats were attached only to the rules which prohibited the evils which men were predisposed to commit.

Men were apt to commit idolatry because it was the custom of all the nations. In much the same way, they are apt to lie under oath because oaths are so commonly taken. This is why threats were attached to these first two Commandments.

[1] The Objector had protested that the punishment for disobedience should have been declared not just in the first and second precepts, but in each of them. St. Thomas wants the Objector to slow down – to ask himself why legislators employ punishments in the first place. They do so because people are prone to do wrong.

[2] In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle explains the necessity of punishment by pointing out that the general run of people are moved more strongly by fear than by shame, and more strongly by the fear of punishment than the fear of disgrace:

Were persuasive words sufficient of themselves to make men virtuous, many great rewards would be due according to Theognis; and it would be necessary to give them to those who persuade. At present it seems that persuasive discourse can challenge and move youths of excellent character and can fill the lover of the good with virtue. But it cannot arouse the majority to virtue, for most people are not subject by nature to shame but to fear; nor do they refrain from evil because of disgrace but because of punishment. In fact, since they live by passion, they follow their own pleasures, by which the passions themselves are nourished, and avoid the contrary pains. They do not know what is truly good and pleasant, nor can they taste its delight. What words would reform people of this sort? It is impossible or at least difficult to change by argument what is held by inveterate habit.³⁶

³⁶Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 10, Chapter 9, following the wording of the text in Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, cited above.

In his *Commentary* on the work, St. Thomas adds,

Something acceptable must be proposed to change a man by argument. Now, one who does not relish an honorable good but is inclined toward passion does not accept any reasoning that leads to virtue. Hence it is impossible, or at least difficult, for anyone to be able to change a man by argument from what he holds by inveterate usage. So also in speculative matters it is not possible to lead back to truth a man who firmly cleaves to the opposite of those principles to which goals are equivalent in practical matters.³⁷

[3] Very well, punishment is needed because men are prone to do wrong. But are they equally prone to every sort of wrong? No, certain kinds of wrong attract them more strongly than others. Therefore, the reminder of punishment for disobedience is not equally necessary in the case of every precept, as the Objector thought. The necessary for it arises only in the case of those precepts which men tend to resist.

[4] The people of the Old Testament were especially resistant to the prohibition of idolatry because monotheism was unique, idolatry was everywhere, and they expected to gain benefits from their false gods. The Old Testament history of the Chosen Nation is full of relapses into paganism, followed by calamity, followed at last by repentance and return to the true God.

Typically, each Near Eastern god was associated with a particular virtue, a particular aspect of nature, and a particular physical image, which was placed in a particular temple. The worship of the One God changed all this, and not just because He is only one. Rather than being associated with some aspect of nature, He is distinct from nature as its Creator. Rather than being associated with some virtue, He is the exemplar of all virtue. Although at certain periods He had a temple, in a deeper sense the entire universe was His temple. Rather than having man fashion images of Him, He Himself fashioned man as His image and placed this image in the temple of the universe.³⁸ As the book of Genesis reports, on the sixth day of Creation God declared,

“Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.³⁹

[5] People are also especially resistant to the prohibition of false swearing, just because the making of promises to seal agreements is so central a feature of everyday life, and false swearing seems therefore expedient. A true oath is more than saying “I promise,” for one calls

³⁷Thomas Aquinas, *ibid.*, Book 10, Lecture 14.

³⁸The illuminating observation about God placing His image, man, in the universe, as His temple, was first suggested to me in personal conversation with Professor Rikk Watts, presently of Alphacrucis College, Australia.

³⁹Genesis 1:26-27 (RSV-CE).

upon God to witness the promise. If there were no Divine punishment for invoking Him dishonestly, then it would be enormously tempting to say “So help me God, I will do this” even though one intended to do the opposite.

To this day, witnesses in criminal proceedings are sworn in. The English common law held that to be competent to give testimony, a person must believe in a God who punishes false swearing. In these supposedly enlightened times, the requirement has been dropped, on grounds that it unfairly impugns the virtue of atheists. But if it is true, as Aristotle thinks, that the general run of people are moved more strongly by fear than by shame, and more strongly by fear of punishment than by fear of disgrace, then the advisability of this development is questionable. After all, the very reason we seek testimony is to find out the truth. If the witnesses themselves are lying, then it is difficult to detect their dishonesty and even harder to prove it. For this reason, fear of human punishment for false testimony is likely to be weak. Divine justice turns the tables, because God already knows the truth.

The argument is sometimes made that a person who is prone to lie will also lie about whether he believes in a God who punishes false swearing. This is true, and it may well pose a problem in an age in which infidelity is common but people conceal it. In an age in which infidelity is rare – or in an age like ours, in which it is common, but people are more likely to boast of it than conceal it -- the objection does not seem to hold water.

[6] St. Thomas believes that the prohibitions of idolatry and false swearing are singled out for reminders of Divine punishment because these are the prohibitions men most strongly resist.

Reply to Objection 5. **[1]** *The commandment about the Sabbath was made in memory of a past blessing. Wherefore special mention of the memory is made therein.* **[2]** *Or again, the commandment about the Sabbath has a determination affixed to it that does not belong to the natural law, wherefore this precept needed a special admonition.*

Reply to Objection 5. Two reasons can be given for the fact that only the Sabbath precept refers to memory. One is that it memorialized a past favor. The other is that by specifying the day on which worship should take place, it went beyond the general duty to worship which is found in the natural law, so that it needed a special reminder.

[1] The fifth Objection was that the importance of memory should have been mentioned in every precept, not just the third. St. Thomas gives two reasons for treating the Third Commandment differently. The first is that among all the Commandments, the Third is the only one decreed specifically in commemoration of a Divine blessing – whether the blessing of Creation, as in the version given in Exodus, or the blessing of deliverance from slavery, as in the version given in Deuteronomy.

[2] The second reason for treating the Third Commandment differently is that although even the natural law prescribes rest and worship, and reflection is able to show how appropriate it is to set aside times and places for them, reason alone does not tell us why the designated time should be the seventh day. Thus, Exodus reminds the people that the seventh is the day on which God is said to have rested.

DISCUSSION

Sins of the Fathers

The First Commandment's prohibition of worshipping false gods concludes with the warning that God visits the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate Him. A little later than the Decalogue, Deuteronomy goes further, declaring that He "keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments to a *thousand* generations."⁴⁰ However, generational consequences are often held to impugn His justice and deny the principle of responsibility, for they imply that in the case of this Commandment, some will suffer for the sins of others.

But don't some always suffer for the sins of others? The natural consequence of sin is that damage ripples not only through me, the sinner, but outward in every direction. God could have made a world in which nothing had consequences, nothing had meaning: A world in which, among other things, children turned out the same no matter how their parents raised them. In that case, why should the parents care for them? Why bother with parents at all?

He bothers with parents because He chose to make a world in which finite rational creatures are given the astounding privilege of imitating His Fatherhood and participating in the Wisdom by which He governs the universe. "Among all others," St. Thomas writes, "the rational creature is subject to Divine providence in the most excellent way, in so far as it partakes of a share of providence, by being provident both for itself and for others. *Wherefore it has a share of the Eternal Reason.*"⁴¹ By the fact that in raising my children, I am also helping raise my children's children and my children's children's children, this privilege is not taken away, but intensified.

With the privilege comes responsibility, for failure to live up to it causes real injury to others. The obverse of the power to do good is the power to do hurt. If I am a bad father, my children may find it more difficult to trust the Fatherhood of God. If I adore *that which is not*, I pave a path that they may walk on too. So the generational consequence is real – but it is the other side of a blessing: We are placed in a universe in which what we do matters.

⁴⁰Deuteronomy 7:9 (RSV-CE), emphasis added.

⁴¹I-II, Q. 91, Art. 2.

Yet God's providential care may also mitigate some of the temporal consequences of forgiven sin. In view of the repeated sins of the people, Moses implores God,

And now, I pray thee, let the power of the Lord be great as thou hast promised, saying, "The Lord is slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression, but he will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of fathers upon children, upon the third and upon the fourth generation." Pardon the iniquity of this people, I pray thee, according to the greatness of thy steadfast love, and according as thou hast forgiven this people, from Egypt even until now.⁴²

God replies that although He will grant the pardon for which Moses has asked, there will still be a penalty for those who saw His glory and signs and yet despised Him. The generation of their children will enter into the Promised Land, but they will not.

And would it have been better for them if they had been allowed to enter it along with their children? If it is true that temporal punishment is necessary for the correction of our souls, probably not! Besides, if they had they accompanied their children, would it have been better for their children?

Does the Old Law Recognize the Natural Law?

St. Thomas has argued in I-II, Question 100, Article 1, that the moral precepts of the Old Law *are in fact* precepts of natural law. Whether the Old Testament itself views them this way is another question. Indeed, some thinkers have claimed that the Old Testament has no concept of natural law, but only a concept of Divine positive law: "God commanded not murdering, so we had better not murder, but He could just as well have commanded murdering, and then we would have to murder."

Actually, the natural law is acknowledged even in the Old Testament's tributes to Divine law, although indirectly. Consider again Moses' address to the Israelites in Deuteronomy 4. The query "what great nation is there, that has statutes and ordinances so righteous as all this law which I set before you this day?" proposes a comparison. It presupposes their ability of the people to recognize the body of laws set before them as a more perfect expression of the principles of right and wrong, dimly known by everyone, than the laws of the other nations are.

Indeed the Old Testament contains many such indirect acknowledgements of natural law. For example, when God announces His intention to destroy the Cities of the Plain, Abraham protests in the name of God's own justice:

Far be it from thee to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from thee! Shall not the Judge

⁴²Numbers 14:17-19 (RSV-CE).

of all the earth do right?"⁴³

Again, in the prologue to the Ten Commandments, God reminds the people of their indebtedness to Him:

And God spoke all these words, saying, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before me"⁴⁴

How is it that Abraham knows something about God's justice before Torah has been given? How is it that the Israelites know the law of gratitude before the Law has been revealed to them? The answer is that His most fundamental moral requirements are already impressed upon the innermost design of the created moral intellect. We know a part of God's will for us through deep conscience, even before receiving it in words.

Utterly oblivious of this point, the political philosopher Leo Strauss argues that

The idea of natural right must be unknown as long as the idea of nature is unknown. ... The Old Testament ... does not know "nature": the Hebrew term for "nature" is unknown in the Hebrew Bible. ... There is, then, no knowledge of natural right as such in the Old Testament. The discovery of nature necessarily precedes the discovery of natural right.⁴⁵

This line of reasoning is exactly the reverse of what it should be. Conscience is the interior testimony to the fact that certain things are just and unjust not because we like or dislike them, not because some human government has commanded or prohibited them, but because *that is how things are*. We do not first develop the concept of conscience and then come to have what the concept describes; rather we discover that we have it, and then work out the concept "conscience." We do not first develop the concept of nature and then discover that things *are* a certain way; rather we discover that things *are* a certain way, and then work out the concept "nature." One would think from Strauss's statement that theory precedes facts. On the contrary, the recognition of facts provokes theory – yes, even conceding that a theory may call our attention to facts we had not noticed when we first developed it.

One of the inescapable features of the Old Testament is that God not only judges His own people but other nations as well, by a standard that can only be called natural law, since Divine law was not given to them. This fact is conspicuous at the beginning of the book of the prophet Amos, where more than a chapter is devoted to God's judgment upon the transgressions of the

⁴³Genesis 18:23-25 (RSV).

⁴⁴Exodus 20:1-3 (RSV).

⁴⁵Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), pp. 81-82.

surrounding pagan peoples -- Syrians, Moabites, Philistines, and others -- before God even mentions the transgressions of Israel.

But the same fact can be seen throughout Torah. Otherwise what could it mean for God to say "Not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart are you going in to possess their land; but because of the wickedness of these nations the Lord your God is driving them out from before you"?⁴⁶ Unless standards that distinguish righteousness from wickedness apply to all nations, the statement would be incoherent.

Besides, it is not at all true that the concept of nature is absent from the Old Testament. The only thing missing from it is a *word* which might be translated "nature." For the Old Testament attributes *how things are* to what God, in His goodness, has wrought. Not only has He created, but He has imparted to His Creation a certain integrity of its own. For He could have capriciously made this happen and then that, so that no regularity could be detected, but instead He has made a "covenant" with the day and with the night, as unbreakable as His literal covenant with David:

The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah: "Thus says the Lord: If you can break my covenant with the day and my covenant with the night, so that day and night will not come at their appointed time, then also my covenant with David my servant may be broken, so that he shall not have a son to reign on his throne, and my covenant with the Levitical priests my ministers. As the host of heaven cannot be numbered and the sands of the sea cannot be measured, so I will multiply the descendants of David my servant, and the Levitical priests who minister to me."⁴⁷

The psalmist draws an elegant parallel between the celestial and moral aspects of the world that God has created:

The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. In them he has set a tent for the sun, which comes forth like a bridegroom leaving his chamber, and like a strong man runs its course with joy. Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them; and there is nothing hid from its heat.

The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the Lord is clean, enduring for ever; the ordinances of the Lord are true, and righteous altogether. More

⁴⁶Deuteronomy 9:5a (RSV-CE). We have seen this verse before in another context.

⁴⁷Jeremiah 33:19-22 (RSV-CE).

to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb. Moreover by them is thy servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.⁴⁸

Lost in admiration of these graces, the inspired poet appeals to the Creator for purity:

But who can discern his errors? Clear thou me from hidden faults. Keep back thy servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me! Then I shall be blameless, and innocent of great transgression. Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.⁴⁹

⁴⁸Psalm 19:1-11 (in the Vulgate, numbered as 18:1-12). I quote this part of Psalm 18 a number of times in this *Commentary*, but it deserves the repeated mention.

⁴⁹Ibid, verses 12-14 (in the Vulgate, numbered as 13-15).