

This chapter, “Why the Natural Law Suggests a Divine Source,” is my contribution to Francis J. Beckwith, Robert P. George, and Susan McWilliams, *A Second Look at First Things* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2013). The book is a *festchrift* for my good friend, the distinguished legal scholar, Hadley Arkes, a lifelong defender of the application of natural law to jurisprudence. The other contributors include Larry Arn, Allen Guelzo, James Schall, S.J., David Forte, Micah Watson, Christopher Wolfe, Vincent Phillip Muñoz, Michael Novak, Gerard Bradley, James R. Stoner, Jr., Christopher Tollefsen, and Peter Augustine Lawler.

Since the editors subtitled this fine anthology “The Case for Conservative Politics,” I hope they will indulge me in trying to prevent a misunderstanding which I am sure they were not trying to promote. My chapter does not make the case for conservative politics. Certainly I am conservative in the sense that I desire to “conserve” belief in God. Insofar as the reigning liberal political culture adores gods other than God, I oppose it. But God is not the servant of any political views, even if they are one’s own, and even if they happen to be true. Some kinds of conservatism forget this fact, and that is another way of adoring gods other than God.

To read about the respective problems with liberalism and conservatism, click [here](#) and [here](#). To learn more about *A Second Look at First Things*, click [here](#). To read “Why the Natural Law Suggests a Divine Source,” go to the next page.

# Chapter 8: Why the Natural Law Suggests a Divine Source

J. Budziszewski

## **Introduction**

*They show that what the law requires  
is written on their hearts . . .*<sup>1</sup>

Certain moral basics are not only right for everyone, but at some level known to everyone. Even false friends know that they should be faithful to their friends; even ingrates are at some level aware of the duty of gratitude; even skirt-chasers know that they ought to be faithful to their wives. These and other foundational principles have traditionally been called “natural law,” because we know them through the way we are made, through the shared experience of lives that are structured by human nature. The fact that we know them naturally doesn’t necessarily mean that we always follow them. Nor does it mean that our knowledge of them is clear: Though real as rain, it may be cloudy, latent, unreflective, and philosophically uninformed. But just as we all have an absent-minded feeling of weight even if we know nothing about the theory of gravitation, so we all have a dim awareness of the natural law even if we know nothing about the philosophy of natural law.

The argument of this chapter is that reality of the natural law gives

1 Romans 2:15a, RSV. I hope that nobody will suppose that just because each section is headed with a quotation from Scripture, the arguments rely on verbal revelation. It would have served as well to quote Shakespeare, if suitable quotations could be found. Those who do believe in verbal revelation may be interested to know that the Book of Scripture confirms the Book of Nature; those who don’t may regard it as ordinary literature.

good reason to believe in the reality of God, even apart from verbal revelation. This is not to reject the possibility of verbal revelation; it is only to say that we are not presently considering it. Several of the revealed religions have vigorously explored the philosophy of natural law, but philosophers outside the revealed religions have pursued it too. This chapter considers the Book of Nature, not the Book of Scripture, and our suggestion is that, like its twin, it points back to its divine Author.

#### **Four Modes of Natural Moral Knowledge**

*There is no speech, nor are there words;  
their voice is not heard; yet their voice  
goes out through all the earth.<sup>2</sup>*

Before we investigate the suggestion that natural law points to God, a little more must be said about the natural law itself. How, exactly, is the natural law “natural” – how does “the way we are made” indicate right and wrong? In at least four ways, including the sheer recognition of human designedness, the deep structure of the human moral intellect, the other deep structures of our design, and what happens to us when we set ourselves at odds with our design. Some non-classical natural law theories emphasize one or two of these modes of natural knowledge at the expense of the others, and some even deny one or two of them. However, the mainstream of the natural law tradition affirms and integrates all four. Let us take a brief look at each one.

To return to the beginning, first is the simple fact that we recognize human nature to be not a blooming, buzzing confusion, but a deeply ordered, meaningful reality, a design. If the way we are were merely an arbitrary jumble of arbitrary processes with no meaning or purpose, then strictly speaking, we would have no nature. How could it possibly instruct us? How could we speak of following it if there were nothing to follow? We might just as well reprogram the mishmash, abolish our so-called nature – why not? But there is no good reason to believe that we are a mishmash. We do not experience ourselves that way; not only do we recognize order and structure in human life, but also it has value

2 Psalm 19:3–4a, RSV.

and significance to us. Some claim that this is nonsense, that the perception of moral meaning is an illusion, a way in which natural selection makes suckers of us, tricking us into carrying out its blind program.<sup>3</sup> Their idea is that animals who think they perceive meaning in their lives will be more strongly motivated to live and cooperate long enough to pass on their genes. But this explanation is circular. After all, the perception of meaning would strengthen the motive to live only if we *needed* to perceive meaning – only if we lost interest in living if we didn't perceive it. What adaptive value could such a tendency have? Wouldn't it have been more straightforward for natural selection to produce animals who didn't need to perceive meaning? If the evolutionary program is to make them live and cooperate so that they can pass on their genes, wouldn't it have been more economical simply to evolve a predisposition to live and cooperate? To put it another way, rather than first producing animals who lose their will to live unless they can see a meaning which isn't there, then making them think they *do* see a meaning which isn't there, why not just produce animals who want to live? A reasonable person concludes that we seek meaning not because it helps smuggle our genes into our descendants, but because there really is meaning – and because we are ordained to seek it and perchance to find it. One of the things that have meaning is our own nature, and part of this meaning is moral.

Second is the deep structure of the human moral intellect, of the power of moral reasoning. We might call this power deep conscience.

3 “It’s amazing that a process as amoral and crassly pragmatic as natural selection could design [!] a mental organ that makes us feel as if we’re in touch with higher truths. Truly a shameless ploy.” Robert Wright, *The Moral Animal: The New Science of Evolutionary Psychology* (New York, NY: Random House, 1994), 212. “[O]ur belief in morality is merely an adaptation put in place to further our reproductive ends. . . . [E]thics as we understand it is an illusion fobbed off on us by our genes to get us to co-operate (so that human genes survive). . . . Furthermore the way our biology enforces its ends is by making us think that there is an objective higher code to which we are all subject.” Michael Ruse and E.O. Wilson, “The Evolution of Ethics,” *New Scientist* 108:1478 (17 October 1985): 51–52. For critique, see J. Budziszewski, “Accept No Imitations: Naturalism vs. Natural Law,” *The Line Through the Heart: Natural Law as Fact, Theory, and Sign of Contradiction* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2009), 79–95.

Deep conscience is what tells us the basics of right and wrong, like “Never do gratuitous harm to your neighbor,” “Punish only the guilty,” or even more fundamentally, “Good is to be done and pursued, and evil avoided.” It would be ridiculous to suggest that we work these out as conclusions from still deeper premises; *they are* the premises from which conclusions are worked out. It would be equally silly to suggest that we know these things only because our parents taught them to us. Certainly they did teach us, and that is important. But just as in the realm of arithmetic, no amount of perverse parental teaching could convince an intelligent child that the sum of ten plus ten is two, so in the realm of morality, no amount of perverse parental teaching could convince him that we owe loyalty to enemies and betrayal to friends.<sup>4</sup> And there is more. Not only does deep conscience teach us the foundational principles of right and wrong; it is how we discern that there is a distinction between right and wrong in the first place. Without it we would presumably be able to recognize a difference between what we want and what we do not want, but the possibility of a duty to do something *even though we do not want to* would escape us; we would be color-blind to the moral color “ought.” In this sense, every mode of natural moral knowledge is built on deep conscience as a foundation – although, in another sense, every mode also depends on the recognition of designedness, which we have already discussed. For if deep conscience itself had no meaning, then why should we bother with it? Why not ignore it? If we find that we cannot ignore it, but that it gets in the way, then why not find a way to delete or disconnect it? We cannot help perceiving that this would be simply wrong. Conscience presents itself to us not merely as an inconvenient thought, but as an interior witness to a real law.

Third is how we are made more generally – the other features of the

4 Although we recognize the moral basics as true in themselves, it would incorrect to call them “innate.” We are not born knowing them; the newborn infant does not reflect, “I ought to be faithful to my spouse, if I have a spouse, whatever a spouse is, and whatever faithfulness is.” On the other hand, as soon as a child attains the age of reason – as soon as he is able to grasp the concepts to which such rules refer – he is able to see that the rules are true. Surely the mind must have a certain innate *structure* to be capable of such a feat. However, it is not pre-loaded with innate *ideas*.

human design, the other qualities of the human constitution. To mention but a few such features, we are persons rather than things; we come in two polar sexes; and we are imbued with a desire to know, which is moved not just by practical considerations, but by wonder. Each of these features makes a difference to how we should live. A striking fact about them is that each is ordered to a purpose, each of them stands in a “for the sake of” relationship to some human good. The difference of the sexes, for example, is ordained to the union of complementary opposites, and wonder is ordained to the seeking of wisdom. In fact, not only is our nature structured by “for the sake of” relations, it is in itself a kind of “for the sake of” relation. To be a person is to be ordained to meaningful freedom, to have value in myself rather than being merely an instrument or tool of someone or something else.

Fourth is the natural consequences of our actions, what happens when we set ourselves at odds with our design. In old-fashioned language, we reap what we sow. Amazingly, rather than being in conflict with deep conscience or the other features of our design, the system of natural consequences complements them – a fact to which we return later. Conscience bids me be faithful to my friends, but if I betray them all then I will have no friends. Wonder bids me seek wisdom, but if I am indifferent to wisdom I will become even stupider than I had intended. Awe and gratitude bid me acknowledge my divine Author, but if I lose Him I will ultimately lose myself. We may call the principle of natural consequences the “law of the harvest.” It is the teacher of last resort, the testimony to natural law that kicks in after we have refused to pay attention to the other three.

Having already broached the subject of God, let us turn to some of the various ways in which the reality of the natural law points to a divine origin. I say “some” because these are only a sample; other arguments are possible as well. I call them “arguments” rather than “proofs” because the discussion is never finally closed; the best that philosophy can ever do is provide good reasons for believing that something is true, reasons which can then be investigated more fully. My aim, then, is not to anticipate and answer all possible objections to these good reasons – that would be impossible – but to bring them within grasp, to render them accessible to intuition.

### **The Argument from Natural Law as Order**

*He fixed their bounds which cannot be passed.*<sup>5</sup>

Several different forms of the Argument from Natural Law as Order might be developed. The form in which I am presenting it makes it a special case of several other more general arguments for the existence of God.<sup>6</sup> In this form, it runs like this:

1. Natural law is a form of natural order, specifically, of natural *moral* order.
2. But every form of natural order requires a “cause,” an explanation, and this form is no exception.
3. The most reasonable explanation for natural order is that nature itself has a cause which imparts such order to it.
4. This is what we call God.

Natural law, then, points to its divine origin in the same way that all natural order points to its divine origin. Let us consider each step of the argument in turn.

The most common objection to Step 1 is that the very expression “natural law” is misleading – that moral law is not a kind of *natural* order because, if it were, then everything that happens in nature would be moral, and obviously this is not the case. The objection misunderstands what is meant by calling moral law a kind of natural order. Two different kinds of statement describing natural order are commonly called “laws of nature,” and at present we are referring to only one of them. What science calls the laws of nature – generalizations such as the law of gravity – describe how things *actually do* happen in the world. What ethics calls the laws of nature – generalizations such as the Golden Rule – describe how things *ought* to happen in the world, and serve as standards for the conduct of beings capable of grasping them. But how things ought to happen is just as truly a structure of reality as how they do happen, and just as truly knowable by the use of our natural intellect.

An example may help make this clear: What are eyes for? Obviously, for seeing. This is not just a wild guess, or an inference from

5 Psalm 148:5b-6, RSV.

6 The Argument from Order and the Cosmological Argument.

facts outside of nature. It is a reasonable inference from the facts of nature itself. What facts? Not *just* the fact that eyes do see (for in itself that would not be enough), but also the fact that without referring to their power to see, we would have no good way to explain why we have eyes in the first place. Now if the purpose of eyes is that they see, then eyes that see well are good eyes, and eyes that see poorly are poor ones; given their purpose, this is what it *means* for eyes to be “good.” Moreover, good is to be pursued; the appropriateness of pursuing it is what it means for *anything* to be good. Therefore, the appropriate thing to do with poor eyes is try to turn them into good ones, and we ought to do so. Do you see what we have just done? We have reasoned from certain facts about what is (the function of the eyes) to certain conclusions about what ought to be done (helping them to fulfill their function). The conclusion, which is evaluative, turns out to be just as much a natural truth as the premise, which is descriptive. You may be thinking, “That can’t be true, because I’ve always been told that an ‘is’ cannot imply an ‘ought.’” This so-called rule of reasoning is overstated. Certainly not every kind of “is” implies an “ought.” It really would be a fallacy, for example, to reason “rocks do fall on people, therefore rocks ought to fall on people.” But attention to what we have just done shows that *some kinds* of “is” really do imply *some kinds* of “oughts.” The fallacy lies not in reasoning from “is” to “ought” *as such*, but in drawing the wrong kinds of connection between these two kinds of proposition.

Concerning Step 2: It may seem that order does *not* require an explanation – that it can arise spontaneously, without anything bringing it about. Generally speaking, however, the achievement of the sorts of order we casually call “spontaneous” requires more design and contrivance, not less. If I toss nine three-inch-square blocks into a nine-inch-square box, then jostle the box, the blocks will spontaneously arrange themselves into a symmetrical three-by-three block grid. But they will do so only because they are just the right number, shape and size to fit – a set of features unlikely to arise by chance. In general, the more elaborate the spontaneous order, the greater the need to explain the circumstances which make it possible, so we have merely pushed the need for explanation one step back.

Concerning Step 3: It may seem that even if order does require an explanation, it does not require an *ultimate* explanation. Perhaps order is explained by cause A, cause A is explained by cause B, cause B is explained by cause C, and so on in an infinite regress. The problem is that requiring an infinite regress of explanations is equivalent to having no explanation at all. If order really does require explanation, then at some point the chain of explanations must terminate in a first cause or first explanation.

Concerning Step 4: It may seem that even if natural order requires a first cause or first explanation, this first cause may be something *else* in nature. If so, then why must the explanation resort to a Creator who is *different* from nature, who brought nature into order? Perhaps, instead of God, we should be thinking of, say, very powerful Martians, who are just as much a part of nature as we are. This objection overlooks a crucial distinction. Suppose it were true that for everything in nature, and for every kind of order among these things, we could find a cause or explanation which was also within nature. Even if this were true, it wouldn't explain enough. The *entire ensemble* of things and of kinds of order among them would remain to be explained, and the explanation would have to be distinct from the ensemble itself. To explain things in nature, it might, conceivably, be sufficient to resort to other things in nature; to explain nature *as such*, though, one must resort to something other than nature. This something is what we call God.

An interesting variation on the Argument from Natural Law as Order relies on the fact that the universe exhibits more than one kind of natural order – for example moral order, causal order, and teleological order. The various forms of natural order do correspond surprisingly closely; for example, I ought to be faithful to my friends (moral order), unfaithfulness tends to destroy friendship (causal order), and faithfulness is both part of friendship and practiced for its sake (teleological order). But the correspondence is not perfect. Our hearts are riddled with desires that interfere with our ultimate happiness, and we are sometimes strongly tempted to do what is wrong. The correspondence among the different kinds of order is itself a kind of order in need of explanation, and as such, points to a divine origin. On the

other hand, the fact that the correspondence is less than perfect – the dislocation we suffer, which puts us at odds with ourselves – also requires explanation, an explanation which seems to go beyond the resources of natural law theory *as such*. This fact does not imply that natural law theory is untrue; it suggests only that it is not the *whole* truth about human nature, a point which natural law thinkers may gladly concede.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Argument from Natural Law as Law**

*. . . while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them.*<sup>8</sup>

The Argument from Natural Law as Law depends not on the fact that the natural law is one among many forms of natural order, but on the fact that it is a *specific* form of natural order, that is, law. The simplest but most suggestive argument version of the argument runs like this:

1. Natural law is really law.
2. Law requires enactment, therefore an enactor or legislator.
3. But law also requires promulgation, and natural law is promulgated through nature.
4. Nature could not serve as a means of promulgation unless the legislator fashioned it to do so.
5. Therefore, the legislator of the natural law must be the creator or fashioner of nature. This is what we call God.

The pillar of this argument is Step 1. Why should we accept it? Why should we believe that natural law is real law, rather than, say, a collection of urges or of interesting ideas? The most powerful reason to consider it a real law is the faculty of conscience. Conscience isn't merely something we pick up along the way; the experience is natural to us. Moreover, the experience is highly distinctive, utterly unlike any other – it presents itself not just as a medley of attractions and aversions, but as an interior witness to a standard which we do not make

7 To many thinkers, myself included, the interior dislocation suggests the need of *historical* explanation, an *event* – in Christian terms, a fall from grace.

8 Romans 2:15b, RSV.

up, which directs us and by which we are judged, and which we cannot change to suit ourselves.

It may seem that this confidence that conscience is what it seems to be is inflated: That it could not be what it seems to be, in the first place because it is not truly natural, in the second place because it is not truly distinctive. Rather than being natural, perhaps it is pumped in from the outside, an internal residue of lessons taught to us by others. Parents tell us things, teachers tell us things, and over time we accumulate a set of inclinations and inhibitions. And even if it is natural, rather than being a distinctive kind of experience, an interior witness, perhaps conscience is just a fancy name for some subset of mammalian instincts. Just as we have an instinct to eat when we are hungry, so we have an instinct, say, to do justice, the only difference being that we dress up the latter instinct by calling it a duty or a law.

Although these dismissive arguments are superficially plausible, they raise more questions than they answer. Certainly one can see why conscience might seem like a mere residue of socialization. After all, our sense of what is right and wrong is certainly influenced by how we are brought up and taught. But as we saw earlier, the only way to teach anyone anything is to build on something already there; unless conscience were partly natural, there would be nothing for the teachings to catch hold of, to take root in. “Don’t hit your little brother,” mother says to Johnnie, “you know better than that. How would you like it if he hit you?” The reason she says “You know better than that” is that Johnnie does know better than that. The reason she asks “How would you like it if he hit you?” is that even if he has never heard the Golden Rule, she can count on the underlying idea making sense to him. Teaching certainly helps, just as teaching helps us get the arithmetic sum “two plus two is four.” Yet the reason the teaching works is that Johnnie can see for himself that he shouldn’t do to his brother what he wouldn’t want done to him – just as he can see for himself that two plus two is really four.

The classical term for the natural substrate of conscience is *synderesis*, and for what teaching plants in this rich soil, *conscientia*. As I suggested earlier, we may call the former “deep conscience”; to complete the pair, we may call the latter “surface conscience.” Deep conscience makes it possible to reject false moral teachings because we see

for ourselves that they are wrong. It is also the explanation for a fact that would otherwise be inexplicable: that the basics of conscience are the same everywhere. After all, if conscience were *only* a residue of what we are taught, why shouldn't it be completely variable? Why shouldn't the young in one country be taught "Treat everyone the same as you would wish to be treated," but in another "Treat everyone the opposite of how you would wish to be treated?" Why shouldn't they be trained in one land to be courageous, but in another to be cowards? Why shouldn't they hear in one culture that they should honor their parents, but in another that they should crush, despise, humiliate, crow over, and eat their parents? The moral codes of different times and places differ only in the details, and in the strictness with which people live up to what they believe – just as we would expect, if the possibilities of the acquired powers of moral judgment are shaped and limited by a natural substrate.

To return to the other dismissive argument, one can also see why deep conscience might seem like a fancy name for a subset of mammalian instincts. After all, haven't we just seen that deep conscience is natural after all? Yes. And isn't instinct the all-encompassing term for all natural impulses? Some people do use the term that way, but it is a misleading way to use it, because there is more than one kind of natural impulse, and we need distinctions. But why should we make *this* distinction – why should we distinguish deep conscience from instinct? There are at least two reasons.

In the first place, just as conscience may bid me to go against what I have been taught, so too it may bid me to go against my instincts. I may have an instinct to kill a man whom I resent, yet conscience warns that it is wrong to deliberately take innocent human life. I may have an instinct to run away from danger, yet conscience bids me stand and defend my friends. Someone might say that in cases like this, conscience is merely the strongest instinct. The problem with this explanation is that in some cases I have *conflicting* instincts, and conscience tells me which one to follow. Suppose that in certain circumstances, fighting would be more adaptive. Then why shouldn't I have evolved in such a way that in such circumstances, the instinct to fight automatically prevails? Something like this does seem to happen among the

animals; behavioral biologists speak of an “order of prepotency” among the instincts, which varies according to the situation. In some situations one impulse has a higher rank, in other situations another one does. But conscience often tells a human like me to follow the *weaker* impulse! What is going on here? Why should evolution have followed such a tortuous and circuitous path, allowing me conflicting impulses, but also giving me a third thing that says “ignore that one and follow this one”? If this third thing is just *another* instinct, then what authority could it have to pass judgment? That which passes judgment upon instincts must be something different from an instinct.

In the second place, if conscience really were just an instinct, then why should we dress it up by giving it a fancy name? What adaptive value would there be in doing so? None. A better explanation for why we describe the impulses of conscience in terms of law is that they do reflect law. Not only is “I want to” different than “I ought to,” but we also experience the violation of the former differently than we experience the violation of the latter. Ordinary slips of prudence lead merely to disappointment; violation of conscience leads to a sense of trespass, of breach, of transgression. The good that I betrayed was not merely commended by inclination, but commanded by authority. I am not only dismayed, I am accused. I have violated a real law.

Once we climb Step 1, the other steps in the argument are easy.

Concerning Step 2: Laws are caused by enactment, and enactment requires personal agency. Of course not all causes are personal. Rain, for example, is produced by an impersonal cause, the condensation of water from the atmosphere. By contrast, law is something addressed *to* a free and rational being *by* a free and rational being. If there is a law, then there must exist a personal agency competent to enact it, a legislator.

Concerning Step 3: The fact that the law is made known through nature – through how we are made, rather than by some other means such as verbal revelation – is the point of describing it as natural. To be sure, the same law might be made known to us by other means as well. The point is simply that whether or not it has been made known by other means, it has been made known by nature.

Concerning Step 4: In order to send a message by means of a written note, the sender must be able to write words and decide where they go on the page; otherwise, the recipients would receive not a message, but only a blank or a scribble. The same is true when the sender communicates by means of human nature, except that in this case the message is written on the recipient himself. He does not write the message, but he is the medium of expression.

Concerning Step 5: If the legislator is the one responsible for the promulgation of the law, and the law is promulgated through the design of nature, then the legislator must be the one responsible for the design of nature.

I cannot emphasize too strongly that this is not a “divine command theory,” if by that term we mean the view that law is law just because God commanded it, and that He could have commanded anything, however evil, that he willed. Law, in the full sense of the term, is more than just an enactment by superior power; it must be an ordinance of reason, for the common good, made by legitimate public authority, and made known. To be confident that natural law is really law is to believe that it fulfills all four of these conditions, not just one. Interestingly, then, the Argument from Natural Law as Law not only points to the reality of God, but also tells us something about His character. If natural law is really law, then God must be reasonable, good, and worthy of obedience. If natural law is *First Law*, the law on which all other law depends, then He must be First Reason, First Good, and First Authority.

### **The Argument from Guilt and Forgiveness**

*Wilt thou hide thyself for ever?*

*How long will thy wrath burn like fire?*<sup>9</sup>

The Argument from Guilt and Forgiveness depends not on the properties of natural law *as such* – for example that it is order, or that it is law – but on the properties of conscience, which announces it to us.

1. Violation of natural law generates awareness of guilt.
2. Awareness of guilt generates a natural desire for forgiveness.

9 Psalm 89:46b, RSV.

3. Since “nature makes nothing in vain,”<sup>10</sup> forgiveness must actually be possible.
4. However, only a personal agency can forgive.
5. The only personal agency which could forgive a violation of the natural law would be the creator and custodian of nature. This is what we call God.

To begin at the beginning, conscience works in more than one mode. In the cautionary mode it alerts us to the peril of moral wrong: “Don’t do that!” In the accusatory mode, it indicts us for wrong we have already done: “Look what you did!” In the avenging mode, it punishes the soul who refuses to read the indictment: “Now you must pay.” Conscience is so potent that clear vision of the natural law can be crushing; the first thing an honest man sees with this vision is how far he falls short of it.

Concerning Step 2: A strange thing about the accusation of conscience is that even though it is *my* conscience that accuses, it seems to speak to me with an authority greater than my own: I am not merely angry with myself, I find myself under wrath. I am aware of having breached a boundary which I did not make, but which my deepest self agrees with utterly. I spontaneously desire that the breach be sealed back up, that good relations between me and the law be restored, that I somehow return to the other side of transgression. Surprisingly, though, repentance alone isn’t enough; it turns out to be only a necessary and not a sufficient condition of the healing of the breach. I experience not only a need to be sorry, but a need for my sorriness to be accepted. What I want is reconciliation with the rule that I have crossed; what I desire is forgiveness. This desire is woven into the cloth of human nature. We don’t just learn it from our culture, for it spontaneously arises in all cultures, even if not always with equal clarity.

Concerning Step 3: It would be absurd to suggest that just because I want something, there must be someone or something who can give it

10 Aristotle, *On the Generation of Animals*, Book 2, Chapter 5. I hope it will be needless to say that I am not endorsing the details of Aristotle’s biology, only the observation that organisms are teleologically ordered.

to me. Suppose I conceive an irrational, delusional desire for pickled square roots; tough luck. In the case of *natural* desires, however, the case is different, because for every natural desire, there really does exist a possible satisfaction. To hunger corresponds food; to thirst, water; to wonder, knowledge. I may not *receive* food, water, knowledge, but at least such things exist; I *could* receive them. In fact, just as we saw earlier in the case of the desire for meaning, a natural desire for which there was no possible satisfaction would be pointless and maladaptive. There would be no reason for our nature to include it; it should not exist. So it is with the natural desire for forgiveness. If there were no such thing as forgiveness, the desire for it could not be woven into human nature in the first place.

Concerning Step 4: Not all of our attitudes, emotions, perceptions, and desires have to do with other persons, but many do. Consider the difference between pleasure and gratitude. I might find a cool breeze pleasurable even if I were the only person in the world, but I cannot be grateful for the cool breeze unless there is someone to whom gratitude is owed. The desire for forgiveness falls not into the former category but into the latter. I cannot *just experience* forgiveness, as I may *just experience* joy; I must actually be forgiven. I cannot be forgiven by a *thing*, as I may be given pain by a *thing*; I can only be forgiven by a person. Someone must actually forgive me.

Concerning Step 5: From what personal agency am I then to seek forgiveness when I have violated the natural law – with whom am I to seek reconciliation? There are three possibilities: Myself, other human beings, or God. The first possibility fails for the reason stated when we were discussing Step 2: Conscience speaks not with my own authority, but as with an authority that transcends me. The second possibility seems more promising, because I do, in fact, seek reconciliation with neighbors whom I have wronged, I can, in fact, receive it, and my neighbors are more than just me. If I hurt my wife's feelings, if I forget a promise to a friend, if I selfishly take credit that belongs to someone else, I know that I must not only change course, confess that I am in the wrong, and try to heal the injury, but ask forgiveness: "I am sorry;

please forgive me.” But is this *enough*? No. Suppose I have been unfaithful to my wife, but she forgives me and takes me back, no longer holds my treason against me. Is everything fine? Somehow, it isn’t. I haven’t just transgressed against her; I have transgressed against something greater than either of us, against the right and good itself. It isn’t just her wrath and sorrow that I feel; it is as though the law itself were wroth and sorrowful with me, as though I must be reconciled not only with the beloved wife whom I offended, but with the authority that made it wrong to offend her. The problem is that morality, by itself, has a heart of rock. I can no more be reconciled with law *as such* than I can offer atonement to the weather, or kiss and make up with the force of gravity. Only a personal agency can forgive; and the only personal agency with the authority to forgive the breach of natural law would be the Creator of Nature. This is what we call God.

Someone might say that the only reason I would want this kind of forgiveness is that I think there is a God. If I didn’t believe in God, then I wouldn’t long for such forgiveness. Yet how often have atheists protested to me that they *don’t need* to believe in God to have a conscience that works just like mine? I not only concede their claim, I insist on it: Their consciences *do* work just like mine. This being the case, it is futile to suggest that we desire more-than-human forgiveness only because we believe in God. Rather it seems that we believe in God in part because we desire more-than-human forgiveness. We naturally experience the knowledge of guilt; we naturally desire forgiveness; but law by itself cannot forgive. The atheist, who supposes that there can be a law without a personal authority who is its source and custodian, must therefore suppose that forgiveness is both necessary *and impossible* – which is impossible.

But wait – don’t some more radical atheists bite the bullet? Don’t they *deny* conscience, reasoning that “if God is dead, then everything is permitted”? Certainly some do reason in such a way, but none can actually live in such a way; the experience of stricken conscience does not wait upon our theological assumptions. It presents itself to us in much the same way whether we believe in God or don’t; the only difference is that the atheist lacks resources for explaining why it *should* present itself to him in that way, or why it should exist in the first place.

### **The Argument from Desire for Final Justice**

*Yet a little while, and the wicked will be no more;  
though you look well at his place, he will not be there.*<sup>11</sup>

The previous argument relied on the proposition that “nature makes nothing in vain,” and so does this one. This time, though, we are considering a different feature of our nature: not the desire for forgiveness, but the desire for final justice.

1. When the natural law is violated, we naturally desire that justice be done to the wrongdoer.
2. For the reasons already given previously, such a desire could not exist unless justice could in fact be done.
3. But although human justice can partially requite wrongs, some wrongs are so heinous that human justice can never fully requite them.
4. There must then be another power which can fully requite them.
5. This power may be either personal or impersonal. If personal, then it is what we call God; if impersonal, then for reasons already given previously, it points to God as its cause or explanation.

The only likely confusion concerning Step 1 is the meaning of doing justice to wrongdoers. Society is justly ordered when each person receives what is due to him. Crime disturbs this just order, for the wrongdoer takes from people their lives, peace, liberties, dignity, and worldly goods in order to give himself undeserved benefits. Deserved punishment protects society morally by restoring this just order, compensating the victims and making the wrongdoer pay a price equivalent to the harm he has done. This is retribution. It must not be confused with revenge, which is prodded by a different motive. In retribution the spur is the virtue of indignation, which answers injury with injury for public good. In revenge the spur is the passion of resentment, which answers malice with malice for private satisfaction. The desire for retribution is natural, but the desire for revenge is merely its perversion.

11 Psalm 37:10, RSV.

Concerning Step 2: It is always best and safest to assume is that nothing in an organism's design is purposeless, even if its purpose is not yet known. Those who assume otherwise always get their comeuppance. Numerous functions have recently been discovered for those portions of the human genome once dismissed as "junk DNA."<sup>12</sup> Organs which were once called "vestigial," like the tonsils and appendix, have also turned out to have their own proper jobs in the body. Just as with the physical features of our nature, so with its non-physical features – in particular, our natural desires. They have purposes no less than the heart or the kidneys do, and for every desire there corresponds some possible satisfaction, or else they would be pointless. If we naturally long for forgiveness when we have done wrong, there must be a possibility of forgiveness; if we naturally pine for justice to the impenitent, there must be a possibility of justice.

Concerning Step 3: Yet human powers are insufficient to right all wrongs and bring all wrongdoers to justice. It isn't just that we don't catch all of them; the problem would remain even if none of them slipped from our grasp. As to the victims, some tears cannot be wiped away by anything within our puny strength; how can the memory of rape be purged, or the murdered dead be brought back to life? As to the perpetrators, what payment could be made to compensate inconsolable griefs? How then could true balance be restored? Not even the ancient formula "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed" – which was not, by the way, an expression of contempt for life, but of respect for it<sup>13</sup> – fills the bill. Can the taking of his life, his only life, yet only one life, make up for his lethal gassing of twenty thousand? What we call public order is relative; what we mean by it is merely that the public is *less* disordered than in various other conditions with which we are familiar. One of the deepest counsels of wisdom (but one of the most difficult to learn) is that human powers are insufficient to achieve final justice.

12 Jonathan Wells, *The Myth of Junk DNA* (Seattle, Washington: Discovery Institute Press, 2011).

13 The passage ends, "for God made man in his own image" (Genesis 9:6, RSV).

Concerning Step 4: One might respond, “Even though human power cannot achieve final justice, the natural human longing for final justice is not in vain, because it moves us to do *what little we can* toward final justice.” But if the purpose of the desire is merely to move us to do *what little we can* toward final justice, then why are we naturally endowed with a desire for *final* justice? Why should we not be endowed merely with a desire for what little we can do? Such a longing *could* be satisfied by human powers, because we would desire no more than we could reach; what we could not reach, we would not desire. Yet that is not in fact what we want. Our desire is for *final* justice, *perfect* justice. If we mistakenly suppose that for every natural desire there corresponds not just some possible satisfaction but some *purely natural* satisfaction, some satisfaction *within the scope of human powers*, then the desire for final justice is not only in vain but worse than in vain. Not only does it fail to help us, but it wounds us. Convinced that we can somehow achieve final justice by our own powers, yet persistently failing to achieve it by moral means, we come to think that we must resort to immoral means. Setting our hearts on utopia, we resolve to do evil so that good will result. So it is that among those convinced of the sufficiency of human powers, the natural desire for final justice finally generates an overmastering temptation to injustice. What shall we conclude? If it is really true that for every natural desire there corresponds some possible satisfaction – yet if it is also true that no satisfaction of the natural desire for final justice lies within human powers – what follows is that we must look to another power for its satisfaction.

Concerning Step 5: “Another power” is an ambiguous expression, because it may refer either to direct supernatural agency, or to a form of natural order. In the former case, we are speaking, again, of God. In the latter, it may seem at first that we are *not* speaking of God, but of something immanent and impersonal like Fate or Karma. But then these would be forms of natural order, and as we saw in the Argument from Natural Law as Order, such order itself points to God as its cause or explanation. Rather than of impersonal agencies like Fate or Karma, then, we are really speaking of His Providence.

In short, if it is really true that “nature makes nothing in vain,” then it is impossible that the natural desire for final justice is in vain. If the desire cannot be satisfied by any human power, then it must be satisfiable by a power more than human. It turns out that the only plausible such power is the personal agency by which nature was made and endowed with its properties, the same agency that implanted the desire for final justice in us in the first place. This is what we call God.

### **Conclusion**

*Come now, let us reason together.*<sup>14</sup>

I have already mentioned that the four paths we have traced from the reality of natural law to the reality of God are not the only paths possible. Perhaps I should also mention that they aren't a package deal. Although here and there, one of the arguments shares a piece with another, they are substantially independent, so it would be possible for some of them to be valid even if, on closer examination, some of them were not. It would even be logically possible to believe in God and yet think *none* of these four arguments was valid, although I do not think that is the case. I have advanced them because I believe them.

Questions like the reality of God arouse strong emotions, including, sometimes, resentment. However, the etymology of the word “philosophy” is not “love of crushing your opponent,” but “love of wisdom.” If God is real, it is profoundly important to know. If He were not real, it would be profoundly important to know that too – that is, on the assumption that anything could then be real or not-real at all (which I think might then become dubious, although that is another story). I hope, then, that if any reader thinks he has found insight in these arguments, he will take this insight seriously – but that if any reader thinks he has found errors in them, he will view his discovery not in the spirit of an athlete spiking the football in the end zone and shouting *Score!*, but in the spirit of a seeker for truth. The most important thing would be to discern what kind of errors they were: Were they truly fatal errors from which the argument could not recover, or were they technical errors which might be repaired so that the renovated argument was

14 Isaiah 1:18, RSV.

successful after all? Even in the case of fatal error, the job is not done. One must then ask what gave rise to it. A good deal about truth can be learned from fatal error, just as a good deal about health can be learned from the causes of bodily death. Errors have no resources in themselves to seem true; not even an error can be plausible unless some distorted bit of truth is mixed up with it. The important thing is to find out that bit is, and how it can be disentangled from the obscuring vines.

But what if there happen to be no fatal errors? I cannot help remembering a conversation in which someone asked me, “What if I just *know* the conclusion of an argument is false, but no matter how hard I try, I can’t find anything wrong with the terms, the premises, or the reasoning?” The answer is, “Then you change your mind.”