

# Summa Theologica

Thomas Aquinas  
1265–1274

*The natural law is the guide to habits of right conduct. Its most general principle, that we should pursue what is good and avoid what is evil, derives from immediate experience. We share the desire for self-preservation with all that exists, and we share the desire to propagate our species with all that lives, but our unique excellence is reason. When reason follows the law of nature, we acquire the virtues necessary to our social state. The law of nature applies equally to all rational creatures, though it suffers particular exceptions. Its primary precepts cannot be obliterated from our minds, but its secondary precepts may be forgotten through vice.*

First Part of the Second Part

Question 94

Article 1

Whether the Natural Law Is a Habit?

**On the contrary**, Augustine says (*De Bono Conjug.* xxi) that “a habit is that whereby something is done when necessary.” But such is not the natural

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law: since it is in infants and in the damned who cannot act by it. Therefore the natural law is not a habit.

*I answer that,* A thing may be called a habit in two ways. First, properly and essentially: and thus the natural law is not a habit. For it has been stated above (90, 1, *ad* 2) that the natural law is something appointed by reason, just as a proposition is a work of reason.

Now that which a man does is not the same as that whereby he does it: for he makes a becoming speech by the habit of grammar. Since then a habit is that by which we act, a law cannot be a habit properly and essentially.

Secondly, the term habit may be applied to that which we hold by a habit: thus faith may mean that which we hold by faith. And accordingly, since the precepts of the natural law are sometimes considered by reason actually, while sometimes they are in the reason only habitually, in this way the natural law may be called a habit.

Thus, in speculative matters, the indemonstrable principles are not the habit itself whereby we hold those principles, but are the principles the habit of which we possess.

### Article 2

#### Whether the Natural Law Contains Several Precepts, or Only One?

***On the contrary,*** The precepts of the natural law in man stand in relation to practical matters, as the

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first principles to matters of demonstration. But there are several first indemonstrable principles. Therefore there are also several precepts of the natural law.

*I answer that,* As stated above (Question 91, Article 3), the precepts of the natural law are to the practical reason, what the first principles of demonstrations are to the speculative reason; because both are self-evident principles.

Now a thing is said to be self-evident in two ways: first, in itself; secondly, in relation to us. Any proposition is said to be self-evident in itself, if its predicate is contained in the notion of the subject: although, to one who knows not the definition of the subject, it happens that such a proposition is not self-evident. For instance, this proposition, “Man is a rational being,” is, in its very nature, self-evident, since who says “man,” says “a rational being”: and yet to one who knows not what a man is, this proposition is not self-evident.

Hence it is that, as Boethius says (*De Hebdom.*), certain axioms or propositions are universally self-evident to all; and such are those propositions whose terms are known to all, as, “Every whole is greater than its part,” and, “Things equal to one and the same are equal to one another.” But some propositions are self-evident only to the wise, who understand the meaning of the terms of such propositions: thus to one who understands that an angel is not a body, it is self-evident that an angel is not circumscriptively in a place: but this is not evident to the unlearned, for they cannot grasp it.

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Now a certain order is to be found in those things that are apprehended universally. For that which, before aught else, falls under apprehension, is “being,” the notion of which is included in all things whatsoever a man apprehends. Wherefore the first indemonstrable principle is that “the same thing cannot be affirmed and denied at the same time,” which is based on the notion of “being” and “not-being”: and on this principle all others are based, as is stated in *Metaph.* iv, text. 9. Now as “being” is the first thing that falls under the apprehension simply, so “good” is the first thing that falls under the apprehension of the practical reason, which is directed to action: since every agent acts for an end under the aspect of good. Consequently the first principle of practical reason is one founded on the notion of good, viz. that “good is that which all things seek after.”

Hence this is the first precept of law, that “good is to be done and pursued, and evil is to be avoided.” All other precepts of the natural law are based upon this: so that whatever the practical reason naturally apprehends as man’s good (or evil) belongs to the precepts of the natural law as something to be done or avoided.

Since, however, good has the nature of an end, and evil, the nature of a contrary, hence it is that all those things to which man has a natural inclination, are naturally apprehended by reason as being good, and consequently as objects of pursuit, and their contraries as evil, and objects of avoidance. Wherefore according to the order of natural inclinations, is the order of the precepts of the natural law.

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Because in man there is first of all an inclination to good in accordance with the nature which he has in common with all substances: inasmuch as every substance seeks the preservation of its own being, according to its nature: and by reason of this inclination, whatever is a means of preserving human life, and of warding off its obstacles, belongs to the natural law.

Secondly, there is in man an inclination to things that pertain to him more specially, according to that nature which he has in common with other animals: and in virtue of this inclination, those things are said to belong to the natural law, “which nature has taught to all animals” [*Pandect. Just. I, tit. i*], such as sexual intercourse, education of offspring and so forth.

Thirdly, there is in man an inclination to good, according to the nature of his reason, which nature is proper to him: thus man has a natural inclination to know the truth about God, and to live in society: and in this respect, whatever pertains to this inclination belongs to the natural law; for instance, to shun ignorance, to avoid offending those among whom one has to live, and other such things regarding the above inclination.

### Article 3

#### Whether All Acts of Virtue

#### Are Prescribed by the Natural Law?

***On the contrary***, Damascene says (*De Fide Orth.* iii, 4) that “virtues are natural.” Therefore virtuous acts also are a subject of the natural law.

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*I answer that,* We may speak of virtuous acts in two ways: first, under the aspect of virtuous; secondly, as such and such acts considered in their proper species. If then we speak of acts of virtue, considered as virtuous, thus all virtuous acts belong to the natural law.

For it has been stated (2) that to the natural law belongs everything to which a man is inclined according to his nature. Now each thing is inclined naturally to an operation that is suitable to it according to its form: thus fire is inclined to give heat. Wherefore, since the rational soul is the proper form of man, there is in every man a natural inclination to act according to reason: and this is to act according to virtue.

Consequently, considered thus, all acts of virtue are prescribed by the natural law: since each one's reason naturally dictates to him to act virtuously. But if we speak of virtuous acts, considered in themselves, i.e. in their proper species, thus not all virtuous acts are prescribed by the natural law: for many things are done virtuously, to which nature does not incline at first; but which, through the inquiry of reason, have been found by men to be conducive to well-living.

### Article 4

#### Whether the Natural Law Is the Same in All Men?

*On the contrary,* Isidore says (*Etym.* v, 4): “The natural law is common to all nations.”

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*I answer that,* As stated above (2, 3), to the natural law belongs those things to which a man is inclined naturally: and among these it is proper to man to be inclined to act according to reason.

Now the process of reason is from the common to the proper, as stated in *Phys.* i. The speculative reason, however, is differently situated in this matter, from the practical reason. For, since the speculative reason is busied chiefly with the necessary things, which cannot be otherwise than they are, its proper conclusions, like the universal principles, contain the truth without fail.

The practical reason, on the other hand, is busied with contingent matters, about which human actions are concerned: and consequently, although there is necessity in the general principles, the more we descend to matters of detail, the more frequently we encounter defects. Accordingly then in speculative matters truth is the same in all men, both as to principles and as to conclusions: although the truth is not known to all as regards the conclusions, but only as regards the principles which are called common notions. But in matters of action, truth or practical rectitude is not the same for all, as to matters of detail, but only as to the general principles: and where there is the same rectitude in matters of detail, it is not equally known to all.

It is therefore evident that, as regards the general principles whether of speculative or of practical reason, truth or rectitude is the same for all, and is equally known by all. As to the proper conclusions of

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the speculative reason, the truth is the same for all, but is not equally known to all: thus it is true for all that the three angles of a triangle are together equal to two right angles, although it is not known to all. But as to the proper conclusions of the practical reason, neither is the truth or rectitude the same for all, nor, where it is the same, is it equally known by all.

Thus it is right and true for all to act according to reason: and from this principle it follows as a proper conclusion, that goods entrusted to another should be restored to their owner. Now this is true for the majority of cases: but it may happen in a particular case that it would be injurious, and therefore unreasonable, to restore goods held in trust; for instance, if they are claimed for the purpose of fighting against one's country.

And this principle will be found to fail the more, according as we descend further into detail, e.g. if one were to say that goods held in trust should be restored with such and such a guarantee, or in such and such a way; because the greater the number of conditions added, the greater the number of ways in which the principle may fail, so that it be not right to restore or not to restore.

Consequently we must say that the natural law, as to general principles, is the same for all, both as to rectitude and as to knowledge. But as to certain matters of detail, which are conclusions, as it were, of those general principles, it is the same for all in the majority of cases, both as to rectitude and as to knowledge; and yet in some few cases it may fail, both

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as to rectitude, by reason of certain obstacles (just as natures subject to generation and corruption fail in some few cases on account of some obstacle), and as to knowledge, since in some the reason is perverted by passion, or evil habit, or an evil disposition of nature; thus formerly, theft, although it is expressly contrary to the natural law, was not considered wrong among the Germans, as Julius Caesar relates (*De Bello Gall.* vi).

### Article 5

#### Whether the Natural Law Can Be Changed?

***On the contrary***, It is said in the Decretals (Dist. v): “The natural law dates from the creation of the rational creature. It does not vary according to time, but remains unchangeable.”

*I answer that*, A change in the natural law may be understood in two ways. First, by way of addition. In this sense nothing hinders the natural law from being changed: since many things for the benefit of human life have been added over and above the natural law, both by the Divine law and by human laws.

Secondly, a change in the natural law may be understood by way of subtraction, so that what previously was according to the natural law, ceases to be so. In this sense, the natural law is altogether unchangeable in its first principles: but in its secondary principles, which, as we have said (4), are certain detailed proximate conclusions drawn from the first principles, the natural law is not changed so that what

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it prescribes be not right in most cases. But it may be changed in some particular cases of rare occurrence, through some special causes hindering the observance of such precepts, as stated above (Article 4).

### Article 6

#### Whether the Law of Nature Can Be Abolished from the Heart of Man?

*On the contrary*, Augustine says (*Confess.* ii): “Thy law is written in the hearts of men, which iniquity itself effaces not.” But the law which is written in men’s hearts is the natural law. Therefore the natural law cannot be blotted out.

*I answer that*, As stated above (4, 5), there belong to the natural law, first, certain most general precepts, that are known to all; and secondly, certain secondary and more detailed precepts, which are, as it were, conclusions following closely from first principles. As to those general principles, the natural law, in the abstract, can nowise be blotted out from men’s hearts. But it is blotted out in the case of a particular action, in so far as reason is hindered from applying the general principle to a particular point of practice, on account of concupiscence or some other passion, as stated above (Question 77, Article 2).

But as to the other, i.e. the secondary precepts, the natural law can be blotted out from the human heart, either by evil persuasions, just as in speculative matters errors occur in respect of necessary conclusions; or by vicious customs and corrupt habits, as

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among some men, theft, and even unnatural vices, as the Apostle states (Romans 1), were not esteemed sinful.

[Translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Fathers, 1911; revised 1920; objections and replies omitted]

