

Brian Besong. *An Introduction to Ethics. A Natural Law Approach*. Eugene: Cascade Books, 2018.

It is natural to ask questions especially those related to morality. In his book *An Introduction to Ethics. A Natural Law Approach*, Brian Besong, Assistant professor of philosophy at Ohio Dominican University asks numerous very practical questions about the daily life of every human being: how to find happiness, what are good and bad actions, what is moral knowledge. And he brings his own answers—abundant in very concrete, relevant examples, based on a philosophical and moral approach (as the title explains): that of the natural law.

Through his work Besong wants to increase within Western society the awareness of the need for moral reflection. He does not refer directly to Christian faith; he tries above all to remind us (following the thought of Thomas Aquinas) that although man is a physical being, his soul and eternal life have to be his main concerns (this is what, according to the author, many Westerners seem to forget). The great advantage of this book is that in very clear words, without drawing from a complicated philosophical dictionary, the author presents the moral backbone for the twenty first century person, so much needed in the modern world. The author's venture is breakneck: how to present in an approachable way the ideas of moral conduct based on the monumental intellectual account of Aristotle and, in particular, of Aquinas.

Besong skillfully and consciously avoids the complicated conceptual apparatus of philosophy. As he states in the preface

the present work will have its target audience beginning in ethical philosophy. For this reason, I want to make my writing as straightforward, brief, and non-technical as possible. I will try to avoid quotations and the fate of dense analysis and debate that tends to frustrate the non-academic reader (x).

Indeed the style of writing is approachable, sometimes simple and direct, in order to not deter readers unaccustomed to philosophical writings. The book is logically divided into six chapters according to the topics discussed. Each

chapter ends with a series of questions—a smart approach which allows readers to review each chapter’s content and check their understanding.

The author emphasizes in the first pages that the main subject is “the principles of ethics that dominated moral thinking in the West at least until the so-called ‘Age of Enlightenment’ that began in late seventeenth-century Europe” (ix), according to “natural law tradition.” As a result, the book very often refers to the thoughts of Thomas Aquinas and the work of Aristotle—principles that should apply to everyday life, especially the life of Westerners. In the chapter Pursuit of Happiness he asks readers

what motivation do we have, if any, to care about morality. Suppose you could get away with doing whatever you feel like, what reason do you have to be good? What do you think you could get away with doing? (34)

Or, quoting this excerpt from the chapter Rights and Duties:

Imagine that I am approached by a panhandler on the street and asked for money. Imagine also that I am told by the panhandler that he is hungry. Do I have the duty to give, if I can? (165).

As one can see from the above quotations, *An Introduction to Ethics* is a real beginner’s guide to ethics and philosophy thanks to both simple language and everyday life situations which serve as illustrations of the issues the author describes. On 227 pages Besong clearly explains concepts according to Thomas Aquinas. “For Aquinas, there are two parts of justice which are exceedingly simple. First, justice requires we avoid evil. Second, justice requires we do good” (196). It must be admitted that such sentences are very understandable.

While writing this review, I assumed that since Besong wrote a book “for the masses” (perhaps I exaggerate with “masses”, but still the book is not aimed at scientists), I approached its content as one of those “mass” readers—the author’s target. Even though this review may not be considered as purely scientific (and rightly so), I undertake to use polemical arguments from the world of science (but not necessarily related to philosophy). Why do I find their presence desirable in the *Introduction to Ethics*? The author not only explains why it is worth striving for happiness and for doing good, but also he meticulously explains how to do it—sticking to the natural law theory. If I wanted to present a standard review, it would contain a dozen or so sentences about the fact that it is difficult to talk about an innovative methodology, or that it does not open

new fields of scientific search in the area of ethics. However, the book is special because of the target audience: beginners in ethical philosophy. Hence my temptation to diagnose both the book and the theory of natural law in general from this point of view.

That being said, my curiosity remains a little unsatisfied. The author raises extremely important moral issues that touch the core of human existence; however certain answers and examples, as well as some points of view, are worth more in depth discussion. I will try to present a few of them and make some comments without diminishing or questioning the educational value of the book.

Speaking of moral relativism (on which he blames grossly immoral actions), Besong recalls the various genocides ordered by Stalin, Hitler and Pol Pot while asserting that

relativism makes it impossible to criticize immoral people and cultures. When the relativist gave up on a commitment to objective moral truth, she also gave up on the possibility of genuine moral criticism (8).

In my opinion, even though the author wants to avoid quotations, the accusation of stopping people from criticizing the perpetrators is significant and needs more argumentative support. I would raise some questions: Who are these relativists? What are their names? In which publications they presented their statements?

Besong protests against the former dueling law that might be reintroduced in the future (yet, he doesn't add any further details on such a reintroduction): "One can imagine in some future libertarian society the 'right' to duel to the death for any reason, as long as both parties are consenting adults" (160). What can one say in this context about American society (where he comes from) and the right to shoot, or even kill someone on one's land? Is it morally right, even if legally allowed in regard to the law of self-defense? Who made such a declaration on the reintroduction of the right to duel, and when?

Further Besong wonders if animals have any rights:

In mature members of the human species, we detect a genuine pursuit of happiness, genuine powers of rationality and moral agency. We can thus conclude, given this observation, that humans are the sorts of being who can pursue happiness, we would need to have similar observations of mature members of those species engaging in a similar, rational pursuit of the good.... it is far from clear that any non-human animals satisfy these conditions (163-4).

In light of scientific research on the behaviour of animals, it is not yet clear (but not “far from clear”) that animals are able to distinguish between what is good and what is bad—so in making ethical choices—there are scientists who do not exclude such abilities. Professor Frans de Waal, a Dutch/American biologist and primatologist, and a leading expert in the field of evolutionary cognition stated in an interview to Polish weekly *Tygodnik Powszechny*:

Chimpanzees make distinctions between acceptable and unacceptable behavior, so they can apply punishments, but I am not sure they have more abstract distinctions—good or bad. I would not exclude it, but I am not sure.¹

The author of *The Bonobo and the Atheist* (2013), and *Are We Smart Enough to Know How Smart Animals Are?* (2016) says on his Facebook page: “As a biologist, I obviously see humans as animals.” Hence in light of scientists’ research, such as de Waal, shouldn’t we—humans—think about giving to animals the right to pursuit happiness? If so, which animals should be concerned by the rules of natural law—all species or primates only? As provocative as it seems to be, the issue leads to another question: from what point can we speak about humans. Does humanity begin with homo sapiens? If so, how do we categorize the hominoids who must be considered as our ancestors, namely the Neanderthals, who for tens of thousands of years lived in parallel with homo sapiens and interbred thereby carrying the genes from Neanderthals to today’s humans?² Did extinct species—Neanderthals, Denisovans, homo naledi—enjoy natural rights as advocated by Aquinas? I truly would like to know even though such an issue remains only in the realm of academic discussion.

There is a morally troublesome passage in Besong’s book titled *Killing in a just war*. As Besong explains:

Although we will not explain the topic at length here, it may be helpful to clarify that killing in a morally justified war is permissible in much the same way as private killing is in self-defence (174).

1. Frans de Waal, “Mądrzejsze niż nam się wydaje [Smarter than we think],” *Tygodnik Powszechny*, October 29, 2016, 18–9.

2. “Genomic studies have shown that Neanderthals interbred with modern humans, and that non-Africans today are the products of this mixture.” Sriram Sankararaman et al., “The genomic landscape of Neanderthal ancestry in present-day humans,” *Nature* 507 (2014), <https://doi.org/10.1038/nature12961>. <https://www.nature.com/articles/nature12961>.

I regret he doesn't provide any explanation of his understanding of a just war, nor any definition. There are a multitude of theories concerning the term starting from Confucian philosophy through Aristotle and Aquinas to the current Catechism of the Catholic Church dating from 1992. Yet, is it still morally legitimate to pursue centuries old ideas to justify any war because of the civil casualties involved? In 2016 "Members of a Vatican conference called on Pope Francis to renounce the Catholic Church's 'just war' theory and develop a new doctrine of 'just peace,'" reported BBC News.³ Hasn't the concept of just war become obsolete?

Another question: why is man capable of the worst atrocities inflicted, at times only for the pleasure of hurting? Besong explains:

ignorance diminishes a person's moral responsibility only when the ignorance itself is innocent. Ignorance that I freely, knowingly, and intentionally bring about is ignorance that I have responsibility for, and is consequently ignorance that does not diminish my moral responsibility (120).

Now, let's try to look at this problem not from ethical point of view but psychological. Philip Zimbardo, an American psychologist who in particular analyzed the role of social position in the psychology of the individual, conducted an experiment in 1971 on the effects of prison life.⁴ In the preface to his book *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil* (2007) he wrote:

A large body of evidence in social psychology supports the concept that situational power triumphs over individual power in given contexts. (...) Rather than providing a religious analysis, however, I offer a psychological account of how ordinary people sometimes turn evil and commit unspeakable acts.⁵

3. "Pope urged to end Catholic Church's 'just war' teachings," BBC News, accessed August 20, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-36050229>.

4. "Stanford Prison Experiment, a social psychology study in which college students became prisoners or guards in a simulated prison environment. The experiment, funded by the U.S. Office of Naval Research, took place at Stanford University in August 1971. It was intended to measure the effect of role-playing, labelling, and social expectations on behaviour over a period of two weeks. However, mistreatment of prisoners escalated so alarmingly that principal investigator Philip G. Zimbardo terminated the experiment after only six days." "Stanford Prison Experiment," Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed August 20, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Stanford-Prison-Experiment>.

5. Philip Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil* (New York: Random House, 2007).

I am not going to say that the social context justifies immoral acts—evil remains evil. However, it is worth considering Zimbardo’s thesis and expanding responsibility for evil to those who create conditions for the spread of evil. According to Zimbardo social structures such as prisons, city ghettos, or war battlefields are on the hot seat as well as direct perpetrators of immoral acts. Of course, it would be naïve to strive for the disappearance of prisons and armies, but it is worth being aware of their role as favorable crime environment.

Summarizing Besong’s *Introduction to Ethics*, I totally share his view that societies (not only Westerners) badly need moral pillars and guidelines to ethics, especially in the modern world where ubiquitous social media serves as a source of ethical rules. Of course, Besong does not have to respond to the critics of natural law theory as his book focuses on explaining the theory, not on discussing with opponents. However, I would like to see in his manual of morality, as a reader—“beginner in ethical philosophy,” an attempt to answer the most relevant questions in connection with the natural law theory. Do I sin if I don’t want to have children? Can I commit suicide in the face of inevitable torture and certain death in an extreme war situation? And since the preservation of human life is one of the foundations of natural law, how it is possible that I can kill someone in a just cause?

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