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Review of Alfonso Gomez-Lobo, Morality and the Human Goods: An Introduction to Natural Law Ethics

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if truth is a property of propositions expressing the meaning, that is, *stable content* of justice, then surely it makes sense to draw the form/content, context/content distinction? Without some such distinction, we must conclude that a change of context (or form) necessarily results in a change in content—that is, meaning, truth. Indeed, without such a distinction, historical particularity is so “constitutive of knower and known that ‘knowledge’ is mere human construct” (as Aidan Nichols critically remarks). This is historical relativism, which Smit much to his credit never accepted.

Nevertheless, for all my reservations and criticisms, this book is worthy of study. It raises challenging issues between Catholics and neo-Calvinists that neither can afford to ignore. As the French Dominican Yves Congar put it a half-century back: “Smit demonstrates great skill at perceiving the different currents [in recent Catholic thought] . . . grasping them at their deepest roots.” N.V

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Morality and the Human Goods: An Introduction to Natural Law Ethics by Alfonso Gomez-Lobo (*Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2002*), xvii + 142 pp.

ALFONSO GOMEZ-LOBO, in a brief and readable volume, provides perhaps the best summary of the (new) natural law ethics available. It covers both the nature of practical reason, moral norms, and basic goods as well as the pressing questions of abortion and euthanasia. Gomez-Lobo mentions his debt to Germain Grisez and especially John Finnis, whose influence “is obvious on every page of this book” (129). Gomez-Lobo’s introduction will make an influential interpretation of natural law readily accessible to a wider audience.

It is clear that this work is the fruit of years of teaching and reflects the background and concerns of college students today. Gomez-Lobo begins with Plato’s *Crito*, recalling one “of the oldest (and finest) examples of the practice of moral philosophy” (xi). Like the *Crito*, Gomez-Lobo’s work appeals to objective reasons rather than subjective feelings in the quest to decide what is right or wrong. “Our goal is to obtain agreement in moral matters” by means of appeal to reasons that are in principle compelling to all human beings (even if in a particular case circumstances of age or disability exclude a class of human beings from being able to actually

participate in the discussion). This agreement on morals is not merely a contractual creation in which what is good and right becomes good and right because we agree to it. Rather, “we should agree on something *because it is true*. Therefore, our efforts in search of agreements should aim at finding reasons to think that what we agree on is indeed true” (3, original emphasis).

In chapter one, Gomez-Lobo treats the first principle of practical reasoning, that good is to be done and evil avoided. He calls this the “Formal Principle,” which is not itself moral but rather a general principle of practical rationality. Why should we believe in the Formal Principle? The Formal Principle is not known to be true in virtue of empirical observation and experimentation. The Formal Principle is not a claim about what is the case, but rather is a claim about what *ought* to be the case. The Formal Principle is a normative principle, not a descriptive one. Rather, the “first principle of practical rationality is true by virtue of the meaning of its terms” (5). The truth of the Formal Principle is therefore analogous to the truth that a bachelor is an unmarried man, in that it is by definition true. These truths tells us, *formally* speaking, that something is the case, without pointing out which instances of men or possible goods actually instantiate this formality.

Some readers might ask further questions at this point. Do we have reason to so sharply distinguish between what is normative and descriptive? Even if the Formal Principle is normative, isn't the Formal Principle arguably also descriptive, in that every agent pursues only that which is taken to be in some sense (albeit sometimes mistakenly) good? One might also ask about the rationale for accepting the Formal Principle. If the Formal Principle is true by virtue of the meaning of its terms, isn't the meaning of terms discovered precisely by means of empirical observation and discovery of the way language is actually used in the world? However, to ask and answer these kinds of questions may have taken the author too far from his target undergraduate audience and into direct debate with critics of Germain Grisez's interpretation of Thomas Aquinas.

In chapter two, Gomez-Lobo treats the list of “basic goods” that together make up human happiness and flourishing. He deftly pits two competing intuitions of students (subjectivism and fallibilism) against one another.

What seems good to me may actually not be good for me simply because I can make mistakes. Indeed, one of the most notorious domains for self-deception is that of one's own good. When I want something badly, I have little trouble convincing myself that it will be for my own good. Some people are known for buying beautiful, bright red “lemons.” (7)

Although students widely believe that “what seems good to me is good,” they perhaps even more strongly believe that no one is infallible. Gomez-Lobo does them the service of pointing out the tension between these two beliefs.

Also helpful is his analysis of the basic goods, in particular his defense of the claim that basic human goods are good without exception.

Health, we agree, is the good of the body. The fact that here is a war going on and that young, healthy men are going to be drafted and sent to die in a foreign land is not part of the concept of health. It would be better, indeed, for a young man to be ill when the summons arrives, but this does not affect the notion of health. What is bad is not the health of the recruit but the draft and, ultimately, the war. Health by itself, we must admit on reflection, is still a good. (36)

Similarly, life is always a good, though sometimes evils are made possible on account of life. Gomez-Lobo’s distinction between qualified and unqualified consideration of a good helps avoid the pitfalls of such contemporary notions as “wrongful life.” The fact that good can come from evil or evil can come from good does not change good into evil or evil into good.

In chapter three, he handles certain questions about whether money, beauty, freedom, or pleasure should be considered basic goods. In coming to a negative conclusion, his discussion of whether pleasure is a good is particularly instructive, allowing this text to be fruitfully read in class along with the classic *Utilitarianism* of John Stuart Mill, whose views are explicitly raised in the penultimate chapter of the book.

In chapter four, Gomez-Lobo provides “guidelines for the actual attainment of goods, some of which provide the link between the foundational and the specifically moral domain” including vigilance, commitment, inclusiveness, detachment, impartiality, care, and respect.

In chapter five, “Agents, Actions, and Consequences,” perhaps the most challenging part of the book, the author tackles the problem of defining the “act itself” or, as it is sometimes called, the “object of the human act.” Drawing perhaps implicitly on *Veritatis splendor*, he focuses on the “main immediate goal of the action itself” in distinction to “immediate partial goals of an action” and “the more remote or further goal of the agent” (51). Not all consequences define an action as a certain kind of action, but rather “[a] consequence is non-accidental if it is so linked to the nature of the action that an adequate description of the action would account for it” (53, emphasis removed). One wonders how Gomez-Lobo would apply this criterion in a variety of cases, for example the separating of conjoined twins Jodie and Mary, the use of

methotrexate to treat ectopic pregnancy, and craniotomy in cases of cephalo-pelvic disproportion.

This leads into a discussion of “double-effect” and moral norms. Gomez-Lobo justifies moral norms in terms of goods. The moral life is not a matter of “rule worship,” but rather the rules enlighten what is or is not truly fulfilling. The exceptionless negative norms, for example, not to kill the innocent or commit adultery, protect and promote the human flourishing of all. Also of great value in his discussion are the seemingly tangential remarks throughout the text, such as the following:

An individual who shies away from commitments simply will not be able to enjoy certain goods. If you never sign a contract committing yourself to the purchase of a house, you will never own a house. A person who is “free” from all commitments inevitably will end up empty-handed. (63)

This important book may indeed prompt a commitment in those who read it seriously, a commitment to think deeper about the purpose of life, the nature of the human good, and the role of reason in both. Through *Morality and the Human Goods: An Introduction to Natural Law Ethics*, Gomez-Lobo’s experience in the classroom now will benefit an even wider audience. N&V

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Heralds of the Good News: Isaiah and Paul in Concert in the Letter to the Romans by J. Ross Wagner (*Leiden: Brill, 2002*), xxii + 437 pp.

CONTAINING APPROXIMATELY one-quarter of Paul’s citations of the Old Testament, Romans 9–11 has puzzled interpreters through the ages. Although C. H. Dodd may have put it more bluntly than others, he certainly is not alone among New Testament scholars in his assessment of Paul’s argument in these chapters as “the weakest point in the whole epistle.” Like many, Dodd suggests that in Romans 9–10 Paul sets out an argument that he eventually abandons in Romans 11 for an encomium on the mercy of God. In *Heralds of the Good News*, J. Ross Wagner sets for himself the ambitious task of systematically examining each of Paul’s citations of and allusions to the Book of Isaiah in the Letter to the Romans, focusing primarily on Romans 9–11 and 15. The result is an impressive work that makes considerable progress toward untangling the knot of Paul’s dense and perplexing argument.