

NON-TRANSCENDENT STANDARDS

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Richard Weaver, in his book *Ideas Have Consequences*, asserts that Western society as a whole has, since the beginning of the Enlightenment, ceased to believe in the “transcendentals” or universals of the classical worldview, and has therefore given up believing in any kind of an abstract moral standard. He asserts that because we have thrown out classically organized morality, we have no alternative but to fall into what he refers to as “modern decadence (Weaver 3).” He is wrong. There is indeed at least one alternative to modern relativism other than returning to the traditional worldview. When man denies the existence of forms, or absolute, transcendent standards, he does not deny the existence of all standards; there may yet be personally and socially binding standards which relate specifically to man himself, such as Aristotle posits, that, without transcending man, remain valid.

To understand Weaver’s argument one must first understand the classical worldview, and why western society gave it up. Beginning at least as far back as Plato, the western worldview was, in essence, the idea that the world is organized according to a very specific purpose, and each thing which exists falls into a hierarchy that points towards an end “goal” – Plato called this ultimate end the Good, and Thomas Aquinas called it God. Aquinas defines God as being “...that thing than which nothing greater can be conceived.” (Aquinas 338) Both Aquinas and Plato conceive of the world as being an imperfect “imitation” of another, perfect, world. In this world exist the absolute standards for man’s existence and behavior, or, as Weaver calls them, transcendentals. Everything that exists acts according to these standards, which encompass the laws of nature, morality, literature, and all conceivable disciplines. This organization of the world was a beautiful idea, and western man clung to it for over two thousand years, but there

came a time when he decided it was simply no longer feasible. William of Ockam was the first to declare that the problem with this organized worldview was its adherence to “universals” – or what Plato called forms, and what Aquinas called ideas in God’s mind. The traditional western worldview – the idea that everything has a specific purpose – is grounded in the concept of the forms. Plato held that each object in existence exists in the crude imitation of its “form.” The forms are “blueprints” of the physical world, which exist in a non-physical world. Objects in the physical world imitate their respective forms; not consciously, but through their very existence. In other words, each object participates in its form to a greater or lesser degree. Each object that exists, has existed, or may ever exist has a corresponding form in the world of the forms, or an idea in God’s mind. According to Plato and Aquinas’ worldview, it is not even possible to conceive of a thing which does not have a transcending standard by which we may measure it.

Aristotle agreed with Plato that there are standards by which man’s actions must be measured, but he held that these standards do not exist in an abstract world of forms, but within man himself. “The universal causes... of which we spoke do not exist.” (Aristotle 1692).

Aristotle believed that while men must, in fact, act according to the standards set by Natural Law, these standards do not need any reason for existing other than their inherent existence in man himself. He says it is “...impossible that the substance and that of which it is the substance should exist apart...” (Aristotle 991^b 1-3). That is, while a standard of behavior and existence does exist, it does not need to transcend those things it applies to.

There are, arguably, problems with the traditional scheme of conception, whether Plato’s or Aristotle’s, as William of Ockam saw fit to demonstrate. He argued, essentially, that forms and natures complicate things, and are therefore unnecessary. He believed that “...no particular

substance is a universal; every substance is numerically one and a particular (Ockam 371).”

Ockam argued that it is unnecessary for there to exist a form (or universal) of “man,” when we can discover what “man” is simply by looking at individual examples of men.

To put this into simpler terms, let us take the idea of a chair. The chair has, according to the classical worldview, a form, or a specifically defined purpose for which it exists. Let us say that the definition of the form of a chair is “a man-made object meant to be sat on.” This form is the same for every chair which has ever existed or will exist. All well and good. However, we come into problems when we find that, under circumstances demanding it, we are quite willing to use the chair as firewood, or as a club. Also, when circumstances demand it, we are quite willing to sit on a tabletop, or on a rock. In other words, anything that participates in one form participates in others, and conversely things that do not seem related to that form at all may still serve the same purpose. This is the sort of situation which leads Ockam to believe that the idea of forms is simply too complex to be useful or valid in understanding the world.

Weaver argues that when we discard the idea of transcendent forms and morality, we lose the basis we used for societal structure – Natural Law. If there are no forms, he says, we cannot speak of Natural Law; if we cannot speak of Natural Law, we cannot have structured ethics; if we cannot have ethics we cannot have any sort of morality. Weaver is incorrect, however, in saying that without transcendentals we cannot have Natural Law, because he overlooks the very definition of Natural Law – that it is *a priori* and inherent in each man’s being, without necessarily being placed there by any outside source. Natural Law is, by definition, non-transcendent. It is inherent in man’s existence that, for his very survival, he must live peaceably

with other men. No outside source or higher authority need dictate this, since it is something that all men, through their nature as men, hold in common.

So, if we deny that there is a cohesive standard which transcends mankind, what is left? One option is to deny *any* kind of truth, which leads to moral decadence and a complete lack of social standards. Weaver argues that this is the only other option; “The denial of everything transcending experience means inevitably □ the denial of truth (Weaver 4).” He asks that if “man [is] the measure of all things (Weaver 4),” then what is to stop us from falling into relativism and believing that there are no standards, because each man makes his own standards, and no one man’s standards are more “right” than another’s? The answer is that Natural Law will stop us. What any one man decides is right is not right merely because a man has decided it – if a man decides that murder is right, he cannot survive, because he violates Natural Law, which requires men to live peaceably with one another. Denying that any standard of truth applies will indeed lead to moral decadence, and Weaver is correct in asserting that this “modern decadence” is decidedly not a good thing. It is what leads Kierkegaard’s character to complain that the times “...are wretched, for they are without passion (Kierkegaard 27).” Moral relativism is not freedom; it is lack of purpose and lack of meaning. Nobody wants moral relativism.

However, our alternatives to decadence and relativism are not limited to a return to the classical, transcendental, worldview. There is at least one more option; we can hold moral, social, and aesthetic standards which relate directly to man, and do not “transcend” him. That is, standards which do not exist because of an ultimate Good, or God, or forms in which they participate. These standards, rather, can be based solely on man’s nature itself, and on man’s relations to man. It is possible for us to hold a morality that requires us to act according to it not

because God tells us to, or because each man must necessarily act according to his purpose, but simply because it is the best and the most natural thing to do.

(1398 words)