

The Moral Government

by Olin Alfred Curtis

Olin Alfred Curtis explores the nature of the moral law as rooted in God's holiness and its implications for moral government and individual responsibility.

Scripture: Psalm 19:7, Isaiah 53:5, Romans 2:15, Romans 6:23, Romans 13:10, 2 Corinthians 5:21, Galatians 5:14, Colossians 2:17, Hebrews 10:1, 1 Peter 2:24

Topics: "Moral Law", "Gods Holiness"

Description

Olin Alfred Curtis delves into the concept of the moral law, contrasting absolute laws grounded in the nature of things with positive laws created by God's will. He explores the idea that sin should be punished according to its demerit, emphasizing that this law is not unchangeable by divine oath or decree. Curtis critiques the Grotian theory of substitution and highlights the need for a larger conception of the moral law beyond mere justice. He presents his own view that the moral law stems from God's holiness, personalized in His self-consciousness, leading to moral distinction, obligation, and concern.

Transcript

The Moral Law. As a starting point in rejection, I will analyze that view of the moral law which was given by Hugo Grotius in his famous *Defensio*, and which became the foundation of the pure governmental theory of the atonement.

1. There are two kinds of divine laws: First, those laws which are grounded in the nature of things; or the absolute laws, such as, for example, the law against bearing false witness. Second, those laws which were created by the naked will of God; or the positive laws, such as, for example, a ceremonial law.
2. An absolute law is fully irrelaxable. A positive law is not, in itself, irrelaxable, although it may be made irrelaxable by a divine oath, or by a promise of God, or by a special decree that it shall not be changed.
3. The law involved in the atonement is that sin shall be punished according to its demerit, or with a punishment "corresponding to the crime" (*poenā tali quae culpae respondeat*).
4. This law that sin shall be punished according to its demerit is not grounded in the nature of things, and is therefore a positive law, and is therefore by nature relaxable.
5. Now comes the question, Has this law, as to the punishment of sin, ever been made irrelaxable by a divine oath, or by a promise of God, or by a special decree? After a discussion of Scripture which is

remarkably shrewd even for a consummate lawyer, Grotius answers, No; neither by oath, nor by promise, nor by special decree, has this positive penal law been made unalterable.

6. The law, then, that sin shall be punished with a punishment "corresponding to the crime" can be changed whenever God so determines. Thus, the way is prepared for the Grotian theory of substitution.

One is tempted to criticise this Grotian conception of the moral law from end to end, but we have no time to spend on such wasteful work. I will say only this much, If there is even the tiniest spark of reality in the view I have no ability to make the priceless discovery. In the one place where Grotius could touch reality (the idea that something is deeper than the volition of God as personal) his treatment of the place results in distinctions which are as unreal as they are ingenious.

But it is not enough to reject Grotius; we need to find a larger conception of the moral law. If we cannot lift the view of the moral law out of this atmosphere of the court of justice, there is not even the slenderest possibility of effecting any conviction in the Christian consciousness. The Christian man knows right well that the God of his salvation does not deal with men like a justice of the Supreme Court. In seeking this larger conception of the moral law our work is not a minute biblical exposition, but rather a philosophical study based upon the entire sweep of Christian teaching. Were we to consider Saint Paul alone, our final conclusion would be larger than any which could be exegetically drawn from his use of the term **nomos**, although his use of that one word would surely, in some passages, carry us far beyond the Mosaic law.

Before stating my own conception of the moral law, there is one important thing to be done in preparation, namely, to trace moral distinction to its causal finality. We touched upon the matter in our discussion of the holiness of God, but the full consideration was, for pedagogical reasons, left over for this connection. Our question is this: Passing beyond the relative right, what makes any absolutely right thing right, or any absolutely wrong thing wrong? Where and what is the eternal fundament of moral distinction? where and how is the eternal fixture of moral fact? There are several answers which I must instantly reject. The causal finality is not arbitrary. It is not what Horace Bushnell once denominated "the bare almightiness of God." The sheer divine will does not create moral distinction, and then by naked volition fix one thing as right and another thing as wrong. Nor is there a law of moral distinction and fact beyond God, a law which can be conceived of as separate from God, "grounded in the nature of things." There is no "nature of things" outside of God and in eternal operation. God is the total ultimate. I will not try to thrust even a point of imagination in behind God. All this suggestion of "two Infinities," one of them being the personal God, and the other being an impersonal somewhat, can have no lodgment in my philosophy of the sways his scepter, is crowned with his glory" -- altogether satisfactory. Dale was, I am sure, on the track of the fact, but he did not quite clear up his thinking. He does not seem to be certain what and where this law is which comes to life in God. Sometimes the law appears to be placed in God, and then, again, outside of God. And then, again, the law is treated as if it were a pure abstraction, an economical point of departure in thinking. But the law which Dale needed, and which probably he was seeking, is the law of God's own organism, the law of holiness. This law of holiness is profounder than the personal life of God, and yet it does come to dominion only in that personal life. It has all the steadiness of a necessary impersonal Infinite; and yet it becomes ethical in personal experience and becomes completely effective in personal love.

In closer work let us now see how this law of holiness is personally ethicalized. You will remember that in our study of personality we made a distinction between the two beats in self-consciousness, self-grasp and self- estimate? The same distinction is of worth in clearing up the situation here. When in self-grasp

God seizes the law of holiness, or the basic plan of his own harmonious life, he places an estimate upon it, and that estimate is the personal beginning of the whole moral world. In that estimate there are two features: first, moral distinction; second, moral obligation. That is, God both makes in self-consciousness an eternal difference between right and wrong and feels that the law of holiness insists upon the right. The feeling of this insistence is the original "sunrise of the moral ought." To this moral ought, expressing the law of holiness in positive demand, God gives himself in eternal self-commitment; and this self-commitment is moral concern, or the divine personal righteousness. Now we are on the watch for the definite moral fact. A moral fact, absolutely considered, is anything in harmony with the law of holiness thus personalized. For example, it is wrong to tell a lie, not because there is a law to such effect "grounded in the nature of things," and not because God has arbitrarily willed it so; but because God must will it so to satisfy the personalized law of holiness. God himself cannot will a falsehood, cannot will contrary to truth or reality, and not violate his own moral concern for the law of holiness as that law is grasped and estimated in the divine self-consciousness. Words are poor tools here, but through all their poverty you will not fail to note the important thing which I am trying to do for Christian ethics by tracing all moral life back to an unyielding fundament without sacrificing the philosophical and practical significance of the personal God of the Christian faith. Of course, my analysis is sheer speculation, but it is a speculation which lends itself constantly to wholesome Christian thinking and feeling. And, further, you will not fail to note that my view supplies a clue to every element in the conscience of man, and indicates how profoundly man has been created in the image of God. In a final brief word, then, a thing is absolutely right, not because God wills it, but because God wills it in harmony with the plan of his own being as realized in his own personal life. Browning (as usual) is not far from the bottom when he says:

"I trust in God -- the right shall be right

And other than the wrong, while He endures."

I will now state, as succinctly as may be, my full conception of the moral law. It is nothing other than the law of God's holiness realized in his personal experience, and may be itemized as follows:

1. The law of holiness in the nature of God. This is the bare plan of harmony according to which the entire Godhead is one individual organism.
2. The law of holiness in the self-consciousness of God. As the law is grasped it is estimated, and thence arises moral distinction and moral obligation.
3. The law of holiness in the self-decision of God. As the moral obligation appears, God eternally yields to it in self-commitment, and thence arises the personal bearing of moral concern, and all specific volitions determining moral fact. In moral concern, God wills every right thing to be a right thing.
4. The law of holiness in the personal fellowship of moral love. The law of holiness is the plan of harmony; but the plan is actually carried out, the holiness is perfectly effected under the supreme motive of love which the persons of the Godhead have in their fellowship. For example, the law of holiness requires that the attribute of justice shall be modified to a certain extent; but this modification is accomplished only under the impulse of moral love, not God's love for man or any creature, but that love which binds the persons of the Godhead together in blessed fellowship. Just as we found, in our study of the moral person, that moral love is the one motive powerful enough to organize completely his whole being, so the Infinite Being himself becomes an organism by means of moral love. I say here, too, moral love, for the love of God gathers up the entire moral process in personality and so has in it moral distinction, moral obligation,

and moral concern. But these moral momenta are all transmuted into rapture by a personal love which is absolutely unselfish. In this way the divine moral life is lifted out of the frigid dreadfulness of mere duty, the moral ought is made a thing of rejoicing enthusiasm. In moral concern no person of the Godhead is thinking of himself; he feels that concern in his love for the other persons. Thus, we are able to conceive of an inflexible moral life which is also completely altruistic.

The Moral Law in the Moral Government. Again we come to that great principle of personal expression. When we urge this principle as a law inherent in the divine personal life it may look at first as if we were yielding a tribute, if not a full assent, to the pantheistic idea of the necessary development of Deity. But we are yielding no tribute whatever. According to our view, no manifestation unfolds in any way the individuality of God. Nor is any expression necessary to achieve, or to develop, the personality of God. Already, God is a Being absolutely perfect in both individuality and personality. The expression is purely personal. It is the normal activity, you might almost say the vocation, of personality. Personality cannot be idle, it must be doing something, it wants "to get out under the sky." This is a totally different notion from that involved in pantheism, different practically as well as theoretically. I will, however, admit this much: Were there only one person in the Godhead, this principle of expression would be entangled with a need of personal fellowship; and the solitary God would, in his awful loneliness, be driven to create persons to satisfy this social need; for it is simply inconceivable that any self-conscious being could live eternally alone. Even this would not lead (necessarily) to pantheism, but it would make the universe of created persons so fundamentally necessary to complete God's life that a most unwholesome sentimentalism would be the outcome in theology. But the doctrine of the Trinity saves us from the sentimental entanglement. Moral persons are created by the triune God of the Christian faith under the motive of beneficence united with the principle of personal self-expression.

The case as to the expression is, however, still clearer when we begin to consider the moral government; for the moral government deals with finite persons after they have been created; and there can be no question but that God must deal with them according to the law of his own inner life, and not according to an arbitrary plan prepared for the occasion. God must so act toward moral creatures as to express truly what he is in himself. God could not create even a wake-robin as a mere whim, much less could he be arbitrary in matters of moral destiny. There are today writers who hold (if I understand them) that the moral law was made by the will of God on purpose to govern moral persons. Such a view is entirely beyond my credence. The moral law is eternal from its base to its summit, from the basal plan of holiness to the crowning experience of moral love. There would have been the moral law, precisely the same, too, had the universe of things and persons never been willed into existence. But this eternal, this unchangeable law does find a new expression in the moral government of God. Indeed, the moral government is nothing other than the moral law itself now related, in a scheme of perfect economy, to all created moral persons. It is the holiness of God made active in actual administration.

The Goal of the Moral Government. In this administration the moral government has an end in view, has a definite goal which it is ever seeking to reach. This goal may be conceived under the figure of three concentric circles. The comprehensive outer circle is the cosmic goal. At last, under the moral government, the entire universe is to manifest the perfect holiness of God. Often it has been affirmed that such a complete cosmic expression of holiness requires that every individual moral person shall ultimately become holy. I do not see any force in the affirmation. What is required is this: The final universe must express all God is. And therefore every created person must at last be so placed and so treated as to reveal the moral law in its long reach from the law of holiness, on through moral concern, to moral love.

But it is interposed, "A sinner forever unsaved could not evince the moral love of God." Why not, I ask, if God had loved him and used all the resources of the Godhead to save him, and his everlasting condition and placement manifested all the facts.

The middle circle is the goal of the individual holy person. I am now thinking of angels, and all individual moral persons, who have no racial connection. The outcome in this individual goal is more than a bare expression of divine holiness; it is such an expression in all the joy of actual fellowship with God. All holy persons are to be admitted into the presence of God, and to witness the glory of God. It will not quite answer to say that the *doxa* is enlarged, but we can say that it is accommodated to the moral creature, so that he can, in a finite measure, take part in the ineffable experience of the Godhead. In no absolute sense can a creature ever be like God, whether in being or in experience; but a holy creature can live in the blaze of the infinite life and never be consumed; can gather into consciousness the supreme felicity and never be overwhelmed. The innermost circle is the racial goal. This innermost goal has all the significance of the other two, as to expression of holiness and fellowship with God; but it has, further, a peculiarity of its own. Both the expression and the fellowship are to be with a racial emphasis. The race of mankind is to be made a holy brotherhood; and in perfect social solidarity is to be taken into the divine, and is there to enjoy all God is and manifest all God is. Thus, the goal of the moral government is one goal, as to the expression of holiness; but three united goals, as to the manner of expression.

The fact of a goal to be reached implies intentional movement toward it; and this movement is the one key to all method in the moral government. God does this or allows that, all because he is trying to move. For the sake of economy, let us now keep man alone in mind, inasmuch as we are working specially toward man's redemption. Men are sinners and men are free persons, and therefore holiness cannot be expressed at a stroke, as omnipotence might be expressed. The full expression can be achieved only by means of a gradual movement which ends in the goal. This movement is secured by augment in expression. That is, in every situation the moral government is trying to get into concrete manifestation something more of God's moral law than was evident before. Connected with this principle of augment is the principle of crisis. Now and again the history breaks into great points of meaning where the moral law completely dominates the event; and the movement under moral government fairly leaps toward the goal. But the one supremely important thing to fasten in the mind, before we take up such details of moral government as penalty and moral requirement, is this idea of movement by augment toward the goal.

Moral Requirement. The moral requirement is what the moral government requires, as a moral demand, in any given stage of the movement on toward the final goal. In the Garden of Eden the requirement was: "But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it, (Gen. 2.17). Whatever this was in fact, it was a temporary demand suitable to the childhood of the race; but still it was the beginning of a movement toward the goal, and never is it to be treated out of relation to that movement.

Another stage in moral requirement is expressed in the Decalogue, or the Law of the Ten Words, where morality and religion are knit together in a charter of ethical piety." For our present purpose it is not necessary to discuss the relation this law sustains to the different codes of Hebrew law. (See article by Professor Driver in the Hastings Dictionary, vol. iii, p. 64.) All we need is to note the loftiest point in the Hebrew conception of moral requirement. On the one hand, we are not to regard the Decalogue as an unimportant matter of merely local significance; and, on the other hand, we are not to regard it as a finality. The Decalogue was fulfilled by our Lord. Following Turretin, some theologians have taught that the Decalogue needed no correction, and our Lord only brought out its real meaning. But our Lord's new interpretation amounted to a correction of the whole spirit of the Decalogue, and was a mighty movement

toward the goal of the moral government. As Professor Paterson has shown (Hastings Dictionary, vol. i, p. 580), it is quite "possible to construct with scarcely a gap the Decalogue according to Christ"; and at every point there is movement toward the larger ideal. Following the law of Christ, one does not cease to be a moral man; but he passes into the spirit of moral love, which now fills his consciousness and gives motive for the most noble conduct. It is somewhat as if a man having a lofty ideal of duty, but also having with this ideal of duty a spirit of sheer legalism, should suddenly find himself in active possession of a great heart throbbing warmly toward man and God. Would he not be surprised? The exact truth is in the utterance of Saint Paul when he says: "Love therefore is the fulfillment of the law." (Read Rom. 13.8-10.)

Penalty. There are two very different views of the significance of penalty in the moral government: One view is that penalty is the automatic visitation of justice upon the offender in precise regard to his guilt. Just as fire will burn you to the extent of your exposure, so justice will reach you to the exact extent of your sinful exposure. According to this view, when extremely and consistently held, there is in penalty no reformatory aim and no deterrent office. The other and opposing view is that all penalty is really utilitarian -- reformatory, or educational, or in some way protective of moral interests. In this connection Dr. John Miley did some wise work in trying to weld the two views. In his Systematic Theology (ii, 173) he says: "There are the two offices of justice. But they must never be separated. Penalty, as a means in the use of justice, has an end beyond the retribution of sin. But, whatever its ulterior end, it is just only as it threatens or falls upon, demerit. And only thus can it fulfill its high office in the interest of moral government. It is the failure first properly to discriminate the two offices of justice in the punishment of sin and the protection of rights, and then properly to combine the two elements in the one doctrine of punishment, that the rectoral atonement exposes itself to really serious objections, which yet have no validity against a true construction of the theory." This is a complete answer to those who claim that to hold the rectoral aim and worth of penalty is to have "no ground of punishment but the benefit of others." But my objection to the rectoral theory is not in the least like the objection of those represented by Dr. Charles Hodge. To me, the whole utilitarian conception, even if so modified that "the law of expediency [only] determines the measure of divine penalties within the demerit of sin," is not profound enough. It does perpetual violence to the awful note of reality in redemption. I am not satisfied with automatic penalty, nor with expedient penalty, nor with the two kinds joined together to express the office of justice. We must have, I believe, the larger conception that the aim in all penalty is so to express, not the justice of God, but the holiness of God, as to secure actual movement toward the final goal of moral government. This expression of the divine holiness is not automatic, and yet it is as necessary as though it were automatic. This expression of the divine holiness is not an expedient either, and yet it has more moral value in the moral government than any expedient could have. Penalty is for actual movement toward the holy goal. And so the only way to do without a given penalty is to procure such a substitute for it as will express more completely or more intensely the holiness of God.

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