

2008

## Moral Knowledge: The Limits of Redeemed Vision

Gilbert C. Meilaender

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/lu\\_law\\_review](http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/lu_law_review)

---

### Recommended Citation

Meilaender, Gilbert C. (2008) "Moral Knowledge: The Limits of Redeemed Vision," *Liberty University Law Review*: Vol. 2: Iss. 3, Article 9.

Available at: [http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/lu\\_law\\_review/vol2/iss3/9](http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/lu_law_review/vol2/iss3/9)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Liberty University School of Law at DigitalCommons@Liberty University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Liberty University Law Review by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Liberty University. For more information, please contact [scholarlycommunication@liberty.edu](mailto:scholarlycommunication@liberty.edu).

# MORAL KNOWLEDGE: THE LIMITS OF REDEEMED VISION

*Gilbert C. Meilaender*<sup>†</sup>

Wisdom and goodness to the vile seem vile.  
Shakespeare, *King Lear*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Christian ethic that emerges from the arguments in my book *Faith and Faithfulness* has both deontological and perfectionist features. There is place for rules—in particular, rules that set limits upon how we may seek the various goods that life offers. But rules do not tell the whole story, nor can commitment to them as a structured form of love be sustained apart from the virtues of faith and hope.

We can see this if we consider the seemingly simple commandments of the Decalogue, to which Christians have returned for guidance in generation after generation. Taken as moral rules, each commandment will surely need to be made more complicated and complex; exception clauses and more precise characterizations may have to be added. In their context, however, they are also something more than rules; they are a brief picture of what it means to trust God in the whole of life. For the God who here commands identifies himself as the redeemer, the One who has delivered his people from bondage.<sup>1</sup> The commandments of the law's first table call for trust in this God; those of the second table specify how people who trust God to accomplish his saving purposes ought to treat their neighbors. Luther's explanations of the commandments in his *Small Catechism* capture this essential connection by grounding all obligations in the God-relation: "We should fear and love God so that . . . ."

Moreover, the commandments as Luther explicates them do two things: they set limits to our action, but they also demarcate a sphere of "the permitted." Thus, for example, Luther explains the commandment prohibiting murder: "We should fear and love God that we may not hurt nor harm our neighbor in his body, but help and befriend him in every bodily need." Some actions—which, of course, may need to be specified in rather precise detail—hurt and harm the neighbor. We should not seek to protect ourselves by those means, and, hence, our freedom is limited. But to

---

<sup>†</sup> Richard & Phyllis Duesenberg Professor of Christian Ethics at Valparaiso University. Professor Meilaender is an associate editor for the *Journal of Religious Ethics*. This article reprinted with permission from the sixth chapter of GILBERT C. MEILAENDER, *FAITH AND FAITHFULNESS* (1991).

1. *Exodus* 20:1-2.

respect those limits is not yet fully to enact this picture of trust. The limits—important though they are for human life and even if they were fully observed—do no more than mark out for us the immense expanse of life in which we are set free to serve others. If we are not free in the ways prohibited by the commandments, if those ways are not neighbor-love, then in what ways? In the countless ways which love finds but law cannot command. If God can be trusted to care for us, the energy that we might ourselves have devoted to that cause is set free for service to help and befriend the neighbor in every bodily need.

When faith is sustained by hope and active in love, it struggles to shape and inform the whole of life. Its powerful influence is set free in the worldly spheres in which we live and in which God orders our life—in family, work, and politics. God ordains marriage and sets the solitary in families; he establishes for humanity the task of tilling the ground and caring for the co-creation; he upholds the power of government to seek some measure of justice and peace. Through these worldly spheres God preserves human life, sees to our needs and those of our neighbors, and offers the hope for a fulfilling and flourishing life. But the God at work in these realms of life is the same God who in Jesus of Nazareth has delivered us from this present evil age and inaugurated the age which is to come.<sup>2</sup> Through the Spirit of the risen Christ, given to believers in baptism, God's love is poured into our hearts; yet, that Spirit is not only a present gift but also ground of hope, the down payment on future redemption.<sup>3</sup> Hence, within this world Christians are to lead transformed lives, are to hand themselves over to the empowering and sanctifying grace of God; living in this age, in "the flesh," they live by faith in the Son of God, whose pardoning grace has made them his.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, Christians find themselves living in two realms, in this age and the coming age that is already also here—and both are God's. We live as children, parents, spouses, workers, citizens; yet, unless we wish to sever entirely the two realms of the one God's activity, we must affirm that it is faithfulness to which we are called in the worldly spheres of life and faithfulness in which they train us. The overarching rubric by which to interpret what is happening in spheres such as family, work, and politics is this: They are places where God, having set us free through his pardoning grace, sets before us others who need our care and faithful commitment.

---

2. *Galatians* 1:4; *Ephesians* 1:21.

3. *2 Corinthians* 1:22; 5:5.

4. *Romans* 12:2; *Galatians* 2:20.

And they are schools of virtue in which, by God's empowering grace, our faith begins to learn the meaning of faithfulness. Hence, as Augustine said, the servants of God "have no reason to regret even this life of time, for in it they are schooled for eternity."<sup>5</sup>

Apart from such general statements, however, we should neither expect nor seek from Christian ethics any *single* principle by which to specify how Christian life must take shape within these worldly spheres. As justice may take quite different forms within different spheres of life, so too may faithfulness.<sup>6</sup> For example, the shape that faith, active in and formed by love, takes within a marriage may differ considerably from its political form. Moreover, an equality which is appropriate and desirable within the sphere of politics or work may be out of place within a bond like that of parent and child. We cannot simply apply a principle to all of life; instead, we must look to see what is called for in the different spheres in which we live. We may well ask, of course, how can one who is caught between the two ages of God's rule determine what is called for here and now? How can a vision not yet fully transformed discern the true meaning of faithfulness? What are the limits of our moral knowledge?

## II. THE POLITICAL USE OF THE LAW

In the first chapter of my book *Faith and Faithfulness*,<sup>7</sup> I suggested that Christian ethics is fundamentally a singular ethic, shaped by the distinctive contours of the Christian story—but never solely that. When we consider how we might know the meaning of faithfulness in the different spheres of life, we should not forget that more general claim. This knowledge is in part the work of natural (i.e., created) reason, which, in Christian thought, has often been discussed in terms of a theory of natural law. By considering briefly the nature of such theories we can permit the perspective discussed in that chapter to reassert itself. We will discover that we cannot adopt a natural law theory without being driven to raise certain theological questions, and they, in turn, may move us toward an ethic that makes use of natural reason without being grounded in it.

At the very least, a natural law ethic seeks to discern—on the basis of our God-given rational powers and apart from any special revelation—some standards of behavior or conditions of human association that apply to all human beings and societies (past, present, and future). We may develop

---

5. ST. AUGUSTINE, CITY OF GOD, bk. I, ch. 29.

6. Cf. MICHAEL WALZER, SPHERES OF JUSTICE (1983).

7. GILBERT C. MEILAENDER, FAITH AND FAITHFULNESS (1991).

such a theory from two rather different directions, however, and they give rise to quite different sorts of theories. One way begins by noting that the “natural” may refer to what we regularly observe in the world. That is, it may be essentially a descriptive category. Acorns grow into oaks. Only societies with the courage to defend themselves survive. In this sense what is natural is simply what we see happening regularly around us. To be sure, from this description we may seek to derive a *prescription* (though always a hypothetical one): An acorn, if it is to fulfill its nature, ought to grow into an oak. Societies, if they wish to survive, ought to find ways to instill courage in their members.

Thinking of the natural in this way gives rise to an ethic that makes survival central and that describes the basic conditions necessary for any community to function effectively and survive. Natural law presents us with hypothetical imperatives prescribing the minimal requirements for social survival. Hobbes is often thought of as the father of such theories, and H. L. A. Hart’s theory of “the minimum content of natural law” is a good example of such a theory in modern dress.<sup>8</sup> Hart invites us to consider certain givens about human beings and their world: We are vulnerable and easily harmed. We have relative equality in strength—and even the strong must sleep sometimes. We need things like food, clothes, and shelter—all of which may be limited resources. We need to find a way to make agreements with each other. From such facts, and presupposing our desire to survive, we might derive a set of minimal rules needed for human life in society—rules that would look rather like the second table of the Decalogue: If we are to have some confidence in our association together, we will need to prohibit harming and killing. If the family is to function effectively as the basic unit of society, spouses will need to be able to trust each other, and parents will need to see that the sacrifices they make on behalf of the next generation give rise to filial gratitude and esteem. If we are to secure for ourselves some of those necessary but limited resources, we will need institutional means of protecting what belongs to one person or another. And if agreements are to have any chance of lasting over time, we must be able to trust the spoken word of others. Putting the matter this way has the added advantage of allowing us to see the roots of such a theory not only in Hobbes but also in the Reformation category of the “political use of the law.” When natural reason discerns these imperatives, it is responding to God’s own urging and compelling action to govern human life.

---

8. H.L.A. HART, *THE CONCEPT OF LAW* 189 (1961).

We should not underestimate the difficulties of achieving even so limited an understanding of the meaning of faithfulness in human communities. In the *Summa Theologica*, St. Thomas writes that the first principles of the natural law are self-evident.<sup>9</sup> This might be taken to mean “obvious,” as if any morality that is “natural” must be obvious to the minds of all. But that is not Thomas’s meaning. He goes on at once to distinguish two kinds of self-evidence. A proposition can be self-evident *in itself*, he says, if it is what we call a tautology—its predicate contained in the notion of its subject. And a proposition may be self-evident *in relation to us* when we understand clearly the definition of the subject and can see that the predicate is contained within it. If we lack such understanding, the proposition—however self-evident in itself—will not be self-evident in relation to us. Therefore, Thomas concludes, some statements may be “self-evident only to the wise.” We may come only gradually to understand a truth which, once seen, is self-evident (in the sense that it shines by its own light and is derived from no other, more fundamental truth).

When, therefore, we seek to understand how best to structure our common life together, some development in our moral knowledge is both likely and necessary. St. Thomas himself thought that our passions and evil habits might often hide from us truth that ought to be evident to our natural reason. He offers an example: “Such was the case among the ancient Germans, who failed to recognize theft as contrary to justice, as Julius Caesar relates, even though it is an explicit violation of natural law.”<sup>10</sup> E. A. Goerner has offered a helpful reading of this example, and I follow him here in explicating Thomas’s point.<sup>11</sup>

It is unlikely that the Germanic tribes of whom Caesar wrote and to whom Thomas refers thought that all robbery was just. Their raiding and marauding was directed against those outside their own tribes (since, indeed, their society would be unlikely to have survived if they made no attempt to suppress robbery within their community). But these tribes, since they lived largely from plunder, could survive and even flourish while countenancing a good bit of robbery against outsiders. If such a policy would ultimately prove destructive, that consequence was hidden for a time by the effectiveness of Roman imperial power. Within the empire the long-term consequences of such activity could be controlled and hidden, and the

---

9. ST. THOMAS AQUINAS, *SUMMA THEOLOGICA*, pt. I-II, q. 94, a. 2 (Benziger Bros. ed., 1947) (1274), available at <http://www.ccel.org/a/aquinas/summa/FP.html>.

10. *Id.* at 4.

11. E. A. Goerner, *On Thomistic Natural Law: The Bad Man’s View of Thomistic Natural Right*, 7 *POL. THEORY* 114 (1979).

tribes did not have to fear that their pattern of life might cause the collapse of the economic system upon which they depended. There was always more booty for the taking.

In time, however, the decay of imperial power meant that the raiding grew in proportion, and the seemingly endless supply of plunder was lost as the Roman economy began to collapse. What, then, did the Germanic tribes have to do? They were forced gradually to establish a political order that suppressed the constant robbing and raiding. Once the responsibility for a stable society became theirs, they themselves had to assert the requirement of the natural law against robbery. "In order to enjoy what was left of what they had taken from the Romans and in order to raise the defense forces necessary to protect it from the next wave of robbers, the Franks, for example, worked to set up a stable order of property that allowed the slow economic development of Gaul and parts of Germany. They had learned from nature itself the precept forbidding raiding."<sup>12</sup>

This is part of what it means to speak of a naturally known morality. If it is self-evident to the wise and good, still it is far from obvious. It can and must be learned, and that learning process may be a gradual and arduous one. Violate the meaning of faithfulness built into the created spheres of worldly life and you will eventually suffer. But the "you" who suffers may be no single, particular agent; any given violator may be one for whom vice pays, one who seems to flourish. The sufferer will be the larger community whose common life is endangered. Thus, for example, the commandment enjoining honor for one's father and mother has a promise attached: "that your days may be prolonged, and that it may go well with you, in the land which the LORD your God gives you."<sup>13</sup> This does not mean that every disobedient son or disrespectful daughter must fail to flourish and will die at an early age. It means, rather, that no people can finally flourish if familial *pietas* is absent from their shared life.

This is in many ways an attractive theory—appealing in its simplicity and empirical grounding, and in the modesty with which it claims to do no more than establish minimal prescriptions for society. Appealing also in its recognition that we cannot always, by means of rational argument, persuade others to "see" what the natural law requires. The human will is disordered and, lacking certain virtues which only moral education can provide, we may not be in a position to see what the moral life requires. For that reason Aristotle said that ethics was a branch of politics and that only in a well-

---

12. *Id.* at 115.

13. *Deuteronomy* 5:16.

ordered society, in which virtue was inculcated, could one hope for the presence of proper moral vision. We should, I think, be reluctant to adopt his view of government—a view that sees the task of government chiefly in educative terms, for those terms may miss the moral importance of freedom. But we cannot deny that a society must find ways, preferably through nongovernmental structures and institutions, of shaping moral vision.

Granting that this theory of natural law is attractive, we must also admit, however, that it is minimal. It cannot by itself capture the fullness of “the good life,” the richness and density that Christians have found in their way of life. This problem we might, of course, solve simply by addition—by enriching this minimal content with a more developed sense of the ways in which Christian faithfulness goes beyond natural law so understood. And, indeed, this is often precisely what we do. But the difficulties run still deeper, and they point us to an enduring tension for Christians between ethics (the good life in its rich density) and politics (where there may be much to be said for only minimal requirements). This type of natural law ethic may have considerable difficulty making place for self-sacrifice, for death in a good cause. For there may come a moment when what should be done if *I* want to survive is not what should be done if *we* want to survive. The courage society needs may be precisely the courage likely to get me killed. “Men need virtues as bees need stings. An individual bee may perish by stinging, all the same bees need stings; an individual man may perish by being brave or just, all the same men need courage and justice.”<sup>14</sup> Hypothetical imperatives based on community survival may have a difficult time eliciting such a spirit of self-sacrifice and may, therefore, fall considerably short of forging a true communal bond. Behind the hypothetical imperative of “the political use of the law” always stands the implied threat: do this or else. And to make that threat effective we will need what government always needs: sanctions, the threat of force. Thus, however useful such a natural law ethic may be, it cannot capture successfully one of the great themes of the Christian life: self-giving and even self-sacrifice on behalf of the neighbor, done with glad and willing heart.

---

14. PETER GEACH, *THE VIRTUES* 17 (1977).

### III. A FULLY HUMAN LIFE

In seeking moral knowledge we might begin from a quite different sense of the natural: not what we regularly observe all around but the development appropriate to a particular kind of being. This is an evaluative rather than a descriptive category, and we will not gain this sort of knowledge simply by paying attention to regularities within the world. After all, more acorns lie on the ground and rot than grow into oak trees; yet, we still understand what it would mean to say that it is natural for the acorn to grow into an oak (or even, were we moved to put it this way, that the oak is the “flourishing” of the acorn). A society whose members courageously sacrifice themselves for each other may or may not survive for a long time, but in another sense it flourishes—as an image of what community at its best may be.

We can distinguish this version of natural law from the first by considering again the Decalogue’s requirement that children honor their parents. In terms of the first theory, this became in effect a hypothetical imperative: If a society wishes to perpetuate itself by asking the present generation to sacrifice itself for those who come after, it will need to inculcate in children a spirit of filial piety. Yet, important as such a claim is, it may seem to miss the sense in which a bond of parent and child is valued not simply as a means to communal survival but as the locus of cooperation and connection in which we first learn the meaning of love. This bond helps us to picture what human life at its best may be—to fall short of which is to risk not only our survival but the fullness of our humanity. From this perspective the requirements of the Decalogue’s second table are not simply minimal rules for community survival; they are an outline of faithfulness in a life that fully realizes its humanity.

Whatever problems may arise for this type of natural law ethic, it will at least have little difficulty justifying self-sacrifice. For on this view what matters is *how* we live, not *how long*. To realize our nature is not merely to survive, but to be a person of a certain sort. This approach may seem to capture the nobility of virtuous action better than the first, more modest and empirical, natural law theory. Perhaps for that very reason, however, it is far less likely to be a foundation for moral agreement. We may have great difficulty in specifying an ideal of human behavior and character that seems rationally demonstrable. How could we ever know what it means for human beings to flourish, to fully realize their nature? Nevertheless, Christians more than some others may be reluctant to give up on such a possibility; for the Christian understanding of our world as *creation* accounts for the difficulty of demonstrating such an ideal while, at the same

time, giving us confidence that one may be found. In a passage of exquisite beauty and insight, Josef Pieper has made just this point.

Because things come forth from the eye of God, they partake wholly of the nature of the Logos, that is, they are lucid and limpid to their very depths. It is their origin in the Logos which makes them knowable to men. But because of this very origin in the Logos, they mirror an *infinite* light and can therefore not be wholly comprehended. It is not darkness or chaos which makes them unfathomable. If a man, therefore, in his philosophical inquiry, gropes after the essence of things, he finds himself, by the very act of approaching his object, in an unfathomable abyss, but it is an abyss of *light*.<sup>15</sup>

What we learn is not best described as “partly true” (and, hence, “partly false”), but, at least sometimes, as “a part of the truth,” which can remain true even as our understanding deepens and develops. As we come to know part of the truth about the meaning of faithfulness, we come upon not simply a work of our own making but the Creator’s goal for the creation.

I do not wish to exaggerate the possibility of such rational discernment. The fact of human sinfulness must also affect our estimate of our own ability to know the full meaning of faithfulness. Since our loves are disordered, so may be our understanding. Unduly concerned with our own needs and interests, our vision of justice may be distorted. Too fearful to withstand the pressures of the workplace, we may fail to give our work the exacting attention it requires. Too eager to advance in that same work, we may fail to see obvious needs of our children. Lured by momentary pleasures or vanities, ruled by the desire to have our own way, we may ignore the needs of our spouse. It is hard to place much confidence in the judgments of people such as we know ourselves to be.

The deepest theological problem is not this, however; rather, it lies at the very heart of what Christians believe. How shall we articulate the meaning of a “flourishing” or “fully realized” human life apart from reference to Jesus? Christians have wanted to say that we become “mature” by growing “to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.”<sup>16</sup> But if the

---

15. JOSEF PIEPER, *THE SILENCE OF SAINT THOMAS* 96 (1957).

16. *Ephesians* 4:13. I do not wish to underestimate the difficulties involved in specifying what it would mean to be “like Christ” or to “follow Jesus.” For a very careful delineation of the issues, see Gene Outka, *Following at a Distance: Ethics and the Identity of Jesus*, in *SCRIPTURAL AUTHORITY AND NARRATIVE INTERPRETATION* 144-60 (Garrett Green ed., 1987).

perfection of our humanity is revealed in Jesus, a Christian understanding of faithfulness within the spheres of worldly life may seem rather discontinuous with visions of human flourishing that come more naturally to us. This is, after all, a Jesus who must be in his Father's house even at some cost to the normal meaning of filial piety.<sup>17</sup> It is a Jesus whose notion of justice to those who labor may even seem unjust when measured by the light of our unaided reason.<sup>18</sup> And, more generally, Reinhold Niebuhr may have been right to characterize the love Jesus enacts as "a tangent toward 'eternity'" within time.<sup>19</sup> The perfection of human nature revealed in Jesus seems, at least sometimes, discontinuous with our natural understanding of human beings at their best.

Here is the theological issue to which either sort of natural law theory finally drives us: It is God who claims our faithfulness in the spheres of worldly life—his governance that we detect in the political use of the law, the goal of his creation that we discern at least in part when we learn a little about the meaning of faithfulness. That same God, however, in his redeeming action in Jesus, enacts a faithfulness that may seem different from what we think we have learned about the nature of virtue. If we affirm that it is the one God whose faithfulness is manifested both in his governance of creation and in the crucified Jesus, we must affirm both continuity and discontinuity in our understanding of the moral life. The worth and significance of faithfulness in the spheres of worldly life must be recognized; for there God sets before us the neighbors in need of our care. But the incompleteness of this life must also be seen and its ultimacy questioned; for in it God begins to school us for eternity, to shape our love into the form of his own faithfulness. The issue, finally, is Christological: The risen Christ *is* Jesus of Nazareth; yet the life to which he is raised is that of the new age. His resurrection *is* the vindication of the earthly life he lived among us; yet the life he now lives is not simply the natural completion or fulfillment of that life. From within that tension Christians reflect upon the meaning of faithfulness. It is the most fundamental limit to our search for understanding of the moral life.

#### IV. FAITH SEEKING UNDERSTANDING

In seeking moral understanding, therefore, Christians must begin from faith, though this starting point need not imply a wisdom available to them

---

17. *Luke* 2:41.

18. *Matthew* 20:1.

19. 2 REINHOLD NIEBUHR, *THE NATURE AND DESTINY OF MAN* 69 (1964).

alone. Faith sees the governing hand of God at work in human communities when it discerns the minimal requirements for life together; faith discerns at least a part of God's own faithfulness when it gains insight into the meaning of morally mature human life. And we need not deny that what faith seeks it sometimes finds: understanding. Indeed, faith may broaden our vision and enable us to see what might otherwise have remained hidden to sight; it may enrich and enlarge our understanding of the moral life, and this enlarged understanding is, in principle at least, able to be shared with anyone and everyone. We have, for example, already seen the way in which faith's affirmation of the *person* of Christ was the motive force behind development of an enlarged understanding of human personhood.<sup>20</sup> The search for such understanding is authorized by the Spirit of the risen Christ, whose resurrection vindicates and fulfills this life even while transcending it. Our natural reason is given a kind of modest affirmation, its vision is enlarged—but always within limits marked by discontinuity between this age and that to come.

Here we may add to the discussion of Christian ethics a different linguistic formula by which to characterize the problem of continuity and discontinuity between the moral life accessible to natural reason and the redeemed vision of one led by Christ's Spirit. That formula is the language of *ultimate* and *penultimate* by which Dietrich Bonhoeffer sought to affirm both the relative independence of natural reason and the ultimate grounding of all understanding in Christ, who is the wisdom of God.<sup>21</sup> This language provides a way to acknowledge the priority of God's redeeming work in Jesus, yet also affirm God's call to faithfulness within all the spheres of worldly life—and to affirm that call without absorbing it entirely within the life of faith. Bonhoeffer argues that we should begin from the end: with the ultimate. That last thing is God's compassion on sinners in Jesus. But within that particularity we find the world affirmed. Participation in Christ is ultimate because there is no more definitive word of God than that spoken in Jesus and no method for achieving what God gives freely in him. No amount of restructuring of this penultimate world can itself bring in the kingdom in which faithfulness is fully enacted. And yet, the significance of worldly life is not to be discounted. "A way must be traversed, even though, in fact, there is no way that leads to this goal . . . . The penultimate,

---

20. See MEILAENDER, *supra* note 7, at ch. 2.

21. DIETRICH BONHOEFFER, *ETHICS* 120 (1955).

therefore, remains even though the ultimate entirely annuls and invalidates it."<sup>22</sup>

Bonhoeffer is attempting both to affirm and negate our ordinary, garden-variety understandings of virtue in everyday life. These spheres must be distinguished from the kingdom of God, though not separated entirely from it. The penultimate—the flourishing of life within human history—is not the last thing, for it is *penultimate*. But for the sake of that last thing, human life must be preserved and nurtured, for it is *penultimate*. There is no way to advance from penultimate to ultimate—no way to move from the virtues we develop in worldly life to the faithful love that unites the body of Christ. Movement is in the other direction. “The penultimate shall be respected and validated for the sake of the approaching ultimate.”<sup>23</sup> We can try to illustrate what Bonhoeffer has in mind by means of an illustration used by Helmut Thielicke. Since sickness and health—in their fullest senses—depend on whether we are at one with God, they are ultimately independent of the “psychophysical conditions with which medicine deals.”<sup>24</sup> We might then wonder, however, what is the worth of the physician’s calling and whether any real knowledge is available to physicians from the study of medicine alone. “It could be that someone whom I as a physician restore to health is thereby made more self-confident and goes to hell, whereas another whom I cannot help, who wastes away as I stand helplessly by, takes his sickness as a visitation, the kind which brings the prodigal home, and so wins through to eternity.”<sup>25</sup> What should we conclude? That medical knowledge is of no worth or is no real knowledge at all? No. Only that our understanding of its worth and working is limited, that we cannot finally use it as a means toward wholeness in the fullest sense, and that such final purposes always lie within the initiative of God alone.<sup>26</sup> But even if there is no way from penultimate to ultimate, no way from medical healing to the wholeness we truly need, such healing may still give us some inkling or intimation of what we mean by wholeness and what we hope for from God. The God who heals our diseases is the God who forgives our iniquities and crowns us with steadfast love and mercy.<sup>27</sup> The healing he provides in the spheres of worldly life cannot be entirely alien to his own ultimate purposes.

---

22. *Id.* at 124.

23. *Id.* 139.

24. 1 HELMUT THIELICKE, THEOLOGICAL ETHICS 257 (1966).

25. *Id.*

26. *Id.* at 263.

27. *Psalms* 103:3-4.

We can see, therefore. We can see and understand a good bit about what is good and wise in this life, even though we can never overcome or transcend the discontinuity that marks both the point of contact and the point of rupture between God's creative and redeeming action. In no sphere of life is this discontinuity more evident than the political. There even more than elsewhere it may be difficult to discern even "intimations" of continuity between the cities we struggle to preserve and the city God is building. Yet, if discontinuity must be emphasized there, continuity (though perhaps only visible to the eye of faith) must also not be denied. An alluring example of this double movement is given in Augustine's *City of God* by his use of the story of the founding of Rome.

Romulus killed Remus, Augustine suggests, because each "sought the glory of establishing the Roman state," but this was a glory that could not be shared.<sup>28</sup> Hence, conflict between them was inevitable, and we should not suppose that such conflict can be eliminated from human societies. Indeed, such conflicts only demonstrate the extent to which our cities are permeated by *the* earthly city (the *civitas terrena*), since it too was founded on a fratricide, when Cain killed Abel. And conflict will continue to the end of history, when the *civitas Dei* will be fully established.

But this is not Augustine's only use of the story of Rome's founding. Much earlier in *City of God* Augustine had also emphasized the discontinuity between earthly politics and the *civitas Dei*. "As for this mortal life, which ends after a few days' course, what does it matter under whose rule a man lives, being so soon to die, provided that the rulers do not force him to wicked and impious acts?"<sup>29</sup> Christians should learn, Augustine says, that if conquerors can endure many hardships for the sake of earthly kingdoms, believers ought much more be willing to endure hardship for the sake of a heavenly one. Yet, in the midst of such an argument designed to show the comparative unimportance of different political regimes, Augustine sounds a slightly different note—appealing in a different way to the story of Rome's founding. He suggests that "the remission of sins . . . finds a kind of shadowy resemblance in that refuge of Romulus, where the offer of impunity for crimes of every kind collected a multitude which was to result in the foundation of the city of Rome."<sup>30</sup> Romulus is said to have founded Rome as a sanctuary for criminals, and in that Augustine discerns a "shadowy resemblance," an imitation, of the

---

28. ST. AUGUSTINE, *CITY OF GOD*, bk. XV, ch. 5.

29. *Id.* at bk. V, ch. 17.

30. *Id.*

peace offered by the City of God. No path leads from intimation to realization, but to have understood the meaning of peace in the one is to have seen a shadowy resemblance of the peace God finally gives.