

1. The following exchange is NOT intellectually coherent:
 - A. Do you understand what a tree is? Do you grasp its definition and essence?
 - B. Yes, I do.
 - A. All right, you understand the form and meaning of tree. Let's move on. Next, I will tell you what a good tree is. I will identify a tree that is achieving its potentials as tree, a tree acting successfully as tree. This will be a "happy" tree, a flourishing tree. I will tell you what is the end or *telos* of tree.
—You already know the formal cause; I will now tell you the final cause.

COMMENT: An exchange like this makes no sense, because you cannot grasp the definition, essence, or form of a tree unless you know what makes a happy tree. You do not know the *eidos* of tree unless you know its *telos*.

2. The same is true in regard to a physician, the art of medicine, and anything else, such as a boat or a boxer. You cannot truly know what it is unless you know how it acts at its best, how it flourishes, how it acts well. You might be able to identify one on the basis of some of its accidents, but you won't know truly what it is.
3. Therefore, anyone who uses a particular term well must already know what the thing is in itself and what its *telos* or end is. No one who uses a term truly does not know what the *telos* of the thing named is. The *telos* is the thing in its completion and perfection. You must have at least an inkling of this perfection if you know what the thing is.
4. So, if someone is using a particular word but says or does things that contradict – speak against – the *telos* of the thing named by the word, he shows that he does not know what the word means or what the thing is. A doctor who uses his skill to kill people does not know what a doctor is. The truth of the thing is not visible to him.

Deep down he knows he is being inconsistent or incoherent, but he may not want to admit this to others or to himself. This is a distinctive kind of blindness, ignorance, or confusion.

5. Note the strong conjunction between
 - a. the meaning of the word and
 - b. the essence of the thing.—They are the same. They are the intelligibility of the thing named by the word.
—If you understand the "meaning" of a term you thereby understand the nature of the thing named by the term.
—And because the essence of a thing is unfolded or fulfilled in its *telos*, if you truly understand the "meaning" of a term you must thereby understand the excellence or finality of the thing named by the term.
6. This conjunction of *eidos* and *telos* holds also for human beings. People who act against their nature and their end or ends know, deep down, that they are violating their nature. They become torn apart.
7. "Natural law" can be understood as those demands that are made by the *telos* or ends of human nature. They are the practical imperatives that derive from what we are by nature and from the ends of our nature. They are obligations that come to us, not because of laws passed by human beings or customs developed by societies, but because of "what we are," which we understand as transcending any particular laws or customs. These are the goods by nature, the obligations by nature. Social laws and customs are "measured" by such obligations and ends. See my essay "Discovery and Obligation in Natural Law," in *Natural Moral Law in Contemporary Society*, edited by Holger Zaborowski (Washington, DC: CUA Press, 2010), 24–43.

It's not that we know nature of a thing *separately* and *apart* from conventions, customs, practices, and laws. It is not that we know the nature or essence first and the positive laws or customs later.

Rather, we know the nature of things (especially human things) *within and in contrast with, in distinction from*, such conventions, customs, practices and laws. The natural is played off against the conventional as another dimension, and such an interplay is always going on for a thoughtful person.

We also know the natures of things within and in distinction from our own purposes, and this interplay is also always going on for a thoughtful moral agent.