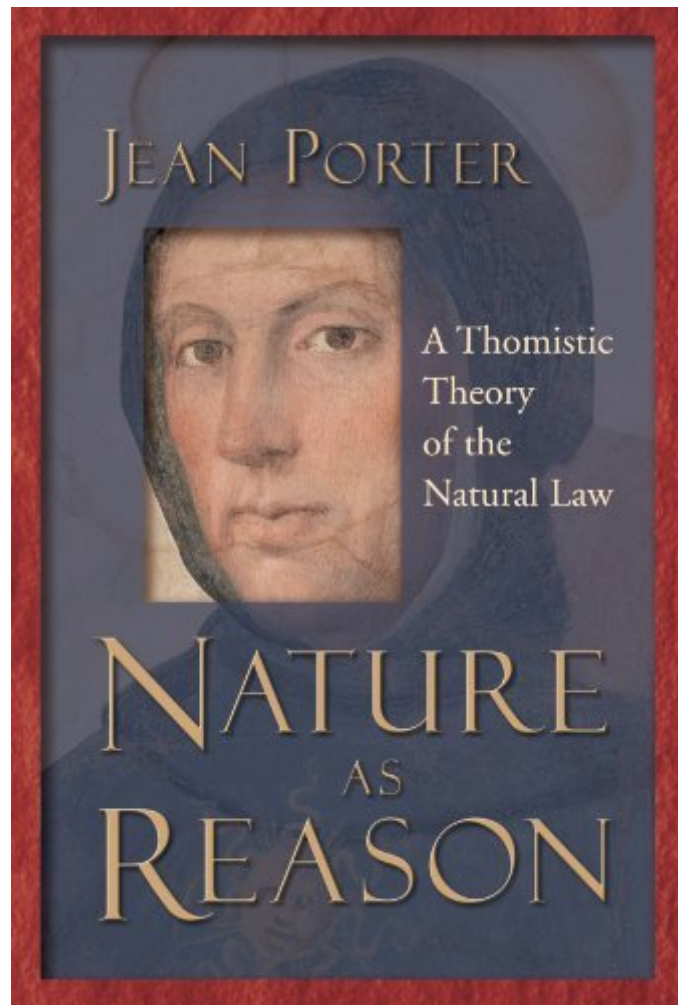


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Nature As Reason: A Thomistic Theory Of The Natural Law



Synopsis

This noteworthy book develops a new theory of the natural law that takes its orientation from the account of the natural law developed by Thomas Aquinas, as interpreted and supplemented in the context of scholastic theology in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Though this history might seem irrelevant to twenty-first-century life, Jean Porter shows that the scholastic approach to the natural law still has much to contribute to the contemporary discussion of Christian ethics. Aquinas and his interlocutors provide a way of thinking about the natural law that is distinctively theological while at the same time remaining open to other intellectual perspectives, including those of science. In the course of her work, Porter examines the scholastics' assumptions and beliefs about nature, Aquinas's account of happiness, and the overarching claim that reason can generate moral norms. Ultimately, Porter argues that a Thomistic theory of the natural law is well suited to provide a starting point for developing a more nuanced account of the relationship between specific beliefs and practices. While Aquinas's approach to the natural law may not provide a system of ethical norms that is both universally compelling and detailed enough to be practical, it does offer something that is arguably more valuable -- namely, a way of reflecting theologically on the phenomenon of human morality.

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Customer Reviews

In this detailed and carefully researched work, Jean Porter examines St Thomas's theory of natural law, and examines how it can apply to contemporary moral questions and issues. Fortunately Porter's work is refreshingly clear of the apologetic tone much work on natural law takes, especially in Catholic circles. Many people appeal to the natural law to defend the teachings of the Catholic magisterium (teaching authority of the church), particularly in more controversial areas like sex, gender and bioethics. Such writers often appeal to the thought of St Thomas, when in fact they are simply appealing to what the Pope or a Vatican congregation has said about the matter in a doctrinal document or encyclical. While such an approach may have its uses (i.e. in training seminarians) it doesn't constitute real scholarship. Porter's work avoids two-dimensional apologetics and instead tries to retrieve the substance of St Thomas's teaching in contemporary language. The result is a refreshing and open-minded interpretation of Thomas and his natural law theory. The biggest stumbling block is the teleological view of nature underlying St Thomas's theory. Doesn't evolution and physical science show clearly the universe really has no direction or purpose? How can human life have meaning in the face of a seemingly cold and hostile universe, of which humans are like specks of dust? Even Blaise Pascal seemed to realise this when he said the infinite, cold spaces of endless time and space caused deep fear and anxiety in him. Even so, St Thomas is worth taking seriously, even if only because he uses rigorous argument rather than appeals to authority to work out a position.

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