

The Symmetry Argument for Catholic Integralism

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ABSTRACT: This essay defends Catholic integralism. Integralists propose that governments exist to secure the common good: temporal and spiritual. God authorizes two powers to govern humankind: the state governs in matters temporal, the church in matters spiritual. When their missions intersect, the church is sovereign owing to its nobler purpose. Christian states must make their authority available to the church to secure religious ends. Despite rejecting integralism, most Catholic political philosophers are perfectionist: states exist to promote the authentic individual and common good. These *natural law perfectionists* agree that states exist to promote *natural* goods: goods, such as health and friendship, that anyone can see as such through the use of reason. Yet in contrast with integralism, they deny that states should promote *supernatural* goods: goods, such as faith and hope, that we only grasp through revelation. Most Catholic perfectionists treat natural and supernatural goods *asymmetrically*. Integralists reject the asymmetry. God authorizes the church to promote supernatural goods, and the church may direct the state to advance its mission. On this basis, I argue that integralists can mount a powerful philosophical argument against standard natural law perfectionism—the *symmetry argument*. It claims that natural law perfectionists cannot justify their asymmetric treatment of goodness. Integralism, in contrast, treats the good symmetrically.

Catholic political philosophers are overwhelmingly perfectionist: states exist to promote the authentic individual and common good.¹ These *natural law perfectionists* claim that states should promote *natural* goods: goods, such as health and friendship, that anyone can see as good through natural reason. States should *not* promote *supernatural* goods, such as faith and hope, that we only grasp through revelation. Catholic perfectionists typically treat natural and supernatural goods *asymmetrically*.

A growing group of Catholic perfectionists rejects the asymmetry (Waldstein 2016, Crean and Fimister 2020, Pink 2018a; for an overview, see Schwartzman and Wilson 2019). They harken back to Catholic perfectionists in previous centuries, who treated natural and supernatural goods similarly. The older tradition is venerable. It arguably includes Thomas Aquinas (ST II-II, q. 11; 2014), Francisco Suarez (2015, xv-xvii, 757-832), Robert Bellarmine (2012, 211-225), Francisco Vitoria (1991, 218-230), and the great 19th century Popes, Pius IX (1864) and Leo XIII (1885). These *Catholic Integralists* agree that God authorizes the state to promote natural goods and authorizes the church to promote supernatural goods. But the church has the nobler purpose, and so may direct the state to advance its mission.

The state aids the church chiefly through its civil law. The church imposes spiritual penalties on errant Christians; however, if those penalties do not correct or stop the offender, the state may impose civil penalties. Integralist civil laws can, for instance, require the physical punishment of heretics following their excommunication. The state does not *enforce* church law, but it can *exact* civil punishments for violating church law.

¹ Perfectionism holds that states should promote the authentic human good and face no general moral prohibition against doing so.

Catholic integralism fell into obscurity following the Second Vatican Council (1962-5). The church issued a document, *Dignitatis Humanae* (*DH*), whose second article begins: “This Vatican Council declares that the human person has a right to religious freedom” (Paul VI, 1965). The dignity of the person requires religious freedom for all. Justice prohibits coercion in matters of faith. Since *DH* and integralism appear incompatible, integralism became associated with schismatic groups.

Philosopher Thomas Pink (2012, 2017) dissents. Appearances notwithstanding, *DH* and integralism agree. *DH* recognizes a right of religious freedom against states, but it does not recognize a right of religious freedom against the church. *DH* never denies that the church can authorize states to punish its errant members. The church set this policy aside, Pink admits. But policies can change.

Most Catholic theologians reject Pink’s interpretation (Finnis 2013, 566-77; Rhonheimer 214; Miller 2018). But his high-caliber work has brought integralism back from exile, which allows us to examine it anew.

I argue that integralists can mount a powerful philosophical argument against natural law perfectionism—the *symmetry argument*. Natural law perfectionists cannot justify their asymmetric treatment of goodness. Integralism, in contrast, treats the good symmetrically.

We cannot dismiss the symmetry argument with the charge of infeasibility. We need only limit its scope: the argument shows that states should advance the supernatural good *when they can*. Integralism is not wholly utopian either. Integralist regimes once existed,² and so integralism may describe a feasible ideal.

I ignore liberal arguments against integralism, such as the claim that the state should not take sides on issues where people reasonably disagree. Natural law perfectionists reject this liberal constraint on state action (George 1999, 202). I explore a disagreement between non-liberals.³

I also take Pink’s interpretation of *DH* for granted; if he is wrong, integralists must return to hibernation.

Natural law perfectionism comes in different flavors. I address the most well-known and politically influential version: the “new” natural law theory (hereafter, NNL) of Germain Grisez (1983), John Finnis (2011), Robert P. George (1995), and others.⁴ NNL theorists cannot reject symmetric treatment of the good, or so I claim.

I will now review NNL, introduce the symmetry argument, and defend its central premise—the symmetry conditional. The paper then assesses three replies: an objection from *authorization*, an objection from *religion*, and an objection from *prudence*. These replies fail. I conclude that the symmetry argument succeeds. The bold consequence? Catholic natural law theorists must take integralism seriously.

1. New Natural Law Theory

I characterize natural law theory first as an ethical theory, a theory that classifies actions as morally required, permitted, or prohibited. According to Mark Murphy (2011, 1.4), paradigmatic natural law theories hold the following:

² Or they at least appeared to. It is unclear when kings accepted temporal papal power *de facto*.

³ I describe natural law perfectionists as non-liberals because they do not classify autonomy as a basic good.

⁴ I place “new” in quotation marks because these theorists think that their view is more consonant with Aquinas than the natural law theorists that preceded them.

- (1) The natural law is given by God.
- (2) It is naturally authoritative over all human beings.
- (3) It is naturally knowable by all human beings.
- (4) The good is prior to the right.
- (5) Right action is action that responds non-defectively to the good.
- (6) There are a variety of ways in which action can be defective with respect to the good.
- (7) Some of these ways can be captured and formulated as general rules.

God issues the eternal law through the divine intellect, a law that becomes *natural* when applied to creation (ST I-II, q. 93). Natural law does not derive from the divine will, commands, or attitudes.

Natural law specifies behavioral patterns and the conditions for creaturely flourishing. Humans alone have free and rational wills, so natural law also defines what we *ought* to do. Natural law describes our behavioral patterns, our flourishing, and how we *should* act. How? By specifying our final end—our ultimate purpose. Our final end determines which acts, practices, and habits make our lives go better or worse.

Natural laws not only direct behavior: we can tell that they do so. Ordinary human reasoning reveals the natural law. We do not need divine revelation to grasp its requirements.⁵

Natural law theory places the good prior to the right; that is, it grounds right and wrong in facts about the good. Consequentialists agree, but the two views contrast in other respects. Consider three. First, consequentialism typically treats goodness agent-neutrally: a state of affairs can be good even if it is not good *for* any particular individual. Natural law theory treats goodness as agent-relative: goodness is always goodness for a being or creature. Second, consequentialism claims that one can aggregate and then maximize goodness, hence the familiar slogan that the right thing to do is maximize the good. NNL theory rejects the aggregation of natural “basic” goods. Aggregation is incoherent. And if we cannot aggregate goods, third, we cannot maximize them either. Consequentialism collapses.

Morally right actions respond appropriately to natural goods and in one of two ways (Finnis 2011, 118-125; Murphy 2011, sec. 2.4). Some goods merit production. We respond appropriately to the good of health by healing the sick. Other goods deserve respect. We respond appropriately to the good of friendship by keeping our promises. Immoral actions—such as actions that weaken the sick or betray our friends—fail to respond appropriately to goods.

When we obey natural laws, we tend to acquire or enjoy natural goods. Not always though—most natural laws have exceptions. That said, a few natural laws remain moral absolutes—ones we must never transgress (Finnis 1991).

According to NNL theorists, humans live well when we enjoy certain *basic* human goods. Basic goods have their own worth, we should choose to promote or protect them for their own sake, and when we do so, our actions make sense. Knowledge is a basic good with its own worth. We can choose to promote or protect it for its own sake, and when we do, our actions make sense. Cutting grass with scissors *lacks* its own worth, so we should *not* do it for its own sake; when we do, our actions make *no* sense.

Natural law theorists draw up different lists of basic goods. Grisez (1983, 121-2) selects self-integration, practical reasonableness, authenticity, justice and friendship, religion, life and health, knowledge of truth, appreciation of beauty, and playful activities. Finnis (2011, 86-90)

⁵ Though see the discussion of sin, grace, and the knowledge of natural law below.

chooses life, knowledge, aesthetic appreciation, play, friendship, practical reasonableness, and religion (for a common list, see Grisez, et al. 1987). Murphy picks life, knowledge, aesthetic experience, excellence in work and play, excellence in agency, inner peace, friendship and community, religion, and happiness (Murphy 2001, 96). All three lists identify “religion” as a basic good, following Aquinas (ST II-II, q. 81). The good of religion helps assess the symmetry argument.

NNL theorists argue that the basic goods are incommensurable: no one can rationally rank aesthetic appreciation above the pursuit of knowledge (Murphy 2001, 182-98; Grisez 1978; Finnis 2011, 92). Reason does not mandate that I become an artist rather than an academic. We can represent a choice between incommensurables as choosing a basic good *for its own sake* without weighing it against other basic goods (Murphy 2001, 193). Incommensurability will resurface below. It too helps us assess the symmetry argument.

NNL theorists apply natural law to politics. The state should help people pursue and enjoy the basic goods in a life of integral fulfillment. It should also establish the common good: the social condition where both individuals and groups enjoy and pursue the basic goods (Finnis 2011, 120). The state may discourage choices that undermine basic goods.

Many people associate NNL with social conservatism. Understandably so. Finnis and George draw on NNL to defend conservative social policy. Examples include restrictions on same-sex marriage, euthanasia, and abortion (George 1999). Yet this association is not an intrinsic feature of NNL, so I set it aside for our purposes. Doing so clears the mind.

Before I continue, I should note that some call NNL “new” to contrast it with “classical” natural law theory. Classical natural law theorists begin ethics with a theory of human nature, whereas NNL theorists begin ethics by asking what practical reason grasps as basic goods. Classical natural law theorists start ethics with metaphysics. NNL theorists begin ethics with principles of rational choice, which then classify our actions as reasonable or unreasonable (Murphy 2001, 6-45). I am unsure how classical natural law fares against the symmetry argument, so I speak to the matter elsewhere (Vallier 2023, chapter 3).

2. The Symmetry Argument

The symmetry argument draws on three types of supernatural goods. The first is union with God: our incorporation into Christ, where we enjoy sanctifying grace, and receive the beatific vision. The second group consists in the supernatural *virtues* of faith, hope, and love. These virtues empower us to unite with God: faith trusts God, hope relies on God’s promises, and love desires and seeks union with God. The sacraments form the third set. They relate us to God through material means such as baptism, the Eucharist, and confession. The term “supernatural good” names any of these types of good.

Supernatural goods are basic goods, even though we do not grasp them through natural reason. Union with God has its own worth; we should pursue it for its own sake, and when we do so, our actions make sense. NNL theorists may claim that we never choose supernatural goods for their own sake.⁶ Every choice of supernatural goods includes a natural good; that

⁶ God could bestow supernatural goods in response to our choices; our choice *occasions* a divine response. That means we can act to occasion a supernatural good, which is one way to choose a supernatural good.

is, all supernatural goods *pair* with natural goods in the act of choice.⁷ If so, we never opt for supernatural goods alone.

Consider the good of *true* religion. According to NNL, true religion is *two* goods: the natural good of religion, and the supernatural good that comes with complete union with God. When we participate in Catholic religious life, we simultaneously choose natural religion and corporate union with God. For NNL, every choice of a supernatural good is like this. Supernatural goods come paired with natural goods. In every case.

I can accept this point. Vindicating the symmetry argument only presumes the following. We can choose a supernatural good for its own sake even if we thereby also choose a natural good for its own sake. Choosing union with God, for instance, entails choosing religion. Our option for choice is to enjoy the natural-supernatural good pair, choosing both goods for their own sake.

The symmetry argument rests on the intuition that states must promote the whole good, natural and supernatural. It explains integralism's attraction: integralism treats goodness more symmetrically than NNL.⁸ I formulate the argument as follows:

The Symmetry Argument

1. States should promote natural goods (natural law premise).
2. If states should promote natural goods, they should promote supernatural goods (symmetry conditional).
3. States should promote supernatural goods (proto-integralist conclusion).⁹

Integralists and NNL theorists agree that the state should promote natural goods, hence premise 1. This *natural law* premise assumes that states “promote” natural goods by creating conditions where we can enjoy them.¹⁰ I take the natural law premise for granted.

Call premise two the *symmetry conditional*. Here states enable the reception of supernatural goods, but not in the way they promote natural goods. States cannot promote union with God *at all*. As Scripture teaches, God chooses us, not the other way around (John 15:16). God grants His church supreme authority over supernatural goods, which it must then extend to the state. The state's task? Help Christians choose to *remain in God's grace*.

The church-authorized state assists the church by devising coercive policies. It establishes Catholicism as the religion of state, and its schools instill the Catholic faith. Integralist states may also punish heresy and apostasy.

The symmetry conditional does not pit nature against grace. Grace only enhances nature. The state does not choose supernatural goods over natural goods. It sometimes chooses between a mere natural good and a *pair* – a natural good and a supernatural good together.

To illustrate formally, let N be a natural good unpaired with supernatural good S and let N_S be a natural good paired with S . Suppose N is physical health, and N_S is the good of religion

⁷ NNL theorists often describe choices as choices between *options to enjoy* goods. I prefer the less bulky locution of *choosing goods*. Here I treat these locutions as equivalent.

⁸ Integralists do not treat the natural and supernatural good *wholly* symmetrically. The church governs the distribution of the supernatural good, although these goods accrue chiefly to baptized persons.

⁹ States could promote the supernatural good through a monarch (caesaropapism). But I take the integralist form for granted owing to its centrality in church tradition.

¹⁰ “Promotion” does imply *maximization*; the state might not stand under any requirement to maximize the set of goods, and might satiate. Yet either way, states have a powerful reason to prioritize infinite goods over finite goods.

paired with being in a state of grace. The state must now choose N or N_S and should consult all aspects of N_S in its decision. The state must not ignore that N_S pairs with a supernatural good. Again, if states should advance natural goods, they should also advance natural-supernatural pairs of goods.

To illustrate informally, recall Catholic teaching that most Protestant pastors (if not all) lack proper ordination. The disastrous consequence: they cannot confect a valid Eucharist and so cannot offer their parishioners the true body and blood of Jesus. Suppose that John is Methodist and receives the Lord's Supper during weekly services. He misses the true Eucharist. But John enjoys the natural good of religion by obeying Christ's command to remember Him (Mark 14:22-25).¹¹

Five years later, John converts to Catholicism. Since Catholic priests can confect a valid Eucharist, he now receives the genuine body and blood of Jesus. John enjoys religion *and* the supernatural good of greater union with God.¹²

If the symmetry conditional holds, states must consider John's reasons to receive the Eucharist rather than the Methodist substitute. These reasons have great power: union with God is the greatest good of all. Yet NNL orders the state to *ignore* these reasons. How odd.

The integralist state honors these reasons by elevating religious truth over falsehood. Why? True religion is both a natural good and a tremendous supernatural good. The good of false religion pales in comparison. Catholicism, for instance, provides the true Eucharist. Buddhism does not. Practicing Buddhism is still a natural good, but it pales in comparison to practicing Catholicism.

The symmetry conditional seems true. If states should advance natural goods, they must keep citizens Catholic. Or, rather, they must create conditions where its baptized citizens can readily choose to remain in grace.

Proposition 3 is the *proto-integralist conclusion*. The symmetry argument cannot prove integralism: no one knows whether integralist regimes promote the supernatural good better than alternatives. If church and state integrate, increased church corruption could undermine its authority. Or Catholicism may flourish when it competes with other faiths (Finke and Stark 2005).

Integralists must argue that their states best promote supernatural goods. Where do they even begin? No empirical work shows that church-state unions best promote supernatural goods, and some indicates the opposite (Toft, et. al 2011). God distributes supernatural goods as He wishes and shrouds His gifts in mystery. Integralist arrangements crested in the 13th century, but historians doubt that 13th century Western Europeans were especially pious (Johnson and Koyama 2019, 43). Non-integralist regimes advance the supernatural good more effectively, for all we know.¹³ And we know next to nothing.

Still, the proto-integralist conclusion helps the integralist shift the debate. We no longer ask *whether* states should promote supernatural goods, but *how* they should do so. We know that states should promote supernatural goods *when they can*.

¹¹ Obedience and remembrance may also be supernatural goods.

¹² I thank an anonymous referee for pushing me to clarify this point.

¹³ A supernaturalist politics could advance supernatural goods indirectly and non-coercively.

3. Reasons to Accept the Symmetry Conditional

From here forward, I will defend the symmetry conditional on four grounds. First, supernatural goods outweigh mere natural goods. Receiving the Eucharist trumps reading a novel and eternal salvation trumps worldly fame. States have strong reasons to promote supernatural goods (which are always paired with a natural good).

Second, supernatural goods grant eternal life. In heaven, we can enjoy a wide range of natural goods forever. We experience permanent aesthetic enjoyment in God's presence. If that is true, states should support goods that help us enjoy natural goods without end.

Third, sin obscures our ability to identify natural basic goods. We miss what morality requires. Supernatural goods can heal our moral sight by bestowing God's grace upon us (Pink 2018a). With grace, we can better pursue natural goods. We can *see* them. Surely, then, the state should secure the goods that enable us to identify natural goods.

Some Catholic teaching supports the third argument (Pink 2018b). Consider Pope Pius IX (1864): "where religion has been removed from civil society, and the doctrine and authority of divine revelation repudiated, the genuine notion itself of justice and human right is darkened and lost." And Pope Leo XIII (1900): "When Jesus is absent, human reason fails, being bereft of its chief protection and light, and the very end is lost sight of, for which, under God's providence, human society has been built up." Suarez agrees:

For grace also has an essence and a nature of its own, as an infused light to which it also belongs not only to direct men towards supernatural action that is right, good, and required, but also to dispel darkness and errors relating to the pure natural law itself and to teach on the basis of a higher reason the observance of that same natural law. (2015, 46)

Grace helps us identify natural goods. With church authorization, then, states should organize society to enable the full saturation of grace in our institutions. If the state should help us enjoy natural goods, it should create an environment where we can more readily detect those goods. If the state wants to heal us, it should give us the cure.

Pink (2018a) adds that non-confessional states have forgotten the natural law, as shown by their embrace of abortion, contraception, and euthanasia. States that act from natural law alone lose grace and moral knowledge thereby.¹⁴

Finally, even if we grasp the natural law, we cannot always follow it, even most of the time. Without sanctifying grace, "fallen men" cannot even keep the natural laws they recognize, but since grace restores virtuous motives, it helps us achieve natural goods (Crean and Fimister 2020, 78). Grace creates virtues that aid moral choices. Put another way: if the state gives us medicine (grace) to cure a disease (sin), it should help people take it. We cannot achieve natural ends unless the spiritual power teaches and sanctifies us (Ibid., 18). The imparted supernatural goods help us *know* the moral law *and* follow it so that we can attain our natural ends.

We have excellent reasons to accept the symmetry conditional. I now examine three arguments against it: what I call the objections from *authorization*, *religion*, and *prudence*.

¹⁴ Here society surely loses grace, but for the integralist, the political regime also loses it.

4. The Authorization Objection to the Symmetry Conditional

NNL theorists may respond that states lack authority over supernatural goods. The state must only establish peace and justice. Finnis (1998, 219-33) reads Aquinas as claiming that the state should limit itself to pursuing peace, which is not a mere *modus vivendi*. Peace is rather “concord ... and willing agreement between one person or group and another, but also harmony amongst each individual’s own desires” (Ibid., 227). The law should “secure friendship between people, and efforts to maintain peace by laying down precepts of justice” (Aquinas 2016, II-II, q. 38, a. 1c.). Peace furnishes the benefits of social life and avoids contention. It does so even if it “falls short of the complete justice which true virtue requires of us” (Finnis 1998, 228). Finnis accepts this position: the state lacks authority even over some natural goods, much less supernatural goods.

If the state lacks authority over supernatural goods, the symmetry conditional is false. The state cannot secure supernatural goods. It must not use religious coercion, even if coercion helps people keep the faith. Even if the state should promote natural goods, then, *it has no right* to promote supernatural goods.

The integralist agrees that states have no authority over supernatural goods *on their own*. The church has authority. Contra NNL, however, the church can expand state jurisdiction. The church could authorize the state to use civil penalties to support church law and policy.¹⁵

Objection: the church cannot expand state authority because it has no authority to coerce. It cannot give what it does not have. Note, though, that the church spiritually coerces its members all the time, excommunicating impenitent sinners to secure their repentance. Believers may *prefer* physical coercion. Civil punishment only affects this life; spiritual punishment could last forever. The church uses spiritual coercion. Perhaps it can authorize the state to use physical coercion.

Spiritual and physical coercion may differ *in kind*. The authority to use spiritual punishments might not automatically extend to physical punishment. What then? The church may coerce physically owing to its status as a perfect society (*communitas perfecta*). Here’s Bellarmine:

The Church must have every power necessary to attain its end; but the power of using and disposing of temporal things is necessary for attaining the spiritual end, since otherwise evil rulers could support heretics with impunity, and overturn religion; therefore, she has this power too. (2012, book 5, chapter 7)

Leo XIII agrees:

[The Church] is a society chartered as of right divine, perfect in its nature and in its title, to possess in itself and by itself, through the will and loving kindness of its Founder, all needful provision for its maintenance and action. And just as the end at which the Church aims is by far the noblest of ends, so is its authority the most exalted of all authority, nor can it be looked upon as inferior to the civil power, or in any manner dependent upon it. (2014, 112)

¹⁵ One might wonder whether the church can take over state functions. Integralists claim God authorizes the state to enforce the natural law. The church would usurp the state’s divine authority by taking over state functions.

Leo XIII teaches that the Church holds every power needed to maintain itself and its mission. The Church has authority to legislate on all matters concerning religion. Similarly, Archbishop Lefebvre (1994, 85) claims that the church is a perfect society “supplied by its divine Founder with all the means to subsist by itself in a stable and independent fashion.” Crean and Fimister (2020, 16-22) agree.

But hold on. One could claim the church can authorize the state only in matters that fall “within its competence” (Leo XIII 2014, 113). If physical coercion helps advance its mission, the church may use it, but otherwise not. One can argue that physical coercion goes beyond the Church’s competence. Hittinger (2007, 40) claims that the Papal States were “comically incompetent” in their operations. Integralists agree. Crean and Fimister (2020, 77) follow Bellarmine (2012, bk 5, ch 9) in arguing that wielding “both swords” to govern a large public creates temptations to “avarice and pride.” They predict that simony would be more common if the Church must wield the temporal sword (Crean and Fimister 2020, 77, ft. 23).

But even here, the church could have the power to authorize the state to act on its behalf because the state possesses a power the church cannot competently wield. So the church can still extend its authority to a competent power (i.e., the state.)¹⁶ If I am too weak to lift my couch, I can authorize a strong person to lift it. Similarly, if the church is too incompetent to wield the temporal sword, it can give the state the temporal sword on its behalf.

We have thus far assumed that the state can identify the true religion. Now let’s question that assumption. If the state cannot identify true religion, it should not promote the supernatural good. It lacks the competence. A reply: the church knows the religious truth and can inform state officials. Officials can then respond accordingly.¹⁷

Let’s grant that a state with Catholic leaders can trust church testimony. But what if a state is religiously diverse? If the state is led by Catholics, maybe Catholics can override objections from their subordinates.

Or not. State officials may affirm Catholicism as citizens. But they may remain unable to accept Catholicism in their office as state representatives. In medieval societies, monarchs often mixed private and public powers. The mix arose from institutional degradation. The Roman Empire had sharply distinguished between holding an office and owning property. Yet in the medieval period, “the very notion of office ... came to be assimilated to that of proprietary right” as symbolized by the single word “dominium,” which denoted “both proprietary right and governmental authority” (Oakley 2010, 77). Thus, a king could submit his whole “dominium” to the Church in the medieval period. Some did.¹⁸ Like the Roman Empire, modern states separate “proprietary and governmental authority,” by distinguishing a person from her office. Integralism arose only when societies did not draw those distinctions (Oakley 2012, 200-1).

When societies separate office from officeholder, church authorization becomes complex. Constitutional law may prohibit baptized officials from submitting their offices to church authority. The US constitution illustrates this. So, how can the church authorize a modern state to enforce its law? Church and state may sign a concordat that codifies state obedience, or they may advocate constitutional change. These barriers are extreme. Nonetheless, modern states can receive church authorization under certain conditions.

¹⁶ Could the Church develop the competence to use physical coercion? Why not make every state a Papal State? I address these questions in Vallier 2023, chapter 6.

¹⁷ Citizens can receive this knowledge by faith, so state officials can too, even if states themselves are not agents.

¹⁸ One oft-cited example is King John’s submission to Innocent III. This ended the Papal Interdict on England.

NNL theorists can offer three other authorization objections. They can appeal to the standard interpretation of *DH*, which I have set aside, or they can argue that church authorization will permit the state to act *unjustly* or *incompetently*. Unfortunately, all three replies show that the authorization objection depends on successful prior objections. The first reply depends on the proper interpretation of *DH*. The second reply depends on what justice requires. And the third reply amounts to the objection from prudence, which I address below.

5. The Religion Objection to the Symmetry Conditional

The chief objection to the symmetry conditional draws on the character of the natural good of religion. Here I outline this *religion objection*. The next three sections examine integralist responses to it. Some readers may find these replies overly technical. You can skip them. But they engage the intricacies of NNLs in ways that strengthen the symmetry argument, so I include them.

For clarity, we can classify objections to the symmetry conditional as follows.

Objections to the Symmetry Conditional

1. The Authorization Objection
2. The Good of Religion Objection
 - a. The Incommensurability Reply to the Objection
 - b. The Non-Competition Reply to the Objection
 - c. The No Intending Harm to a Good Reply to the Objection
3. Pragmatic Objections

Here's the religion objection: In recruiting the state as its secular arm, the church may permit the state to threaten religion. If so, the church authorizes a violation of natural law, which is impossible.

We enjoy religion when we achieve “harmony with the more-than-human order, those aspects of the ways things are that transcend the world of human making, doing, and acting” (Grisez, et al. 1987, 108). NNL theorists argue that we can enjoy religion even if our faith rests on false beliefs. Any sincere pursuit of religious truth realizes this basic good.¹⁹

Finnis (2006) and George (1995, 219-228) argue that states may only promote religion by ensuring that people may choose religion freely. In *Making Men Moral*, George claims that religion “can indeed provide a reason for political action. It cannot, however, provide a reason for compelling or forbidding religious belief or practice” (41). If we do not freely choose religion, we do not enjoy it (221).

Since people can enjoy religion within different faith traditions, the state must not coercively favor one faith.²⁰ It should tolerate many religions, while encouraging “religious reflection, faith, and practice” (224). Natural law forbids coercion that undermines the good of religion, which means that integralist coercion violates natural law.

Before I assess this argument, remember that the integralist state may only religiously coerce baptized citizens. Others have complete freedom of religion.²¹

¹⁹ Of course, one cannot realize the good of religion within any religion at all.

²⁰ I set aside symbolic (non-coercive) establishment of religion, which NNL theorists can accept.

²¹ Save for exercises of religion that violate natural law.

Terence Cuneo (2005, 116) criticizes the religion objection. A person can choose a religion that undermines other goods, which could make one's life worse on the whole. Suppose Reba joins a religion that discourages knowledge. Religious authorities fear that knowledge will lead Reba to leave the faith. Here Reba enjoys the basic good of religion, but she loses the basic good of knowledge. Forgoing knowledge could "defeat the goodness of ordering her religious life freely" (116). Government should ensure that Reba pursues religion effectively and should discourage bad religions with that goal in mind.²²

Let's strengthen Cuneo's point. If Catholicism is true, humans can unite with God (Hittinger 1998, 120). If Reba becomes a baptized Catholic, she enjoys that union;²³ if Reba becomes Buddhist, she does not.²⁴ Pious Buddhists cannot access grace through the sacraments. The church-authorized state should discourage Reba from Buddhism, if it can do so without creating a greater harm.²⁵ Generalizing: the state should promote true religion even over *excellent* false religions.

The state only coerces belief indirectly. It could bar baptized citizens from reading and sharing heretical literature. It could ban baptized children from madrassas. Integralist state policies remove temptations in order to help people remain in grace.²⁶ Policy changes belief at a remove.

At first glance, then, natural law does not bar integralist state action. The religion objection fails; the symmetry conditional holds.

6. The Incommensurability Reply to the Religion Objection

New natural law theorists say we cannot commensurate the natural basic goods. Reason cannot establish that natural good A is superior to natural good B , or vice versa. Indeed, reason cannot assign them equal value. This *incommensurability thesis*, mentioned above, even applies to choices "between instantiations of one and the same basic good" (Grisez et al. 1987, 110).²⁷ Reason cannot commensurate natural good A_1 and natural good A_2 . We cannot commensurate across different persons. Reason cannot say that it is better (or worse) for Reba to enjoy natural good A than for John to enjoy natural good B .

NNL theorists can argue that we cannot commensurate John's true religion with Reba's false one. The integralist state needs a rational basis for prioritizing spiritual over temporal goods, but incommensurability means no such basis exists. If so, NNL theorists can use the incommensurability thesis to reject the symmetry conditional.

The integralist can reply that integralist states help lead people to true religion. And this for their own good. The state need not commensurate religion across persons, but only within a single life. Integralist policies could be Pareto improvements, moving each person towards a greater realization of religion.

²² If a religion undermines knowledge, the state might limit it. On NNL, the state has authority over natural basic goods. But, if the faith requires reducing knowledge, limiting that good is to suppress it. NNLs want to avoid this.

²³ That is, if Reba makes a free choice to become Catholic and her decision is not under duress.

²⁴ Or she does not receive union as obviously, and not to the same degree.

²⁵ My argument does not assume religion is a merely instrumental good. To say enjoying good A helps one enjoy good B is not to say that A is instrumentally good alone. A and B might both be basic goods.

²⁶ I am grateful to an anonymous referee for this point.

²⁷ One can commensurate between goods within the life of a single person.

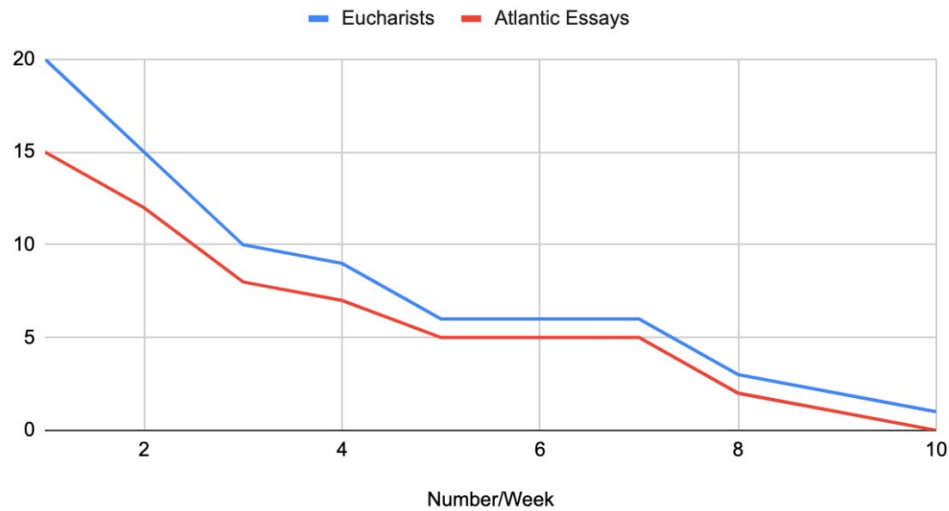
Many supernatural goods have infinite weight. Take union with God: an enormous good that endures forever.²⁸ As Grisez (1983, 156) claims, “Nothing is more important for the Christian than to be in unity with the love of God which comes to us in our Lord Jesus.” We should place God *above* all else. Once we know that Catholicism involves union with God, we should choose it.

Here we can surely commensurate a finite good with an infinite good. Denying this strains credulity.²⁹ I understand claiming that reason cannot commensurate finite goods. Perhaps we encounter two goods and cannot choose one over the other or regard them as indifferent. But a practically reasonable person must choose an infinite good over a finite one. I illustrate with the case of Jan below.

George (1988, 1427) denies that the good of religion overrides other natural goods. We can modify his argument to ask if true Catholic religion outweighs mere natural goods. Consider John, a humble Roman Catholic with a standard 9-to-5 job.³⁰ Suppose John believes that religion trumps other basic goods and concludes that he must attend church rather than get to work on time. We must squeeze in church whenever possible. The priority of religion would “entail that he behaves immorally if he opts instead to spend his time before work reading the paper, or listening to some jazz recordings, or playing with his children.” If religion has priority, he “must, if possible, act specifically for the good of religion.” But John should not always pursue religion first. That would be unreasonable.

Yet we do not choose basic goods in classes but in marginal amounts. For example, we choose knowledge by units. We read one book and then another. The strength of our reasons to pursue a basic good diminishes at the margin. Each book has less value for us than the previous one.

Marginal Value of the Basic Goods of Religion and Knowledge



Display 1: Superiority of Supernatural Goods

²⁸ Here I suppose that we can choose union with God *once God offers it to us*.

²⁹ NNLs often claim that free will requires incommensurability.

³⁰ “John” is the name I link to George’s argument.

True religion outweighs mere natural goods *at the same margin*. John should always choose the first Eucharist over reading an essay in *The Atlantic*. But he can forgo his seventh Eucharist.³¹ John need only rank his first Eucharist over mere natural goods.³²

Consider Display 1, a map of John's choices in a single week. The blue curve represents the marginal value of receiving the Eucharist, whereas the red curve represents the marginal value of reading an essay in *The Atlantic*.³³ The first Eucharist has more value than the first *Atlantic* essay, which has more value than the third Eucharist. The summed value of Eucharists exceeds the summed value of essays. Yet one can still rationally choose to read *The Atlantic* essay rather than receive further Eucharists.

If true religion trumps mere natural goods at the same margin, states should promote it. They should suppress dangerous heresies. If states protect religious freedom for the baptized, more Catholics may leave a state of grace.

7. The Non-Competition Reply to the Religion Objection

One can resist these trade-offs in another way: perhaps we never choose a natural good over a supernatural good. When we choose option x over y , we only opt for the natural good in x absent from y . We only act for the sake of natural goods, and we only make trade-offs between them. The choice of a natural good over a supernatural good *never arises* for individuals, *or their governments*.

Hence the *non-competition thesis*. States cannot choose the supernatural good—*no one* can. The symmetry conditional presumes that the state can choose to promote supernatural goods. If the non-competition thesis holds, that is impossible.

At times, Grisez (1983, 514) seems to argue that we do not choose between natural and supernatural goods. Or, at least, God will never stick us with such a choice. In a commitment to Jesus, “there is no need to choose between human good and friendship with God.”³⁴ Supernatural and natural goods do not compete with one another in practical choice. When we choose God, we choose the natural good of religion; we do not choose between divine goodness and religion (588).³⁵

The symmetry conditional does not suppose that anyone chooses between natural and supernatural goods. States can advance true religion via natural religion. We have one reason to choose religion: it is a natural basic good. We have an additional reason to choose true religion: it comes paired with a supernatural good. We choose between acting on one reason versus two reasons, and the practically rational choice resolves in favor of the latter.

Grisez thinks we can keep supernatural goods once we have them. He claims that charity—loving God—is not something we do, but something God asks us to “*remain in*.”³⁶ Russell Hittinger (1988, 137) responds: “How one can remain in an attitude ... without thereby

³¹ He cannot value the eighth Eucharist since Catholics should not receive the Eucharist more than once a day.

³² Some basic natural goods are also instrumentally good. We may need them to enjoy supernatural goods.

³³ My utility analysis represents the logic of choice *as such*. I do not think basic goods have mere instrumental or subjective value. Neither do I suppose that the *objective* value of the Eucharist diminishes. Rather, additional units of objective good have diminishing returns *for us*.

³⁴ Grisez claims that we never choose union with God, not that we never choose the Eucharist.

³⁵ Here we should read Grisez as referring to coming to faith, not choosing to remain in grace.

³⁶ *Ibid.* My emphasis.

choosing to act in such a way ... is quite mysterious."³⁷ Remaining in an attitude *is* to choose between supernatural goodness and something else.

I structured the symmetry conditional to accommodate this point. The state assists the church by helping people choose to remain in grace. Grisez allows that we can choose to remain in grace or reject the supernatural good once we receive it.

Consider Jan, an aspiring 21st century artist. God has given Jan a remarkable gift: she is a sculpting prodigy. Jan wants to attend the best art school in the world to develop her talent, but secular progressives run the school. They reject Catholic teaching on sex and gender. Jan grew up Roman Catholic and she affirms the teachings of the church. Her views may dim her bright future.

Jan must now choose between developing her talent to the fullest and openly affirming the teachings of her faith. Jan chooses her art career. She becomes Episcopalian, a denomination with progressive views on LGBT issues; through church involvement, she gradually changes her views on sex and gender.³⁸

From Jan's perspective, at least at first, she chooses artistic excellence over true religion. She leaves a state of grace for a natural good. Jan's choice was competitive.³⁹ She consciously chose a mere natural good (excellence) over a superior pair of goods (religion/true religion).

Most Catholics can explain Jan's error: she wrongly discarded a supernatural good for a mere natural good. The supernatural good has greater weight and she threw it away.

NNL theorists cannot adopt this line of reasoning because of how they represent choices between goods. Grisez would represent Jan as choosing between excellence and religion. In so choosing, Jan intends harm to the good of religion: she acts immorally owing to her attitudes towards natural goods alone. Jan meant no harm to religion, though; she simply forgoes true religion for artistic excellence.

The NNL theorist cannot explain Jan's error. We cannot aptly represent Jan as choosing between natural goods. She makes a competitive choice between a natural and a supernatural good by her own lights. Consider how Jan experienced her choice. Jan believes that God once revealed God's self to her, creating a felt closeness with Him. Then she pushes God away. Jan does not experience herself as rejecting a natural good; her faith suffuses her experience. If we explain her mistake as rejecting the natural good of religion, we have not explained her choice as she experienced it.

Turn from Jan to the state. Once the state learns that Catholicism is the true religion, it will face trade-offs. It must choose between building hospitals or establishing inquisitorial courts. In some cases, it chooses health. In others, the true religion. Like Jan, the state faces a choice between a natural good and a supernatural good. Integralist policy choice is competitive. If so, the non-competition reply fails, and the symmetry conditional remains unscathed.

³⁷ I leave open whether Grisez claims that choosing to remain in grace is a choice. The question is whether we have a choice about whether to remain in grace or not.

³⁸ Here Jan might deliberately change her mind, but more likely she engages in a host of actions that gradually change her convictions, such as openly criticizing Catholicism to her teachers, no longer attending mass, etc.

³⁹ Though note that a choice between *A* and *B* can be competitive *even if* *A* and *B* are incommensurable. Even if *A* and *B* are incommensurable, one cannot enjoy them both simultaneously. *A* and *B* are still scarce alternatives.

8. The Intending Harm to a Good Reply to the Religion Objection

NNL theorists stress that one must never intend harm to a basic good (Tollefsen 2008, 8-13). We should not destroy a friendship to pursue knowledge, nor should we destroy our health to achieve athletic excellence. Integralist states, one might argue, require the authority to harm false religion among baptized citizens. States could force Protestants to attend Mass and shutter Protestant churches. But those policies would intend harm to the good of (Protestant) religion, which is always wrong.

The integralist state is not *trying* to harm false religion, though. The state simply advances the true faith. It punishes heresy to ward off religions with less value, much as the church already uses spiritual punishments for the same purpose. On analogy with the Church, the state intends to preserve the true religion. It lacks an immoral intention.

Consider an analogy. The state must protect its citizens from harm. These duties permit using violence to deter enemy combatants, which harms the health of the enemy. The state does not thereby intend to harm the good of health. It preserves its citizens' health.

Integralists see church membership along the same lines. The church must protect its citizens from harm through reason, persuasion, and spiritual punishments. The church-authorized state adds civil penalties to the church's toolkit, and it no more intends harm to religion than it intends harm to the health of enemy combatants. The church intends no harm to religion when it uses spiritual punishments, nor need the state intend harm to religion by assisting the church.

9. The Prudence Objection to the Symmetry Conditional

The last four sections form one argument. States can only promote supernatural goods if they violate natural law. Why? Because the state can undermine the good of religion. The integralist responds that states only coerce to help people remain in grace and so must establish true religion over false religion. The church may expand the authority of the state beyond natural peace and justice.

The new natural lawyer can also offer pragmatic arguments against the symmetry conditional. I have already argued that a Catholic state can overcome its ignorance by listening to the church. I now ask if states can advance true religion once they recognize it.

Suppose states cannot reliably change beliefs through coercion. They may still protect Catholics from spiritual damage, say, if they ban books advancing bad ideas (Waldron 1993, 109). Ongoing protection may then improve the lives of future generations. Brian Barry elaborates the point by imagining persecutors who want to maximize adherents across time.

... saving the souls of the present generation of adults is of trivial significance compared with what is at stake in saving the souls of their descendants. And here the historical record is extremely clear. Most of the contemporary adherents of Islam are the descendants of people who originally adopted it at the point of a sword, but the quality of their faith today is no less for that. The same goes for many Protestant and Catholic areas in Europe. The effectiveness of coercion in producing genuine belief over the course of a few generations is beyond question. (1990, 5)

Conquer the infidel and create sincere faith in the long-run. Then patiently expand the Catholic population. Society will come around.⁴⁰

Christopher Wolfe (2009, 246) defends religious liberty on natural law grounds by combining two arguments. He first argues against directly coercing belief on moral grounds, and then argues in favor of expanding religious liberties on pragmatic grounds. These arguments sum to a “principled prudential” case for religious freedom.

Suppose pragmatic concerns favor protecting religious liberties. Maybe religious freedom limits false piety because religious coercion pressures insincerity. Still, the state’s incompetence is not a moral reason to respect religious freedom: pragmatic considerations only tell us that the prudent state respects religious freedom. Practical arguments cannot strengthen the truth of a moral principle.

Some may resist separating moral and prudential considerations. Yet recall once more that the integralists of old happily distinguished between principle and practice (Bévenot 1954). They contrasted *thesis* and *hypothesis*. Thesis describes the political ideal. Hypothesis then applies principles to less favorable conditions. Integralism is the political thesis.

Wolfe’s arguments only target *hypothesis*—unidealized, real-world conditions. And integralists accept his principled argument: they reject the direct coercion of belief.

Wolfe should advance his pragmatic objection against the *thesis*. Here’s how. Historic integralist regimes had weak state capacity—states performed few functions for a small populace. Even here, popes and kings fought like cats and dogs. For every friendship between pope and crown, European history contains a conflict. The legendary friendship of St. Louis IX and Pope Clement IV (Jones 2017) contrasts with the grand conflict between King Philip IV and Pope Boniface VIII (Duffy 2014, 159-165). These events occurred a mere thirty-five years apart. The latter conflict led to the Avignon Papacy and, later, the Papal Schism (166-175).

Medieval integralist orders proved unstable. The “dyarchy” invited conflicts between two powers with no superior to settle their disputes. Societies can stably divide political power (Hobbes 1994, 392). But the integralist division of power produced instability as often as not.

If Noel Johnson and Mark Koyama (2019) are correct, integralism appeared stable only when church capacity rivaled state capacity. In the 13th century, the French state became more powerful. The pope now had reason to recruit the French state to advance his spiritual objectives. In exchange for favorable policy, he legitimized the monarchy. But by the 14th century, the French state had grown strong enough to ignore papal demands. It did so, and worse.

Modern state capacity greatly exceeds papal power. As I argue elsewhere (Vallier 2023, chapter 5), this power inequality will destabilize integralist arrangements. Integralism does not *stick*. These problems arise even for large, complex social orders under favorable conditions. They may apply to an ideal integralist order. Critics could reject integralism *as thesis*.

10. The Symmetry Argument Vindicated

Recall the Symmetry Argument:

⁴⁰ Of course, Catholics cannot kill off a generation of people. My point is more abstract: religious coercion can work to create the desired beliefs.

1. States should promote natural goods.
2. If states should promote natural goods, they should promote supernatural goods.
3. States should promote supernatural goods.

We see integralism's attraction: it treats goodness symmetrically. It seems *obvious*. The state should promote the whole good under the proper conditions. Three powerful objections fail: authorization, religion, and prudence. Prudential objections have a further implication: they revive the thesis-hypothesis distinction. The distinction comes with a high price: the price of retreating into a radical form of ideal theorizing.

For now, though, the integralist rides high: the proto-integralist conclusion should please them. They have a powerful argument against their chief philosophical and political competitor, one that does not rest on contentious dogmatic disputes. The symmetry argument moves the debate in the integralist's direction.

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