

“Natural Life”

by Dietrich Bonhoeffer

a selection from *Ethics* (DBWE 6:171-91)

Natural Life

Natural life is formed life. The natural is the form that inheres in and serves life. If life severs itself from this form, if it tries to assert itself in freedom from this form, if it will not allow itself to be served by the form of the natural, then it destroys itself down to its roots. Life that makes itself absolute, that makes itself its own goal, destroys itself. Vitalism ends inevitably in nihilism, in the destruction of all that is natural. In the strict sense, life as such is a nothing, an abyss, a ruin. It is movement without end, without goal, movement into nothingness. It does not rest until it has drawn everything into this annihilating movement. This vitalism is found in both individual and communal life. It arises from the false absolutizing of an insight that is essentially correct, that life, both individual and communal, is not only a means to an end but also an end in itself.^[27] God wills life and gives life a form in which it can live, because left to its own resources it can only destroy itself. At the same time, however, this form places life at the service of other lives and of the world; it makes life in a limited sense a means to an end. As there is a vitalistic absolutizing of life as an end in itself that destroys life, so there is an absolutizing of life as a means to an end that has the same result; this holds for both individual and community. We can call this error the mechanization of life. Here the individual is understood only in terms of usefulness [Nutzwert] to the whole, and the community only in terms of its use to an all-controlling institution, organization, or idea. The collective is the god to whom both individual and communal life is sacrificed in a process of total mechanization.^[30] Here life is extinguished, and the form that is meant to serve life assumes unlimited domination over life. Life's being an end in itself is defeated in every respect, and life sinks into nothingness. For as soon as mechanization has killed all life, from which alone it drew its energy, it must collapse itself.

Vitalism and mechanization, as described here, equally express a perhaps unconscious despair about natural life, an enmity to life, a weariness of life, an incapacity for life. Taste for the natural has yielded to the allures of the unnatural. Natural life stands between the extremes of vitalism and mechanization. It is at the same time life as an end in itself and as a means to an end. In Jesus Christ life as an end in itself expresses its createdness, and life as a means to an end expresses its participation in the kingdom of God [Gottesreich]. In the context of natural life, accordingly, life as an end in itself is expressed in rights [Rechte], and life as the means to an end is expressed in duties. These rights and duties are both given with life. So for the sake of Christ and Christ's coming, natural life must be lived according to certain rights and certain duties. Where these rights and duties are denied, suspended, or destroyed, a serious obstacle is placed in the way of the coming of Christ. Here the gratitude that preserves the life we have received, and at the same time places this life in the service of the Creator, is attacked at its roots.

It may sound strange to *idealist* thought that a Christian ethic speaks first of rights and only then of duties. However, we take our stand here not with Kant,^[34] but with Holy Scripture. Therefore we must speak first of the rights of natural life; that means speaking first of what is given to life, and only then of what is demanded of it. God gives before God demands. It is not the creature but the Creator who is honored by respecting the rights of natural life. The wealth of God's gifts is acknowledged. There are no rights before God, but the natural, understood as a pure gift of God, becomes rights with respect to human beings. The rights of natural life are the reflection of the glory of God the Creator in the midst of the fallen world. They are not in the first place what human beings can lay claim to for their own interest, but what God guarantees. Duties spring from the rights themselves, as tasks [Aufgaben] from gifts [Gaben]. They are intrinsic to the rights. In treating natural life and speaking first of rights and then of duties we make space for the gospel in natural life.

Suum Cuique

The most general formulation of rights given with the natural is, in the words of Roman law, *suum cuique*, to each his own. This phrase expresses both the diversity of the natural and the multiplicity of its rights, as well as the unity of justice^[40] that is granted within this multiplicity. This phrase is misused where either the multiplicity of the rights given with the natural or their unity is dissolved. That happens when “one's own” is taken to mean “the same,” thereby destroying the multiplicity of the natural in favor of an abstract law [Gesetz]; or it happens where that which is “one's own” is arbitrarily and subjectively determined, thereby abolishing the unity of the rights in favor of an unconstrained arbitrariness. In both cases the natural itself is violated. One's “own,” that which belongs to each one of us, is in each case something different, something dissimilar (but not something arbitrary!). And yet it is objectively grounded in what is naturally given and therefore universal (but not something abstract and formal).

If there is a right that is rooted in what is naturally given, a “right we are born with,” it may not be abolished or destroyed by some law [Recht] that comes from without. Otherwise the natural itself will be driven to revolution against an unnatural law. The dictum *suum cuique* acknowledges the priority of rights given in what is natural over all positive law. It also protects the natural against arbitrary and revolutionary outbreaks by pointing to the right of the other, which belongs as much to natural right as does mine. So my own natural right exists only by respecting the other's natural

right. But here the *suum cuique* already comes up against its limits. It rests on the presupposition that given natural rights can be brought into harmony with one another, that is, that there are no fundamentally conflicting natural rights. When conflicts like this arise between naturally grounded rights, then the concepts of right have to be seen as incomplete, misunderstood, or inadequate. They are not traced back to the structure of the world itself as it is; in other words, they are not found to be rooted in sin that is also at work in the natural. The *suum cuique* as the paramount statement of rights does not take account of the conflict between rights within the natural itself. It is this actual conflict that requires positive law [Recht] that is set from outside nature, positive law both divine and civil [weltlich].

This limit of the *suum cuique* does not, however, negate its relative correctness. Where law is sought in what is naturally given, the will and the gift of the Creator are honored even in a world rent by conflicts, and at the same time the way is pointed toward the fulfillment of all law, when Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit will give to each one of us what is our own. In this way, we can speak about preserving this principle in its proper meaning as penultimate, determined by the ultimate.

The *suum cuique*, however, contains yet another decisive presupposition that has not gone unchallenged, conflict over which has continually shaken the natural foundations of life. This presupposition is that "each," that is, each individual, brings a natural right into the world at birth. This proposition is contradicted by those who allow a natural right only to the community but not to the individual. For them the individual is only a means to the end of serving the community. The well-being of the community ranks above the natural right of the individual. As a principle this proposition proclaims social eudaemonism and denies all rights of the individual. With this, however, it attacks natural life itself. Destroying the rights of the individual paves the way for the complete destruction of all law and leads toward chaos. It is no accident, then, that social eudaemonism has so often resulted in a rule of violence that annihilated the rights of the community as well. The right of the individual is the power that supports the right of the community as, conversely, the right of the community supports and protects the right of the individual. It follows from the will of God, who creates individuals to give them eternal life, that there is a natural right of the individual. It is this fact that, recognized or unrecognized, is expressed repeatedly in natural life and successfully resists social eudaemonism as unnatural. God's having created individuals and called them to eternal life is a reality that is effective in natural life. To disregard it has ominous consequences. It is therefore the business of reason within natural life to take account of the right of the individual, even when the divine background of this right is not recognized. The natural opponent of social eudaemonism has therefore always been reason, that organ which "takes in" the reality of the fallen world and brings it to consciousness. For its part, social eudaemonism binds itself to a blind voluntarism in incomprehensible, "unreasonable" overestimation of the power of the will over against the reality of natural life itself. Voluntarism cannot grasp the truth that reason is closer to reality than blind will, which claims that it is closest to reality. The *suum cuique* is the highest possible recognition of reason, which corresponds to reality and, within natural life, discerns the right that God (whom reason does not know) gives to the individual.

In what follows, when we speak of the content of the rights of natural life, the urgent question of what guarantees these rights will arise again and again. Who is the effective advocate for the rights of natural life? Here we must repeat what has already been said: it is in the first place God who stands up for these rights. But in doing so, God again and again uses life itself, life that sooner or later prevails over every violation of the natural. One must reckon here with time periods that can extend beyond the life span of an individual. The reason for this is that in the domain of natural life the preservation of human life as species is more important than the life of the individual, and natural life again and again inevitably extends beyond the individual. The destroyed right of an individual, which is possibly never restored, in turn strengthens the natural life's powers of resistance to prevail in subsequent generations. The problem of a theodicy that is implied here cannot be solved until later. If God, and through God life itself, effectively stands up for the rights inherent to life, then whatever individuals do to preserve their natural rights is of very little importance, in terms of effectiveness. What the individual in fact does will depend on many considerations that we cannot survey here. The individual will always have to bear in mind that life itself is the strongest ally. Individuals definitely *may* defend their natural rights. Whether, how, and when they *should* is another question to be decided later. Under all circumstances they must defend a right in such a way as to make it credible that God, not the individual, is standing up for the right.^[50]

The Right to Bodily Life

Bodily life, which we receive through no action of our own, intrinsically bears the right to its preservation. This is not a right that we have stolen or earned for ourselves; it is in the truest sense a right that is "born with us,"^[52] that we have received, that was there before our will, that rests in what actually exists [im Seienden]. Since by God's will human life on earth exists only as bodily life, the body has a right to be preserved for the sake of the whole person. Since all rights are extinguished at death, the preservation of bodily life is the very foundation of all natural rights and is therefore endowed with special importance. The most primordial right of natural life is the protection of the body from intentional injury, violation, and killing. That may sound very sober and unheroic. However, the body does not exist in the first place to be sacrificed but to be preserved. That the right and duty to sacrifice the body can emerge from other and higher viewpoints presupposes the primordial right of the body to be preserved. Bodily life, like life as a whole, is both a means to an end and an end in itself. It is idealistic, but not Christian, to understand the body exclusively as a means to an end. The means can be disposed of as soon as the end is achieved. This corresponds to the view that the body is a prison of the immortal soul, which will leave the body forever at death. In Christian teaching the body has a higher

dignity.^[54] The human being is a bodily being and remains so in eternity as well. Bodiliness and being human [Menschsein] belong indivisibly together. Thus, the bodiliness that God has willed as the form of human existence becomes an end in itself. This does not exclude the body from being subordinated to a higher end. But it is important that the rights of bodily life include its preservation not only as a means to an end but also as an end in itself. That the body is an end in itself is expressed within natural life in the joys of the body. If the body were only the means to an end, the human being would have no right to bodily joys. Bodily pleasure, then, could not be allowed^[56] to exceed a useful minimum. And that would have drastic results for Christian judgments about all the problems related to bodily life—problems of housing, food, clothing, recreation, play, and sexuality. But if the body is an end in itself, then there is a right to bodily joys, without subordinating them to a further, higher purpose. Part of the very essence of joy is that it is spoiled by thoughts about purpose. We shall have to come back to this later, when we talk about the right to happiness [Glück]. Within natural life, the joys of the body are a sign of the eternal joy that is promised human beings in the presence of God. The exclusive use of a person's body as a means to an end denies that person the possibility of experiencing bodily joys and intrudes upon the primordial right to bodily life. "Eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with good cheer; for your work is pleasing to God. Let your garments always be white; do not let oil be lacking on your head. Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that God has given you under the sun, as long as your vain life endures, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun" (Eccles. 9:7ff.). "Rejoice, young man, while you are young, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth. Follow the inclination of your heart and the desire of your eyes, and know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment" (11:9). "For apart from him [God], who can eat or who can have enjoyment?" (2:25).

Unlike an animal shelter, a human dwelling is not intended to be only a protection against bad weather and the night, as well as a place to raise offspring. It is the space in which human beings may enjoy the pleasures of personal life in the security of their loved ones and their possessions. Eating and drinking serve not only the purpose of keeping the body healthy, but also the natural joy of bodily life. Clothing is not merely a necessary covering for the body, but is at the same time an adornment of the body. Relaxation not only serves the purpose of increasing the capacity for work, but also provides the body with the measure of rest and joy that is due to it. In its essential distance from all purposefulness, play is the clearest expression that bodily life is an end in itself. Sexuality is not only a means of procreation, but, independent of this purpose, embodies joy within marriage in the love of two people for each other. As all this indicates, the meaning of bodily life never revolves around being a means to an end, but is fulfilled only by its intrinsic claim to joy.

Perhaps the clearest evidence that bodily life is meant for joy lies in the way that the body, even when it is rightly made to serve a necessary end with vigorous effort, finds joy in such service. Still, this is the case only so long as the usefulness of the body as a means to an end makes room for the intrinsic right of the body as an end in itself.

The body is always "my" body. Even in marriage it can never belong to another in the same way as it belongs to me. It is my body that separates me spatially from other people and places me as a human being over against another human being. To encroach upon my body is to intrude into my personal existence. The honor that I owe to another person is expressed in a clearly maintained distance from that person's bodily life. Corporal punishment is only justified when the person concerned is not yet regarded as an independent [selbständige] person, and when the corporal punishment is meant to express this dependent relationship and so lead to the necessary independence. One cannot make a hard-and-fast rule as to who is to be regarded as having an independent existence. Still, the boundary of childhood will be the principal measure, and certainly adults who have become conscious of their natural rights must be seen as having an independent existence. Bodily punishment of criminals is somewhat different. It can be defended in those cases where, because of the meanness and base dishonor of the crime, a deliberate dishonoring is intended, and where criminal encroachment upon the bodily life of another demands punishment imposed upon the body of the offender.

Among free, independent persons, conscious encroachment on the body of another means destruction of the first natural right of human beings and therefore a fundamental deprivation of rights and the destruction of natural life.

The first right of natural life is the protection of bodily life from arbitrary killing. We must speak of arbitrary killing wherever innocent life is deliberately killed. In this context every life that does not undertake a conscious attack on another life, and is not guilty of a crime worthy of death, is innocent. Accordingly, the killing of an enemy in war is not arbitrary; for even if the enemy is not personally guilty, the enemy still consciously takes part in the attack of another person on the life of my people and must therefore share the consequences of bearing the common guilt. The killing of a criminal who has encroached on another life is, of course, not arbitrary. Nor is the killing of civilians in war arbitrary when it is not directly intended,^[66] but is only the unfortunate result of a necessary military action. The killing of defenseless prisoners or the wounded, who are not capable of attacking my life, is arbitrary. The killing of an innocent person in passion or for some advantage is arbitrary. Every conscious killing of innocent life is arbitrary.

This last statement has not remained unchallenged. The problem that arises here is described by the concept of euthanasia. The basic question here is whether innocent life that is no longer worth living may be terminated in a painless manner. A double motivation underlies this question—concern for the sick, and concern for the healthy. Before we go into the substance of the question, however, we must establish as fundamental that any decision about the right to kill human life can never be made based on the sum of various grounds. Either *one* reason is so compelling that it leads to this decision, or the reason is not compelling. In that case, however, such a decision cannot be justified by adducing a number of additional reasons. The killing of another's life can only take place on the basis of unconditional

necessity, and then it must be carried out even against any number of other reasons, even good ones. Never may the killing of another's life be one possibility among many, however well founded that possibility may be. Where there is even the smallest responsible possibility of allowing the other to stay alive, then the destruction of this life would be arbitrary killing—murder. Killing or sparing life are never equivalent alternatives in a decision. The preservation of life has an incomparable priority over destruction. Life may claim all grounds to validate itself, while for killing there is only one single valid ground. Where this is not considered, one runs afoul of the Creator and Preserver of life. In supporting the right to euthanasia on several different grounds, one puts oneself in the wrong from the beginning, by admitting indirectly that there is no single absolutely compelling ground.

So, in dealing with this question, we must examine each of the grounds on its own terms and ask about its compelling character. We can never try to compensate for the weakness of one ground by bringing up another.

Does consideration for the incurably ill and the heavy burden of their suffering demand the deliberate ending of their lives by a humane form of death? Such a case takes for granted that the consent, that is, the wish, of the ill person must be presupposed. Where this wish has not been or cannot be clearly expressed, as, for example, by the severely retarded, or where even the desire for life is unmistakably expressed, one can no longer honestly speak of consideration for the ill. And who can gauge how strongly even the incurably mentally ill person, despite suffering, clings to life and how much happiness that person may achieve even in a miserable life? There are strong indications that in such people the affirmation of life is particularly strong and unrestrained. Here consideration for the ill person could not become grounds for the destruction of that life. Or, in the reverse case, when a severely depressive person asks for the ending of his or her life,^[72] may we then overlook the fact that this is the plea of an ill person who is not in control of himself or herself? To reply that this is also the case with the severely retarded person who hangs on to life disregards the fact that the right to life has priority over the right to kill.

¶But let us take the case of an incurably ill person who with a clear mind consents to, even yearns for, the ending of his or her life. Can such a wish constitute a compelling demand for the application of euthanasia? Without doubt, one cannot speak of a compelling demand as long as the patient's life still makes demands of its own—in other words, as long as the physician is obligated not only to the will but also to the life of the patient. The question of the killing of another life is shifted here toward whether ending one's own life in the most severe illness is permitted and may be assisted. We will discuss this question in connection with the problem of self-murder.

¶The objection that physicians in some cases will no longer do everything possible to prolong life artificially raises a serious question. For example, perhaps they will not send a severely retarded tuberculosis patient to a sanatorium; this, it is argued, is no different from deliberately ending the patient's life. Still, it is important to hold firmly to the distinction between allowing to die and killing. In life in general, one cannot in every case use all conceivable means to postpone death, yet there remains a decisive difference between this and deliberate killing. One must therefore conclude that consideration for the ill person cannot be adequate grounds for killing human life.^[75]

Does concern for the healthy, then, make the killing of innocent life necessary? To answer this question in the affirmative presupposes that every life must have a certain utility [Nutzwert] for the community and that life is no longer justified when this usefulness ceases and may in a given case be destroyed. Even where one avoids this radical version of the idea, the right to life of those who are socially valuable is evaluated differently from the socially worthless, even though in both cases nothing but innocent life is involved. But this different valuation evidently cannot be carried out in life, because it would have impossible consequences. It would forbid what one takes for granted, namely, the risking of socially valuable lives on behalf of lives that might be socially less valuable, for example, in war or in any situation in which life is at risk. This is enough to indicate that those of social value make no distinctions about rights of life. Precisely they will be ready to risk their own lives for those whom society values less—the strong for the weak, the healthy for the sick. Precisely those who are strong will not ask about the utility for themselves of the weak—although the weak might do so. Instead, the need of the weak will lead the strong to new tasks that develop their own social value. The strong will see in the weak not a lessening of their strength, but an incentive to higher deeds. The idea of destroying the life of one who has lost social utility [Nutzwert] comes from weakness, not from strength.

Above all, however, this idea comes from the false presupposition that life consists only in its social utility. This ignores the fact that life created and preserved by God possesses an inherent right, completely independent of its social utility. The right to life inheres in what exists [im Seienden] and not in some value or other. There is no worthless life before God, because God holds life itself to be valuable. Because God is the Creator, Preserver, and Redeemer of life, even the poorest life before God becomes a valuable life. Poor Lazarus, the leper who lay crippled before the door of the rich man while dogs licked his wounds^[79]—a man without any social utility, a victim of those who judge life only by its utility—is valued by God as worthy of eternal life. Where, other than in God, should the measure for the ultimate worth of a life lie? In the subjective affirmation of life? If so, then many a genius would be surpassed by an idiot. In the judgment of the community? If so, then it would soon be evident that judgment about socially valuable or worthless life would be abandoned to the need of the moment and therefore to arbitrary action, and that now this group and now that group of people would fall victim to extermination. The distinction between valuable and worthless life sooner or later destroys life itself.

¶After this basic clarification something must still be said about the real social utility of seemingly useless, meaningless life. We cannot get around the fact that precisely this so-called worthless life of the incurably ill has elicited the greatest amount of social readiness for sacrifice and true heroism among the healthy, including physicians,

caretakers, and relatives. Values of the highest real utility for the community have emerged precisely from such dedication of healthy life to sick life.^[81]

Of course, it cannot be denied that severe, incurable genetic diseases are a serious problem and even a certain danger for the community. The question, however, is whether this danger can be met only by exterminating these lives. The answer is definitely no. To quarantine such ill people is, from the perspective of health, an adequate means. Economically the care of such patients can never seriously impair the living standard of a people. A nation's expenditures for the care of such patients have never come close to expenditures on luxury goods. The healthy will always be prepared to assume certain limited burdens for the sick, for the very natural reason that there is no certainty about their own future.

But must not incurable genetic disease also be seen as an attack on the existence of the community, like, for example, the attack of an enemy in war? Here a double distinction must be noted. First, this attack can be countered by other means than the extermination of life. Second, in the case of those with genetic defects, we are dealing with innocent life. If one speaks here of guilt at all, it is certainly not the guilt of the sick, but of the community itself.^[84] It would be unbearable Pharisaism if the community should treat the sick as guilty and place itself in the right at the sick person's expense. Killing the innocent would be arbitrary in the extreme.

The question whether life, in the case of persons severely retarded from birth, is really *human* life at all is so naive that it hardly needs to be answered. It is disabled life, born of human parents, which can be nothing else than *human* life, however unfortunate. Indeed, the very fact that human life can appear so terribly distorted should make the healthy ponder.

A borderline case for all these considerations would occur if a plague broke out on a ship that had no facilities for isolation and, by human reckoning, the healthy could be saved only by the death of the sick. In this case the decision would have to remain open.

The thesis that killing innocent sick life is permissible for the benefit of the healthy has its roots not in fundamental social, economic, or hygienic reasons, but in ideology [Weltanschauung]. A superhuman attempt is proposed in order to liberate the human community from seemingly meaningless sickness. A battle is fought against fate or, as we can also say, against the essence of the fallen world. One supposes that with rational means one can create a new, healthy humanity. At the same time, health is held to be the highest value to which all other values must be sacrificed. The rationalization and the biologization^[88] of human life unite in this vain undertaking, which destroys the right to life of all that is created and thereby, finally, destroys all human community.

If, then, we come to the conclusion that consideration for the healthy gives no right to kill innocent, sick life intentionally, the question of euthanasia receives a negative answer. Holy Scripture summarizes this judgment in the sentence, "Do not kill the innocent" (Exod. 23:7).

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, [*Ethics*](#), ed. Ilse Tödt et al., trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West, and Douglas W. Stott, vol. 6, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), 171–191.