

## BOOK REVIEW

of

J. Budziszewski,

*Written on the Heart: The Case for Natural Law*,  
InterVarsity Press, 1997.

This review is by Larry D. Paarmann.

There are popular books available on natural law intended for a general audience, such as Budziszewski's *The Revenge of Conscience*, Spence Publishing Co., 1999 and his *What We Can't Not Know*, Spence Publishing Co., 2003, but this book under review was written with the intent of being a formal class textbook. It would seem that most InterVarsity books are not intended for formal class textbook use, but Budziszewski implies that that was at least partially the intent of this book. He refers to his students (presumably at the University of Texas at Austin), and mentions an earlier version of the book being used as a correspondence textbook, in the Acknowledgments. In the Preface he suggests that "beginning students will be most interested in units I through IV, scholars and advanced students in unit V", and he hopes that "secular teachers" may find the book useful "who want to expose their students to a view of things they may not often hear." Even without these comments by the author himself, the structure and level of the book are academic. However, he openly proclaims that his perspective on the subject is that of a Christian. For those wanting a somewhat intellectual presentation of the history of natural law theory, a Christian perspective on natural-law theory, and a somewhat up-to-date overview of recent developments, this is an excellent book. Bear in mind, however, this book is for those who want a serious understanding of natural-law theory. It is not easy reading, and yet neither the vocabulary nor the assumed background is beyond, say, beginning college level.

Professor J. Budziszewski holds a joint appointment in government and philosophy at the University of Texas at Austin, where he has taught since 1981. When he joined the faculty there he was an atheist. He was also a nihilist. That is, he was significantly under the influence of Friedrich Nietzsche, the 19th century philosopher, and did not believe there was any basis for knowledge, truth or morality. He started his academic career at the University of Texas, fresh out of graduate school, holding two basic principles: (1) human beings decide what is good and evil, and (2) individuals are not responsible for what they do. His long-term plans

were to build ethical and political theory on these two principles. He now considers such thinking as indefensible and foolish. It is clear to him, now, that he had started with atheism and nihilism, and "cooked up arguments only to rationalize" his position; it was not cogent arguments that led him to it. Budziszewski confesses "It was . . . agony. You cannot imagine . . . what a person has to do to himself to go on believing such nonsense. . . . I came, over time, to feel a greater and greater horror about myself. Not exactly a feeling of guilt, not exactly a feeling of shame, just horror: an overpowering true intuition that my condition was terribly wrong." This brought him back to the Faith he had abandoned in his youth. "The next few years after my conversion were like being in a dark attic where I had been for a long time, but in which shutter after shutter was being thrown back so that great shafts of light began to stream in and illuminate the dusty corners." He repudiated his own Ph.D. dissertation and his earlier two basic principles above, and reoriented his thinking on ethical and political matters along Christian teachings. (This paragraph is from Budziszewski's *Revenge of Conscience*; presented here because of its interest, and because it helps us understand who he is.)

*Written on the Heart* has fifteen chapters in five units: Unit I. Aristotle. 1. Politics & the Human Good, 2. Moral Excellence & Regime Design, 3. Friendship, Justice & the Moral Significance of Law. Unit II. Thomas Aquinas. 4. The Grand Design of Law, 5. The Law of Nature & the Law of Man, 6. Human Law & Regime Design. Unit III. John Locke. 7. The State of Nature & the Social Contract, 8. Two Views of Natural Law, 9. Private Property & Revolution. Unit IV. John Stuart Mill. 10. The Pleasure Principle, 11. The Problem with the Pleasure Principle, 12. Utility & Justice. Intermezzo: The Art of Teaching. Unit V. *Written on the Heart*. 13. A Christian Appraisal of Natural-Law Theory, 14. A Reprise of the Older Thinkers, 15. A Sampling of Recent Thinkers. Appendix: Elementary Reasoning. There are essay questions at the end of chapters 1 through 12. There is a fairly extensive bibliography, and a detailed index.

In the Preface, Budziszewski writes, "As a Christian I regard the natural-law tradition as the

nearest approach to the truth about the ‘law written on the heart’ which ethical and political philosophy have yet, by the grace of God, achieved. . . . Moreover, natural law is especially pertinent to *politics* just because it *is* written on the heart, for that makes it a standard for believers and unbelievers alike; not only is it right for all, but at some level it is known to all. Even the pagans knew it. . . . Yet this law can be repressed. Philosophy itself can be a higher mode of ignorance.”

In Units I through IV Budziszewski attempts to present an objective summary of four representative approaches to natural law, that of Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, John Locke, and John Stuart Mill.

In chapter 1 Budziszewski writes as follows: “Partnership, goodness, perfection – all of these are ethical ideas. Why can’t Aristotle talk about politics without getting into all that moralistic stuff? *Answer*: Aristotle would find the modern notion that the study of politics can be separated from ‘all that moralistic stuff’ simply confused. If partnership in a good life is what the City *is*, how could one understand the City without understanding the nature of the good?”

In chapter 3: “In every age some people are so blind as to think that there is no such thing as natural justice, no such thing as a standard to which we can be held accountable. In their view, what we choose to call just is the beginning, the middle and the end of the story. This view comes in many varieties and travels under many names: in Aristotle’s day it was Sophism, in ours relativism, pragmatism, post-modernism and many others.”

In chapter 4: “You may think of the primary precepts, which are also called ‘first principles of practical reason,’ as *moral principles that we can’t not know*, such as ‘Good should be pursued and evil avoided’ and ‘Love your neighbor.’ In one sense these general rules are like axioms in classical geometry, for, although they cannot be proven themselves, they are what every proof depends on.”

In chapter 7: “Locke stakes his entire argument for natural law and natural rights on the existence of God. But how do we know that God exists? Locke answers in his other writings that we know him by his works. The universe shows magnificent order and design; however, design presupposes a Designer. Called the Argument from Design, this is but one of about twenty arguments philosophers have advanced for the existence of God.”

In Unit V Budziszewski assesses the natural law of Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, and John Locke. He does not assess John Stuart Mill, since he earlier dismissed him as not really being a proponent of natural law.

In chapter 13 Budziszewski writes: “In sum, the very heart on which God has written his law is

estranged from itself. Jeremiah laments that it is ‘deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?’ (Jeremiah 17:9 NIV). Indeed it needs to be written upon again, this time with transforming power (31:33).”

In chapter 14 Budziszewski credits Aristotle, but he finds him inadequate: “I should say that the usefulness of Aristotle for the theory of natural law owes not to his grasp on very truth but to his being the supreme example of general revelation ‘penetrating the mind of man even in his revolt.’”

Budziszewski clearly admires Aquinas, but he does not think he is as true to Scripture as he should be: “There is much for a Christian to complain of in Thomas Aquinas, and I speak as one who loves him. Though he knows that everything other than God is utterly dependent on God, he sometimes gives the impression that what goes on in nature is somehow less dependent on him than are the effects of his grace. Though he knows that there can be no sin without the complicity of the mind, he sometimes gives the impression that the mind has not fallen as far as the rest of us. Though he knows that the text on our hearts is overwritten by sin, he sometimes gives the impression that it is just as plain to the sinful eye as a traffic light in the middle of the road.”

While Locke may seem to be a natural law advocate, Budziszewski doesn’t think it is genuine: “Though John Locke speaks of principles of action written on the heart by God himself, this is lip service; by such language he means something far different from what Scripture does. He views the mind as a blank slate on which letters can be written only by sense data. To be sure he thinks that there are such things as innate desires, but he does not believe in such a thing as underived knowledge. Therefore, if we are to know natural law, we must infer it from sense data”.

What about John Stuart Mill? Mill is not a natural law advocate at all, but rather claims to be a utilitarian: “In his view feelings or sensations are the only things we can really be sure about”. So why include him in a book about natural law. Apparently Budziszewski includes him to show the inconsistencies and contradictions that those who deny natural law can get into.

In chapter 15 Budziszewski claims that “Although some have claimed that it did, and others might wish that it had, the philosophy of natural law did not end with the classical and early modern writers. It is enjoying a hard-won renaissance.” If this is so, then this book provides a valuable overview of natural-law development, decline, and renewal. Since Scripture proclaims that all mankind is without excuse, knowing elements of God’s law written on the heart, this renewal is welcome.