Excerpt: "Victim of Cannibal Agreed to be Eaten" by Luke Harding, The Guardian, December 3rd, 2003

To the family next door, Armin Meiwes seemed the perfect neighbour. He mowed their lawn, repaired their car and even invited them round for dinner.

Other residents in the small German town of Rotenburg also believed there was nothing odd about the 42-year-old computer expert, whose light burned late into the night inside his creaking mansion. Yesterday, however, Meiwes appeared in court charged with killing - and then frying and eating - another man.

In one of the most extraordinary trials in German criminal history, the self-confessed cannibal admitted that he had met a 43-year-old Berlin engineer, Bernd Brandes, after advertising on the internet, and had chopped him up and eaten him.

It was, he said, something he had wanted to do for a long time. "I always had the fantasy and in the end I fulfilled it," Meiwes told the court on the first day of his trial for murder in the nearby city of Kassel.

Yesterday German prosecutors described how Meiwes had fantasised about killing and devouring someone, including his classmates, from the age of eight.

The desire grew stronger after the death of his mother in 1999, prosecutor Marcus Köhler said.

In March 2001 Meiwes advertised on the internet for a "young well-built man, who wanted to be eaten". Brandes replied.

On the evening of March 9, the two men went up to the bedroom in Meiwes' rambling timbered farmhouse. Mr Brandes swallowed 20 sleeping tablets and half a bottle of schnapps before Meiwes cut off Brandes' penis, with his agreement, and fried it for both of them to eat.

Brandes - by this stage bleeding heavily - then took a bath, while Meiwes read a Star Trek novel.

In the early hours of the morning, he finished off his victim by stabbing him in the neck with a large kitchen knife, kissing him first.

The cannibal then chopped Mr Brandes into pieces and put several bits of him in his freezer, next to a takeaway pizza, and buried the skull in his garden.

Over the next few weeks, he defrosted and cooked parts of Mr Brandes in olive oil and garlic, eventually consuming 20kg of human flesh before police finally turned up at his door.

"With every bite, my memory of him grew stronger," he said.

Behind bars, Meiwes told detectives that he had consumed his victim with a bottle of South African red wine, had got out his best cutlery and decorated his dinner table with candles. He tasted of pork, he added.

The unprecedented case has proved problematic for German lawyers who discovered that cannibalism is not illegal in Germany.

Instead, they have charged Meiwes with murder for the purposes of sexual pleasure and with "disturbing the peace of the dead".

The accused, however, has a unique defence: that his victim actually agreed to be killed and eaten.

Crucial to the case is a gruesome videotape made by Meiwes of the entire evening, during which Brandes apparently makes clear his consent.

"Is, Ought, and Nature's Laws" by David Bentley Hart, *First Things*, March 2013

There is a long, rich, varied, and subtle tradition of natural law theory, almost none of which I find especially convincing, but most of which I acknowledge to be—according to the presuppositions of the intellectual world in which it was gestated—perfectly coherent. My skepticism, moreover, has nothing to do with any metaphysical disagreement. I certainly believe in a harmony between cosmic and moral order, sustained by the divine goodness in which both participate. I simply do not believe that the terms of that harmony are as precisely discernible as natural law thinkers imagine.

That is an argument for another time, however. My chief topic here is the attempt in recent years by certain self-described Thomists, particularly in America, to import this tradition into public policy debates, but in a way amenable to modern political culture. What I have in mind is a style of thought whose proponents (names are not important) believe that compelling moral truths can be deduced from a scrupulous contemplation of the principles of cosmic and human nature, quite apart from special revelation, and within the context of the modern conceptual world. This, it seems to me, is a hopeless cause.

Classical natural law theory, after all, begins from the recognition that the movement of the human will is never purely spontaneous, and that all volition is evoked by and directed toward an object beyond itself. It presupposes, moreover, that beyond the immediate objects of desire lies the ultimate end of all willing, the Good as such, which in its absolute priority makes it possible for any finite object to appear to the will as desirable. It asserts that nature is governed by final causes. And, finally, it takes as given that the proper ends of the human will and the final causes of creation are inalienably analogous to one another, because at some ultimate level they coincide (for believers, because God is the one source in which both participate). Thus, in knowing the causal ends of nature, we should be able to know many of the proper moral ends of the will, and even their relative priority in regard to one another.

So far, so good. But insuperable problems arise when—in part out of a commendable desire to speak to secular society in ways it can understand, in part out of some tacit quasi-Kantian notion that moral philosophy must yield clear and universally binding imperatives—the natural law theorist insists that the moral meaning of nature should be perfectly evident to any properly reasoning mind, regardless of religious belief or cultural formation.

Thus, allegedly, the testimony of nature should inform any rightly attentive intellect that abortion is murder, that lying is wrong, that marriage should be monogamous, that we should value charity above personal profit, and that it is wicked (as well as extremely discourteous) to eat members of that tribe that lives over in the next valley. "Nature," however, tells us nothing of the sort, at least not in the form of clear commands; neither does it supply us with hypotaxes of moral obligation. In neither an absolute nor a dependent sense—neither as categorical nor as hypothetical imperatives, to use the Kantian terms—can our common knowledge of our nature or of the nature of the universe at large instruct us clearly in the content of true morality.

For one thing, as far as any *categorical* morality is concerned, Hume's bluntly stated assertion that one cannot logically derive an "ought" from an "is" happens to be formally correct. Even if one could exhaustively describe the elements of our nature, the additional claim that we are morally obliged to act in accord with them, or to prefer natural uses to unnatural, would still be adventitious to the whole ensemble of facts that this description would comprise.

The assumption that the natural and moral orders are connected to one another in any but a purely pragmatic way must be logically antecedent to our interpretation of the world; it is a belief about nature, but not a natural belief as such; it is a supernatural judgment that renders natural reality intelligible in a particular way. I know of many a stout defender of natural law who is quick to dismiss Hume's argument, but who—when pressed to explain why—can do no better than to resort to a purely conditional argument: *If* one is (for instance) to live a fully human life, then one must . . . (etc.). But, in supplementing a dubious "is" with a negotiable "if," one certainly cannot arrive at a categorical "ought."

In abstraction from specific religious or metaphysical traditions, there really is very little that natural law theory can meaningfully say about the relative worthiness of the employments of the will. There are, of course, generally observable facts about the characteristics of our humanity (the desire for life and happiness, the capacity for allegiance

and affinity, the spontaneity of affection for one's family) and about the things that usually conduce to the fulfillment of innate human needs (health, a well-ordered family and polity, sufficient food, aesthetic bliss, a sense of spiritual mystery, leisure, and so forth); and if we all lived in a Platonic or Aristotelian or Christian intellectual world, in which everyone presumed some necessary moral analogy between the teleology of nature and the proper objects of the will, it would be fairly easy to connect these facts to moral prescriptions in ways that our society would find persuasive. We do not live in such a world, however.

It is, after all, simply a fact that many of what we take to be the plain and evident elements of universal morality are in reality artifacts of cultural traditions. Today we generally eschew cannibalism, slavery, polygamy, and wars of conquest because of a millennial process of social evolution, the gradual universalization of certain moral beliefs that entered human experience in the form not of natural intuitions but of historical events. We have come to find a great many practices abhorrent and a great many others commendable not because the former transparently offend against our nature while the latter clearly correspond to it, but because at various moments in human history we found ourselves addressed by uncanny voices that seemed to emanate from outside the totality of the perceptible natural order and its material economies.

One certainly may believe that those voices in fact awakened us to "natural" truths, but only because one's prior supernatural convictions prompt one to do so. To try then to convince someone who rejects those convictions nevertheless to embrace those truths on purely "natural" grounds can never be much more than an exercise in suasive rhetoric (and perhaps something of a *pia fraus*).

The truth is that we cannot talk intelligibly about natural law if we have not all first agreed upon what nature is and accepted in advance that there really is a necessary bond between what is and what should be. Nor can that bond be understood in naturalistic terms. Even if it were clearly demonstrable that for the majority of persons the happiest life is also the most wholesome, and that most of us find spiritual and corporeal contentment by observing a certain "natural" ethical mean—still, the daringly disenchanted moralist might ask: "What do we owe to nature?"

To his mind, after all, the good may not be contentment or even justice, but the extension of the pathos of the will, as Nietzsche would put it: the poetic labor of the will to power, the overcoming of the limits of the merely human, the justification of the purely fortuitous phenomenon of the world through its transformation into a supreme aesthetic event. What if he should *choose* to believe (and are not all values elective values for the secular moralist?) that the most exalted object of the will is the *Übermensch*, that natural prodigy or fortunate accident that now must become the end to which human culture consciously aspires?

Denounce him, if you wish, for the perversity of his convictions. Still, after all hypothetical imperatives have been adduced, and all appeals to the general good have been made, nothing would logically oblige him to alter his ideas. Only the total spiritual conversion of his vision of reality could truly change his thinking.

To put the matter very simply, belief in natural law is inseparable from the idea of nature as a realm shaped by final causes, oriented in their totality toward a single transcendent moral Good: one whose dictates cannot simply be deduced from our experience of the natural order, but must be received as an apocalyptic interruption of our ordinary explanations that nevertheless, miraculously, makes the natural order intelligible to us as a reality that opens up to what is more than natural.

There is no logically coherent way to translate that form of cosmic moral vision into the language of modern "practical reason" or of public policy debate in a secular society. Our concept of nature, in any age, is entirely dependent upon supernatural (or at least metaphysical) convictions. And, in an age that has been shaped by a mechanistic understanding of the physical world, a neo-Darwinian view of life, and a voluntarist understanding of the self, nature's "laws" must appear to be anything but moral.