

An Introduction to Religion and Ethics Eduqas AS Knowledge Organiser:

St Thomas Aquinas' Natural Law: laws and precepts as the basis of morality

Key concepts:

- Aquinas built upon Aristotle's Natural Law and the idea that the universe has a natural order that works to achieve an 'end' or 'purpose' (telos) but, unlike Aristotle, Aquinas argued that this end is to be united with the Christian God and called this the Beatific Vision. Human flourishing and well-being are vital to this but the true realisation of it is to be found in God.
- Aquinas' version of Natural Law is often seen as a form of moral absolutism because the emphasis has often been upon the Primary Precepts and their corresponding moral obligations. Thus, it is often seen as deontological because moral behaviour is seen as being determined by these fundamental principles that are not based on consequences; however, the role of virtues still play an important role for Aquinas.
- For Aquinas, it is reason that determines how we apply the precepts and this leads to secondary precepts that are more specific. Whilst primarily deontological, Aquinas Natural Law can be seen as teleological also:
 - (1) it is based in the end of the Beatific Vision.
 - (2) the development the secondary precepts, the end result is considered.

Aquinas four levels of Natural Law:

- The Eternal law is God's ultimate 'Law'. Due to human imperfection and the imperfection of the Fallen natural order we can never know this fully.
- God's Divine law is that which is revealed through scriptures and guides humanity towards the goal of perfection, although the Beatific vision is only fully possible in the afterlife.
- Natural Law is our ability to perceive the Primary Precepts and work out through reason how these principles are to be applied in life.
- The Human law helps society to achieve the common good by establishing a tradition of rules and customary behaviour based upon experienced judgements. This is not a perfect law but one in which error is possible.

- The Primary Precepts are themselves not the result of reason as they are underived moral principles or self-evident truths established by God; however, they are relevant for all and applied through reason.
- The Primary Precepts are: (1) Preserve innocent life; (2) Ordered living in society; (3) Worship God; (4) Educate children; and, (5) Reproduction of the species.
- These Primary Precepts identify the actions in life that are 'good' and in line with our natural purpose, or as Aquinas identified, to help humans to 'act in such a way as to achieve good and avoid evil'.
- From these, secondary precepts are deduced by reason and thus forming firm and established guidance. An example of a secondary precept is 'do not steal' reflecting the Primary Precept of 'ordered living in society.'
- The application of Primary Precepts and development of secondary precepts for moral situations is known as 'casuistry'. Secondary precepts are not exceptionless norms; Primary Precepts are always exceptionless.

Key quotes:

"If in any point it deflects from the law of nature, it is no longer a law but a perversion of law." (Aquinas)

"Natural Law is the same for all men... there is a single standard of truth and right for everyone ...which is known by everyone." (Aquinas)

"Every judgement of conscience... is obligatory, in such wise that he who acts against his conscience always sins." (T. Aquinas)

Issues for analysis and evaluation:

Key arguments/debates

For some philosophers Natural Law is too inflexible. Whilst arguably clear and objective some see it as too simplistic. In addition some debate Natural Law reasoning as too subjective as it assumes certain things to be 'natural' and always right.

Key questions

Is Natural Law really universal?

Does a strict absolutist approach have any role for virtues and the conscience?

Key words:

Aquinas
moral absolutism
Divine
underived

Aristotle
deontological
Natural
Secondary precepts

telos
virtues
Human
casuistry

Beautiful Vision
Eternal
Primary Precepts
exceptionless