

Natural Law – Primary Precepts

The Primary Precepts describe the purpose of human life. A good person is one who fulfils their purpose. If something is contrary to our God-given purpose, it is wrong. All living things strive to survive and reproduce. As rational beings, we have other purposes peculiar to us – education and living in a civilised society with rules. These are underpinned by the belief that God made us with a specific purpose.

W – Worship God

O – live in an **O**rdered society

R - Reproduce

L - Learn

D – Defend the innocent

Natural Law – Secondary Precepts

Natural Law is a deontological theory, based on ‘duty’. Duty based theories contain rules that we must follow, rather than judging something of value (pleasure/happiness/fulfilment of preferences etc.) that we need to bring about. The Secondary Precepts are absolute, they are derived from the Primary Precepts and have no exceptions. For example, as one of the Primary Precepts is reproduction, using contraceptives is always wrong. Other Secondary Precepts include ‘Do not abort’, ‘Do not euthanise’, ‘Do not experiment on embryos’. ‘Do not divorce’ etc. The Secondary Precepts are derived from the Primary Precepts using reason.

Natural Law – God and the Eternal Law

Aquinas held that belief in God as creator is essential in understanding our purpose as human beings. He had a very positive view of humanity, believing we are made in God’s image, designed for perfection. The way to fulfil this God-given potential is to follow the natural law. ‘Eternal law’ refers to the principles by which God governs the universe, and we can only know this in part. Using reason, we can know what is right for humans, we can determine the natural law, which is the part of the eternal law that relates to human choices. Following the natural law will not lead us to perfection in this life, as it can only be achieved after death, but can help us be virtuous.

Natural Law – Do good, avoid evil

Just as ‘natural’ law is an unhelpful term (an artificial limb is natural because it helps us fulfil our purpose or *nature*), so is ‘doing good’. We think of the good that is done, the outcome or consequences. A better summary of Natural Law theory would be ‘Do good actions, avoid doing evil acts.’ The theory looks at the action itself. For example, the act of lying is wrong, even though lying sometimes leads to good outcomes. ‘Do good’ means tell the truth. An abortion for a 9 year old rape victim may save her life, but it involves killing an innocent foetus, so it is an evil act. According to Natural Law, we must only do good actions, never evil actions, even if bad acts lead to good outcomes.

Natural Law – Double Effect

This is often misunderstood, but is a central part of Natural Law theory. Many actions have unintended secondary effects. For example, a woman may take a pill that controls her monthly cycle, but it may also, unintentionally, prevent her from becoming pregnant. In some cases it would obviously be wrong to perform the act (such as driving across a playground as a short-cut – even if I didn’t intend to drive through playing children, it would still be wrong). What you need to do, when there is a double effect, is see whether the secondary effect’s consequences outweigh the benefits of performing the act – are they proportionate?

Natural Law – Real/apparent goods

Aquinas understands the attraction of Utilitarian thinking – condoms could be very useful to prevent the spread of AIDS, and divorce may seem a practical solution when a marriage has broken down. However, things like pleasure in these cases are only apparent goods: they don’t actually help us fulfil our God-given purpose. Real goods are in line with our telos, and help towards the Primary Precepts. Helping someone have a painless death may seem compassionate, but it stops that person from fulfilling their purpose as a human. The last weeks of life can be a very important time when we come to terms with our own mortality. Pain relief through euthanasia is an *apparent* good.

Natural Law – Interior/Exterior Acts

People do terrible things with best intentions. Natural Law would include euthanasia and abortion in this category. If you help someone have an abortion, this could be done with the very best intentions. However, Aquinas would say it is still a bad act, as the exterior act (what you actually do) is wrong, even though the intention (interior act) was good. For an action to be right, there needs to be a good intention and the act itself must be right. Eg soldiers – if they fight to defend someone under attack, their exterior actions are good, but if they attack the enemy with hatred and a thirst for revenge in their hearts, their interior acts are wrong even if their exterior acts are good.

Natural Law – Efficient/Final Cause

The idea of a ‘Final Cause’ goes back to Aristotle – everything has a telos or purpose. There are things that motivate us to do things – a doctor will go to work to get paid, for example. However, that shouldn’t be the *reason* he goes to work, it’s just the efficient cause. The final cause is to save people’s lives. People will have sex for pleasure, but if it’s the only reason you have sex, you’re missing the point of sex. It’s very easy to focus on the efficient cause, but it may leave you unfulfilled. Aristotle used the term ‘eudaimonia’ to describe human flourishing, a condition where we fulfil our purpose. Acting ethically means acting in accordance with our design or purpose.

