

For Catholic natural law approaches, what is the moral difference between a rock falling and killing someone, a fox killing a chicken, and a human killing their spouse?

Natural law provides guidance for Catholics on moral decision making and the nature of their existence as humans.¹ It states that all humans are naturally drawn to what is good and have intellect from God that allows them to avoid evil.² Natural law does not cover every conflict in human life however, thus it is left up to Catholics to make judgements based on what they understand about the concept and guidance they may seek from other forms of law.³ When answering the question above from a moral standpoint, it is a humans reasoning capabilities that causes them to have more moral responsibility than other creatures and nature created by God.⁴ By examining the teachings of natural law and exploring St Thomas Aquinas' theory, the Catholic stance on morality will become clear.

Natural law is a concept in Catholic ethics that underpins their ideas about morality and human nature.⁵ Morality is viewed as a natural human ability,⁶ based in our innate understanding to do good by utilising our unique reasoning skills.⁷ Thus in natural law theory, humans have a responsibility to use their natural intellect and practical reasoning capabilities to judge what decisions should be chosen for the sake of good, and what should be avoided to repress evil.⁸ Through pursuing this understanding of reality, humans will be able to discover their final telos.⁹

The writings of St Thomas Aquinas have been hugely influential in articulating Catholic ideas of natural law. Aquinas believed that natural law can be defined by primary and secondary precepts,¹⁰ although every human will have their own interpretation of how to live by these precepts due to their unique life experiences and circumstances.¹¹ His perspective on natural law was based on the 'order of nature'¹² and how humans act

¹ Anthony J. Lisska, 'Natural Law and the Roman Catholic Tradition: The Importance of Philosophical Realism', *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, 71.4 (2012), p. 746.

² Francis J. Beckwith, 'Catholicism and the Natural Law: A Response to Four Misunderstandings', *Religions*, 12.6 (2021), p. 1.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁵ Lisska, *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, p. 746.

⁶ Beckwith, *Religions*, p. 1.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁹ Ginna M. Pennance-Acevedo, 'St. Thomas Aquinas and John Locke on Natural Law', *Studia Gilsoniana*, 6 (2017) p. 222.

¹⁰ Beckwith, *Religions*, p. 3.

¹¹ Pennance-Acevedo, *Studia Gilsoniana*, p. 226.

¹² Lisska, *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, p. 746.

from a realist account.¹³ Thus the precepts are more of a generalization of human behaviour instead of a direct answer for all of life's decisions.

The first of Aquinas' precepts of natural law is that 'Good is to be done and pursued, and evil is to be avoided'¹⁴. Aquinas echoes here the fundamental core of natural law, that all humans have an 'interior sense'¹⁵ of what is good for us depending on our natural inclination to pursue or reject it.¹⁶

Another of Aquinas' precepts is centred on the preservation of human life. As humans are not ruled by their natural instincts alone, the preservation of human life stretches to include more than mere survival.¹⁷ Humans should not only make decisions that improve the quality of their own lives, but also the lives of people around them, as this is part of human existence and capability.¹⁸

This precept, however, brings into question when killing is permissible or accepted. If humans are to avoid death, there are times when killing must occur, such as in self-defence or in the case of war. While killing in other circumstances could be considered evil. This displays a complicated aspect of natural law. It is not always easy to know what decisions are truly good, and thus Catholics may need to seek guidance beyond the core precepts.

The third precept associated with Aquinas' theory of natural law focuses on the responsibility humans have for their offspring.¹⁹ As humans have intellect that separates them from animals, they have the ability to reject their natural inclinations in a way animals cannot. This means that humans should not abandon or neglect their children, because their reasoning capabilities should be used to understand that would be evil.

The last of Aquinas' precepts is related to humans belief in God. It is natural for a human to seek the truth of God through their use of speculative reasoning.²⁰ To ignore this innate calling would be recognized as acting against what is natural and thus be considered evil.²¹

Aquinas' teachings on natural law provide clarity on the moral agency humans hold compared to the animals and nature they share the world with. If a rock was to fall and kill someone, that rock would lack the intellect given to humans by God to make a

¹³ Ibid., p. 746.

¹⁴ Beckwith, *Religions*, p. 3.

¹⁵ Pennance-Acevedo, *Studia Gilsoniana*, p. 225.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 225.

¹⁷ Beckwith, *Religions*, p. 3.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 3.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 4.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 4.

²¹ Ibid., p. 4.

decision based on what is morally right in that moment.²² It would simply be following its telos and would hold no responsibility for the death of that person. Similarly, a fox would also lack the ability to reason as it is a uniquely human trait,²³ and killing a chicken would be an action driven by instinct alone.²⁴ Despite the fox acting in accordance with Aquinas' precept of preserving life, as it is hunting to feed itself, it would not perceive killing the chicken as a choice.²⁵

Therefore, as humans are 'rational animals',²⁶ they should not only understand the moral weight of choosing to kill their spouse but use those reasoning capabilities to make a decision that is good and just. If their spouse is an innocent person who is not threatening their life in any way, then killing them would be considered an act of evil as it is going against one of Aquinas' precepts of natural law.

The idea of natural law is quite simple, however the reality of moral decision making is complicated. There is no set of specific rules a person should follow. Aquinas and the Catholic church both recognize other forms of law that may govern our decisions.²⁷ This includes Divine law, which stems from sacred scriptures, and Human law, which is law decided by human governments.²⁸ The natural instinct inside of humans drawn to good can be influenced by these laws when choosing how to live their lives.

As natural law is understood as having internal and external elements, a human may be innately drawn to what is good but struggle to act on that according to what is morally correct. Externally there will be aspects of life that impact decision making such as personal circumstance²⁹ and the different forms of law.³⁰ Catholics can further seek out guidance from the church which teaches the core of natural law and its precepts.³¹ It is through understanding the precepts of natural law that humans can learn that doing what is good should not be limited to their own happiness.³² What is good for one, is not always good for all.

Referring to the question, a human may kill their spouse over a conflict such as cheating. Even if the human believes they are better off without their spouse or feels a need to get revenge for the betrayal, as their spouse is not threatening their life, this

²² Ibid., p. 3.

²³ Pennance-Acevedo, *Studia Gilsoniana*, p. 227.

²⁴ Beckwith, *Religions*, p. 3.

²⁵ Pennance-Acevedo, *Studia Gilsoniana*, p. 227.

²⁶ Beckwith, *Religions*, p. 3.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 4.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 4.

²⁹ Pennance-Acevedo, *Studia Gilsoniana*, p. 226.

³⁰ Beckwith, *Religions*, p. 4.

³¹ Ibid., p. 7.

³² Pennance-Acevedo, *Studia Gilsoniana*, p. 228.

decision should be reasoned against considering it is not good for everyone involved in the situation overall.

The Catholic concept of natural law includes all humans whether religious or not. Atheists have long been questioned on how they can live moral lives without God.³³ The concern is that without God's guidance there is no way to make decisions based on moral facts or truths.³⁴ Atheists may argue that there is no set definition of moral behaviour,³⁵ and some may reject traditional ideas of moral principles altogether by embracing views of nihilism or relativism.³⁶ However, in natural law, atheists would still innately be drawn to good. The difference is that they wouldn't understand the reason why.

In Catholic teaching, humans are to 'achieve fullness of being'³⁷, and this can only be done by understanding reality.³⁸ This knowledge of reality alongside the desire to be good will eventually lead to the principles of natural law, and that is what guides Catholics to their final telos.³⁹ Without the key understanding of natural law and how to navigate morality, atheists would not be able to discover their purpose.

Although, this does not mean that an atheist would answer this question differently than a Catholic would. Even with the knowledge of natural law, Catholics are still capable of acting immorally due to the existence of evil. Catholics should reason against making decisions that are evil,⁴⁰ but that doesn't mean all will agree on what that constitutes. Even without a drive for discovering their telos, atheists have the ability to adopt a moral code and can also observe the natural behaviour of what is around them.

Psychologist Jonathan Haidt believed that all humans have moral foundations.⁴¹ These include fairness, care, loyalty and respect.⁴² These foundations are not based in any religious teachings yet align with many aspects of Aquinas's precepts of natural law. Specifically, that humans should live in peace with others⁴³ and help society flourish,⁴⁴ as that is what's good for all. Therefore, it may not be considered necessary for every

³³ Erik J. Wielenberg, 'Atheism and Morality', in *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism* (Oxford Academic, 2013), pp. 89–103.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

³⁷ Pennance-Acevedo, *Studia Gilsoniana*, p. 222.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

⁴⁰ Beckwith, *Religions*, p. 3.

⁴¹ Wielenberg, *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, p. 4.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁴³ Beckwith, *Religions*, p. 4.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

human to understand natural law when making moral decisions, but for Catholics, it can provide a guidance that atheists will not have access to.

Through the teaching of natural law, Catholics can better understand their human nature and their moral standing compared to the rest of God's creations. Catholics should follow their innate desire to be good and use their unique reasoning skills to do that. In understanding natural law, Catholics have a further sense of how they should live their lives compared to non-believers, even if non-Catholics are also able to develop their own moral compass. A Catholic must learn the precepts of natural law and use what abilities God has given them to navigate morality in the strongest way possible.

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