

Natural Law is an absolutist and deontological philosophical theory which highlights that humans have intrinsic knowledge about rights and responsibilities. This theory was crafted by Saint Thomas Aquinas, one of the most influential theologians. Aquinas writes about the Natural Law theory in his book called Summa Theologica.

In Summa Theologica, Aquinas says 'The natural law is promulgated by the very fact that God instilled it into man's mind so as to be known by him naturally'.¹

Aquinas asserted that every human has natural reasoning abilities given to them by God that they can utilize to understand God's command. Natural law is based on the concept that one should do good and avoid committing evil acts; this is called synderesis. Hence belief in religion is not a requirement to follow Natural Law.

In Summa Theologica he made it clear that man has more intrinsic knowledge unlike other creatures:

As man is more perfect than other animals, he has more intrinsic operations than other animals, because his perfection is something composite. Hence the angels, who are more perfect and more simple, have fewer intrinsic operations than man, for they have no imagination, or feeling, or the like. In God there exists only one real operation---that is, His essence.²

To make it simpler to identify good actions, Aquinas highlighted the concept of primary precepts: The five absolutist principles that we need to observe. The primary precepts are: To protect life, to reproduce, to gain knowledge and education, to live in a society where there is order and to worship God.

Aquinas showed the importance of worshiping God: 'The more a man is united to God, the better his state becomes...'³

When humans encounter a situation where they need to choose which action to take, they must use their reasoning to figure out which action will uphold these precepts. This results in the formation of secondary precepts, which can not go against primary precepts. Secondary precepts are relative acts that a human can commit to fulfill the requirements of primary precepts.

¹ Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, [n.d.]), p. 2267.

² Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, [n.d.]), p. 363.

³ Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, [n.d.]), p. 2348.

In special scenarios, two primary precepts can conflict. Imagine a scene where someone is trying to kill you, to protect your life you may have to attack the offender which can result in their death. Here 2 primary precepts are conflicting. You are preserving your life but you may need to kill another person for self defense purposes.

‘Just as to cease from evil is a kind of good, so a prohibition is a kind of precept...’⁴

Due to complex situations like these, Aquinas highlighted the concept of the doctrine of double effect. This concept shows that when a man has to choose between two evil actions, they must choose the one which is lesser evil. And the resulting evil action must not be committed with intention, for example you kill an attacker due to self defense but your intention was not to kill them.

Aquinas asserts that: ‘if in a particular case we add that a man is a murderer or dangerous to society, to kill him is a good’⁵

Bibliography:

Aquinas, Thomas, Summa Theologica (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, [n.d.])

⁴ Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, [n.d.]), p. 2283.

⁵ Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, [n.d.]), p. 249.