

# The key features of natural moral law and virtue ethics essay sample

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Virtue Ethics is a character based ethical theory. This means that it looks at the virtue or moral character of the individual carrying out an action, rather than at ethical laws, or the consequences of particular actions. Rather than attempting to reason what should be considered 'good' or 'bad', virtue ethics focuses on how adopting certain attitudes may lead to certain fulfilments.

Virtue ethics is principally concerned with the idea of the human character and asks how you can be a better person. In this way it is different to many other ethical theories as it puts right character before right behaviour. It argues we should be less concerned with actions and consequences, and much more with the character of the moral agent. The question 'what is it right or obligatory to do?' is nowhere near as important in virtue ethics as the question, 'how should we be?'

The principles of virtue ethics are that 1. An action is only right if it is an action that a virtuous person would carry out in the same circumstances. 2. A virtuous person is a person who acts virtuously. 3. A person acts virtuously if they possess and live the virtues. 4. A virtue is a moral characteristic that a person needs to live well.

Aristotle, widely considered to be the founder of virtue ethics, devised in his work 'Nicomachean Ethics' that there are twelve moral virtues which fall between two vices. Vices are two extremes, for example there is a vice of deficiency for something and a vice of excess. The virtuous mean or 'Golden Mean' is the mid-way point or balance between each vice. Therefore the balance between Shamelessness (a vice of deficiency) and Bashfulness (a vice of

excess), the mid-point of 'Golden Mean' would be Modesty. Therefore if you don't have enough modesty you would become shameful, and if you have an extreme of modesty, you become bashful.

Virtue ethics is focused on our growth, being virtuous needs practice to control our behaviour as we can be deficient and excessive in our actions. This is our spontaneous behaviour or automatic behaviour, we need to train it so our spontaneous behaviour goes straight to the golden mean.

Alasdair MacIntyre suggests that the three questions that Virtue Ethics asks are: Who am I? Who ought I to become? And how ought I to get there? . In his book 'After Virtue' MacIntyre emphasizes the importance of moral goods defined in respect to a community engaged in a 'practice' – which he calls 'internal goods' or 'goods of excellence' – rather than focusing on practice-independent obligation of a moral agent (deontological ethics) or the consequences of a particular act (utilitarianism).

James F Keenan states that the previous list of virtues that exists needs expanding. Keenan stated that 'being virtuous is more than having a particular habit of acting, e. g. generosity. Rather, it means having a fundamental set of related virtues that enable a person to live and act morally well'

Natural Moral law on the other hand is the ancient belief that we can deduce what is right and wrong by looking at nature, this being the one moral code that is applicable to all people. The main features of Natural Moral Law as an ethical theory are that it is unchanging, universally applicable and relevant

to all circumstances. The theory is absolutist, objective, deontological and thought to be God-given.

By pursuing Natural Moral Law, we should do what comes naturally, with the end justifying the means. In other words everything has an efficient cause 'to get things done', and an end product as the final cause, a final purpose to everything we do. A primary example is the act of sex. A child would be the natural outcome; so contraception is seen to interfere. Therefore, it is unnatural. Another illustration of the end justifying the means is; if killing hundreds of people aids the breaking down of a dictatorship, then the murders are justified because the country is made a better place. The end has justified the means, even though the means was not necessarily a natural act.

The Aristotelian 'Theory of Causes' is important to understand here because this states that everything has a final cause or purpose. In relation to natural law, this means that anything that interferes with that purpose is to be considered 'wrong'.

Thomas Aquinas applied Aristotle's theories to Christianity. He posited that natural ethics was not only learned from observation of the natural because it seemed that the cravings of the body, which were by all means natural, were not all moral. As such he thought that in order to discover what is good we must use observation in combination with excellent reason. He believed that reason could be corrupted by the trials of human existence. With his reason he induced that the moral laws could be broken down into four precepts (in order of precedence);

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1. Eternal law - The mind of God
2. Divine law - Our perception of the mind of God (the bible)
3. Natural law - Derived from observation of the way things "should" be and reason.
4. Human law - The laws created by the current earthly authority.

An important aspect of natural law is that of exterior and interior motive.

This means that an action must only be in itself moral (E. G. Charity) but the intent must also be moral (E. G. Altruism).

For example lying to protect someone's feeling is a good interior act because of the good intent but a bad exterior act because part of the nature of man is to know truth and obstructing this is unnatural.

There are primary and secondary precepts which link in with natural law.

Primary precepts are general and unflexible no matter the society such as to worship God and to love one's neighbour. Secondary precepts however are more specific, but also more flexible in when interpreted in the context of a situation e. g. the number of wives a man is to have.

Assess the strengths and weaknesses of one of these ethical theories

Natural Moral Law's strengths lie in its absolutist deontological view of morality as its principles are universally understandable and therefore ease the process of making moral decisions and determining what is right and wrong. Natural Law provides justification for certain ideas that are

recognisable in modern times, such as human rights and equality, and provides a complete system of moral living in accordance with what it is to be human. Though absolutist, Natural Law has certain flexibility in its secondary precepts and allows it to be applied to a wider spectrum of circumstances.

Natural Law's absolutist stance states that certain actions, such as the abuse of the innocent, will always be wrong and therefore is immune to modern flexible morality or cultural relativism. This means that Natural Law upholds values such as human rights, for example, it is never right to torture someone to get information. The problem with this deontological viewpoint however, is that sometimes one needs to consider the consequences of an action. If, for example, the torturing someone resulted in the prevention of a disaster such as September 11th 2001, one could argue that it was necessary to torture that one person to save the lives of thousands of others. Natural Law leaves no room for thinking about consequences and therefore is undermined as an ethical theory.

Its basis on reason prevents cultural and religious discrimination and can be used by both those who believe in God and those living without a moral system. However, although Natural Law can exist without religion and secular thinkers can relate to Natural Law in a somewhat limited sense, it is so closely aligned to religion that the theory makes little sense without belief in God. The theory also relies on the belief that God created the universe and the moral law within nature. Therefore, Aquinas' assumption that all men seek to worship God may seem unnatural to many and the idea of a God-

given moral code within nature is meaningless to those who do not believe in God as a creator.

Natural Law holds that there is an objective morality that humans can all aim for and that good and bad is not merely relative. Taking this into consideration, Natural Law is a potentially insensitive and authoritarian moral system where general principles are applied to specific situations regardless of particular circumstances. For example, if reproduction is one of the final causes, how can we explain those who are homosexual or infertile? Furthermore, if one considers the possibility that homosexuality may derive from genetic traits, and therefore be a part of someone's nature, the final cause of reproduction has no basis. If this were the case, it could be said that sexual intercourse has as its purpose recreation and not reproduction. Vardy and Grosch have also challenged Aquinas' final cause of reproduction in 'The Puzzle of Ethics' with this argument, stating the possibility that the function of genitalia is pleasure and not reproduction.

Whilst Natural Law upholds the idea that some things, such as the preservation of human life, have intrinsic value, one could also observe that Aquinas' thinking is typical of its time. His belief that every individual has a purpose and function that is God-given and unchangeable could be considered outdated. Alongside this argument, although Natural Law is supposedly a Christian ethic, Jesus opposed the legalistic morality of his time, the Pharisees.

Although the weaknesses of Natural Moral Law outweigh the strengths, given the above criticisms, it is worth noting that natural law may not be as rigid as

it first appears. Aquinas accepted that while the primary precepts were unalterable, the secondary precepts were subject to change owing to particular circumstances.