

theory of natural law  
according to thomas  
aquinas essay  
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## Theory of Natural Law According to Thomas Aquinas

The natural law is a moral theory that is said to be written on the hearts of all humans and is a guide for behavior. Thomas Aquinas held this theory to be part of the divine or eternal law that God made known and applied. Humans, as recipients of the natural law, from this and through reason, derive their natural inclinations on how to act properly. So, according to Aquinas, to practically achieve their proper end, these rational souls desire self-preservation and act virtuously, which also involves avoiding obstacles that frustrate human flourishing. In accordance with the heart, then, to apply objective moral principles correctly that consider the basic goods to the natural law, one can judge the conscience of discernment between what is reasonable and what is unreasonable. Aquinas, as a philosopher and theologian, wrote works that tried to convince non-Christians that Christian doctrines were reasonable; He explained Christian theology systematically. He believed that no conflict exists between reason and faith; reason paired together with faith can attain truth. If anyone found differences between theology's faith in divine revelation and philosophy's conclusions, it would be based upon one's faulty reasoning.

The basic goods of the natural law are life, love, knowledge or truth, beauty, and freedom. Aquinas views these inherent goods as incommensurable values that are self-evident and knowable by nature. He claimed that we humans have an obligation to protect and promote these intrinsic values and ought to avoid anything and everything that harm them. Life, to begin with, Aquinas viewed goals of happiness in two ways: living a good life on earth and having everlasting life in heaven. Aquinas believed that people could

only satisfy their natural desire for happiness through fellowship with God. Christians believe that, because of their faith, they are justified to have peace with God. Through Jesus Christ, they have redemption, forgiveness of sins, and gain access to God's grace. By this, they can be filled with joy because they are working towards their goal of salvation. With the faith-based commitment and love of God, Aquinas' natural law falls into a teleological theory.

For the basic good of love, Aquinas' said, " No human truly has joy unless that person lives in love." According to him, the things that we love tell us what we are. For the basic good of knowledge, it is mainly the conscience of an object. Knowledge has the condition of truth and is universal. Aquinas believed God to be the sole source of truth. To defend the value of beauty, Aquinas said, " There is nothing that does not share in goodness and beauty. Each thing is good and beautiful by its own proper form." For the basic good of freedom, natural law has held its influence among many historical leaders. Aristotle's writing on the natural law viewed some people as natural slaves and other people as natural masters. Aquinas holds that slavery could not be justified by the natural law. However, he views that slavery can be consistent with the natural law only if it is qualified for punishment of crimes.

To further attaining a proper end, the first moral principle of the natural law is to do good and avoid evil. In every good thing, the supreme good, that is to say God, is desired. Good things are that which furthers human nature, promoting inclinations and aspects of our common nature. In good, evil can exist unintentionally and takes place by accident. For example, the goodness of nature did not operate to intend that the birth of Adolf Hitler caused him

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to grow up and lead an army to kill Jews. Committing evil violates the goods of the natural law making it morally objectionable. However, even though values are always objectively true, actions may not always be morally objective; this is because in different situations, an action has the capability of representing different values. For example, in the case of theft, Aquinas has an interesting treatment. Stealing is evil because it breaks the value of truth, meaning a man didn't obtain through honest work.

Yet, in matters of necessity, theft can be valued good. For example, in a situation where one is trying to save someone's life by stealing, it can in fact be morally permissible to take something that belongs to someone else.

Aquinas said, "Whoever acts against conscience always does moral evil."

Actions have to form through reason applied with base values. All other principles for action of the natural law theory that concern what is to be done or avoided are based on this first moral principle, "good is to be done and evil avoided." Assuming everything desires good, one has to pursue some sort of particular good to carry out in

action. We can grasp what is the human good naturally by practical reason.

For example, if Betty volunteers her efforts in participating in a fundraiser for the Defeat Diabetes Foundation, she is reasonably supporting charity in a good way. However, if Betty and her friends decide to rob a Braum's restaurant and give all the funds to the Defeat Diabetes Foundation, this is clearly not a sufficient excuse for the act of charity. Betty is not stealing out of necessity. Aquinas believed humans have natural urges towards complete goodness.

I find this theory philosophically plausible, yet it is evident of some weaknesses. Doing good and avoiding evil is definitely evident in most human nature. Yet the natural law has weaknesses in expressing how one should act accordingly in particular moral situations. In the case of theft previously mentioned, Aquinas says that stealing can never be good. In another sense, he views stealing out of necessity morally permissible. Although these views seem to be contradicting, I believe he is trying to justify and completely separate stealing out of need from stealing in general. An act would not be considered theft because, if by taking something required to preserve the basic goods of the natural law, it actually belongs to us already. The natural law has shown a tremendous influence to the advancement of human rights. Not only is the theory in the way it links Christian beliefs to morality, it also applies credit to human reasoning. Dr. King believed that human law is invalid if it contradicts with the natural law. According to the natural law, everything has a purpose; people are made for a purpose. Aquinas believed if the universe was created after a divine plan for a purpose, humans could know their role to play “ in the scheme of things” in determining how to act towards our goals.