PAPER 2 · TOPIC 01

Natural Law

A **deontological, absolutist** theory associated with Thomas Aquinas (1225-74), building on Aristotle and the Stoics. Right action accords with our God-given nature and purpose (telos), discoverable by **reason**.

Key Terms

Glossary

Deontological - Duty-based; focuses on the intrinsic rightness/wrongness of acts, not consequences.
Absolutist - Universal moral norms that apply in all situations, at all times.
Telos - The end, goal or purpose of a thing.
Eudaimonia - (Aristotle) Human flourishing / living well - the ultimate telos.
Synderesis - The innate principle to "do good and avoid evil"; the foundation of all precepts.

Key Scholars

Thomas Aquinas - 1225-1274
Aristotle - 384-322 BCE
The Stoics - c.300 BCE onwards
Jean-Paul Sartre - 1905-1980
G. E. Moore - 1873-1958
Joseph Fletcher - 1905-1991
Robert Bowie - contemporary

Learn: AO1 knowledge

Origins & foundations

- Stoics: humans have a "divine spark"; live *according to nature* and reason to find happiness in an ordered cosmos.
- Aristotle: everything has a telos; the human telos is a life of reason leading to **eudaimonia**. Distinguished efficient cause from **final cause** (purpose).
- Aquinas Christianised these: the world is ordered by God; reason (God-given) lets us discern the moral law without needing the Bible.

The Four Tiers of Law

Tier	Meaning
Eternal Law	The principles by which God made and controls the universe - known fully only to God.
Divine Law	Revealed law (the Bible) - e.g. Decalogue, Sermon on the Mount.
Natural Law	The eternal law as perceived by human **reason** - accessible to all.

Tier	Meaning
Human Law	The actual laws/customs of societies - valid only if consistent with natural & divine law.

Precepts

From the **synderesis rule** ("good is to be done and pursued, evil avoided") flow the **Five Primary Precepts** (remember *POWER*):

1. **P**reservation of life
2. **O**rdered society
3. **W**orship of God
4. **E**ducation / nurture of children
5. **R**eproduction

Secondary precepts are specific rules *deduced* from the primary precepts (e.g. preservation of life "do not commit euthanasia"; reproduction "no contraception"). These allow some flexibility by situation.

Real & apparent goods

We always pursue what seems good, but we sin when we mistake an **apparent good** (e.g. an adulterous affair) for a **real good** that fits our true telos.

Interior & exterior acts

A good **exterior act** (what you do) must be done with a good **interior act** (right intention). A good deed done for selfish reasons is not virtuous.

Doctrine of Double Effect

If an act has both a good and a bad effect, it is permissible provided: the act itself is good/neutral, the **good effect is intended** and the bad merely foreseen, and the good outweighs the bad. *e.g. giving high-dose painkillers intending pain relief, foreseeing but not intending death.*

The Virtues

Four **cardinal virtues** (Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, Temperance) plus three **theological/revealed virtues** (Faith, Hope, Charity) develop the moral character needed to keep the law.

Aristotle's teleology is an account of explanation, not a slogan about purpose

Begin with *telos*, the Greek word for an end, goal or completion. In ordinary speech a purpose is often somebody's intention: a designer makes an object for a use. Aristotle's teleology is broader. A final cause answers why a natural process tends towards a characteristic completion even when no human designer is present. An acorn develops as the kind of thing whose mature form is an oak; an eye is intelligible through seeing. The explanation is about the organisation and powers of a thing, not merely about the event that came immediately before it.

Physics II.3 distinguishes material, formal, efficient and final causes. The bronze is the statue's material cause; the shape or account of what the statue is supplies the formal cause; the sculptor is an efficient source of change; and the purpose for which it is made supplies a final cause. These are not four rival guesses. They answer different versions of “why?”. A purely efficient explanation may describe the chain of production while leaving unanswered what counts as the process succeeding or failing.

That distinction matters ethically. Calling rational flourishing the human end does not mean that every immediate desire should be fulfilled. A capacity can be exercised badly. Nor does it mean that whatever commonly happens is morally correct. Aristotle's question concerns the excellent fulfilment of distinctively human powers across a whole life.

Aquinas later places this teleological picture within creation and divine governance, but students should not collapse the two thinkers: Aristotelian virtue ethics begins with character, habituation and practical judgement, while Thomistic natural law adds an account of law, participation and precepts.

Reason orders appetite: episteme, techne and phronesis

Aquinas distinguishes rational from non-rational human capacities. Appetite, emotion and impulse are not simply enemies of ethics; they supply motives and perceptions that can be educated. The moral problem is whether they are ordered by reason towards *eudaimonia*, a flourishing life, or pull action towards an attractive but partial good. This is why virtue requires stable formation rather than one isolated correct choice.

Three intellectual excellences sharpen the point. *Episteme* concerns demonstrable knowledge; *techne* is skill in making; *phronesis* is practical wisdom about action. Practical wisdom cannot be reduced to applying an algorithm. It identifies morally salient features, deliberates about feasible means and sees how a local choice fits a worthwhile life. Someone may know a general rule and still lack the judgement required to apply it honestly, proportionately or at the right time.

Aquinas transforms this picture by treating practical reason as participation in an intelligible moral order. Yet the Aristotelian inheritance protects natural law from a crude “follow the biological function” reading. Human inclinations must be understood and coordinated rationally. Preservation, knowledge, social life and other goods can compete in a case; prudence specifies how they are pursued together. The hard AO2 question is whether this rational ordering discovers objective goods or simply builds the evaluator's prior values into the description of flourishing.

From eternal law to human law: authority, participation and determinatio

Aquinas defines law through reason, a common good, legitimate authority and promulgation. These features prevent law from being equated with any command backed by force. **Eternal law** is divine wisdom ordering creation. **Natural law** is the rational creature's participation in that order. **Divine law** is revealed guidance directed towards humanity's supernatural end and needed where reason is uncertain. **Human law** gives concrete public form to general moral requirements.

The movement from natural to human law often involves *determinatio*: several arrangements could reasonably realise the same general good. Natural law may require safe and ordered travel without dictating one universal speed limit. Political authority selects a workable specification and promulgates it. This explains both the objectivity and the variability of law. The underlying good is not created by preference, but the institutional form can differ with circumstance.

Human enactment is therefore neither automatically moral nor irrelevant. An unjust rule can fail as a genuine ordinance of reason, yet disobedience can also damage the common good by weakening coordination. Evaluation must ask what defect makes a law unjust, whether compliance would itself involve wrongdoing, and what the consequences of resistance are for others. Natural law's account is more politically nuanced than “religious rules override the state”, but it still needs a defensible account of legitimate authority in a plural society.

Primary principles, secondary conclusions and real goods

The first principle of practical reason-good is to be pursued and evil avoided-is too general to decide a case unaided. Aquinas associates further basic orientations with natural inclinations: preserving life, family and education, knowledge of truth, social life and rational conduct. OCR mnemonics are useful retrieval devices, but they can make these orientations look like five disconnected rules. Their point is to name dimensions of flourishing that practical reason must respect.

Secondary precepts are more specific conclusions. Their reliability depends on sound factual premises, accurate description and an ordered understanding of goods. This gives natural law some flexibility without making the primary goods negotiable. The claim that “all secondary precepts are absolute” is therefore misleading; equally misleading is the idea that any agent may suspend them whenever a preferred consequence appears.