NATURAL LAW AND CONSCIENCE

The material in this section is relevant to questions on:
- natural law and conscience specifically
- ethical theories in general
- solving dilemmas in practical ethics

The principles of natural law

Cicero first touched on the principle of natural law: 'True law is right reason in agreement with nature. It is applied universally and is unchanging and everlasting ... one eternal and unchangeable law will be valid for all nations and all times, and there will be one master and rule, that is God.'

Aquinas takes up this approach to ethics in his *Summa Theologicae*, maintaining that there is a moral code towards which human beings naturally incline, and this he calls natural law. Morality consists of this natural law plus God’s commands, which develop it further. The moral human being lives in accordance with this natural law; Christians are distinguished from non-Christians in that they live their lives in the knowledge that they will continue beyond the grave.

Paul claims in Romans 1:1-3 that the moral law of God is evident from the nature of man. However, both Jews and gentiles are guilty of violating it and are thus inclined towards unnatural behaviour: greed, envy, conflict. Jesus points out that the divorce law in the Torah is a concession to this sinful nature and not what God intended in the original order of creation (Matthew 19:3-8). Natural moral knowledge should make it clear that divorce is wrong.

The principle of natural law depends on establishing the purpose of human life, which Aquinas maintains is to live, reproduce, learn, worship God and order society. All things must be in accordance with these purposes, to which man is naturally inclined. If man uses his God-given reason combined with experience, even unbelievers can make the right decisions about how to act.

When man chooses evil rather than good, he does so because he mistakenly thinks that it is good. However, it is a falling short of the good, and in so doing human beings fall short of God’s best for them. Human actions should be directed towards God as the only possible end. This is the universal aim of all human beings, who desire communion with God. However, every individual also has a further purpose that is specific to their own skills and talents. Some goals are therefore applicable only to some, but the goal of a relationship with God in this life and beyond is open to all. Any action which takes human beings further along this path is good; any action which leads them further away is wrong.

Aquinas identifies four kinds of law: (i) the eternal law, as God’s will and wisdom, revealed in (ii) divine law, given in scripture and through the church, made known in (iii) natural law, from which (iv) human law is derived.

The state is therefore not an artificial creation, but a natural extension of natural and divine law. Hence, as Paul writes in Romans 13:1: ‘Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.’

EVALUATION

Natural law theory proposes a simple, universal guide for judging the moral value of human actions. The purposes that Aquinas proposes for human existence are common to all people. However:

- Aquinas assumes that all men believe in God and have the desire to worship him.
- He assumes too that we seek to preserve humankind by reproduction. He agrees that this is not necessarily applicable to all individuals and thus allows for a celibate priesthood. But this exclusion must
surely also apply to homosexuals, and yet natural law would argue that homosexuality is against divine law.

The theory rests on being able to identify the specific function or purpose of an act. Although one purpose of sexual union is reproduction, there is no guarantee that this will always be the result. Natural law theory would therefore demand that every sexual union should at least have the potential for reproduction, thus eliminating not only homosexual relationships but also sterilization and the use of contraception. It also raises the question of whether couples who know themselves to be infertile or are past the age of child-bearing should continue to enjoy a sexual relationship.

Aquinas assumes that human beings are composed of parts that each have a distinct function and do not interrelate. Vardy and Grosch (in The Puzzle of Ethics, Fount, 1994, p. 61) suggest that this is a reflection of Aquinas's own time, in which each person had a place, be it knight, baron or serf, and accepted this as the natural order. It is reflected even in Victorian thinking: 'The rich man at his castle/The poor man at his gate/God made them high and lowly/And ordered their estate' (Mrs C.F. Alexander).

Aquinas maintains that we have a single human reason and human nature, which should lead all human beings to make the same moral choices. It makes no allowance for situationism, relativism or individualism. It is too optimistic to suppose we can extract moral rules from generalizations about human nature. At the most we might be able to say that God's creation offers certain indications of the divine purpose for man, and which we are advised to follow.

Human nature is not unchanging, as Aquinas assumes. It could be argued that it is an evolving thing, continually in the process of change. Surely, at least, human nature is changed by the grace of God as exhibited in the life and death of Jesus, whereas Aquinas bases his theory on the nature of man at creation (Genesis 1-3).

**CONSCIENCE**

*Conscience is the inner aspect of the life of the individual where a sense of what is right and wrong is developed.*

David Atkinson and David Field (eds), *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology*, IVP, 1995, p. 251

Christians view the conscience as a guardian of their moral health; it prompts them to respond according to their moral code by stimulating feelings of guilt or well-being. Christian teaching on conscience is influenced by three biblical principles:

(i) Conscience is universal to all human beings, whether they believe or not, and is God-given (Romans 2:12ff.).

(ii) Man's conscience has been affected by the Fall (Genesis 3) and is thus corrupted and imperfect

(iii) Jesus' death cleanses man's unhealthy conscience and enables man to retune his conscience with the divine will.

Man's conscience requires instruction, training, education and sensitizing to the will of God so that it is stimulated to direct man in the way of God and away from evil. The more right choices man makes, the more his conscience will prompt him in this direction and into the likeness of God.

Aquinas gave conscience the place of moral judge and the realm in which man exercised his reason in working out what was correct.
Kant maintained it was the arena in which man turned an is into an ought: 'It is good to be kind to children: You ought to be kind to children.'

Freud understood the conscience as the internalized super-ego which controlled and socialized man but was capable of doing great damage to his mental health, particularly when it was confused with religion.

Sociologists would propose the view that the conscience is developed by upbringing, education and socialization. It is therefore not inherent in human beings and does not owe its origin to God.