

Key concepts:

The application of Aquinas' Natural Law to the issue of voluntary euthanasia.

- Preservation of life is a Primary Precept which means that many use 'the sanctity of life' argument as opposition for voluntary euthanasia. According to this teaching, God gives life and God decides when life ends. Human life as a gift from God is precious, special and unique amongst creation.
- Another line of argument is that ethically, people should have a duty to address the prolonged suffering of others because it provides opportunity to help and care for those who are suffering through intensified medical care such as Hospices and thereby displaying Christian love.
- In accordance with this view, the impact that a prolonged and painful death may have on others, such as close family and friends should also be a factor.
- There is also a generic argument that if euthanasia was legalised, the Natural Law precept of an ordered society would be challenged since it could create a 'slippery slope' and be open to sinister motives of greed or abuse of the aged and ill.
- Despite this, there are some inconsistencies with regard to administration of medication where the line drawn is not at all clear. For example, Spain, a country heavily influenced by Roman Catholic tradition, sees it as licit to induce unconsciousness through heavy sedation to ease suffering. This eventually leads to death. So, it is morally licit to administer large doses of morphine to 'control the pain' of a terminally ill patient, even if it is foreseen that this action would shorten the patient's life. In line with the principle of double effect, the intention was not to kill the person, but to bring relief to their pain despite the obvious consequences.

The application of Aquinas' Natural Law to the issue of abortion.

- Although Aquinas' Natural Law has no clear directive on abortion, the tradition of the Roman Catholic Church and the magisterium has been to reject all forms of abortion. The key debate concerns the question as to at what point potential human life acquires such value as to make abortion an ethical injustice. Since the magisterium teaches that life begins with conception, it is clear that abortion is contrary to Natural Law because it directly breaks the first precept.
- In accordance with this the method of foetal reduction through selection of embryos is also condemned by the magisterium since fertilisation and conception are seen as the same and it refers to this practice as 'selective abortion'. However, it does not necessarily follow that all Roman Catholics reject abortion since there are different arguments presented within Roman Catholicism.
- Even in Christian theology, Aquinas appears to recognise the humanness of a foetus at ensoulment.
- Others would accept the Roman Catholic position in general but also argue that there are exceptional circumstances such as rape and incest.
- Others, like Kainz argue that the issue of abortion is also about the Primary Precept involving a woman's right to choose whether or not to reproduce.
- There are some Roman Catholic pro-choice groups (e.g. Catholics for Choice).

Key quotes:

"... I will neither give a deadly drug to anybody who asked for it, nor will I make a suggestion to this effect." (Hippocratic Oath)

"I will not give to a woman an abortive remedy." (Hippocratic Oath)

"The basic argument against abortion, on which all others build, is that the unborn child is already a human being, a person, a bearer of rights, and that abortion is therefore murder." (John Mackie)

Issues for analysis and evaluation:

Key arguments/debates

Some philosophers would see a strength in Natural Law in using reason as a basis for ethical decisions instead of unpredictable consequences or emotions. However, is it consistent with Christian love to ignore the will and rights of a woman who experiences evil and suffering?

Key questions

Is Natural Law too cold-hearted and rational for ethical issues?

Should the Primary Precept of life take priority over the highest virtue of love?

Key words:

Life	preservation	sanctity	unique	love
duty	slippery slope	Spain	morphine	principle of double effect
foreseen	fertilisation	conception	selective abortion	ensoulment
rape	Kainz	reproduction		