
Natural Law Ethics

Natural Law Ethics, which is another metaethical theory intended to guide us on our search for moral absolutes. We look at the historical development of Natural Law Ethics, its relationship to Virtue Ethics, and we discuss its strengths and weaknesses.

It holds that the fundamental principles of ethical conduct are rationally discernible in human nature and the natural world and through reflection on the world in which we live, human nature, the basic needs of human flourishing, and the like, we can discern which actions are moral.

Aristotle does not connect our natural rights to God as does the author of the Declaration of Independence. That was a development in Natural Law Ethics that came later. Those who do not believe in God could, in theory, adopt Aristotle's Natural Law approach to ethics by affirming that the purpose that each thing (and person) has is not bestowed on it by its Creator but rather is simply an aspect of the nature of that thing, a "brute fact" (as they say).

An atheistic Natural Law ethic fits well with the teleological aspects of virtue ethics: since living virtuously is essentially living in accord with God's design for the created order, living according to God's plan yields a virtuous life. Thus, living a virtuous life is quite naturally fulfilling and leads to pursued happiness. Aquinas holds that humans are created in the image of God and that this involves mirroring God's cognitive capacities at least to the extent necessary to recognize the natural moral law that forms part of the created order. Like Virtue Ethics, Natural Law Ethics seems to have some valuable insights but does not seem able to stand on its own as a metaethical theory.