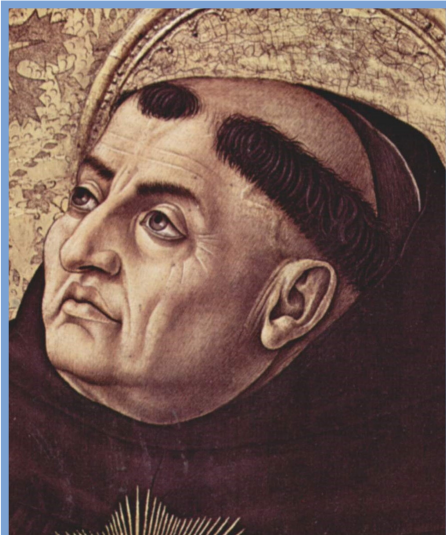


Natural Law and Animal Ethics

1. What is natural law and how does it work?

Natural law is a branch of normative ethics, and normative ethics is concerned with investigating different frameworks that help decide whether an action is right or wrong. Different normative ethical theories provide different frameworks for ethical decision-making, and natural law is one of these frameworks. Although natural law is referred to as a single framework, it is actually a group of frameworks, because various thinkers have presented different versions over the years. Among these are those presented by Aristotle, Cicero, and Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), whose version supports the Catholic Church.

Generally, all versions of natural law have two key components. First, they usually claim that what is natural is right and what is unnatural is wrong. For example, feeding soil to an infant human being is self-evidently unnatural, because it disagrees with human nature (the human body cannot extract nutrients from soil, so would starve and die on such a diet). Nevertheless, most cases are not as obvious as this extreme example, which necessitates the second key component: they usually claim that reason can identify what is natural in ambiguous cases. For example, Thomas Aquinas claimed that natural actions can be identified by thinking about how God intended the human body to be used. Consequently, both homosexual sexual intercourse and heterosexual sexual intercourse using contraception are unnatural and wrong, because they do not use the human body as intended by God.



Thomas Aquinas

Natural Law

A branch of normative ethics concerned with reasoning right and wrong from human nature (i.e. natural human behaviour).

Human purpose: the idea of human purpose is essential to Thomas Aquinas's version of natural law. He believed that God created human beings with a purpose (i.e. union with God), and that human nature (i.e. the human body) allows human beings to fulfil this purpose. Consequently, for Thomas Aquinas, the ideas of human nature and human purpose were inextricably intertwined, so natural actions are equivalent to actions intended by God. According to Thomas Aquinas, human beings were created to seek and achieve union with God, and human reason can be used to identify how to fulfil this purpose.

Hierarchy of souls: Thomas Aquinas based his version of natural law on the hierarchy of souls created by Aristotle. According to Aristotle, human beings have higher status than animals, and animals have higher status than plants, which justifies human use of animals and plants, and animal use of plants. Thomas Aquinas claimed the hierarchy of souls justifies human use of animals and plants to help fulfil human purpose, and the use of plants by animals to help fulfil their purpose. This idea is anthropocentric, and supports the subjugation of animals by human beings.

2. How is natural law applied to issues in animal ethics?

Farming: the issue of farming animals for meat and other animal products is a fundamental area of debate in animal ethics. Natural law considers farming animals to be right, because meat and other animal products feed human beings, which allows them to seek and achieve their purpose. Additionally, animals are lower down the hierarchy of souls than human beings, so their use is ethically unproblematic. Notwithstanding this, factory farming may be wrong according to natural law; if a clear link between factory farming and both famine and climate change is established, then it would be wrong as a result of the harm it causes to some human beings.

Medicine and science: the issue of animal experimentation is also an important area of debate in animal ethics, although it affects significantly fewer animals than factory farming. Natural law considers almost all uses of animals in medicine and science to be right, including xenotransplantation (i.e. the use of animal organs in human transplant patients). Again, fulfilment of human purpose and the position of animals relative to human beings in the hierarchy of souls justifies this use. Nevertheless, genetic engineering is prohibited, because it involves manipulating the God-given natures of animals or human beings (i.e. so-called "playing God").

Sport: the use of animals in sport is a more complicated ethical issue. Although natural law subjugates animals to human beings, it is only right to use animals to fulfil human purpose. It is not clear that the use of animals in sport helps human beings to seek and achieve union with God, and it is doubtful that God intended human beings to behave in this way with animals (which have their own God-given purpose). Additionally, Thomas Aquinas feared that violence towards animals might desensitise human beings to violence towards one another, which would make it wrong. Ultimately, natural law may permit the use of animals in sport, but only under certain conditions.

3. **Why** is the application of natural law to issues in animal ethics important?

The question of why the application of natural law to issues in animal ethics is important is really about why issues in animal ethics are important. First, issues in animal ethics are pervasive, because they affect billions of captive animals worldwide. Natural law accepts the use of animals in farming, and medicine and science; consequently, it offers little respite to animals or animal rights campaigners. Second, issues in animal ethics are potent, because they animate animal rights organisations. Natural law does appear flexible enough to permit reinterpretations, and in recent years the Catholic Church has condemned the needless death of animals, and practices like factory farming, in the name of natural law. It is possible these reinterpretations have occurred in response to the public mood. Third, issues in animal ethics are problematic, because they reveal human assumptions and double standards; however, natural law is unlikely to address these, because it relies upon Aristotle's hierarchy of souls and the anthropocentric belief that human beings are more important than animals (people are made in God's image unlike animals).

George Thinks

Thomas Aquinas's version of natural law is outlined in *Summa Theologica*, which was written in the thirteenth century. Animal rights campaigners often blame Christianity, and Thomas Aquinas in particular, for the treatment of animals in factory farms and laboratories across the Western world. Whilst it's true that natural law justifies human use of animals, the picture is a little more complicated; strictly speaking, it justifies human use of animals when such use helps to fulfil human purpose, and if such use threatens the fulfilment of human purpose then it's prohibited. Arguably, natural law is a victim of modern times, because it's hopelessly ill-equipped to deal with ethical dilemmas that Thomas Aquinas was unable to conceive of in the thirteenth century.

I never thought I'd end up defending natural law, but here I am! Think about it: factory farms and laboratories didn't exist in the thirteenth century, and farm animals led relatively pleasant lives compared with today. Yes, they were used for food and farming processes (like ploughing fields), but Thomas Aquinas actually advocated for their fair treatment (he cautioned against cruelty to animals in case it inspired cruelty to other human beings). On the subject of using animals in sport, *Summa Theologica* is silent; however, based on Thomas Aquinas's admonition against animal cruelty, it's almost impossible to believe he'd have approved of it. If anything then, the excessive cruelties inflicted on animals today can only be justified by a misapplication of natural law.

