

Dr. James S. Spiegel, Christian Ethics, Session 8, Natural Law Ethics Resources from NotebookLM

1) Abstract, 2) Audio podcast, 3) Briefing Document, 4) Study Guide, and 5) FAQs

1. Abstract of Spiegel, Christian Ethics, Session 8, Natural Law Ethics, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL

Dr. James S. Spiegel's lecture on Christian Ethics, specifically Session 8, introduces natural law ethics as a significant theological moral theory. Tracing its roots to ancient Greek philosophy and prominent thinkers like Augustine and Aquinas, natural law posits that everything, including humans, has a purpose or telos designed by God. This inherent design reveals natural laws, both descriptive and prescriptive, guiding behavior towards human flourishing. Aquinas further categorizes law into eternal, natural, divine, and human forms, explaining how reason can discern natural law aimed at our good. The lecture also addresses objections to natural law and acknowledges its limitations in resolving specific modern moral dilemmas. Ultimately, it presents natural law ethics as a system where observing inherent moral prescriptions leads to beneficial outcomes, while deviation results in negative consequences.

**2. 11 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of
Dr. Spiegel, Christian Ethics, Session 8 – Double click icon to
play in Windows media player or go to the
Biblicalelearning.org [BeL] Site and click the audio podcast link
there (Theology → Apologetics → Christian Ethics).**



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3. Briefing Document: Spiegel, Christian Ethics, Session 8, Natural Law Ethics

Briefing Document: Natural Law Ethics

Overview: This briefing document summarizes the main themes and important ideas presented by Dr. James S. Spiegel in Session 8 of his Christian Ethics course, focusing on Natural Law Ethics. Spiegel traces the historical roots of this ethical tradition, outlines its core tenets, discusses key figures like Thomas Aquinas, addresses common objections, and highlights some of its limitations.

Main Themes and Important Ideas:

1. Telos and Purpose:

- Natural law ethics begins with the idea that everything, including human beings, has a **telos**, meaning a purpose, aim, or function.
- For man-made objects, this purpose is evident in their design.
- For human beings, this purpose is rooted in their creation by God. "God made human beings a certain way. He made our organs a certain way to serve various purposes."
- By examining our design and functions, we can infer certain moral truths.

2. Natural Law as Divine Design:

- The source of the telos for all natural objects and human beings is God, who created the world as a functional and rational system.
- From this divine design, we can infer **natural laws**.
- These laws are both **descriptive** (e.g., laws of physics) and **prescriptive** (moral laws guiding behavior).
- Observing these natural moral laws leads to positive consequences, while deviating from them results in negative outcomes. "As we observe these natural moral laws or prescriptions, things tend to go well for us. But as we deviate, then things tend to go bad."

3. Human Reason and the Discovery of Natural Law:

- God created humans as rational beings, made in His image, enabling them to discern these natural laws. "...he has, as it were, tuned our minds to be alert to these various natural laws and how we ought to live in a general sense."
- Aquinas identifies basic ends known to us, including: self-preservation, pursuing understanding, educating offspring, and avoiding harm.

4. Biblical Roots of Natural Law:

- Spiegel points to biblical passages, particularly **Romans 2:14-15**, as supporting the idea of natural law.
- Paul states that Gentiles "do by nature things required by the law...They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness..."
- This suggests an innate sense of right and wrong, even without explicit divine revelation.

5. Aquinas' Taxonomy of Law:

- **Eternal Law:** The sum of all of God's decrees governing the universe.
- **Natural Law:** The aspect of eternal law discernible by human reason, aimed at our natural good. This includes:
 - **Primary Precepts:** Fundamental moral principles that are inherently known (e.g., pursue good and avoid evil, love your neighbor). J. Budziszewski's phrase, "moral principles that we can't not know," is highlighted.
 - **Secondary Precepts:** General moral norms derived from primary precepts (e.g., do not lie, return what belongs to others).
- **Divine Law:** The aspect of eternal law revealed in scripture, going beyond what can be known through reason alone.
- **Human Law:** Applications of natural law (and sometimes divine law) to civil society (e.g., traffic laws, laws against adultery).

6. Factors that Pervert Understanding of Natural Law (According to Aquinas):

- **Passion:** Strong emotions like anger and sexual passions can cloud judgment.
- **Evil Habits:** Repeated engagement in immoral behavior can distort moral understanding (e.g., pornography).
- **Evil Dispositions of Nature:** Potential genetic predispositions (e.g., to alcoholism).
- **Vicious Custom:** Societal approval of immoral behavior (e.g., bribery).
- **Evil Persuasion:** Being convinced by flawed philosophical arguments that immoral actions are permissible.

7. Objections to Natural Law and Responses:

- **Objection:** There can't be natural law because no moral principle is universally accepted; some people endorse wicked behavior.
- **Bochenski's Response:** We can know things we don't know we know (illustrated with the law of non-contradiction).
- People can repress or suppress what they know to be true (e.g., denying equal rights).
- **Objection:** People invent new values.
- **Bochenski's Response:** This is false. What appears to be a new value is likely a new label for an existing true value. "People cannot invent values, at least true values, any more than they can invent, say, a new primary color."

8. Limitations of Natural Law Ethics:

- Provides limited guidance on specific complex moral issues or dilemmas, such as distributive justice and drug legalization. "Issues like this are difficult in any case, and natural law ethics seems minimally helpful in these cases."
- It can be difficult to definitively determine whether certain actions fulfill one's telos.
- The "naturalistic fallacy" – the criticism that just because something is natural doesn't mean it's morally good, and vice versa. "Just because something is unnatural doesn't mean that it's immoral..." The example of using the tongue to lick stamps is given to illustrate that the intended function of a body part doesn't restrict all moral uses of it. "Just because the most natural or obvious use of a

particular bodily organ is one thing doesn't mean that it's immoral to use it in another context."

Conclusion:

Dr. Spiegel's session on Natural Law Ethics provides a comprehensive overview of this significant theological and philosophical tradition. He highlights its foundational principles rooted in the concept of telos and divine design, emphasizes the role of human reason in discerning natural moral laws, and underscores its biblical connections. While acknowledging its valuable insights, Spiegel also presents common objections and critical limitations, encouraging a nuanced understanding of its applicability to contemporary ethical challenges.

4. Study Guide: Spiegel, Christian Ethics, Session 8, Natural Law Ethics

Natural Law Ethics: A Study Guide

I. Key Concepts and Themes

- **Telos:** Define "telos" in the context of natural law ethics. Explain how this concept applies to both man-made objects and human beings.
- **Source of Telos:** According to natural law ethics (as presented), what is the ultimate source of the telos for all things, including humanity?
- **Natural Laws (Descriptive vs. Prescriptive):** Differentiate between descriptive and prescriptive natural laws. Provide examples of each.
- **Discovery of Natural Law:** How are humans able to discover or understand natural moral laws? What role does reason play?
- **Consequences of Violating Natural Law:** What are the general consequences of acting against natural moral laws, according to this ethical framework?
- **Aquinas' Taxonomy of Law:** Outline and briefly explain the four categories of law as described by Thomas Aquinas: eternal law, natural law, divine law, and human law.
- **Primary Precepts:** What are primary precepts in Aquinas' framework? Give examples of these fundamental moral principles.
- **Secondary Precepts:** How do secondary precepts relate to primary precepts? Provide examples of secondary precepts.
- **Biblical Basis for Natural Law:** Identify the biblical passages mentioned as potential support for the concept of natural law. What is the significance of Romans 2 in this context?
- **Factors Obscuring Natural Law:** According to Aquinas, what are some of the factors that can distort or pervert an individual's understanding of natural law? Provide examples for each factor.
- **Objections to Natural Law:** Describe the two main objections to natural law ethics discussed in the text.

- **Responses to Objections:** Summarize the responses provided by J. Bochenski to these objections.
- **Limitations of Natural Law Ethics:** What are some of the noted limitations or challenges associated with natural law ethics, as discussed in the text?

II. Quiz

Answer the following questions in 2-3 sentences each.

1. What is the central idea of "telos" in natural law ethics, and how does it relate to the purpose of human beings?
2. According to the source material, what is the ultimate origin of natural law, and how does this relate to the design of the world?
3. Explain the difference between a descriptive natural law, such as the law of gravity, and a prescriptive natural law within ethical theory.
4. In Aquinas' framework, what is the relationship between eternal law and natural law? How do humans come to know natural law?
5. Provide two examples of primary precepts as understood in natural law ethics, highlighting their fundamental nature.
6. How do secondary precepts differ from primary precepts, and what role do they play in applying natural law principles? Give an example.
7. According to Romans 2, what suggests that even those without explicit religious law have some inherent moral understanding?
8. Describe two factors, as identified by Aquinas, that can negatively influence or distort an individual's perception of natural law.
9. What is one common objection raised against the existence or practicality of natural law, as presented in the text?
10. What is one limitation of natural law ethics discussed in the source material regarding its application to specific moral dilemmas?

III. Answer Key for Quiz

1. "Telos" refers to the inherent purpose, aim, or function of something. In natural law ethics, it posits that human beings, like everything else, have a specific purpose or design, which is crucial for determining moral truths.

2. The ultimate origin of natural law is God, who created the world as a functional and rational system. He designed all things, including human beings, with specific ends in mind, from which natural laws can be inferred.
3. Descriptive natural laws are regularities observed in the natural world, like the laws of physics, while prescriptive natural laws are moral guidelines that dictate how humans should act to fulfill their telos and live well.
4. Eternal law, in Aquinas' view, is the entirety of God's decrees governing the universe, and natural law is the aspect of eternal law that is discernible by human reason. Humans can understand natural law through their rational capacity to discern their inherent good.
5. Examples of primary precepts include "pursue good and avoid evil" and "love your neighbor." These are considered fundamental moral principles that are self-evident and universally known by cognitively functional individuals.
6. Secondary precepts are moral norms derived from the broader primary precepts, offering more specific, though still general, applications. An example is "do not lie," which stems from the primary precept of pursuing good and avoiding harm in social interactions.
7. Romans 2 suggests that even Gentiles without formal religious law naturally do things required by the law, indicating that the requirements of the law are "written on their hearts," evidenced by their conscience.
8. Two factors that can distort the understanding of natural law include passions, such as anger or lust, which can cloud rational judgment, and evil habits, like repeated exposure to pornography, which can warp perceptions of morality.
9. One common objection is that the existence of individuals who reject seemingly universal moral principles, such as prohibitions against murder, suggests that there is no truly natural moral law.
10. One limitation is that natural law ethics often provides minimal guidance on specific and complex moral issues, such as the just distribution of resources or the legalization of drugs in a pluralistic society.

IV. Essay Format Questions

1. Discuss the relationship between the concept of "telos" and the formulation of moral principles within natural law ethics. How does understanding human purpose inform our understanding of right and wrong?
2. Compare and contrast Aquinas' understanding of natural law with the biblical passages cited in the text as potential support for natural law. To what extent do these sources align or diverge in their understanding of inherent morality?
3. Critically evaluate the objections raised against natural law ethics, particularly the argument that the existence of moral disagreement disproves natural law. How effective are the responses provided in addressing these challenges?
4. Analyze the strengths and limitations of natural law ethics as a framework for moral decision-making in contemporary society. Consider its ability to address complex ethical dilemmas and its susceptibility to subjective interpretation.
5. Explore the factors that Aquinas suggests can obscure or pervert an individual's understanding of natural law. How relevant are these factors in explaining moral disagreements and unethical behavior in the modern world?

V. Glossary of Key Terms

- **Telos:** (Greek) The inherent purpose, end, aim, or function of something. In natural law ethics, it refers to the natural end or goal towards which human beings and other things are directed.
- **Natural Law:** A system of moral principles believed to be inherent in human nature and discoverable through reason, independent of human-made laws or customs.
- **Divine Command Theory:** An ethical theory stating that morally right actions are those commanded by God, and morally wrong actions are those forbidden by God.
- **Eternal Law:** In Aquinas' philosophy, the sum of all of God's decrees that govern the universe; God's overall plan and ordering of all things.
- **Primary Precepts:** Fundamental moral principles in natural law ethics that are considered self-evident and universally binding, such as the inclination to preserve one's own being.
- **Secondary Precepts:** Moral norms that are derived from the primary precepts through reason and offer more specific guidance on how to act morally.
- **Divine Law:** That aspect of the eternal law that is revealed by God through scripture or special revelation.
- **Human Law:** Positive laws enacted by human authorities (e.g., governments) for the common good of society, which should ideally be in accordance with natural law and divine law.
- **Conscience:** An inner feeling or voice viewed as acting as a guide to the rightness or wrongness of one's behavior. In the context of natural law, it is often seen as the faculty by which we recognize the primary precepts.
- **Rationality:** The quality of being based on or in accordance with reason or logic. Natural law ethics emphasizes the role of human reason in discerning moral truths.
- **Prescriptive Law:** A type of law that tells people what they ought to do or how they should behave.
- **Descriptive Law:** A type of law that describes regularities or patterns observed in the natural world, without making moral claims.

5. FAQs on Spiegel, Christian Ethics, Session 8, Natural Law Ethics, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

Frequently Asked Questions: Natural Law Ethics

1. What is natural law ethics and what are its historical roots? Natural law ethics posits that there are inherent moral principles discoverable through reason by observing the natural order of the world and human nature. It suggests that everything, including humans, has a *telos* or purpose designed by God. The roots of natural law ethics can be traced back to ancient Greek philosophy, particularly the ideas of Socrates, Aristotle, and the Stoics. It was later significantly developed within Christian theology by figures like Augustine and Thomas Aquinas.

2. What is the central idea of "telos" in natural law ethics and how does it relate to morality? The concept of *telos* refers to the inherent purpose, aim, or function of something. In natural law ethics, the idea is that God created everything, including human beings and their organs, with specific purposes. By understanding our design and these natural functions, we can infer certain moral truths about how we should act. Living in accordance with our *telos* and fulfilling our designed purpose is seen as morally good, while deviating from it leads to negative consequences.

3. How does Thomas Aquinas categorize different types of law within the framework of natural law ethics? Aquinas provides a hierarchical taxonomy of law. At the highest level is **eternal law**, which encompasses all of God's decrees governing the universe. **Natural law** is the aspect of eternal law that humans can discern through reason and is aimed at our natural good. **Divine law** is the part of eternal law revealed through scripture, going beyond what can be known through reason alone. Finally, **human law** refers to applications of natural law (and sometimes divine law) to civil society, such as traffic laws.

4. What are primary and secondary precepts in Aquinas's understanding of natural law? Primary precepts are fundamental moral principles that are considered universally known and cannot be not known by cognitively functional individuals. Examples include the pursuit of good and avoidance of evil, self-preservation, the pursuit of understanding, educating offspring, and avoiding harm to others. Secondary precepts are more specific moral norms derived from these primary precepts through reasoning and application. Examples include not lying and returning what belongs to others.

5. How does natural law ethics explain the existence of a universal sense of morality, even among those without specific religious or legal codes? Natural law ethics suggests that God created humans with rationality and in His image, equipping us with an innate capacity to recognize fundamental moral truths. As the Apostle Paul writes in Romans, even Gentiles who do not have the Mosaic Law often instinctively act in accordance with its requirements, indicating that these moral principles are "written on their hearts" and witnessed by their conscience.

6. According to Aquinas, what factors can distort or pervert our understanding of natural law? Aquinas identifies several factors that can obscure our ability to correctly discern natural law. These include being overcome by strong passions (like anger or sexual desires), the influence of evil habits, negative innate dispositions, the impact of vicious customs within a community that approves of immoral behavior, and being swayed by flawed philosophical arguments that justify immoral actions.

7. What are some common objections raised against natural law ethics and how are they addressed within the theory? One objection is the apparent lack of universally accepted moral principles, as some individuals seem to reject even basic moral norms. A response to this is that people can know things implicitly without consciously acknowledging them or may repress truths they don't want to accept. Another objection is that people seem to invent new values. A counter-argument suggests that these are often just new labels for existing, true values rather than genuine creations of entirely new moral principles.

8. What are some limitations or challenges associated with applying natural law ethics to specific moral issues? Critics point out that natural law ethics can sometimes offer limited guidance on complex and specific moral dilemmas, such as issues of distributive justice or drug legalization. Additionally, it can be challenging to definitively determine whether certain actions truly fulfill or violate our inherent *telos*. The critique also arises that simply because something might be considered "unnatural" (in the sense of not being the primary or obvious function of something) does not automatically render it immoral.