Course Objectives

The tradition of natural law ethics includes a rather wide variety of theories. From its origins natural law thinking has attempted to identify and defend an objective and intelligible basis for morality by concentrating on human nature, especially in terms of its structures and teleology. For some, the natural law refers to a higher law by which to measure the justice of human institutions and civil legislation. Some thinkers have called on natural law in order to defend the rights of individuals under a Constitution. Others use it to understand what makes agents morally virtuous and what the goal of human development is. What unites these many views under a common title is the appeal to nature as in certain ways normative for human behavior.

An important aim of this course is to acquaint the student with a variety of theories that fall under the heading of natural law ethics and the different sorts of problems they are designed to address. A second aim is to exemplify the application of the natural law/natural rights tradition to current moral problems. Given the important theological uses made of the natural moral law, a third aim is to explore some connections between philosophical and theological approaches to ethics by special consideration of the Thomistic tradition in natural law ethics.