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Mains Practice Questions

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Q. What do you understand by natural law ethics? Discuss with examples the criticism of this branch of ethics. (150 Words)

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Approach

- Start with writing what is meant by natural law ethics and how it promotes natural values.
- Discuss criticism of this branch of ethics by giving examples.
- Conclude suitably.

Introduction

Natural law philosophy was fully developed by the medieval philosopher St. Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas says that every natural object has a natural purpose or function.

For example, the purpose of the heart is to circulate blood.

When natural objects perform their purposes, the resulting situation is wholesome, and one which has a natural value. But when natural objects are unable to perform their natural functions or achieve their natural purposes, the resulting situation is undesirable.

Body

Natural Law Ethics promotes

- **Identifies Natural Values:** Natural law theory identifies natural values as including what human beings innately desire and need as well as whatever conforms to the cosmic order and its laws.
It then adds that these natural values are (morally) good and that we have a moral obligation to promote them. Of these goods, human reason is particularly important and should guide and direct all that we do.
- Although natural law doesn't have to relate to any religion, Aquinas added that the entire cosmos is the creation of a good and rational God.
This is intended to account for the inherent goodness of natural values as well as for the fact that we can discover the structure of the natural world.
- **Preserving Life:** All living things share the natural value of preserving life. Living things ultimately die. But so long as they are alive, their parts serve the purpose of maintaining life.
As life is a natural value, attempts to preserve it are good. Duty of preserving human life (and indeed all life) is basic to natural law ethics and sets it apart from other approaches to ethics.

- **Promote Social Order:** As preservation of human species is part of man's natural function, men should do such things which promote the proper function of humanity.
 - As human beings flourish in a well-ordered society, morality requires that we do things which promote social order. As a result, telling the truth, keeping promises, and doing such other things as promoting mutual trust become moral duties.
- **Principle of forfeiture and the Doctrine of Double Effects :** Natural law ethics concedes that in certain circumstances one may have to deprive individuals of their life. If a mad killer is going on a rampage, police will be justified in killing him. The action of police will be justified on the basis of the principle of forfeiture.

Criticism of Natural Law Ethics

- **Promoting natural purpose and functions may not always be desirable.** Sting of female mosquitoes spreads malaria. Various measures are taken to destroy the habitats of these mosquitoes. But such measures may seem to violate natural law ethics.
 - Another example could be the removal of poisonous weeds.
- Many features of nature are unattractive. For example, the animal kingdom consists of many predators and their prey. Killing and violence mark natural life.
 - According to Darwin, natural evolution of species involves struggle for existence between species. Often the weak members are eliminated in the process.
 - Hence, natural processes may not yield morally acceptable principles.
- Another problem with natural law theories is that they pick and choose what they regard as natural. All natural organisms decay and die.
 - Death is also a part of nature. But does it mean that we should promote or hasten death in certain circumstances.
 - Natural law ethics oppose this suggestion. Many will regard their position as morally justified. But it may be inconsistent with their approach of favouring natural processes and functions.

Conclusion

What is interesting about natural law theory is that it includes both consequentialist and deontological components and so presents an alternative to both Kantianism and utilitarianism. Consequences, intentions, and moral principles all have roles in natural law theory.