5. To what extent does Plato integrate traditional religious beliefs into his ethical system?

6. Discuss critically the implication of the Socratic-Platonic argument that "knowledge is virtue".

7. Give a critical account of Plato's theory of "human nature".

8. Explain briefly what Aristotle means by the "contemplative life".

9. Compare and contrast Aristotle's ethical theory with that of Plato's.

10. Discuss the significance of the distinction between "theoretical reason" and "practical reason".


# 6 STUDY UNIT 5: MEDIEVAL ETHICS [AUGUSTINE AND AQUINAS]

**Learning Outcomes**
When you have completed this study unit, you should be able to:
- Give an account of Saint Augustine's ethical approach which depicts God as the chief good of humankind.
- Give an account of Thomas Aquinas's ethical theory as "natural law".
- Evaluate the respective merits of these two influential figures in the Judeo-Christian tradition


## 6.1 St AUGUSTINE (354-430 CE)

Augustine was born in Tagaste in the African province of Numidia. His father was a pagan, but his mother was a devout Christian and it is likely that it was his mother who was the deciding influence in his life. In 396 CE he became Bishop of Hippo, the seaport near Tagaste. The driving force of his philosophical activity was his intense concern over his own, personal destiny.


### 6.1.1 Introduction

Augustine's concern for his personal destiny prompted him to raise critical questions about himself and humanity in general. What puzzled him was the ever- present problem of moral evil. It was difficult for Augustine to explain the existence of evil in human experience. Augustine, like many others, found it difficult to reconcile Christianity's portrayal of a good creator God with the fact of evil. If God is a loving God, how can he allow evil to rule "a world that a perfectly good God had created"? Because he could find no answer in the Christianity that he supported as a young man, Augustine turned to the Manichaeans. The Manichaeans were a group who claimed intellectual superiority over others. But, despite this attitude, the Manichaeans were sympathetic to some Christian views. They openly rejected "the basic monotheism of the old Testament and, with it, the doctrine that the Creator and Redeemer of man are one and the same" (Stumpf 1983:130).

As a group, the Manichaeans taught a doctrine of dualism, which stated that the universe rested on two basic principles, the principle of light or goodness, on the one hand, and the principle of darkness or evil, on the other. The two principles were seen to be in conflict with each other. Human life mirrored this conflict in terms of the conflict between the soul, composed of light, and the body, composed of darkness. Dualism as a doctrine solved Augustine's problem of the contradiction of the fact of evil in a God-created world, but it raised a host of new problems. He later turned to Platonism which enhanced his intellectual standing, Augustine's dramatic change occurred in 386 CE, when he decided to devote his life to the pursuit of philosophy. For him, the sudden change did not conflict with his Christian values, because his pursuit of philosophy also meant the knowledge of God. He made his intentions clear when he made the following confession (Stumpf 1983:131):

> I am confident that, among the Platonists, I shall find what is not opposed to the teachings of our religion. ... from this moment forward, it is my resolve never to depart from the authority of Christ, for I find none that is stronger. ... I must follow after this with the greatest subtlety of reason.

Augustine's pursuit of philosophy made him true to his Christian values because he realised that true philosophy encompassed both faith and reason. He acknowledged the fact that reason without faith was possible, but claimed that it would never be complete. In this study unit, we are going to examine Augustine's arguments as follows: firstly, that God is humankind's chief good, and secondly, that we have a choice to align ourselves with the city of God or the earthly city. We are also going to consider Thomas Aquinas's ethical theory as "natural law".

### 6.1.2 Augustine's ethical theory

Augustine's ethical theory regards morality as the ground of everything. This becomes clear from his explanation on how human beings should conduct themselves on their road to happiness, which is the goal of all human behaviour. Every human being should live in a way that brings him/her happiness. Augustine, like the Greeks, argues that happiness is the thing that all human beings desire the most.

### 6.1.2.1 God as our chief good

For Augustine, happiness is achievable if we do not confine ourselves to the natural, but turn to the supernatural. Human beings are not nature's creation, but God's creation. It is from this perspective that we need to understand that it is only when we possess and love our chief well that we will be happy. Our chief good cannot be something within the realm of the natural. Augustine therefore points out that our "highest good is God, who is Goodness itself and the source of limited goodness that any creature has". What Augustine says is in line with the biblical teaching that we are all made in the image of God. It is therefore no accident that we all seek happiness. That we seek it is a consequence of our incompleteness, our finitude. Augustine clarifies the aspect of our incompleteness/finitude through the doctrine of love. (For a detailed discussion of God as our chief good, read Stumpf & Abel [2002: 360]).

## 6.1.2.2 The role of love

Augustine believes that there is no way of separating human beings from love. In his (Augustine) own words, "man inevitably loves". It is human finitude that makes it inevitable that human beings will love. We can choose to love physical objects, other persons (including ourselves) but for Augustine we make a serious mistake when we love all lesser goods more than God. How can lesser goods be as good as God who is perfect and who is Goodness itself? Imperfect goods are in a perpetual state of change, but God is eternal and unchanging. All lesser goods are legitimate objects of love because they have been created by God. Instead of using lesser goods as means to God, we use them as an End in themselves, argues Augustine. "Man's moral problem consists not so much in loving or even in the objects he loves as in the manner in which he attaches himself to his objects of love and in his expectations regarding the outcome of his love." Human beings expect to find happiness from love, yet what they experience instead is misery, helplessness and unhappiness. According to Augustine, the reason for the above is our "disordered" love. How often have we been told that material possessions will never bring us happiness? According to Augustine, nothing is evil in itself; what is evil is our love of lesser goods. Stumpf and Abel (2002:361) justify this argument with the example of overeating:

> It is fine to desire food, since food is part of creation and God wants us to eat in order to keep healthy and be able to serve God. But to desire food to the point of gluttony and obsession is a disordered desire because it lets a creature interfere with our proper relationship to God.

Augustine acknowledges the fact that all things in the world are objects of love because they are God's creation. But his main concern is our love of things for the sake of ultimate happiness. He calls this kind of love disordered love. "Disordered love consists in expecting more from an object of love than it is capable of providing."

## 6.1.2.3 Free will as the cause of evil

Augustine claims that the evil comes about through free will. His starting point is that free will is a gift given to all of us by God, and any misuse of the gift cannot be blamed on God. In short, we are free. The choices we make are our own free choices. We choose to turn toward God or away from God. It is on the basis of this view that Augustine argues that "moral evil is due to our own free choice". Human beings are capable of directing their affections exclusively to physical objects, other persons, themselves and away from the Creator. As Augustine points out, any course of action that we take is voluntary. The above argument is evident in the following story (Stumpf & Abel 2002:361):

> Adam and Eve misused their free will and were justly exiled from the Garden of Eden, just as certain angels, before the creation of the world, misused their free will and were banished to hell. To say that free will is not a good gift because it can be misused to prefer the finite or the infinite, is like saying that hands are not good gifts because they can be misused to commit theft.

The above explanation shows that Augustine rejects both the Manichaeans' and Plato's teaching on what causes evil. The Manichaeans taught "that we do not come entirely from God, but in part from an evil power", and Plato argued that "the cause of evil is simply ignorance". For Augustine, evil is a product of the will. (For a more detailed discussion of free will as the cause of evil, see Stumpf & Abel [2002:361-362]).

**6.1.2.4 The two cities**

Augustine's The City of God brings into sharp focus his concept of free will; according to Augustine we have an alternative: to align ourselves with the City of God or to align ourselves with the earthly city. Once we align ourselves with the city of God, we have moved out of the realm of the temporal and finite (natural) and have entered the realm of the eternal and infinite (supernatural). In other words, we have chosen God over the things of the world. But if we align ourselves with the earthly city, we remain in the realm of the temporal and finite (natural). This implies that we have chosen the lesser goods over God. Judgment Day will reward each group according to their choice and this choice will become evident as the two cities are separated.

**Point to ponder**
Read and reflect on the following newspaper article and analyse it in terms of Augustine's ethical concepts: God as our chief good, love, and free will.

> "The perceived "horror" of the gay debate splitting the church should not be feared", writes Cedric Mayson. Many religious people have attacked homosexuality as a heinous sin, an evil to be cast out and a devilish distortion. Some, from cardinals to bush Baptists, have condemned homosexuality as unnatural and something to be rejected. ... Those who claim that "the Bible condemns homosexuality" need to be careful. Scripture certainly condemns lust, but that applies to the misuse of all sexual activity. Only three texts appear to specifically denounce homosexuality. Two, from Leviticus 18.22 and 20.13, see it as an abomination that should be penalised by death. But few people who use these texts to condemn gays and lesbians would have them killed as scripture commands. They recognise that, just as Jesus moved beyond the Law of Moses, so God has guided us to progress beyond the need for the death penalty. They believe that humanity has evolved since the days of Leviticus, in this and many other ways. Why do they feel that they know better than Leviticus with regard to killing, but not with regard to homosexuality? Paul's condemnation of those who indulge in "shameful acts" (Romans 1.26-27) is also instructive. Walter Wink, a professor of religious studies, points out that Paul had no concept of homosexual orientation. (The word was only coined in 1869.) Paul had no idea that homosexuality was natural to many people. Neither did Paul make the distinction between sexual orientation over which we have little choice and sexual behaviour, where we make moral choices about responsibility, love, promiscuity and lust, whoever our partners are. The Bible sets out an unfolding and developmental view of human awareness that constantly challenges inherited concepts with the spiritual progress of the human community. Human sacrifice and ritualism were replaced during the Old Testament period and attitudes to gentiles, women and the poor changed in the time of the New Testament. Jesus was killed precisely for questioning the religious traditions of the time. There has been constant developments in the 2000 years of Christian history. Slavery, the oppression of women, the divine right of kings and men, the deification of wealth and the glorification of race have all been defended by religious institutions on the grounds of scripture; and defeated on the grounds of obedience to the spirit (Mayson 2003).

**Feedback:** Augustine is aware of the fact that ethics is about how we should live. His starting point is that "we should live in a way that brings us happiness, since happiness is what we all ultimately desire". We can only achieve happiness if we possess God as our chief good.

The fact that we commit immoral actions does not convince Augustine that we are not good creatures. He takes the position that we are good creatures created by God, who is Goodness itself. According to Augustine, "moral evil is due to our free choice", since we are all blessed with free will. What appears to be critical in his argument is the fact that: "God gave us free will with the intention that we use it to love God above all things." If you have a homosexual who has freely chosen to love God above all things because this brings him/her happiness, do you really think that God would reject such an individual because of his/her sexual orientation? Augustine makes it clear that everything in the world is good because everything comes from God. As a result, "all things are legitimate objects of love". He also emphasises the fact that "man's moral problem consists not so much in loving or even in the objects he loves, as in the manner in which he attaches himself to his objects of love". According to Augustine, there is nothing wrong in loving or with the objects of love, if we are conscious of the fact that our highest good is God, who is Goodness itself.

### 6.1.3  St. THOMAS AQUINAS (1225-1274)

Thomas Aquinas's father placed him in the Benedictine Abbey of Monte Cassino at the age of five, and for the next nine years he pursued his studies in this Abbey. At the age of 14, he entered the University of Naples. Four years later, he moved to the University of Paris, where he was influences by Albert Magnus's scientific and philosophical ideas.

### 6.1.4  Introduction
Albert Magnus believed that philosophy and science were important subjects in Christian thought. He considered Aristotle as the greatest of all philosophers, and this prompted him to study Aristotle's philosophy in detail. Thomas Aquinas's respect for Magnus's knowledge encouraged him to follow in his teacher's footsteps and he, too, studied Aristotle's philosophy. One of the issues that made an impact on Aquinas was his realisation that the teachings of Aristotle and the Christian faith were in harmony with each other. It is therefore not surprising that he used Aristotle's theory of ethics as the foundation of his ethical theory. Aquinas, like Aristotle, considered morality to be a quest for happiness. He also agreed with Aristotle that a human being's happiness was connected closely with his/her end/ purpose. Aristotle articulated only a naturalistic morality "whereby men could achieve virtue and happiness by fulfilling their natural capacities or end".

However, as a Christian thinker, Aquinas taught that human beings could achieve happiness by fulfilling both their natural and supernatural end. Despite the fact that Aquinas agreed with most of Aristotle's principles, he argued that Aristotelian ethics was incomplete because it lacked the dimension of faith. Aquinas, like Augustine, was of the opinion that the source and ultimate end of human nature was God. Both Augustine and Aquinas were convinced that true and perfect happiness was only possible through God (that is, when human beings possess God). Aquinas was of the opinion that certain moral laws could be derived from our human nature. For him, we could arrive at these moral laws by philosophical reflection on our human nature. It is this vision that made Aquinas call his theory of philosophical ethics "natural law" (see previous study unit).

### 6.1.5  Aquinas's ethical theory

### 6.1.5.1 The concept of law

The foundation of Aquinas's ethical theory is natural law. In one of his works, *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas provides us with a general definition of law as "a dictate of practical reason emanating from the ruler who governs a complete community".

It is within the framework of this general definition that Aquinas examines the following kinds of law: (1) eternal law, (2) natural law, (3) human law, (4) divine law, and (5) law of sin. Aquinas defines **natural law** in terms of eternal law. According to him, eternal law is the all-encompassing law by which God governs the universe. He (Aquinas) calls it eternal because it comes directly from God (who is eternal). All the inclinations that are part and parcel of all the creatures in the universe fall within the boundaries of eternal law. The law of gravity is given as an example of eternal law because it governs all physical beings. Eternal law is in line with the criteria contained in Aquinas's general definition of law as follows (Stumpf & Abel 2002: 370):

> It is a command of practical reason, since these laws issue from God's reason, used to direct the activity of all creatures in the universe; it is issued by someone with legitimate authority over the universe, namely the Creator; and it aims at the wellbeing of the universe as a whole.

### 6.1.5.2 The concept of natural law

Aquinas does not view morality as an arbitrary set of rules governing human behaviour. According to Aquinas, the basis of moral obligation is located in the nature of human beings. Built into all things, including human beings, are various inclinations that enable all things to participate in eternal law. Aquinas points out that participation "which consists in being ruled by eternal law is passive participation". But it is also important to understand that rational creatures such as human beings participate actively in natural laws, as we have already shown. As human beings, we can use our reason and free will to regulate some of our inclinations. For example, it is possible for a human being to decide whether to eat or postpone a meal.

### 6.1.5.3 The precepts of natural law

Aquinas defines natural law as "the active participation by human beings in fulfilling their natural inclinations''. According to him, inclination has a double sense: in the first sense, there is just one inclination; in the second sense, there are several. Our basic inclination as human beings is to "seek our human good''. This implies that the basic moral truth is to "do good and avoid evil''. Aquinas considers this as the fundamental precept of natural law, which includes all of philosophical morality. The general nature of the fundamental precept of natural law prompted Aquinas to clarify its double sense as follows (Stumpf & Abel 2002:372):

> Although the natural law in a sense contains only one precept, in another sense it contains several. These several precepts result from analysing the good that we naturally seek. There are various basic dimensions to the human good, and these multiple dimensions give rise to several precepts of natural law.

Aquinas points out the three levels of natural human inclinations that are in line with the three main groups of beings to which human beings belong as follows: "On the most basic level, we are substances (things), and an inclination that we share with all things (animate and inanimate) is self-preservation. Second, we are animals, and an inclination of all animals is to preserve all their species. Third, we are rational animals, and as rational animals we have a tendency to seek the truth (including the most important truth of all, truth about God) and to live in society."(Stumpf & Abel 2002:372).

All the above basic human inclinations reflect part of the human good. The fundamental precept to "do well and avoid evil" brings with it specific commands. Aquinas articulates these commands as follows: "We are to preserve our own being, have children and raise them, seek the truth, and live harmoniously in society." Now to be a moral being consists in following these precepts. The idea is that if we follow these precepts, we will live well and achieve happiness. But it is important to realise that Aquinas's natural law does not have all the answers, it only serves as a framework for moral decision making. (For a more detailed discussion of the precepts of natural law, see Stumpf & Abel [2002:371-373].)

**Point to ponder**
Consider the following extract and use it as your starting point to challenge both Augustine and Aquinas's idea that the fundamental command of ethics is to love God.

> Human freedom is a given if we accept the theological position that God created the universe as a reflection of divine love. It would be a most unsatisfactory situation if we had no option but to love God. Although all of us have wished we could command someone to love us, it takes only a moment's reflection to realise that forced love is not love at all; only when someone freely chooses to love us do we feel loved. God is in more or less the same position: for our love to be freely given to God, we must have the option not to love God. Yet God knows what our choices will be since God knows everything. (Mitchell1996:182)

**Feedback:** God is characterised as the omnipotent, omniscient and benevolent Creator of humankind and the universe. The two thinkers argue that God has given us free will to enable us to make free choices. If we commit immoral actions, we are asked not to blame God because moral evil is due to our own free choice. Why is it, then, that we are punished when we exercise our free choice not to love God? If free will is a gift given to us by God, this implies that God was aware from the beginning that some of us might choose not to love him.

### 6.1.6 Summary

The ethical theories of Augustine and Aquinas acknowledge the fact that happiness is our end/purpose. They also agree that the only way in which we can achieve happiness is through God. Their acceptance of philosophy as an important area of human activity does not move them away from their Christian values. They therefore argue that philosophy (reason) without faith is incomplete. A thorough analysis of their approaches shows that the two thinkers use both reason and faith in building their ethical theories. What this means is that any aspects of their theories that cannot be rationally explained move into the realm of the supernatural (faith).

It is important for us to understand the spirit of the period in which these two thinkers developed their theories: the medieval period (1000 to 1500 CE). During this period, theology dominated every sphere of human life. Ethics and morality were regarded as rooted in Christian doctrine and the authority the church reigned over the authority of the state. Human beings have free will, and this enables them to make moral choices, that is, to distinguish between right and wrong, good and evil. Failure on the part of any human being to make appropriate moral choices cannot be blamed on God because the "moral evil is due to our own free choice". However, ethical theories show that, despite our common understanding of the basic moral truth: to "do good and avoid evil", our approach to this basic moral truth will always differ.
The Christians and all those who fall outside Christianity agree that it is important to "do good and avoid evil", but different people follow this precept in very different ways.

**6.2 Self-Assessment Questions**
1. Briefly explain Augustine's concept of love.
2. Briefly explain Augustine concept of happiness.
3. What do you make of Augustine's distinction between God as our chief good and lesser goods?
4. Why is it necessary for us to love God?
5. In Augustine's view, what is the proper way to love temporal, finite beings?
6. Do you think it is possible for finite human beings to possess the infinite God? If so, in what way?
7. Briefly explain Aquinas's concept of law.
8. Briefly explain Aquinas's concept of natural law.
9. What do you make of Aquinas's idea that eternal law is the all-encompassing law of God that governs the universe?
10. In your opinion, are all human inclinations good?
11. In what way is the basic moral truth "do good and avoid evil" universal?
12. "Faith begins where reason ends." To what extent is this true?

# 7 STUDY UNIT 6: ANCIENT GREEK POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

**Learning Outcomes**

When you have completed this study unit, you should be able to:
- describe what political philosophy is
- give an account of Plato's theory of the state
- give an account of Aristotle's theory of the state
- compare and contrast Plato and Aristotle's theories of the state

**7.1 Introduction: What is political philosophy?**

It is generally accepted that no human individual is self-sufficient. From the cradle to the grave we are dependent on others. And even in certain instances where we are not dependent, we are expected, from a moral and political perspective, to interact with others, even as we pursue or own interests, in a manner that is acceptable to society.

In one of his private meditations, the English poet, John Donne (1572-1631), points out that "no man is an island". These words, if interpreted in a gender- neutral way (which has not always been the case) underline the central theme of political philosophy. Given the view that, as human beings, we are first and foremost "social and political animals" (Aristotle), a discipline such as "political and social philosophy" finds its justification in the need to examine certain normative aspects of our social and political lives.

The work of the political philosopher overlaps with that of the sociologist and the political scientist, in that all of them are engaged in research into matters of a social or political nature. However, what distinguishes the work of the political philosopher from that of her colleagues is political philosophy's central preoccupation with normative questions regarding, among other things: