Religion and Ethics Eduqas / WJEC A level Knowledge Organiser:
Theme 2D Deontological Ethics – John Finnis' Development of Natural Law

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Key concepts:

- John Finnis' development of Natural Law emphasised **practical reasonableness**, using intelligence to work out the best action, instead of church authority.

- **Basic goods / basic values** are **self-evident**, **basic** (cannot be reduced to other types of good) and **objectively** all equally, **universally** and **intrinsically** good.

- Basic goods are activities that are the purpose of Aquinas' primary precepts. They are aspects of human existence that are sought for their own sake regardless of the circumstances.

- Basic goods are not laws. They offer a framework within which a moral agent can choose their own actions from many possible moral options.

- A moral agent **participates** in the goods, they are not a ruling nor a calculus.

- The seven basic goods are: life, knowledge, play, aesthetic experience, friendship, practical reasonableness, and religion.

- Participation in the goods leads to human flourishing.

- Finnis views the goods **holistically** meaning all goods must be pursued and no good can be prioritised over any other.

- Any other form of good is simply ways of pursuing one of the above seven goods.

- The common good is the coordination, collaboration, and cooperation of people in a society.

- Society must be organised so that everyone can participate in the basic goods without impediment.

- **Authority** is needed to organise individual life plans so that everyone can freely participate in the goods without damaging the common good.

- It is impractical for everyone to decide for themselves on every issue, so authority helps to swiftly coordinate decisions that affect the common good.

- Authority should not restrict **autonomy**; it organises fair participation in the goods.

- Finnis sees **theoretical reason** (facts about the world – 'is' statements) and practical reason (how to behave – 'ought' statements) as completely different. One does not lead to the other.

- There are nine requirements of practical reason to have:
  - a coherent plan of life
  - no **arbitrary** preferences amongst values
  - no arbitrary preferences amongst persons
  - **detachment**
  - **commitment**
  - **efficiency** within reason: consequences have limited relevance
  - respect every basic value in every act
  - consider the **common good**
  - follow one's **conscience**

- These nine requirements are the way in which one can work out how to participate in all the basic values. This is the Natural Law method.

Key quotes:

'Any sane person is capable of seeing that life, knowledge, fellowship, offspring, and a few other such basic aspects of human existence are, as such, good.' – John Finnis

'It is unreasonable to live merely from moment to moment, following immediate cravings, or just drifting.' – John Finnis

'Each of these human values is itself a common good inasmuch as it can be participated in by an inexhaustible number of persons in an inexhaustible variety of ways.' – John Finnis

Issues for analysis and evaluation:

Key arguments/debates

Some argue that there is too much emphasis on fallible human reasoning, and not enough dependence on God in this theory.

Others point out that there seems to be no clear guidance or law given in Finnis' Natural Law, making it difficult to follow.

Some argue that Finnis' Natural Law has brought him to some intolerant conclusions regarding sexual orientation and immigration for example.

Key questions

Are there any other values that could be added to Finnis' list?

Could you follow Finnis' Natural Law and still perform an immoral act?

Is Finnis' Natural Law useful for helping people make moral decisions?

Are there any moral problems today that cannot be addressed by Finnis' Natural Law?

Key words:

Practical reasonableness	basic goods	basic values	self-evident
basic	objectively	universally	intrinsically
participates	holistically	theorectical reason	arbitrary
detachment	commitment	efficiency	common good
conscience	authority	autonomy	