Year 12 RPE

Religion, Philosophy and Ethics

Summer Homework Task (1)

1) Philosophy of Religion - Read Chapter 1 pages 2 – 15 and make notes on section 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7
2) Make a glossary of all the Key Terms
3) Note down the key People and Quotes
4) Read Section 6 carefully about study Advice - page 11 – 13
5) Draw the Mind Map of Philosophy page 14
6) Try the Tasks in the Revision box on page 14

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Philosophy of religion

Chapter 1

Philosophy and its methods

1 Introduction

Chapter checklist

This chapter is designed to encourage the correct attitude to philosophical discussion. It begins by pointing out that philosophy is a practice that requires engagement and reflection. It is not simply a list of points to be learned. The chapter briefly discusses the major divisions of the subject – logic, metaphysics and epistemology (theory of knowledge), with some discussion of what we mean by knowledge and when we can claim to have it. It gives guidance on good practice in taking notes in philosophy and theology. Finally, it provides suggestions about the skills required in essay writing.

2 Philosophy is a conversation

'Why did you think that?'
'Is that really a good enough reason?'
'Why did I do that?'
'How did you reach that conclusion?'
'Why on earth do things like that happen?'

We have all heard ourselves and others use sentences like these. We ask questions, both of ourselves and others, and we think about and probe the answers we give. If someone gives a silly reason for an action, we tend to ask more questions and try to probe more deeply.

Key term

Philosophy The study of the fundamental nature of knowledge, reality, and existence, especially when considered as an academic discipline.

Key quote

The thing is to understand myself. To see what God really wishes me to do: the thing is to find a truth which is true for me, to find the idea for which I can live and die.

Søren Kierkegaard 1813–55

When we do this, we are conversing – but we are also being philosophers. We are looking for understanding. To understand and to be aware of the questions we ought to ask, and not to be afraid to ask them, is the beginning of wisdom. The word **philosophy** means 'love of wisdom'. In philosophy, we question and think about the answers, then perhaps look for clarification, explanation and justification, just as we do when we are talking to people, so we understand more clearly. Living philosophers talk to each other, and discuss among themselves what other philosophers (including the dead ones) might have meant when they gave their opinions.

Philosophy, including ethics, is not a subject to be learned, but an activity. This is true also in how philosophy relates to theology.

That sounds odd, but understanding this is what makes the difference between doing well in the subject and merely knowing enough to pass an examination. Being good at philosophy is not a question of how much you know, because anyone can, with enough hard work, learn facts. If all you did in the next year or so was learn facts about philosophy, you would have learned the basics to begin philosophy, but no more.

This need not seem so strange. If all you had ever done in mathematics was to learn the meaning of basic arithmetical signs, and learned by heart dozens of different formulas, would you be good at mathematics? Knowing about mathematics is not the same as being a good mathematician. A good mathematician actively uses mathematics, working through problems, using specific knowledge of formulas to work out the solution to problems. This is why the study of mathematics goes beyond mechanical or rote learning. You have to practise it as a set of skills, and in the practice you discover its deeper meanings.

Philosophy is like that. It is quite different from learning something such as the names of the bones in the foot or the periodic table; though good biologists and chemists do more than simply learn these basic facts. They also think through the implications of what has been learned – the meaning of these facts – for understanding the skeleton or chemical structure.

Philosophy, then, requires *engagement*. You should not approach it as you would approach learning a set of notes or a teacher's PowerPoint presentation. Instead, it requires you to think about the issues, reaching your own conclusions – with sound reasoning for the conclusions you reach.

Philosophy discusses big issues. In Ancient Greece, much philosophy, especially as practised by the great philosophers like Socrates, Plato, Aristotle or Pythagoras, was, at its heart, a considered conversation. Perhaps the conservation took place in the market place or, often, during and after a friendly meal.

When a philosopher develops a theory or a new argument, he or she is not saying to the world:

'Learn this!'

Rather, the philosopher asks a question:

'What do you think of this?'

The right response is not to say that you have learned it, but to respond with a considered opinion. You should point out strong or weak points in the argument offered, judging its effectiveness. Sometimes two or three competing arguments are offered, and the philosopher is asking

for a reasoned judgement about which of these arguments might most effectively answer the problem they are designed to solve.

If this sounds challenging, there is some practical advice later in this chapter on how to think in the way required. For the moment, it is important to reflect on, and discuss, what you study. Examination questions and essays call on you to reach judgements, not simply to write down what you have learned. It is too late to work out what you think of theories if you have never discussed them or reached a judgement about them before you go into the examination room. Discussion and reflection are habits to be worked on during the study. The same skills apply more broadly in life. In philosophy we need to bear in mind Socrates' idea that:

'The unexamined life is not worth living.'

To live most fully means thinking about the meaning of our experiences, such as our adventures or friendships. Effective philosophising is just an extension of the same activity. By reflecting we discover ways of thinking and being that we had not considered before, and we learn new possibilities. One of the most exciting moments in philosophy is when you can say, 'I never thought of that!' In time you can think about how you have grown since meeting the idea.

There are practical advantages to this type of engagement, and not simply getting better examination results. There are things in philosophy, as in mathematics, that need to be learned. The process of learning is much easier when you have discussed and argued about something than it is when trying to learn cold facts off the page of a textbook. Reflection and discussion engage the whole mind, not just the memory, though memory is stimulated by them.

Of course, there are things which you must learn. It would be absurd to attempt to learn mathematics without mastering the language of mathematics. You have to learn the meaning of arithmetical symbols, of multiplication, division, square roots and all the rest. Without a grasp of that mathematical grammar, the activity is impossible, though the grammar is best learned in practice, using the symbols and concepts by working through problems.

The same is true in philosophy. There are tools of the trade, which need to be understood through use.

This chapter is designed to show you some basic tools and give a little idea of their use in practice. As you work through the chapters of this book, you will learn to use these terms, and you will become more familiar with their correct use.

Key quote

Faced with the complexity of today's world, philosophical reflection is above all a call to humility ... The greater the difficulties encountered the greater the need for philosophy to make sense of questions.

Irina Bokova: Director-General of UNESCO, on the occasion of World Philosophy Day, 15 November 2012

3 Naming the parts – essential vocabulary for philosophical thinking

Key term

Logic Branch of philosophy concerned with the structure of ideas and arguments.

(a) Four branches of philosophy

Philosophy of religion needs several disciplines – **logic**, **epistemology** (theory of knowledge), and **metaphysics**. **Ethics** is also important. Religion makes claims about the good life and religious systems are usually, perhaps always, ethical systems. They encourage us to live in particular ways, both individually and in relation to others. In one sense,

Key terms

Epistemology Also known as theory of knowledge. This asks about what we can claim to know. What we truly know is not always the same as what we believe.

Metaphysics Branch of philosophy which asks what it is for something to be, to exist.

Ethics Branch of philosophy concerned with moral questions, not simply what we should do but also such things as the meaning and justification of goodness.

Validity This refers to an argument which is soundly constructed, so that if the premises were true, the conclusion would also be true. An argument might be valid but not true.

Key person

Aristotle (384–322BC): A Macedonian, son of the court physician. He studied at the Academy for 20 years, but disagreed with Plato's theory of the Forms, taking a much more empirical approach to his studies. He created his own school, the *Lyceum*.

Key terms

Syllogism Basic structure of an argument as set out by Aristotle, containing at least one major premise and one minor premise.

Major premise In a syllogism, a sentence which is all or nothing, with no exceptions.

Minor premise In a syllogism, a sentence containing an individual piece of information.

ethics can be seen as one of the original tasks of philosophy. Greek philosophers continually asked, 'What is the Good Life for Man?' For the moment, we will postpone discussion of ethics until the next part of the book, when we look at ethical theory in more detail.

There are other branches of philosophy. A philosophical discipline can accompany anything that can be the subject of reflection and questioning. As philosophers, we learn through continual questioning of our beliefs and practices. As long as that is the case, there will be philosophy.

(b) Logic

Logic is about the structure of arguments. Its primary concern is not whether a particular argument is *true*, but rather whether it is *structured to yield true conclusions*. It searches for the **validity** of arguments. An argument is valid if it is in a form that, if the information underlying the argument were true, then the conclusion would also be true.

Until the beginning of the twentieth century, all logic was based on the principles which Aristotle had set out in his logical works. These were known collectively as the *Organon*, comprising six books – *Categories*, *On Interpretation*, *Prior Analytics*, *Posterior Analytics*, *Topics* and *Sophistical Refutations*.

(c) The syllogism

Aristotle's logic is also called 'syllogistic logic', because the **syllogism** is the most basic logical form within the system.

A syllogism has a minimum of three elements: a **major premise**, a **minor premise** and a conclusion.

The most famous example of a syllogism is:

All men are mortal. (major premise)
Socrates is a man. (minor premise)
Therefore: Socrates is mortal. (conclusion)

The first line is a *major premise* because it is an 'all' sentence. The argument would fail if, instead of 'all' we wrote 'a few', 'some' or even 'most'. Socrates might then be one of those men who are not mortal. It could, of course, be 'none' rather than 'all', as long as the term permits no exception. It must include everything of the type because any exception would disprove the rule. The major premise always acts as a universal rule. Just remember that it must always be a case of 'all or nothing'.

The *minor premise* is an individual piece of information. In this case, it is about one particular man, Socrates. Notice that it is the *structure* of the argument that makes the conclusion true. The form of the argument is:

All p are q.
r is p.
Therefore r is q.

We can see that any argument of this form will give us a true conclusion if both premises are true.

Think about a different argument:

All Celts have fifteen fingers.
Brian Boru was a Celt.
Therefore Brian Boru had fifteen fingers.

Here, the minor premise is true, but the major premise is untrue. But we can see that if the two premises were true, then the conclusion would necessarily follow.

Notice that we can say that the conclusion that Brian Boru had fifteen fingers is both *valid* and *logical*. It follows logically from what has gone before in the argument. The term 'logical' does *not* mean the same as 'true' or even 'sensible'. Something is logical when it necessarily follows from certain premises. To sum up: an argument that gives true conclusions when the premises are true is called a *valid* argument.

This type of argument is also called a *deductive* argument. The conclusion is based on the premises and is worked out from them. The conclusion is a necessary consequence.

Key quote

It is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it.

Aristotle

Here we notice something very important. Checking whether something is true cannot be done from the wording of the premises. We have to look at the world to see whether the premises are true. As logicians, our concern is with the premises. But as philosophers we need to look further. There is a connection with epistemology – the question of knowledge.

(d) Three logical principles

There are many logical principles, but most are simple variants on three straightforward notions:

1. *Identity*. This is easy, because it is assumed in every piece of arithmetic you have ever studied. It is the basic truth that $x = x$, or that *something is (identical with) itself*. We take it for granted when we do a sum such as '2 + 2 = 4', that the terms retain their meaning. The second 2 means exactly the same as the first 2. If it did not, even the most basic mathematics would be impossible.
2. *Non-contradiction*. This is the assumption that a contradiction is not logically possible. Nothing with a quality can have the negative of that quality. If we said that a triangle is not triangular, we would be contradicting ourselves.
3. *Excluded middle*. This simply means that everything either has a quality or the negative of that quality. It cannot have both. Either I am a human or I am not. It is logically impossible for me to be both human and not human at the same time and in the same way. This follows from the principle of non-contradiction. It re-works the same idea.

(e) Epistemology

This is sometimes called *theory of knowledge*. It comes from the Greek word *episteme*, which means 'knowledge'.

Epistemology asks what we can really claim to know. It includes questions such as whether and how I can have knowledge of the world outside my mind. Or can I know, in any way, what goes on in your mind since I can never know your thoughts in the way that you know them?

Key terms

A priori Knowledge which is not dependent on sense experience, such as 'a circle is round' which is true by definition.

A posteriori Any knowledge which is dependent on sense experience.

Sense experience Anything learned through one or more of our five senses. I learn there is an odour through smelling it. Sense experience can be indirect. I know about Julius Caesar from the secondary experience of books, films and hearing about him.

Predicate A grammatical term which refers to the description of a concept. In the sentence: 'Her dress is red', 'is red' is the predicate, adding to the idea of the dress.

Tautology (also called an analytic sentence): A formula that is always true on any interpretation of its terms. 'A square has four sides' is a tautology because four-sidedness is essential to the idea of a square. To have four sides (the predicate) can only mean that what the sentence is about (the subject) is a square.

It also asks questions about the differences between knowledge and belief. This matters for Philosophy of Religion as well as Religion and Ethics. Can we ever be said to 'know' God, or what is truly good? Can I know the effects of my actions on others, or my prayers to God? If I say I believe in God, what kind of claim am I making?

Epistemology asks questions, including what would count as evidence. For example, what would be sufficient evidence to justify the existence of God – or anything else? Questions of knowledge often involve questions of metaphysics (see below), which concerns what might exist. What is the relationship between something's existence and our knowledge – or ignorance – of it?

The distinction between ***a priori*** and ***a posteriori*** knowledge is central to epistemology.

(i) A priori

This refers to knowledge which is not dependent on **sense experience**, but on the meaning of words. For example, it is true to say 'a triangle has three sides'. I can know that it is true as long as I know the meanings of all the words in the sentence. A sentence like this is called a **tautology**. This simply means that the meaning of the **predicate** (has three sides), the part of the sentence which describes the subject (the triangle), is a necessary part of the meaning of the subject.

Sense experience is not required to know the meaning of a tautology. This can be confusing, but it matters very much. It is a common mistake to think that *a priori* knowledge is innate. *A priori* does not mean *innate*, as if the ideas were somehow already present in the mind, without any need for learning them. This point becomes much clearer if we think about how we learned basic arithmetic when we were very young. We first needed sense experience to begin to understand. We counted bricks to see that two bricks and two bricks made four bricks. That is how we learned that 2 + 2 = 4. But the truth of the sum is quite separate from how we learned it. If we had learned by adding flowers rather than bricks, 2 + 2 would still equal 4. Once we know the truth, we do not need to keep counting things to see that it is true. And, as we grow in understanding, we learn to understand complicated sums with enormous numbers, without the slightest need to check our mathematics by physically counting millions of bricks. We do not wake up in the night wondering whether two bricks and two bricks still make four bricks.

Other types of sentence, such as 'There is a book on my desk', even if they are true now, would need to be checked again tomorrow, because the book may no longer be there.

There is philosophical debate about what can be known *a priori*. Can anything other than tautologous sentences be known *a priori*? Many modern philosophers, such as A. J. Ayer, think not.

Most modern philosophers restrict the *a priori* to tautologies. As Descartes' *cogito* (I think therefore I am) is not analytic, they would therefore reject it as a tautology because 'existing' is not part of the

definition of 'thinking' in the way that having three sides is essential to the definition of a triangle. Mathematics can be seen as *a priori*, because all mathematical calculations are variations on the basic tautological truth that $x = x$. That is, the result of all sums, such as $453 + 247 = 700$, is simply a variation of $x = x$.

For a profile of Descartes, see Chapter 4.

Some philosophers, such as St Anselm and Descartes, have attempted to prove the existence of God *a priori*. We will see their theories in Chapter 6.

Philosophers point out two things about tautologies:

1. They tell us nothing about the world. For example, 'A mermaid is half-woman, half-fish' is true, because that is what we mean by the word 'mermaid'. But the only way we can know whether mermaids exist is through sense experience. Tautologies are definitions about the meaning of words.
2. Their truth is certain because we make the rules we are using. That is why mathematics is certain. Mathematicians have made the rules by which $2 + 2 = 4$ is true. If someone showed us a triangle and said 'this is round', we would say 'that's not true'. Without circularity, we would not allow the word 'round' to be used.

(ii) A posteriori

Key term

Empirical knowledge Alternative description of *a posteriori* knowledge.

This refers to those things where our knowledge depends on sense experience. Knowledge of this kind is called **empirical knowledge**, from the Greek term *empeiria*, which means 'experience'.

In a descriptive sentence which is not a tautology, some things can be known to be true by using our senses in some other way. Knowing the meaning of the words in 'my cat is playing with a mouse' or 'there are mermaids in the Waters of Leith' is not enough to tell us whether these things are true. Someone would need to look to confirm that it is so. And even if these sentences were true today, we would have to look again tomorrow to see whether they were still true.

Any sense experience has limitations. We can only ever perceive the world with the senses we have. We can never get outside ourselves to check whether our perceptions are accurate. If we look at photographs or see films to check what is out there, we still see those things with our own eyes. We can never certainly know that the world is indeed as it seems to be to us. We can only know that this is how it appears to us.

To think about this a little more, consider the sentence, 'That chair is green.' How do I know whether the chair has any kind of existence beyond my imagination, that outside what-is-me lies this other, not-me object, the chair? I see it as green. All I truly know is that I describe it as green. I may hear you also describing the chair as green. The most I could know is that you use the term 'green' to describe the chair. I do not know what green looks like to you. I cannot get inside your mind to share your understanding of what green feels or looks like, any more than I can know what something tastes like to you. Philosophers call this privacy of experience the 'problem of other minds'.

4 Sense experience and its problems

If knowledge of the outside world depends on our observations, then how do we make sense of the information? How do we take our random observations and make general rules of how things work in the universe? Only through making theories of this kind can we have science.

Many philosophers, including David Hume and Bertrand Russell, argue that most of our science – apart from mathematics, which is deductive – is based on making general conclusions from many observations. So, for example, we notice apparently endless instances of the Sun rising every morning, and draw the general conclusion: 'The Sun rises every morning.' This becomes a principle of geography and astronomy. But, of course, the conclusion is at best only probable. There could still be the exception, when the Sun does not rise, because it has burned out. This kind of reasoning, called *inductive*, can only give us probabilities at best.

For a profiles of David Hume and Bertrand Russell, see Chapter 5.

But induction involves the logical problem of induction. The problem is easy to understand. The only proof that events give us probable general conclusions is that we have experienced them enough times to notice a pattern in them. It is this pattern that leads us to probable general conclusions. The only evidence for induction is induction itself.

(a) Philosophical doubt

A posteriori judgements can never be wholly certain. It is unavoidable that they are uncertain, but this need not be a reason for total scepticism or sleepless nights. After all, many things in life are uncertain. We do not withhold friendship because we cannot prove that our best friend will never betray us, and there is no reason to despair of all our knowledge because we are aware of its limitations.

There is an important difference between genuine philosophical doubt and other types of doubt. A good test about doubt is to ask whether a particular doubt is reasonable. If I say a table cannot think, it would be unreasonable doubt to try to suggest tables could think, unless you could give good reasons to suggest that they might. Given that tables have no known brain cells, someone would have to make a remarkable case to justify doubting my original view. Philosophical doubt is always reasoned doubt. The doubt must be supported. We ought not to entertain a doubt when there is no good reason for that doubt. There are good philosophical reasons for doubting arguments for the existence of God – as there are also for rejecting atheism. The philosopher, regardless of personal belief, should take both sets of doubts very seriously.

Key quote

Take the risk of thinking for yourself, much more happiness, truth, beauty, and wisdom will come to you that way.

Christopher Hitchens (1949–2011)

(b) Knowledge and belief

When can we claim that we *know* something and not simply that we *believe* it?

Philosophers generally agree that four criteria must be satisfied in order to claim knowledge:

1. What we believe to be true must in fact be true. I can hardly be said to *know* that Snaefell is the world's highest mountain when it is not.
2. We must believe that what we believe to be true is really true. If someone said: 'I think Paris is the capital of France, but I'm really not sure', we would not say he had knowledge. He has a belief which happens to be true.
3. We must have sufficiently good reasons – not inadequate ones such as, 'it's in the newspaper' or 'my dad says ...'. This is called justification of our beliefs. There is great debate about what counts as sufficient justification. Some say that all attempts at justification ultimately fail.

4 Our belief must not rest on any false information. I could not be said to truly know who the king was who conquered England in 1066 if I believed that every conqueror was named 'William'. In this case I happen to be right, but I believe it for a reason which is mistaken.

It is important to remember these claims about knowledge. On religious matters, as well as on others, such as politics, people claim to *know* things that really they do not. People claim to 'know' there is a God, or to 'know' there is no God, or to 'know' that nationalisation is the right policy for industry. There may be good reasons for those beliefs, and people certainly may be sincere in holding them, but it would be wrong to say they have knowledge. After all, they may be sincere, but sincerely wrong.

5 Metaphysics

The name 'metaphysics' has an odd history.

After Aristotle died, his pupils edited the notes from his course lectures. They had just finished editing the notes about how things move and change, which they sensibly called *The Physics* when they started on a course for which they had no name, so they called it simply *The Metaphysics*, which meant 'beyond the physics'.

Metaphysics is sometimes understood to deal simply with transcendent matters. That is, it deals with things beyond our normal experience. In ordinary language, when people describe something as 'metaphysical', they refer to something beyond our experience. But it is a mistake to think of the philosophical activity on metaphysics in this way.

The central metaphysical question is: What exists? So, asking whether material objects, such as chairs or cats or guinea pigs, exist is as much a metaphysical question as asking whether God exists or souls exist.

Traditionally, metaphysical theories are divided into two kinds:

1 **Cosmological** – this approach refers to theories of the whole of being. They can be found in the work of Plato. He gave a metaphysical account of the entirety of the universe in relation to the Forms (see next chapter). They can also be found in Hegel, in relation to consciousness and the Absolute (covered in Year 2).
2 **Ontological** – these are theories of whether things of a particular kind exist. They do not attempt to make a grand theory of everything. Ontological approaches are piecemeal. So, for example, to ask whether souls exist is an ontological question. It does not ask what other kinds of things might also exist.

6 Study advice – making notes

The art of note-taking is essential to effective study. Remember that your ability in the subject is not determined by the number or length of notes you take, but by how effective they are as a guide to learning. Some students try to write everything the teacher says, but without truly listening, as if they were merely taking dictation, leaving themselves with a mass of notes which – as the examination approaches – they fear they will never be able to learn. You do not wish to finish the course with a daunting pile of notes any more than you should think you have *learned* something just because you have written it all down in class. If you are just writing in class, it becomes mechanical, passive not active.

The key to good note-taking, as to all good learning, is that it needs to be an *active* process. Do not just take notes because everyone else does. Ask yourself all the time what should be noted. Most importantly, *look back at your notes*. Note-taking is not just something to do in class. Really good notes involve taking time (not huge amounts) before and after class. Your aim is effectiveness and reasonable brevity.

(a) Note-taking: general guidelines

(i) Before class

- If you know the subject of the class, it is a good idea to make yourself a skeleton page of main points likely to emerge during the class. For each bit, leave yourself reasonable but not excessive space. If you leave too much space, you think you need to write pages.
- Some lectures are not so clearly signposted in advance. Nevertheless, give thought to what your notes might look like. What structure would you wish them to have? What is a valuable format to adopt? If you simply write down everything the teacher says, are you giving yourself the opportunities needed for you to do some active reflection and learning?
- Think about what your notes need to contain, remembering that you will want to work at and reflect on them. Remember that you will need literal space for reflection: remember to *leave signposted spaces for your own comments and thoughts*.

(ii) In class

- Always *listen* before you take notes. That means, you must always try to express what is said in your own words. Ask yourself, *how would I make this point*? The fact you are putting it in your own words means you are obliged to think about what you say. By all means, make the odd direct quotation, but remember that you need to be the one who can explain the point to someone else, even if that someone else is an examiner.
- Remember in your notes to be prepared to use headings and subheadings, or even, as here, just bullets, to break up the text. This is easier on the eye and makes the text easier to learn and to cross out.
- Use underlining, highlighters or whatever you find easiest for you to break up notes. Remember, these are your notes, and there is not a single right way for everybody. Experiment a bit.
- In general, write in short sentences. Try to avoid too many abbreviations unless they are simple and memorable (such as e.g., i.e., etc.). When reading through your notes, you do not want to be puzzling about what you meant at the time, months before.

(iii) After class

- You should leave class with well-spaced notes with blank areas for further comments. After all, you want to do something with the material you have gathered. Its purpose is not just to sit in a file.
- Within 24 hours, you should go through the notes you have made, not to try to learn them but to begin to use them effectively.

- If, in outlining an argument, you have listed many supporting or opposing arguments, it is useful to edit your list. Think which you find the most significant points and most telling objections.
- Fill in gaps, with examples or comments as necessary. Getting into this habit develops your reflective skills.
- Remember you need your notes as a basis for explaining your ideas to others.

(b) Specific guidelines for philosophy and theology

- In philosophy and theology, you will be introduced to many theories. Remember, any theory is always an attempt to answer a question. Always begin your notes by setting out the question to which the theory is offered as an answer. Remember that the teacher may rather take the question for granted, but leave a headed space in your notes for the time when you have decided what the question is.
- Try to develop a habit of explaining theories by using very short sections, with a sentence or two in each. It is easier to learn things in simple stages.
- Pay special attention to precise definitions of terms, always giving an example of what the definition means in practice.
- For any more difficult points, such as a technical term, leave yourself space to give an example. The teacher may well provide an example, but there is no harm in also thinking of examples of your own. Remember that careful examples both aid accurate understanding and also demonstrate understanding when you use them in your essays and examination answers.
- After each theory, leave a headed space for comments and reflections. Your first comment should always be: How well does this theory answer the question it was supposed to answer?
- Give yourself space for your own comments even if the teacher has given opposing arguments. You need still to reach your own reasoned judgement.

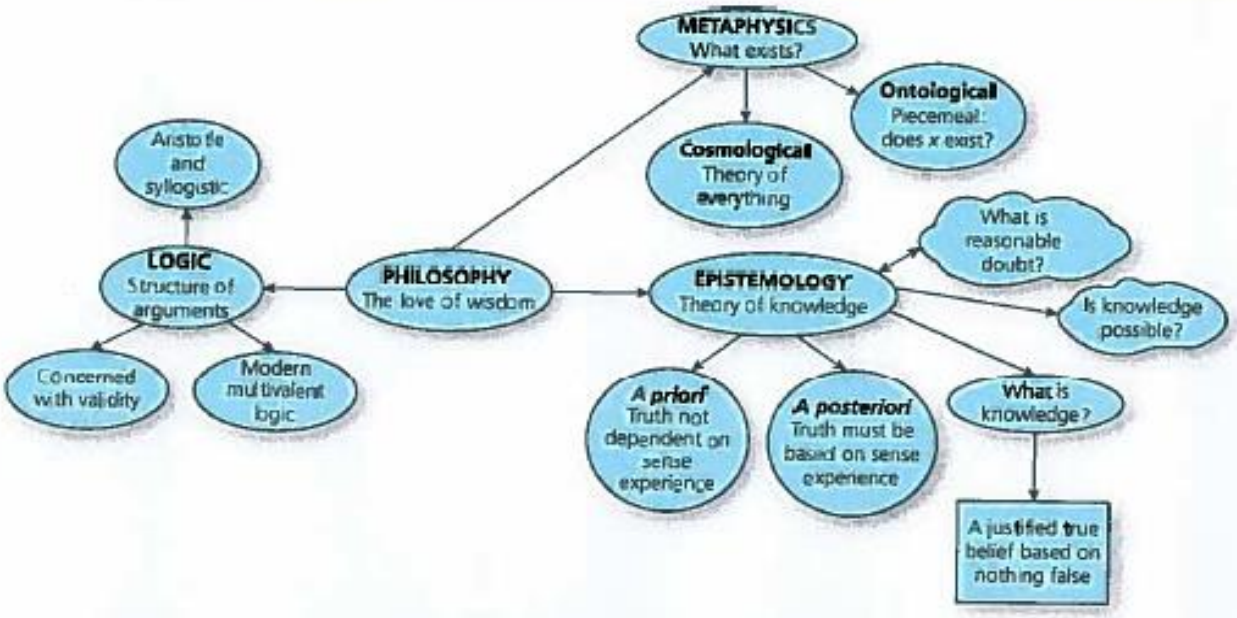
7 Conclusions

Your course is, above all, an activity, demanding thought and reflection. It is a conversation both with those who developed particular theories and with those who study and comment on theories. Be prepared to take a few risks in developing your own reactions to what you hear and learn. By thinking about whether you agree with a theory, you will develop the important skill of supporting your points of view with reasons. If the question you ask yourself is not just 'What do I believe?', but also 'Why do I believe that?', you are thinking philosophically, and in religious matters, theologically too.

Above all, the habits to develop in your learning and thinking are:

- reflection
- careful definition
- asking how well a given theory answers the question it was designed to answer
- using examples to illustrate and demonstrate understanding of ideas in practice.

Summary diagram: Philosophy and its methods



Revision advice

By the end of this chapter you should have a good idea of what philosophy entails. You should be aware that it is a practice and a conversation, and is not simply something to be learned. You should also have some understanding of the principle divisions of the subject and the meanings of logic, metaphysics and epistemology. You should also have some practical knowledge of how to take notes in the subject.

Can you give brief definitions of:

- logic
- metaphysics
- epistemology
- the principle of non-contradiction
- syllogism?

Can you explain:

- the difference between *a priori* and *a posteriori* knowledge
- the difference between validity and truth
- the difference between knowledge and belief
- the problem of induction?

Can you give arguments for and against:

- certain knowledge
- *a posteriori* knowledge
- the belief that the unexamined life is not worth living
- thinking that we understand the minds of other people?

Sample question and guidance

'There is no knowledge so certain that no one can doubt it'. To what extent do you believe that this view is correct?

As a first attempt at a philosophical essay, you might attempt to write about 500–700 words on this title. At this stage, do not worry too much about technical terms, though you may wish to make use of some given in this chapter, especially those on *a priori* and *a posteriori* knowledge and how much we can truly justify. Think also, in ordinary language, about how much we can truly know about what exists outside ourselves. As you write, take care to give examples that illustrate your points.

You need to begin by looking closely at the question. Think about exactly what is meant by '*certain* knowledge'. What counts as knowledge? What is involved in certainty? Is it ever possible to be truly certain? You may wish to look at the idea of justification as outlined in this chapter. It might be helpful to distinguish knowledge from belief and perhaps to consider the point that just because someone says she is certain of her facts does not necessarily mean that she is correct in her beliefs. Sincerity is no guarantee of accuracy.

You might choose to explore the idea that *a priori* knowledge is certain but uninformative about the actual contents of the universe, or you might wish to consider the limits of information gained through sense experience.

The essay title demands some sort of firm conclusion. You might argue either that the statement is true or that it is untrue, or that we can never be certain, but whatever line you take, make sure that you have given reasons for that conclusion, and not just asserted it.

Further essay questions:

To what extent is *a priori* knowledge more reliable and useful than knowledge gained through the senses?

'We can never know what the world is really like.' Discuss.

'In philosophy, questions matter more than answers.' Discuss.

Going further

There are many books which are good as initial reading. It is perhaps best to begin with material which will give you a grasp of epistemology. A brief but reliable guide is: Robert M. Martin: *Epistemology: A Beginner's Guide* (Oneworld, 2010). Another very good introduction is offered by Jennifer Nagel: *Knowledge: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2014). Longer, but with some valuable insights is: Duncan Pritchard: *What is this Thing called Knowledge?* (third edition, Routledge, 2013).
On philosophy in general; Anthony Kenny: *A New History of Western Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 2010) is thematic and thorough.
While it is good to read about philosophy, the best way to progress is to engage directly with the writings of different thinkers. Outstanding in this respect is: *Western Philosophy: An Anthology* Ed. John Cottingham (Blackwell, 2008). Not only does it have a very comprehensive range of materials, but it has clear explanatory pieces by the editor. If you only bought one book as a support to your studies, you could do little better than this as a comprehensive guide to the subject.

Year 12 RPE

Religion, Philosophy and Ethics

Summer Homework Task (2)

1) Ethics / Religion - Read chapter 2 Pages 134 - 142 and make notes on sections 1, 2, 3, 4.
2) make a glossary of all the Key Terms
3) Note down any Key People and Quotes
4) Read the study advice carefully, Page 142 - 143
5) Draw the mind Map of Ethics Page 143
6) Try the Tasks in the Revision Box on Page 144
7) Extension - Try the essay questions on page 144/15 - Look up Book for further research

2

Religion and ethics

Chapter 9

The issues of ethics

1 Introduction

Chapter checklist

This chapter gives essential background to the understanding of ethical discussion. It begins by seeing how ethics affects and permeates daily life, not only in making decisions about actions but in making judgements about others, giving advice and developing good character to live a good life. It relates ethical thought to practical reasoning and the nature of the person. The chapter then deals briefly with issues of ethical language, the relationship between morality and religion, before giving an overview of the subject, explaining some main technical issues. It briefly defines concepts which will be used in both AS and full A Level Studies. As in any subject, knowledge of terminology matters.

When we hear or think of the term 'ethics' we recognise that we are talking about the good life, and how we might live – that is, the question of morality.

It is essential when embarking on ethical studies to be conscious of what is involved in the ethical life. When we hear that we should be moral, we think at first of what we are expected to do, or what we ought ourselves to do. But that is not the total of what is required by the ethical life. To be sure, we do have to act. There are things we need to do, and things we should do. There are also things we ought not to do, as well as things we ought to do, but which we leave undone. Each of these involves moral judgement.

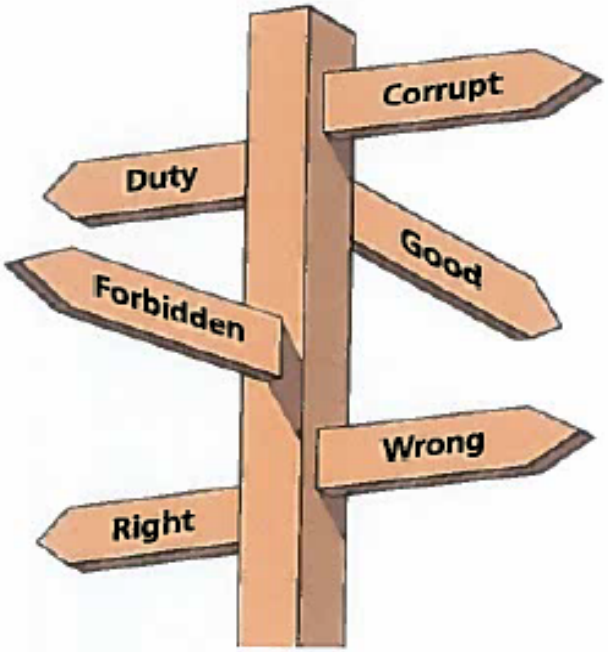
Even when we have listed all these, there are other activities which are part of the moral life. We raise young people. How should we do that? What is the good we want those children to have? Sometimes we are asked to advise others. What is the right thing to seek when doing this? Should we advise for our own good, or for the sake of others?

Beyond this, we sometimes have to make judgements on the actions of others. These judgements are not simply about whether someone has performed a right or wrong act, but whether he or she should be held responsible for that action. Aristotle argued that we cannot hold someone responsible for an act if that person acted in unavoidable ignorance or through being forced to do so. This view was subsequently adopted in Catholic moral teaching.

Key person

Aristotle (384–322BC): A Macedonian, son of the court physician. He studied at the Academy for 20 years, but disagreed with Plato's theory of the Forms, taking a much more empirical approach to his studies. He created his own school, the *Lyceum*.

2 Person and community



Discussion of this kind reminds us that morality arises from the fact that we are social creatures, living in community. Living in community has so many advantages, because we are not self-sufficient. A baby cannot look after herself but depends on the care of others. In the same way, I cannot provide for all my physical and emotional requirements. I need to relate to others who help to supply my needs, just as I find I must contribute to their needs. If I treat my neighbour without concern, with contempt and ingratitude, he may feel less inclined to give me the help I need. Therefore, I need to constrain my behaviour in various ways.

It can be argued, as it has been throughout the history of moral thought, that ideas of duty, responsibility, rights and obligations must arise out of this mutual need. Alan Gewirth gives a detailed justification of this approach in *Reason and Morality* (1978). It is interesting to consider whether someone living alone on a desert island could be considered capable of living a genuinely moral life. He presumably has no duty to others, and there is no one to have a duty towards him. Does he perhaps have duty towards himself? Even if he can be said to have moral demands, these will fall short of the full moral life. He is beholden to no other human being. He has no one other than himself to educate, counsel or judge.

If these considerations are true, the moral life entails life in community.

3 Ethical life

(a) Ethics and practical reasoning

If our ethical life is something lived in community, then it follows that it requires certain types of skill. This will be developed further in Chapter 10, but it is helpful to think carefully about the type of understanding entailed in the moral life.

Plato attempted, not successfully, to argue that the moral life flowed properly from our understanding of the Form of the Good. His was an essentially intellectualist account. For him, wrongdoing is always the result of ignorance. This is psychologically unconvincing. I can know that some activity, such as smoking, is harmful, but still do it anyway. The smoking habit is not the result of ignorance of why it is harmful but must have some other explanation.

If this is true, simply knowing what is right or wrong is not enough to direct our behaviour. Aristotle and a rich tradition since his time argue that moral life requires a kind of practical reasoning, just as art does. Knowing what a good painting is will not make me a good artist, and, in any case, there is no one 'right' painting to paint. The painter has to make judgements not only about what to paint but how to paint it. He may be

Key person

Plato (c.427–347BC): Pupil of Socrates. Created the Academy c.387BC and developed the ideas of Plato into his own distinctive philosophy, explained in a series of dialogues still central to philosophical discussion.

restricted in the size of canvas he may use, and by many other factors. He brings not only intellectual skill to the creation of his painting, but accumulated experience of materials, awareness of his own painting abilities and their limitations, as well as years of practice and experiment.

If Aristotle is right, moral thinking has something of the same character, although there are differences. In art, the artist may make a deliberate error as part of the art (Josef Haydn loved to do this in his music). But deliberate error seems not to be acceptable in morality in that way. Nevertheless, moral judgement does seem to require careful thought and the ability to work out what is right and wrong. But it also needs to work out what is practically manageable, in the circumstances in which people find themselves.

(b) Ethics and the person

If, as suggested, ethics is about the person in community, then it follows that we need to have some agreement about the nature of the person and what he or she is owed in our moral duties.

Agreement on this is hard to find. In ethical discussion, there is a large literature on natural human rights. In the natural law tradition (see Chapter 10), thinking about 'right reason in accordance with nature', it is assumed that we have rights simply because we are human. The United States Declaration of Independence, from July 1776, is unequivocal:

> *We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.*

The assumption that we are endowed with rights makes for much discussion. The claim, 'I know my rights!' seems to follow every perceived injustice that someone suffers.

Yet it is not self-evident to philosophers that we have such rights. What is their origin? What are these rights? When you study utilitarianism you will discover that the theory dismisses any theory of natural rights, arguing that a notion of natural rights interferes with the goal of achieving the best possible outcome. From a different perspective, the American philosopher Ronald Dworkin (1931–2013) argued that rights were not to be understood absolutely. In *Life's Dominion: An Argument About Abortion, Euthanasia and Individual Freedom* (1993), he argues that we should instead see a human life in investment terms, and think of rights incrementally. If a young person dies at 20, it is an immense tragedy. So much has been invested in her by way of care and education, but little return has been given. This life is so much more significant than that of an old person who has paid back society through all she has given, or a baby in whom little investment has been made.

See Ingolf Dalferth: 'Religion, Morality and Being Human: The Controversial Status of Human Dignity', in: P. Jonkers and M. Sarot (Eds.), *Embodied Religion* (2013), pp. 143–179.

Against such views, Ingolf Dalferth (b. 1948) has argued that basic rights, and above all human dignity, are central. Human dignity is not a possession that can be taken away, as freedom may be in some circumstances. We are dignified in being ourselves. It is the essence of being human.

Religious views emphasise that we are children of God. From this they derive an insistence on the sacredness of life and the infinite value of the human person.

However, the question of the status of the person is developed, it seems at least clear that ethics makes sense only in terms of human activity. It is about persons and for persons.

(c) Ethics and language

If we are social persons, much of that sociality comes through language. We use language to frame the ideas we use to understand the world. We use language to tell others our memories and activities. We also use it when we think out the meaning of what we are doing or have done. We use language to reach judgements, to advise, to give instructions or to make requests. We use language to give thanks, whether to other people or to God. We use it to teach and learn, to encourage or to condemn, to complain or to praise.

Being human and being speaking persons are intricately entwined. If we are in constant relationship with each other, and we speak in but also about those relationships, then we cannot think about morality without thinking about the language we use.

The questions to think about in relation to language are not simply questions about the meaning of words or sentences. They are questions about how they are or should be used. If I describe someone as 'good', what am I saying about her? After all, 'good' is used in so many ways. Sometimes we use it as a term of moral approval: for example, when I say 'Mother Teresa was a good person', or 'Giving to the poor is good'. But sometimes I use the term in non-moral ways, such as when I praise someone for being good *at* something: 'Picasso was a good artist' or 'Marin Alsop is a good conductor.' Again, I may use it to express pleasure: 'That was a good meal.' Sometimes I use 'good' as a description, sometimes as an encouragement on a student's piece of work.

Ethics
Ethics in business
moral principles
rules and regulations
of right conduct
values that guide

Both moral and non-moral uses of 'good' are significant for ethics, but there are also deep questions to consider about whether 'Giving alms to the poor is good' is a descriptive sentence like 'Everest is a high mountain'. These questions are called metaethical, and will be important in your Year 2 work.

(d) Ethics and religion

Ethics is often taught in schools in conjunction with, or as part of, the subject of religious studies. Such a connection has value. All the great religions make ethical claims and provide guidance, and sometimes firm directions, on what it means to be moral.

This connection can sometimes have an unfortunate side-effect of leading people to imagine that there is a necessary condition of the ethical, that morality somehow *depends* upon a religious basis. This assumption leads to misunderstandings. People sometimes say of an action that it is wrong *because it is forbidden by the Ten Commandments*. Many Christian philosophers, including St Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther and Pope St John Paul II, would argue that this interpretation gets things the wrong way round. Murder, theft, adultery and lying are forbidden by the Ten Commandments *because they are wrongful acts*. In other words, they are wrong in themselves, and can be known to be wrong in

themselves by reason. Natural law theory argues that what is right and wrong is knowable by reason. On this view, the Ten Commandments simply sum up what we should know by reason.

This view seems to have a good biblical foundation. The Jews behave badly and God gives Moses the Ten Commandments. He does this not to tell his people something new but forcibly to remind them of what they ought to have known very well. Evil and wrongdoing happen in Genesis before the Commandments are promulgated, as we can see in the tales of Noah and the Flood or Abel's murder by Cain. These actions are not presented as those of people acting in ignorance – the wrongdoer is not given the excuse that he couldn't know he had done wrong because the Ten Commandments had not yet been set out. Much later, in the New Testament, St Paul says:

> *When Gentiles, who do not possess the Law do instinctively what the Law requires, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves. They show that what the Law requires is written in their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them on the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all.*

Romans 2:14–16

Archbishop William Temple

Notice the mention of the law written on men's hearts, by which they can work out what is right and wrong. Closer to our own time, the future Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, was categorical:

> *In its nature, the moral judgement is quite wholly independent of Religion.*

William Temple: *The Kingdom of God* (1914), p. 42

Key person

William Temple (1881–1944): British churchman, ecumenist, social activist and philosophical theologian. The only son of an Archbishop of Canterbury to become Archbishop of Canterbury (1942–44). Works include *Nature, Man and God*. Coined the term, 'Welfare State'.

Of course, some religious people insist that their beliefs rest simply on the commands of scripture, thinking that *x is wrong* just because the Bible or the Qu'ran says so. But this belief might not always be more than skin-deep. Suppose a critic were to say, 'So if God changed his mind and decided to make murder, pillage, adultery and lying compulsory, then we should all do them?' Most, perhaps all, would almost certainly say, 'But God would not do that!' If that is their reply, it suggests that there really is something intrinsically wrong about those actions. This is why a good God would not command them. These are things knowable as wrong in themselves.

4 Theories of ethics

Key term

Normative ethics Theories of ethics which give guidance (norms) on how we should behave and/or the character traits we should develop.

Philosophers generally distinguish three areas of enquiry: **normative**, **applied** and **metaethics**.

Metaethics concerns the theory of ethics. It involves questions such as what we mean by terms like 'right', 'wrong', 'good', 'bad', and important issues such as the justification of ethics or the relationship between ethics and law. Some especially significant metaethical theories include:

- **Emotivism:** the view that ethical sentences simply evince [exhibit] an emotion and have no factual justification. 'Killing is wrong' is logically

equivalent to 'Killing – boo!' This theory was held by, among others, Rudolf Carnap and A. J. Ayer.

- **Subjectivism:** the view that *x* is right because I say so and for no other reason. This view is held most notably by **Existentialists** such as Jean-Paul Sartre or Martin Heidegger.
- **Relativism:** the view that rightness is culturally or religiously determined. Incompatible positions are justifiable by their cultural roots. This view is surprisingly common today, especially in the form of **vulgar relativism**, which holds that as all beliefs are relative, all should be tolerated. The theory has only to be stated for its absurdity to be apparent: if there is a requirement to be tolerant, then there is, after all, a universal principle of tolerance. If there is a single universal principle, then this version of relativism is contradictory.
- **Divine command theory:** the view that *x* is right because God commands it. This view is rejected by most Christian philosophers, including St Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther and Pope St John Paul II. It is sometimes found in some – but not all – Evangelical circles.
- **Natural law theory:** believes that moral rightness can be determined through careful reflection on the facts of the world: 'right reason in accordance with nature'. Aristotle, Cicero, St Thomas Aquinas, Richard Hooker, Hugo Grotius and, today, John Finnis, support this view.

Metaethics will be studied in more depth in the second year of the course. For the moment you need only to understand what metaethical questions are about.

Key terms

Applied ethics Discussion of ethical approaches to specific problems of living, such as medicine, politics, theories of punishment, sport, taxation and so on.

Metaethics The branch of ethics concerned with the justification of ethics and the meaning of the language used. It would be a metaethical question to ask what we mean by the term 'good'.

Key quote

A system of morality which is based on relative emotional values is a mere illusion. A thorough vulgar conception which has nothing sound in it and nothing true

Socrates

Key person

Martin Luther (1483–1546): Religious reformer and prolific author. Initiated the sixteenth-century Reformation when in 1517, he published the 95 Theses in Wittenberg, where he was a professor. Attacked the excesses of medieval religion, seeking a simpler and more direct form of religion, based on scripture and personal faith.

Key term

Deontic ethics Any type of ethics, such as Kantianism or utilitarianism (see Chapters 12 and 13), which emphasises the actions we should perform.

Key terms

Emotivism A theory that argues that ethical statements do no more than *evince* emotions, having no factual content. These statements do not *express* emotion as the emotion might not be felt by the speaker.

Subjectivism The view that all ethical judgements are simply statements of the speaker's beliefs and are right because the speaker says they are, and for no other reason.

Divine command theory (sometimes called theological voluntarism) The theory that something is right *because* God commands it, rather than believing that God commands something *because it is right*.

Natural law 'Right reason in accordance with human nature'. This can be worked out by considering what is good for human flourishing.

Existentialism A philosophical movement that believes the universe just exists and has no meaning in itself. Any value it has is the meaning each individual chooses to give it. Famous existentialists include Søren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers and Jean-Paul Sartre.

Vulgar relativism The belief that as every value judgement is relative, all should be tolerated. The position is contradictory because tolerance would be a universal value, not a relative one.

The main concern of the first year of your course is normative ethics. It consists of particular theories of how we ought to live. An important division is between **deontic ethics**, which emphasises what we should do, and **aretaic ethics** (virtue ethics), which emphasises the type of persons we should strive to be.

Key terms

Aretaic ethics Term for virtue ethics which concentrates on the goodness of the agent rather than the goodness of the action performed. It emphasises the dispositions, motives and character of the person who performs the action.

Teleological theories Any theory in which goodness or rightness is determined by the outcome.

Utilitarianism The moral doctrine that one should always seek the greatest balance of good over evil.

Deontological ethics Any ethical system which ignores outcomes, concentrating just on whether the act is good in itself.

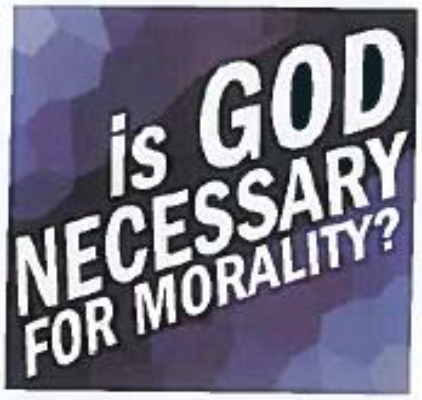
Aretaic ethics are associated with Aristotle and his followers, both ancient and modern. Alisdair Macintyre, Philippa Foot, G. E. M. Anscombe and Martha Nussbaum are key writers in the modern tradition. The perception that it is not enough to perform a good act is crucial to this school of thought. One might perform a just act for an unjust reason. One can never be a just person without performing just acts. But performing just acts does not make one a good person. Motivation and character are crucial.

Deontic ethics are normally split into two kinds:

1 **Teleological theories** (often called consequentialist) determine what is good by outcomes: *x* is seen as good because it leads to good results. Some well-known theories of this kind include:
   - **Utilitarianism** which holds that we should seek always the greatest balance of good over evil. This does not mean 'the greatest good of the greatest number' as the theory is sometimes inaccurately described. It is important to notice that this theory stresses the idea that we should always follow this one principle. The theory has no room for any view of natural rights. Rights get in the way of utility. Supporters of this theory include Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, Henry Sidgwick, and, more recently, Derek Parfit and Peter Singer.
   - **Egoism** (not egotism, which is not a moral theory, but simply refers to complete selfishness) is an ethical theory which believes that we should all seek to act in our own best interests. It argues that if everyone did this, we would all achieve the best results. This approach is presupposed in many theories of economics, including some types of free market theory.
   - **Situation ethics**, generally associated with Joseph Fletcher, argues that in each situation we should do that which will produce the most loving outcome. This approach is sceptical about rules, arguing that always following rules can lead to cruel and unloving consequences.

2 **Deontological** theories argue that something is right in itself:
   - **Kantian** ethics are often understood to emphasise the primacy of doing one's duty regardless of consequences. The categorical imperative emphasises in its first form that we should act only on that maxim we can at the same time will to be universal law, in its second that we should so act as to treat people always as ends and never as means only. What matters above all is having a good will.
   - **Agapism** stresses love. It holds that we should just love. 'Love is all you need.' This theory has few philosophical adherents – Archbishop William Temple dismissed it as 'fatuous bleating' – but it is sometimes heard. The absence of a specific theory of justice appears to make it impractical and emphasises its distance from other views, including those of Christianity.
   - **Divine command theory** also sometimes appears in this category as well as under the guise of a metaethical view.

Categorical imperatives are discussed in Chapter 12.



Key persons

John Stuart Mill (1806–73): English utilitarian, Liberal politician and social philosopher. Brought up on utilitarian principles by James Mill, his father, and Jeremy Bentham. Major works include Utilitarianism (1863) and On Liberty (1859). His marriage to Harriet Taylor greatly influenced his thinking on social policies. Supported womens' legal rights. His basic philosophical position is that all knowledge is based on experience and that our desires and beliefs are products of psychological laws. Ethics, for example, are based on the psychological law that all humans desire to be happy (although he famously differed from Bentham in that he considered that intellectual pleasures are higher than other forms of happiness). MP for Westminster 1865–68, until defeated by W. H. Smith (of the bookseller's). Godfather to Bertrand Russell.

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804): Philosopher from Konigsberg in East Prussia. One of the greatest thinkers in history, attempted to reconcile the insights of the Rationalists, such as Descartes and Leibniz, and the Empiricists such as Locke, Hume and Berkeley. Author of *The Critique of Pure Reason*, the *Critique of Practical Reason* and *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*.

See Chapter 12 for a discussion of Kantian ethics.

Background

Teleological and deontological theories: a word of caution

The division between deontological and teleological theories is best understood in terms of orientation rather than dogmatic categories.

The American philosopher William K. Frankena (1908–94), especially in his very influential textbook *Ethics* (1973), devoted attention to systematic categorisation of ethical theories, especially in the distinction between teleological and deontological theories. The result of the distinction was to create a climate of discussion in which people became needlessly wrapped up in whether a given theory is deontological or teleological, often at the expense of concentrating on what the theories said.

An obvious example was in Kantian ethics. Frankena labelled this deontological, which has led many to understand Kant as strictly unconcerned with consequences. But this is to misread him. As you will see when you study him, he says that we should always do our duty because it is our duty, not because it leads to good outcomes. This is deontological, but, at the same time, when he comes to working out what our duty is, he becomes consequentialist. The principle of universalisation says that we can only treat as moral an action that we are willing for everyone to do. Also we should treat people always as ends, never as means only. Both these principles are consequentialist, and do not make sense without thinking about outcomes. William Temple always treated Kant consequentially and there are interesting essays taking this view in *Essays on Derek Parfit's On What Matters* (2009). Perhaps we can say of Kant that the right-making feature of his theory is whether we have done our duty, which is deontological, but determining that duty requires a teleological approach.

In the same way, natural law is occasionally rather oddly described as a deontological theory, though it is much more commonly understood as a teleological one. For Aristotle and Aquinas, 'right reason in accordance with nature' is to be understood in terms of the consequences for human flourishing.

The important thing to remember is that philosophers who devise or outline ethical theories do not begin their work by thinking 'I am going to write a deontological theory about how to live'. They set out what they believe is right. Any categorising comes later, and by others.

The best way to think of Frankena's categories is that they illuminate the general direction of theories. They are not definitive pigeonholes.

For more detail on the thought of Aquinas, see Chapter 10.

For a discussion of act utilitarianism, see Chapter 11.

Background

A note on relativism and situationalism

Among commonly found terms are 'relativism' and 'situationalism', often contrasted with 'absolutism'. People often confuse the two concepts and it is important to be clear about the difference.

A relativist theory is one which believes that all ethical judgements are relative, whether to culture or to some set of beliefs. There are no absolutes in ethics because nothing is definitively right or wrong.

A situational theory is one where particular judgements are relative to situations, but there is some principle which it is always right to apply. In natural law theory, one must always use right reason in accordance with nature. In act utilitarianism, one must always follow the general principle of seeking the greatest balance of good over evil, though what that will be has to be determined in each situation. In situation ethics, there is an absolute command always to perform the most loving act. It would be a mistake to describe any of these theories as relativist.

Study advice

This chapter contains a large number of 'isms'. As with many things, it is not easy to learn them in one go. It is better in your learning to go back to them as you work through ideas in the following chapters. Seeing how the ideas work out in practice is the best way of making sense of more abstract concepts.

The question of practice matters very much for developing the skills of reflection on the ethical theories mentioned in the next chapters. Sir Karl Popper, one of the greatest philosophers of the twentieth century, used to become very cross when people said: 'It's fine in theory, but it won't work in practice.' His objection to people saying this was an obvious one. If a theory doesn't work in practice, it is a bad theory, because the test of a theory is how it works out in practice. It is very helpful, when you think about ideas you will study, such as utilitarianism or natural law, that you think about actual circumstances and instances, to see whether a particular theory of right and wrong would give the kind of guidance people want. Giving specific examples and instances is good practice in all writing about philosophy, but invaluable in ethics.

Sometimes it can seem difficult to reach a conclusion in ethics. Very often, teachers find students concluding their essay with statements such as 'It is all relative', or 'It is all a matter of opinion' or even 'If it is right for you, then it's right.' When students write in that way, it is just an assertion, not a philosophical argument. What is needed here to do well would be a justification of your point of view.

Take just one of these assertions: 'It is all a matter of opinion.' The point being made here is that we can make no certain ethical judgements and it is a personal matter to decide. In philosophical terms, the student is arguing for subjectivism, the theory that something is right for me because I say so, or choose it as right, and for no other reason.

There is no requirement not to hold the position you have taken, but you need to defend the point. It is not a self-evident truth that there are

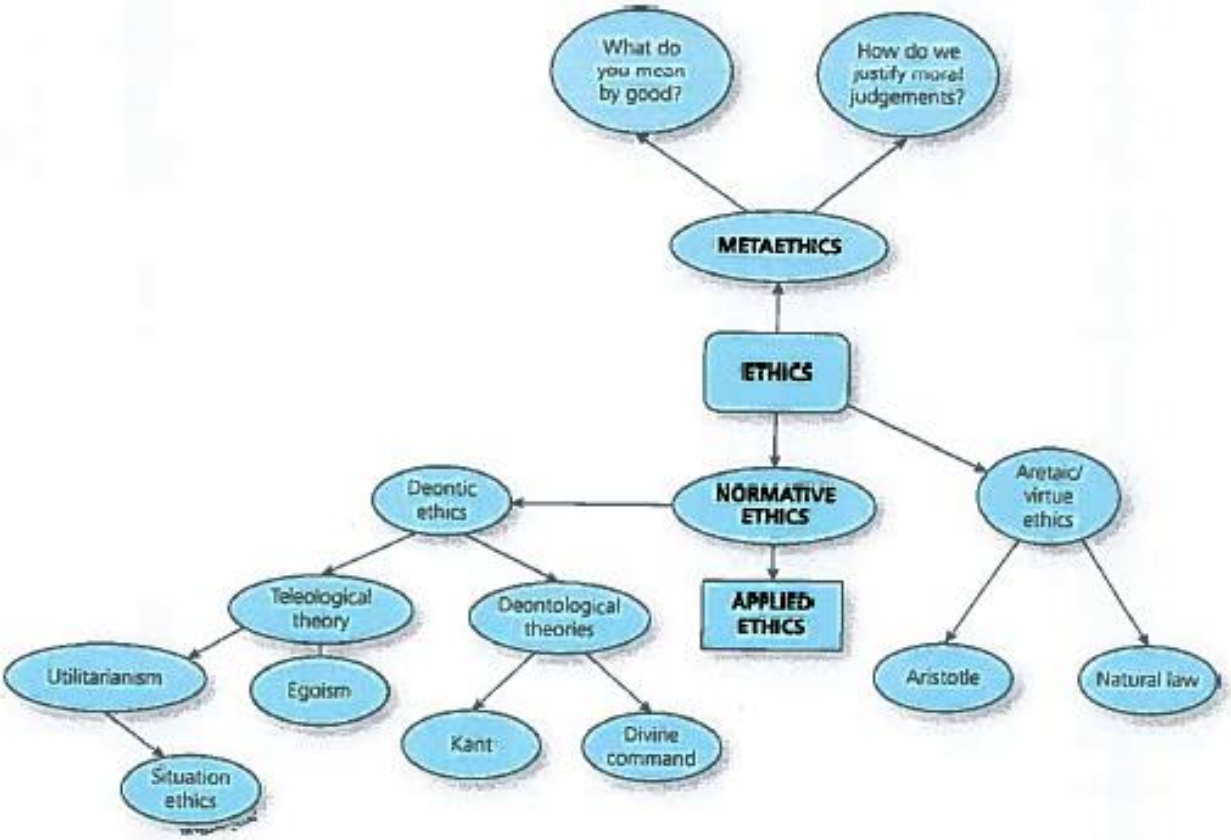
no objective reasons for moral judgements. Your case has to be made and sustained. How should you go about doing so?

The best way is to think about what someone who disagrees with you might argue. What might she say?

Suppose she said: 'I cannot agree with you. Are you saying that I am wrong to say that a man torturing children for his own gratification is doing something objectively wrong, and that my condemning him as immoral is no more than a personal opinion? Surely I can show that torture is bad for people psychologically and physically? Can you demonstrate how someone could really argue that torture is absolutely fine? In the same way, I think that incest is really wrong, because it can have no good results for people and many truly bad ones. And I don't think it is just my opinion that rape, stealing or putting arsenic in someone's coffee just because I don't like her are wrong.'

Now, if you think she is wrong to say these things, and you believe that ethical judgements are just matters of opinion, then the challenge is to show in the specific instances she has mentioned why she is wrong and why it would be legitimate for someone to say these acts were not really wrong in themselves. You would need to justify your conclusion, that these were just matters of opinion, with reasons. If you are able to do so, you are arguing well. If you find that you cannot give good reasons, then perhaps you might want to modify the original assertion. In good philosophical work, we should be prepared to change our minds if we think there are better arguments than we have considered.

Summary diagram: The issue of ethics



Revision advice

It is worth remembering that many terms used in this chapter will recur throughout the course, which means that you will learn about them in more depth through practice. Nevertheless, it is really helpful to have some certainty about key terms before you continue with your studies, recognising that your understanding will gradually deepen as you move beyond basic definition.

Can you give brief definitions of:

- metaethics
- normative ethics
- divine command theory
- natural law theory
- aretaic (virtue) ethics?

Can you explain:

- the difference between metaethics and normative ethics
- the difference between deontic and aretaic (virtue) ethics
- the difference between teleological and deontological approaches to ethics
- relativist and situational approaches to ethics?

Can you give arguments for and against:

- relativism
- subjectivism
- teleological approaches to ethics
- the idea that ethical theory presupposes religious belief?

Before you begin a detailed study of ethics, it is really helpful to begin the habit of thinking reflectively about ethical issues for yourself. Think about specific instances in life and how they might illustrate issues. Perhaps you will find it helpful, in order to begin thinking ethically, to try one or two of the following essay titles, which are designed to get you in the habit of thinking reflectively about questions.

Sample question and guidance

'There is nothing in life which is truly evil.' Discuss.

This essay requires initial thought before you begin writing. The title makes a very bold claim, but it provides an opportunity to think about those who argue that ethical judgements are just subjective matters of opinion. It also requires you to begin to think about what we mean by ideas of right or wrong. You might like to think about whether to describe something as right or wrong means that it is good or bad for people or sentient beings in general. Think perhaps about whether certain actions are always right or wrong, such as helping the poor, or incest.

You might choose to think a little more widely. Is ethical behaviour what we mean by describing something as morally good? People will sometimes describe a dagger or a nuclear weapon as 'evil'. Does this actually make sense? Surely a nuclear weapon is an inanimate thing, made from neutral ingredients? Someone might argue that the human actions of making or using weapons is evil, but does it make sense to speak of the object itself as evil?

This is a very open question, and it is difficult, as so often in philosophy, to say it has a right answer. The question is designed to encourage you think hard and deeply about issues, but it is also designed to develop the use of examples. The question cannot be answered without using examples of things and actions you might want to argue really are evil, or really are not.

Further essay questions

'If there is no God, then nothing is right or wrong.' Discuss.

To what extent would someone living alone on a desert island have moral responsibilities?

When India was a colony, the British authorities did not attempt to prevent people from practising their beliefs. However, they banned the practice of *suttee*, used by a minority of Hindus, in which the widow of a deceased man was burned on the funeral pyre with him. To what extent do you consider the colonial authorities were correct to interfere in people's beliefs in this way?

Going further

There are many books which give general introductions to ethics. Most are rewarding in various ways. One of the finest is Julia Driver: *Ethics: The Fundamentals* (Wiley–Blackwell, 2006). Piers Benn: *Ethics* (Routledge, 1997) provides a solid introduction, and William Frankena: *Ethics* (second edition, Pearson, 1988) remains invaluable despite reservations one might have about his insistence on particular categorisation of theories. His insights on utilitarianism and other theories are penetrating and important. Michael J. Sandel: *Justice: What's the Right Thing To Do,* (Penguin, 2010) is justly popular and wide-ranging, also touching on political philosophy. Simon Blackburn: *Ethics: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2003) is interesting and useful for developing your own ideas. For any student of ethics, an invaluable source is *A Companion to Ethics (Blackwell Companions to Philosophy)*, Ed. Peter Singer (Blackwell, 1993).

Other books discussed in this chapter are:

- Dalferth I. 'Religion, Morality and Being Human: The Controversial Status of Human Dignity', in: P. Jonkers and M. Sarot (Eds.), *Embodied Religion* (Utrecht: Ars Disputandi Supplement Series Vol. 6, 2013).
- Dworkin R. *Life's Dominion: An Argument About Abortion, Euthanasia and Individual Freedom* (Knopf, 1993).
- Gewirth A. *Reason and Morality* (Chicago, 1978).
- Sulkkanen J. and John Cottingham J. *Essays on Derek Parfit's On What Matters* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).
- Temple W. *The Kingdom of God* (Macmillan, 1914).