Yeah, well that's just like your opinion man.
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What’s in this book that’s in the exam?

Are there moral truths and if so what is their nature? This question encourages students to consider a range of possibilities, from moral truth as based on transcendent Platonic forms to the denial of moral truth altogether.

This unit is also concerned with moral decisions. Students will need to consider whether moral decisions should be made in terms of consequences alone, or whether moral rights, duties and principles, which have intrinsic value independent of consequences, are paramount.
The denial of moral truth

- Moral judgements as social conventions relative to a given social group, the distinction between descriptive and normative relativism; moral judgements as serving a non-descriptive function, either emotivism or prescriptivism.

- Issues relating to the above views: the possibility of judging the abhorrent practices of other cultures/individuals; the possibility of moral progress and moral mistakes; the extent to which we can value what we like.

Moral truth

- Moral truth as God-independent transcendent truth, the analogy with mathematical truths, the belief in Platonic forms as the archetypal example of this view, moral elitism, moral knowledge and of weakness of will; moral truth as based on natural facts, eg the view that what is morally desirable is to be understood in terms of what is in fact desired, the open question argument and the naturalistic fallacy; moral truth as based on relational properties which provide reasons for action; the analogy with secondary properties.

- Issues relating to the above views: the problem of how knowledge of moral truth is possible; the possibility of agreement over moral truth; the extent to which such truths can motivate/justify action.

Moral decisions

- The extent to which an action maximises happiness as the sole criterion by which its value can be judged, consideration of act, rule and preference utilitarianism.

- Deontology: the view that moral rights, duties and principles, which are not based on consequences, are required to make ethical decisions; Kant’s attempt to provide a rational grounding for a deontological ethics, the importance of motivation in making moral decisions.

- Virtue theory: practical wisdom as the capacity to make informed, rational judgements without recourse to a formal decision procedure such as the hedonic calculus or the categorical imperative.

- The above views should be discussed in relation to at least one practical ethical problem of the candidate’s choosing e.g. the value of life: abortion, euthanasia; our treatment of the natural environment, non-human animals, and those in poverty, etc.

Types of moral philosophy

Throughout all of what follows, ‘moral’ and ‘ethical’ will be used interchangeably. Some disciplines draw a distinction between these two terms, but we’re not going to. Moral philosophy is typically split into three areas:

Meta-ethics is the area of moral philosophy concerned with the meanings and origins of moral concepts such as ‘moral’, ‘immoral’, ‘good’, ‘bad’, ‘right’ and ‘wrong’. Another way of putting this is to say that meta-ethics is the study of moral language. One key area in meta-ethics is concerned with what can motivate us to act morally, which we looked at in AS. Another key area is the discussion of whether it is possible to have moral knowledge, which is the main focus for A2.

Normative ethics focuses on the kind of life we should live. In other words, what we ought to do. Normative theories typically present some kind of guide to or description of a moral existence. We will be looking at several different types of normative theory.
Some moral theories include both meta- and normative arguments. For example, virtue ethics holds that what is ‘moral’ is defined by particular characteristics we might have, known as excellences or virtues. Given that it is making a claim about the meaning of ‘moral’, virtue ethics is a meta-ethical argument. Furthermore, given that it also recommends that we should possess particular virtues, it is also a normative argument.

**Practical ethics** studies particular topics of moral concern, such as euthanasia, abortion or the treatment of animals. It often applies normative theories to these subjects, to investigate what we ought to do in these areas. For example, applying virtue theory to the topic of gun control. For this reason, practical ethics is also known as ‘applied ethics’.

1. Explain why it might be useful to study meta-ethics before studying normative ethics.

2. Explain why it might be useful to study normative ethics before studying practical ethics.

3. Explain why it might be useful to study moral philosophy overall.

**Preparing for meta-ethics – a refresher in epistemology**

Meta-ethics is concerned with the meanings and origins of moral concepts. A key question here is whether it is possible to have moral knowledge. Given this, it may be more appropriate to regard meta-ethics here as being not so much about morality as we would normally think of it - for example, asking what actions we should and shouldn’t do – and more as an extension of **epistemology** (theory of knowledge).

Because of this, it is important to return to a few more terms from the past:

A statement is **true** if it is the case. In other words, it asserts how things actually are. A statement which asserts what is not the case is **false**. For example, if it is the case that ‘I have a brother’, then ‘I have a brother’ is true. If it is not the case that ‘I have a brother’, then ‘I have a brother’ is false.

**Propositions** are statements which are either true or false. For example, ‘There is a cat in here’, or ‘Triangles have four sides’ are propositions, as they are either true or false.

**Non-propositions** are statements which are neither true nor false. These include nonsensical collections of words such as ‘Beep sleep chimney’, meaningful sentences which have no truth or falsity to them such as ‘Hello, George’ and finally **preferences** or ‘opinions’, such as ‘Cheese tastes good’.
Preferences may look like propositions, in that they appear to be asserting something about the world, but they do not actually contain truth or falsity. In this example, it looks like ‘nice’ is being identified as a property of cheese. However, ‘nice’ is not a property that can be said to have any truth or falsity to it. Consequently, whether something is ‘nice’ is a matter of preference or opinion rather than a matter of truth or falsity.

4. Create two examples of true propositions, using speech marks to indicate them. Explain what makes each of them true.

5. Create two examples of false propositions, using speech marks to indicate them. Explain what makes each of them false.

6. Create two examples of non-propositional statements, using speech marks to indicate them. Explain why each of them cannot be propositional.

The classical definition of propositional knowledge – knowledge of propositions - is true, justified belief. These are argued to be individually necessary conditions, meaning that all of them are required. Therefore, for a proposition to be known, it must be true, justified and believed.

As noted above, for a proposition to be true, it must be the case. For example, for the proposition ‘Avril’s hometown is Napanee, Ontario’ to be true, then Avril’s hometown must actually be Napanee, Ontario.

For a proposition to be a belief, it must be thought to be true. For example, for someone to believe that ‘Avril’s hometown is Napanee, Ontario’, they must think it is true that ‘Avril’s hometown is Napanee, Ontario’.

For a proposition to be justified, there must be good reason for it to be believed. What counts as justification is arguably more contentious than what counts as truth or belief, but such things as sensory experience, credible testimony, memory and logical deduction have all been argued to provide justification for believing a proposition.

One further thing to add about justification is that it is not the same thing as proof. As stated, it is having a good reason to believe a proposition. These are very different things. ‘Proof’ can be said to require absolute certainty, that something has been demonstrated as being true without a doubt. Whether proof is possible is something that is widely argued by philosophers, but it’s not something we really look into. Because of this, it’s
best to avoid all reference to ‘proof’ in your essays, and stick instead with terms such as ‘convincing’, ‘persuasive’ or ‘likely’.

Note that these three conditions can happen in isolation. For example, a proposition could be true, but not justified and not believed. Another proposition could be believed and justified, but not true, or any other possible combination of the three conditions.

To sum up, we can only have knowledge of propositions. Only propositions can be true, justified and believed. And all propositional knowledge is of true, justified propositions.

7. Create an example of propositional knowledge, explaining the specific circumstances which mean all that three individually necessary conditions are fulfilled.

The proposition is

The person saying this proposition is called

What makes this proposition true is

What makes this proposition justified is

What makes this proposition believed is

---

**Introducing meta-ethics**

**Moral properties and moral judgments**

A **moral property** is a feature of something which indicates whether it is moral or immoral. For example, ‘good’, ‘right’, ‘bad’, ‘wrong’, ‘unjust’, ‘vicious’, ‘virtuous’ and ‘commendable’.

A **moral judgment** is a statement which ascribes a moral property to something. In other words, moral judgments provide a negative or positive ethical judgment of something. Here are some examples of moral judgments:

- ‘Killing is wrong’
- ‘Charity is virtuous’
- ‘Edwin is a good person’
- ‘Theft should never happen’
- ‘It is just to burn witches’
- ‘You shouldn’t have stolen that money’
- ‘Abortion is only permissible up until the 2nd trimester, and if there are significant developmental problems with the foetus (i.e. its later quality of life is likely to be severely impaired, as judged by at least three qualified physicians of a minimum 4 years experience), and/or that the pregnancy is a result of incest’

It should be noted that moral judgments will be using terms such as ‘good’ or ‘wrong’ in their ethical sense. For example, ‘Patience is good’ has a quite different focus to ‘The People Under the Stairs is a good film’. Similarly, the statement that ‘2+2 = 6’ is wrong’ is different from ‘Assault is wrong’.
As the last example in the list above shows, moral judgments need not be simplistic. They can be very long indeed, full of clauses and qualifying terms. Lengthier and more complex examples than this can certainly be created. We will tend to use shorter examples of moral judgments in this handbook, because it’s quicker to do so. Unless absolutely necessary, you should do the same thing in your own examples. When writing specifically about meta-ethics, examples of judgments such as ‘x is wrong’, or ‘x is virtuous’ are often the most effective, as the focus is not on whether any specific thing is moral or not, but what it means to say something is moral or not in the first place.

Furthermore, as in AS, make sure that any examples you give of particular statements, propositions, properties and concepts are clearly indicated with speech marks. This also applies to any examples of particular moral judgments you include.

8. Underline or highlight the moral properties in the following moral judgments:
   - ‘Miranda is good’
   - ‘Doing that was unacceptable’
   - ‘x is virtuous because it leads to fulfilment’

9. Create three examples of moral judgments.

10. Explain how moral judgments appear to be similar to propositions.

**Cognitivism and non-cognitivism**

As stated, one of the main questions in meta-ethics is whether or not we can have moral knowledge. If a moral judgment is known – i.e. it is a true, justified belief – it is an example of moral knowledge. Meta-ethical theories that focus on this question are often divided into two broad groups, each of which contain a number of individual theories:

**Cognitivism** argues that we can have moral knowledge. Therefore, moral judgments can be known.

**Non-cognitivism** argues that we cannot have moral knowledge. Therefore, moral judgments cannot be known.

It is very important to understand what is being argued here. Therefore, it is necessary to be clear on the following points:

Cognitivism is not arguing that we have moral knowledge now, or that we didn’t in the past.

Cognitivists are not claiming that they personally have moral knowledge, or that non-cognitivists don’t.

Non-cognitivists are not arguing that they don’t have moral knowledge themselves, but others do.

Non-cognitivists are not arguing that there are no moral judgments.

Instead, what both theories are focused on is whether moral knowledge is possible.

Another way to think about this issue is to consider another subject, such as science. If someone were a cognitivist about science rather than morality, they would be claiming that it is possible to know things about science. This would not be the same as arguing that everything they believed about science was true.
11. Explain whether each of these statements are true or false, and why.

- What is true and false in morality is very complicated, which suggests that non-cognitivism is correct.

- Non-cognitivism argues that our moral beliefs cannot be known.

- As people disagree about what is right and wrong, there can be no moral knowledge.

- Non-cognitivism denies the existence of moral judgments.

- Cognitivists argue that all of their moral judgments are true.

- If there is no such thing as moral knowledge, then all moral judgments are false.

12. Suppose that non-cognitivism is correct. What possible implications are there of this? Explain why.

13. Suppose that cognitivism is correct. What possible implications are there of this? Explain why.

Be extremely careful about how you use any of the epistemological terms we have covered so far when writing about meta-ethics. For example, if you are discussing cognitivist theories, it is safe to refer to their view that moral judgments can be ‘true’ or ‘believed’. However, if you are discussing non-cognitivist theories, it would be inaccurate to use terms such as ‘truth’ or ‘belief’ in relation to their views on moral judgments.

If you are writing about meta-ethics in general, without siding with a particular view, or even if you haven’t yet sided with one, it is best to use the neutral term ‘judgment’ to refer to statements about morality, rather than more controversial terms such as ‘belief’, ‘preference’, or ‘opinion’.
The is/ought gap

The distinction between facts and values

One argument that is referred to regularly in meta-ethics is the ‘is/ought gap’, otherwise known as the ‘fact/value distinction’. Firstly, the argument makes a distinction between ‘is’ statements (or ‘facts’) and ‘ought’ statements (or ‘values’). To use terminology that we have already encountered, ‘is’ statements are clearly propositional, and ‘ought’ statements are moral judgments. In other words, ‘facts’ describe what ‘is’, and moral values tell us what we ‘ought’ to do. Another way of putting this is to say that facts tell us about the world, and values tell us how we should behave in it.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Examples of ‘is’ statements</th>
<th>Examples of ‘ought’ statements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• ‘Torture causes joy in all who experience it’</td>
<td>• ‘Theft is wrong’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• ‘Rape can often result in severe emotional trauma’</td>
<td>• ‘You shouldn’t eat meat’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• ‘Winnie the Pooh is real and lives in Woking’</td>
<td>• ‘Children should be allowed to own handguns’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• ‘Israel is to the South East of Egypt’</td>
<td>• ‘All people have a right to life’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• ‘A two-week old foetus has not yet developed a heart’</td>
<td>• ‘It is wrong to put more funding into cerebral palsy research’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• ‘The use of ID cards in Rwanda allowed Tutsis to be easily targeted for genocide’</td>
<td>• ‘Taxing the unemployed is a wicked thing’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• ‘There is no life on Jupiter’</td>
<td>• ‘Violence against women must be stopped’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• ‘We need to talk about Kevin’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• ‘Stop doing such terrible things!’</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

To clarify matters further, the following points are worth noting:

An ‘is’ statement might not have the word ‘is’ within it, and an ‘ought’ statement might not have the word ‘ought’ in it. What makes a statement an ‘is’ is that it is a factual proposition, and what makes a statement an ‘ought’ is that it is a moral judgment.

As with any proposition, sometimes the truth or falsity of an ‘is’ statement can be difficult to establish (e.g. ‘There is no life on Jupiter’), but they are true or false nonetheless.

Sometimes the thing that we ought to do that is suggested within an ‘ought’ statement is implicit rather than explicit and direct – e.g. ‘Kevin is an evil man’ implies that Kevin ought to act differently to how he does.

14. Create **three** examples of ‘is’ statements/facts.

15. Create **three** examples of ‘ought’ statements/values.

The reason we are distinguishing between ‘is’ and ‘ought’ statements is because it helps us to explain what people do when they engage in arguments about morality. It is an extremely common feature of moral debate that people will provide ‘is’ statements as reasons for holding their ‘ought’ statements. In other words, they suggest that there is a necessary connection between facts and values. It can be said they are attempting to justify their moral judgments by presenting propositions as evidence for them.

For example, someone might judge that ‘x is wrong’, and give reasons for supporting this judgment such as ‘x causes people misery’, ‘x is something people wish to avoid’, or ‘Those who avoid x are more fulfilled than those affected by x’.

[11]
If we were to present such an argument more formally, it might be laid out like this:

P1. ‘x causes people misery’
P2. ‘x is something people wish to avoid’
P3. ‘Those who avoid x are more fulfilled than those affected by x’
C. ‘x is wrong’

16. For each of the following ‘ought’ statements, create at least two ‘is’ statements that might be used to justify them:
   - ‘Providing food to the starving is good’
   - ‘Assaulting people without provocation or purpose is wrong’
   - ‘It is virtuous to have a friendly character’

Is it possible to derive an ‘ought’ from an ‘is’?

We now move on to look at precisely what the is/ought gap argument claims:

It can certainly be seen that people do engage in moral arguments in the way outlined above. However, supporters of the is/ought gap argument claim that this approach to moral reasoning is in error. This is because they argue there is no necessary connection between facts and values. In other words, an ‘is’ does not imply an ‘ought’. There is a ‘gap’ between the two types of statement – we cannot deductively move from premises which are facts to conclusions which are values.¹

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FACTS</th>
<th>VALUES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘x causes people misery’</td>
<td>‘x is wrong’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘x is something people wish to avoid’</td>
<td>YOU SHALL NOT PASS!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Those who avoid x are more fulfilled than those affected by x’</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

To illustrate this further, consider virtue ethics, which argues that if a character trait is truly fulfilling, then it is good and we ought to have this characteristic.

At this point, the is/ought gap argument can be used. It seems that virtue ethicists are stating that if a personality trait is fulfilling (what ‘is’ the case), then we should have it (what ‘ought’ to be the case). However, it can be said that just because something is fulfilling does not necessarily mean it ought to be possessed.

¹ Remember that a deductive argument is one in which there is a necessary connection between the premises and conclusion. If the premises are true, then the conclusion must be true.
The is/ought gap argument points out that although people present 'is' statements as justification for their 'ought' statements, it can be questioned whether doing so actually does provide justification. For example, if someone says 'x is bad', and they give as a reason that 'x causes pain and distress', we can still ask 'Why is it bad to cause pain and distress?' To take another example, if someone judges that 'You should not do x' because 'Everyone hates it when you do x', we can still ask 'Why shouldn’t I do things that everyone hates?' If it is correct to argue that it is always possible to respond in this way, then the is/ought gap may be correct to suggest that we cannot deduce an 'ought' from an 'is'.

A further reason that the is/ought gap argument might be supported is that it seems possible for two people to be in agreement about the facts of a situation, but to still disagree about its morality. For instance, people could be in agreement about the facts relating to a particular instance of theft, but they could still disagree about whether it ought to have happened or not. This suggests that 'is' and 'ought' statements are not necessarily connected.

In summary, if the is/ought gap argument is correct, then it is not possible to derive an 'ought’ from an 'is', as there is no necessary connection between facts and values.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The relationship between cognitivism, non-cognitivism and the is/ought gap</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agrees with the is/ought gap argument</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-cognitivist theories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitivist theories</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

17. Explain why it must be the case that all non-cognitivist theories support the is/ought gap argument.

18. Outline what it would mean to be a cognitivist who supported the is/ought gap argument.

19. Outline what it would mean to be a cognitivist who was against the is/ought gap argument.

**Moral realism and anti-realism**

Among different meta-ethical theories, a further distinction is made between those which are realist and those which are anti-realist. There is some disagreement among philosophers over the precise application of these terms, so what follows is best taken as getting at the general usage of them:
Moral realism argues that moral properties such as ‘good’, ‘wrong’, ‘virtuous’, ‘unjust’ and ‘evil’ are real properties that exist independently of our minds. For example, a realist could support the view that as well as a person really having the properties of being ‘150 lbs.’ and ‘34 years old’, they may also really have the properties of being ‘good’ and ‘just’.

Moral anti-realism denies this view, claiming that there are no real moral properties. Any existence they might be said to have is dependent on our minds, meaning that they have no existence beyond our judgment of them. In other words, terms such as ‘good’ and ‘vicious’ do not relate to anything which actually exists. Because of this, it is not possible for us to discover what is truly moral, as morality is simply decided or invented by us, rather than it having a mind-independent existence.

The Denial of Moral Truth

Moral judgments as serving a non-descriptive function

To say that moral judgments serve a non-descriptive function means that they do not pick out anything which is true or false. This is because they are not describing anything which actually exists – e.g. ‘good’, ‘wrong’, or ‘virtue’. Therefore, moral judgments cannot be known. Two theories which would agree with this position are the non-cognitivist arguments of emotivism and prescriptivism, which we will now look at.

Emotivism

Emotivism is a non-cognitivist, anti-realist theory principally associated with A J Ayer (b. 1910 d. 1989 in London, England). Generally, little time is given to biographical information in these handbooks, but the following is a nice story, so here it is:

In 1987, while Ayer was visiting the Manhattan home of lingerie magnate Fernando Sanchez he heard a woman hollering that the boxer Mike Tyson was in the process of assaulting a woman in an adjoining room. At age seventy-seven, the buoyant Ayer sprang into action and discovered the boxer attacking the model Naomi Campbell. Ayer ordered him to stop.

‘Do you know who the fuck I am?’ Tyson yelled. ‘I’m the heavyweight champion of the world’.

‘And I’m the former Wykeham Professor of Logic’, Ayer replied. ‘We are both pre-eminent in our fields. I suggest we talk about this like rational men’.

As their conversation ensued, Naomi Campbell escaped.

Clearly, Ayer felt compelled to intervene in this situation, showing that non-cognitivists make and act on moral judgments, even if they deny these judgments can be known. He had previously made his name in philosophy for a defence of the denial of moral truth in the book ‘Language, Truth and Logic’ (1936).
In this text, Ayer presents the theory of emotivism, which argues that moral judgments are nothing more than expressions of emotions. The non-descriptive function of the moral judgments we make is to show what we approve or disapprove of. Moral judgments cannot show what is truly right or wrong in ethical terms, as there is no such thing as moral knowledge. For instance, stating ‘x is wrong’ is really nothing more than expressing a dislike for x.

Ayer argues that moral judgments are expressions of emotional attitudes. This is an important point, as it is different from saying that moral judgments are descriptive of emotional attitudes. Ayer does not argue this, because he holds a firm empiricist view that as we cannot perceive feelings, they cannot be described.

In connection with his empiricist approach, Ayer supports a view known as the verification principle, which argues that the only statements we can have knowledge of are those that can be empirically verified – in other words, their truth or falsity can be established from the use of our senses. Ayer argues that moral properties cannot be perceived, and there seems to be no way to empirically verify moral judgments. Therefore, he concludes that moral properties are not real, and that moral knowledge is impossible, as moral judgments are neither true nor false.

Ayer agrees with the is/ought gap argument, holding that we cannot derive a moral judgment from any facts. Being expressions of emotions, moral judgments are not propositional – there is no truth or falsity to them. Consequently, moral judgments are not propositions, so cannot be believed, and therefore cannot be known.

As well as being an expression of our emotions, Ayer states that moral judgments can take the form of being a command, particularly when used in ethical arguments. For example, if we are to say ‘x is wrong’, it is like we are commanding others to feel the same way as ourselves – ‘Don’t support x!’ In other words, as well as having an emotive content, moral judgments also have a prescriptive content, in that they prescribe others to act in certain ways.

Ayer concedes that emotivism means that it is impossible to have any meaningful argument about moral judgments. After all, no moral judgment is true or false. If someone says ‘x is right’, and another says ‘x is wrong’, there is no contradiction involved, as they are simply expressing their feelings, and neither judgment can be more true or false than the other.

**Assessing emotivism**

20. What points does Ayer make in his theory of emotivism that might be convincing?

Several criticisms of emotivism can be made. Firstly, it can be asked precisely what we are doing when we present non-moral facts as evidence for our moral judgments if, as emotivism argues, there is no connection between facts and values. For example, stating propositions about the sentience and emotionality of animals...
when arguing over whether it is moral to eat them. If we are not presenting evidence for the truth or falsity of eating meat being moral, then what is going on instead?

Ayer responds that we are presenting facts in order to provoke a similar emotional expression to our own. For example, if we are trying to convince someone of the immorality of the Guantanamo Bay detention centre, we might present them with facts about the treatment of the detainees, their legal representation and status, related actions of particular governments and so on. All this, Ayer would argue, is to instil in our opponent a similar emotional response to our own. If we do manage to get them to agree with our moral judgment, we have not revealed any truth to them, and neither of us possess any moral knowledge – we just happen to feel the same way.

In relation to this, it is clear that certain actions have widespread moral approval or disapproval. For instance, most people believe that ‘Killing defenceless people is wrong’ and ‘Helping those less fortunate than yourself is good’. However, Ayer would argue that this does not mean that such judgments are true – it just means that most people have a similar emotional response to such things.

Similarly, we can recognise that the moral judgments made in a culture change over time. For instance, in contemporary England, it is typically thought that ‘Slavery is wrong’, whereas many held that ‘Slavery is right’ in earlier days. Ayer does not think this shows any progress towards knowledge of the moral truth about slavery. It only shows that popular feeling used to be in favour of it, and now it isn’t.

Secondly, another objection facing emotivism is that it implies that anything can be judged as moral or immoral. Therefore, there is no more truth or falsity in judging ‘Boiling people alive is wrong’ than in judging ‘All children should be raped’ or, to take a non-moral example ‘Sprouts taste good’. This may seem very counter-intuitive, as many would hold that there is an actual moral difference between, for example, doing work for a charity and napalming a hospital.

Despite this, a committed emotivist could respond that the only reason we judge some actions as so ‘obviously’ moral or immoral is because they provoke a particularly strong emotional response in us. This does not mean there is any moral knowledge of the situation.

Thirdly, another criticism of emotivism is that it wrongly suggests that moral arguments are little more than emotional manipulation, in which we simply aim to get others to feel the same as us. If moral judgments were this way, then we could easily veer between approving of x on one day, and being against x on another, in the same way that we experience changes of mood. However, there is much more to being converted on any moral matter than just altering how we feel, as prescriptivism argues, below.

Fourthly, emotivism has been criticised for providing an unconvincing account of moral disagreement, as it trivialises moral debate. This is because, as some critics have stated, emotivism reduces moral judgments to nothing more than shouting out ‘Hurrah!’ or ‘Boo!’ in response to the situation being judged.

Consider a case where two people find themselves in disagreement: person A judges that ‘x is wrong’, whereas person B judges that ‘x is right’.

If emotivism is correct, then what this exchange really means is that person A is stating ‘Boo to x!’, and person B is stating ‘Hurrah to x!’ If this is all moral arguments are founded on, it seems bizarre that we treat them in a very different way to other matters of mere emotional expression, such as our distaste of particular flavours, or our appreciation of certain colours. After all, we see little point in getting involved in debates about these things.
In other words, although Ayer argues that moral judgments are nothing more than expressions of emotion, the way we discuss and think about them is very different to how we discuss and think about our emotional expressions in other areas. But emotivism is unable to explain why this.

Fifthly, Ayer has received criticism for his commitment to the verification principle, which informs his view that as moral judgments cannot be empirically verified, there is no truth or falsity to them – they are meaningless. This criticism goes more into the territory of epistemology than ethics, but it can briefly be stated that Ayer’s commitment to a strict empiricist approach such as this has its criticisms. For example, rationalism holds that it is possible to have meaningful statements about things which cannot be empirically verified. To take two example, Descartes’ claim that ‘I exist’, or our knowledge of a priori mathematical propositions. If statements do not require to be empirically verified in order for them to be meaningful, then Ayer may be incorrect in stating that there is no truth or falsity to moral judgments.

An additional problem with the verification principle is that it seems to fail the very test it sets out. This is because the verification principle can be summed up by the proposition that ‘The only statements we can have knowledge of are those that can be empirically verified’. The difficulty here is that this proposition doesn’t appear to be one which can be empirically verified itself. This is because no sensory experience seems to provide evidence for or against the truth of the proposition.

21. For each of the five criticisms given of emotivism, (i) briefly sum up what they are, and (ii) explain whether you think they provide significant problems for the theory. Give reasons for your claims, and take into consideration any possible responses which could be made to these criticisms.
Prescriptivism

Prescriptivism, like emotivism, is a non-cognitivist, anti-realist metaethical theory. It is principally associated with R M Hare (b. 1919 in Somerset, England d. 2002 in Oxfordshire, England).

Like Ayer, Hare agrees with the is/ought gap argument, holding that we cannot derive a moral judgment from any facts. However, although he also believes that moral judgments are non-descriptive, he does not believe that they can be regarded as being simply expressions of our emotions. Hare’s argument places important emphasis on the claim that moral judgments are used to prescribe actions to others – in other words, guiding them on what they should or should not do.

Another way of putting this is to say that while emotivism focuses primarily on the view that the non-descriptive function of moral judgments is their being like exclamations, prescriptivism makes more of the view that the non-descriptive function of moral judgments is their being like commands – they guide action.

At a simple level, prescriptivism argues that if we say that ‘x is good’, we are giving our commendation of x, and are prescribing others to do x themselves. On this point, Ayer would also be likely to agree, but Hare takes things a stage further.

Hare argues that it is possible to be rational or irrational in the moral judgments we hold, and how we conduct ourselves in ethical arguments. A key point here is that prescriptivism claims we can make errors in our moral reasoning. However, it is vital to point out that this does not mean that the specific moral judgments we make are either true or false, or that we can have moral knowledge – prescriptivism is a non-cognitivist theory, after all. So what does Hare mean?

To explain what he means by the claim that we can make errors in morality, Hare argues that our moral judgments, although they are neither true nor false, nonetheless need to be universalised and coherent. We shall now look at what Hare means by these terms.

Firstly, what Hare means by a universalised moral judgment is that we make that judgment not just for a single situation, but for all relevantly similar situations. For example, if we state that ‘x is good’, we should judge other instances of x to also be good. Therefore, if we judge that ‘Charitable donations to hospices are good’, then we must accept that claiming this means that all charitable donations to hospices are good.

This, Hare argues, can lead to us altering our moral judgments. Continuing the previous example, if we were to come across a particular hospice where we judged that in this particular case it isn’t good to grant it a charitable donation, then we should either

(a) Reject our original moral judgment of ‘Charitable donations to hospices are good’, or

(b) Refine our original moral judgment. This is likely to involve it becoming more complex. For example, we might refine the judgment to ‘Charitable donations to hospices that do not purposefully engage in involuntary euthanasia are good’. (Note that the moral judgment could be refined even further, resulting in it being very long and specific indeed. Hare is fine with this.)

If we do not use moral judgments as universalised statements, Hare argues we have made a logical error. For example, if I judge that ‘Abortion in the third trimester is wrong’, but I only mean it to apply to some third trimester abortions, and I furthermore do not refine my judgment to reflect this view, then I have made a mistake in my use of language.
Again, it is very important to specify that I haven’t made a mistake regarding what is moral or immoral (because there is no moral truth). It is more appropriate to say that I have made a linguistic or logical mistake. In other words, I am not using moral judgments as their role in language defines how they are used. In a sense, I am using language incorrectly.

Given that prescriptivism is a non-cognitivist theory, Hare does not argue that I should avoid logical errors because it’s morally wrong to do so. The reason I should avoid logical errors in my statements is because, if I don’t, then I don’t make any sense. This is why what I am doing is ‘wrong’ in the logical or linguistic sense of the term, not the moral sense.

22. Create an example to illustrate how (i) someone could fail to apply a particular moral judgment universally, and (ii) how they could solve this error by either rejecting or refining it.

Elsewhere in moral philosophy, Immanuel Kant also refers to universalisability. However, he means something quite different to Hare.

Universalise (Hare) – Applying a moral judgment to all relevantly similar cases.

Universalise (Kant) – Universally willing a maxim without logical or rational contradiction.

Kant was covered in AS for ‘Why should I be moral?’ and we shall be returning to his theories again later in this book. In examination, people confuse the two versions of universalisability all the time. Don’t be one of those people. Nobody likes them.

Secondly, Hare also argues that our moral judgments should be coherent, meaning that they are non-contradictory. For example, if I hold the judgments ‘Everyone has a right to life’, and ‘You can treat children however you want’, then my judgments are incoherent. Again, this is a logical or linguistic error on my part, not a moral one. So that my moral judgments become coherent – and are therefore non-contradictory, and make sense – I must either reject or refine at least one of them.

23. Create an example to illustrate how (i) someone could have two or more incoherent moral judgements, and (ii) how they could solve this error by either rejecting or refining it.

According to emotivism, when we change our moral judgments, all that is happening is that our emotional responses have changed, and our judgments now reflect this. In contrast, prescriptivism argues that another possible reason for our changing our moral judgments is that we realise we must reject or refine them, as a result of recognising that they should be both universal and coherent. Prescriptivists would argue that when
we make moral alterations for these reasons, it is not necessarily the case that our emotional state has changed – instead, we rationally see we have made a mistake which needs fixing.

Furthermore, Hare argues that if we do not act on our moral judgments, we are also behaving in an incoherent, contradictory, and also non-universalising manner. For example, if Katrina judges that ‘Eating animals is wrong’, and eats animals nonetheless, then she has made a logical error. She simply does not see how moral language actually works, in that it prescribes action.

Also, Hare states that a further feature of moral judgments is that, because of how they linguistically operate, they have a superior force over other commands and concerns. For example, if we judge that ‘Torture is wrong’, then we would be making a logical mistake if we tortured someone just because we thought it would be funny, or if someone politely asked us to do it. To judge something as right, wrong, good, or bad means that its moral value should not be overridden by other concerns. Again, it is worth stressing that someone who acts otherwise has not made a moral error – they have made a mistake regarding the role of moral language.

Note that cognitivists would also agree that our moral judgments must be universalised and coherent. However, although cognitivists would largely agree with Hare’s points about the nature of moral language, they would of course add that ethical judgments can be known. For example, from a cognitivist point of view, if someone judges that ‘x is wrong’, and it is true that ‘x is wrong’, it would be incoherent (and false) for them to also hold that ‘x is right’.

Assessing prescriptivism

24. What points does Hare make in his theory of prescriptivism that might be convincing?

One aspect of prescriptivism that has met with approval is its developments from emotivism – in particular, the view that moral judgments are more than simple expressions of emotion, and that it is possible to make logical errors in the judgments we hold. This aspect of prescriptivism is thought to rightly recognise that moral judgments have a much more developed linguistic function than opinions such as ‘Onion dip tastes good’. Prescriptivism shows us that moral judgments are not simply expressive, random or irrational.

However, prescriptivism has still drawn some negative criticism. Firstly, given that it is a non-cognitivist theory (like emotivism), it does not claim that anything is truly moral or immoral. Although the prescriptivist account of moral language is more developed than that of emotivism, this aspect still remains. For many, this is highly counter-intuitive.

As with the identical criticism of emotivism, this can be responded to by asking precisely how we can have any moral knowledge? What makes a moral judgment true or false? If these questions cannot be conclusively answered, then non-cognitivism is likely to remain more persuasive than cognitivism.
Secondly, as we saw, prescriptivism argues that to avoid error, our moral judgments should be universalised and non-contradictory. This has been criticised, as it means that someone could hold any moral judgments, and as long as they did not contradict each other and the person who held them was happy with them being enacted in all relevantly similar circumstances, then no error has occurred. Again, this may seem very counter-intuitive, as it does not bar any moral judgment from being deemed rational and logical, providing it follows the ‘linguistic rules’ of moral language. Someone could, for example, be consistent and non-contradictory in holding such judgments as ‘It is good to eat children’, ‘Everyone I disagree with should be killed’, and ‘A woman’s place is in the oven’.

As above, in response to this, prescriptivism and other non-cognitivist theories could respond that although such conclusions seem counter-intuitive, the case for there being moral knowledge needs to be more firmly made. In other words, the challenge is presented to cognitivism to explain how and why moral knowledge is possible.

Thirdly, some criticism has also been raised regarding Hare’s reference to ‘relevantly similar’ situations. Precisely what makes one situation relevantly similar to another, from a moral point of view? It could be argued that all situations are different, requiring looking at things afresh each time.

However, this criticism can be objected to. If we are to morally judge each situation on a case-by-case basis, then what guiding principles, if any, are we making use of? Furthermore, how can we make a moral judgment if we are not informed by previous judgments we have made?

Also, this could be said to go against how moral reasoning actually works. Even for people whose answer to any moral dilemma is ‘It depends...’ they should nonetheless be able to say what it depends on. In other words, we do not morally treat all situations as isolated incidents. Our body of moral judgments informs the views we go on to form. Perhaps we do not explicitly recognise what judgments we hold, maybe because we haven’t consciously attended to them before, but they are still there. As Hare argues, these judgments may be rejected and refined over time, but they are still essential to forming any further judgments we go on to make.

Fourthly, another criticism of prescriptivism relates to Hare’s argument that morality overrides other concerns. In some cases, it can be said, morality comes ‘second place’ to other priorities. For example, we may consider an aesthetic imperative, such as preserving old buildings and natural landscapes, more important than a commitment to human welfare, such as the construction of new homes.

A possible reply to a situation like the one above is to say that this aesthetic principle is simply a moral principle in disguise, perhaps about human pleasure or freedom. Therefore, morality still has the linguistic role of overriding other concerns.

25. For each of the four criticisms given of prescriptivism, (i) briefly sum up what they are, and (ii) explain whether you think they provide significant problems for the theory. Give reasons for your claims, and take into consideration any possible responses which could be made to these criticisms.
The specifications state that it is enough to look at either emotivism or prescriptivism. Therefore, when it comes to revision, you can probably get away with focusing on just one of these theories. Them saying this also suggests that exam questions are less likely to mention either of them by name, which means that when they want you to write about one of them they’re more likely to use a phrase like ‘denial of moral truth’ or ‘moral judgments as serving a non-descriptive function’, or something like that.

Moral judgments as social conventions relative to a given social group

**Descriptive and normative relativism**

It can certainly be seen that we do not always agree with each other in our moral judgments. Such disagreements can happen between both individuals and cultures in the same or different time period. For example, two people or cultures can disagree with each other over whether ‘Abortion is immoral’. A culture that used to be dominated by the judgment that ‘Slavery is morally unacceptable’ may find this to be an unpopular view at another time.

**Descriptive relativism** is a term used to refer to the existence of such disagreements on moral judgments, between cultures and/or individuals. Descriptive relativism simply notes that there are differences in the judgments people hold – it does not specify anything beyond this, such as whether there can be truth or knowledge of morality.

However, it is possible to take this further and move from acknowledging descriptive relativism to argue for **normative relativism**, sometimes known as ‘cultural relativism’ or ‘moral relativism’. This theory takes the metaethical position that if a culture makes a moral judgment, then that moral judgment is true for that culture at that particular time. Also, the theory can take the normative position that we should not say that a moral value or practice of another culture is right or wrong (or at the very least, we should take great consideration in doing so). This is because to say that an action is ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ only has meaning within a culture’s moral system.
Therefore, it can be true that ‘x is despicable’, but this statement is only true relative to the culture’s morality. To use any other standard of morality to judge what is right or wrong in a culture is incorrect. Consequently, we cannot meaningfully use the standards of our society or appeal to universal standards to judge a different culture.

For these reasons, although normative relativism does make reference to truth in morality, it still gets associated with non-cognitivism more than cognitivism, as the kinds of truths it speaks of are relative ones. There is not ‘truth’ in the same sense that cognitivists use the term.

For example, in the culture of medieval Britain, it was judged that ‘Serfdom is acceptable’. In the culture of modern Britain, it is judged that ‘Serfdom is not acceptable’. In normative relativism, it could be argued it is true in the culture of medieval Britain that ‘Serfdom is acceptable’, and it is also true in the culture of modern Britain that ‘Serfdom is not acceptable’. A modern Briton would be incorrect to judge the medieval Briton as being wrong in their judgment, and vice versa, as both judgments are – relatively – true.

Note that the example above looks at how a culture can change its judgments over time. However, comparisons between contemporary cultures can also be made. For example, two cultural groups living at the same time, perhaps even occupying the same territory might disagree over whether ‘Arranged marriage is unacceptable’. Someone within a culture that agrees with this statement would possess (relative) moral truth if they agreed with it themselves. The culture could claim that it is true for them, but not true for the other culture.

To repeat, this usage of ‘truth’ is quite different to how it is used elsewhere. For instance, within the classical definition of knowledge, any talk of truth being relative, meaning that propositions can be true for some people but not for others, would be argued to make no sense, because if something is true, then it is the case. If it is not true, then it isn’t. The idea of ‘relative truth’ is not compatible with this.

Therefore, an individual who keeps slaves in ancient Greece should not be judged in the same way as an individual acting the same way in modern-day Herefordshire. Furthermore, an anti-slavery Roman citizen would be wrong in their views, as they go against their own cultural values.

Normative relativism can also be described as an anti-realist moral theory, as it is arguing that ethical properties such as ‘good’ and ‘right’ do not have any actual existence themselves. They are simply terms used to express the view of different cultures.

26. Create an example of a situation to explain and illustrate normative relativism.

Moral absolutism

Normative relativism can be seen as oppositional to absolutism, which is the view that there is such a thing as universal or absolute moral values. An absolutist would argue that there are moral principles which exist independently of individual cultures, to which everyone should be accountable to. We shall return to this view later in this section. However, it should be noted that – just as with cognitivism, which any absolutist will agree with – agreeing with absolutism is not the same as holding the view that ‘Everything that I (or my culture) says about morality is true’. It is simply the position that moral judgments which are absolutely rather than relatively true do exist.
Assessing normative relativism

27. What points are made in normative relativism that might be convincing?

Firstly, one criticism of normative relativism is that it leads to counter-intuitive conclusions, in that it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to justifiably criticise the moral values of any other culture. For example, we would have to conclude that – at particular times and places – slavery was the right thing to do, and the fact that the British cultural judgment of slavery has changed is not a sign of moral progress or regress in terms of moving closer towards or further from the truth. Instead, cultural relativism would argue it is true that in British culture slavery was morally justified before, and it is true that it is morally unjustified now, even though what slavery is has not changed.

A normative relativist could respond to this criticism by saying that, yes, it is true that slavery was morally unproblematic in British culture, and now it is true that slavery is wrong in British culture. The point could be stressed that what is morally true is determined by the judgments made by a culture. As the judgments have changed, therefore so has what is moral.

Secondly, absolutists might also argue against normative relativism’s claim that there is significant moral disagreement among cultures. It is very rare for a culture to be in favour of such things as rape, killing of innocent people, theft, and lying, for example. If normative relativism is arguing that because of the amount of moral disagreement, this suggests there is no absolute truth about morality, then why not make the similar move that because of the amount of moral agreement, this suggests there are absolute moral truths?

Thirdly, an additional objection to normative relativism is that it can be taken to suggest that any moral judgment, if a culture agrees to it, is true (relatively speaking). In this respect, it is vulnerable to the same criticism made towards other non-cognitivist theories, in that it is difficult, perhaps impossible, for it to present criticism for any particular moral value. For example, a culture which judges that ‘Human sacrifice is good’ could not be criticised from a cultural relativist perspective, as the judgment is true for them if not for others.

Fourthly, another criticism of normative relativism is that it assumes all cultures are homogenous, with moral judgments accepted by everyone that is part of them. However, this cannot be said to be the case. Within any culture, dissenters to popular moral attitudes can be found. For instance, it can questioned whether it can be said that any culture judges ‘x is good’, when there will be some people within that culture who disagree with this judgment.

In response to this criticism, it could perhaps be argued that if the majority of people in a culture hold a moral judgment, then it is true in that culture.
However, this raises the question of how much of a majority is required. 99%? 75%? 50.1%? Or perhaps it could be argued that the moral judgments of a culture are to be determined by those who have political power. None of these options seems wholly satisfactory.

Fifthly, additional objections can be raised regarding what actually defines a culture, and what is required for us to say that we are part of any particular culture. Similar concerns will be raised when we look at the topic of nation states in political philosophy, but at this point we can simply put forward the question of where a culture begins and ends.

For instance, individuals may find themselves identifying with a range of cultures. For example, someone may at once feel attached to Sikh culture, British culture, European culture, rural culture, gay culture, the culture of a specific local community, and so on. In such cases, and among conflicting cultural values, which one is to take precedence? Also, some individuals may find they have ties to cultures, some ‘resident’ to the geographic area they live in, and others ‘foreign’. For example, a citizen of France may feel part of Israeli and Russian culture. In fact, they may feel culturally closer to the latter two groups than the former. Although it can be argued that they should follow French law while living in France, what reason could be given for living their life by French morality?

Sixthly, another criticism of normative relativism is that it supports the view that moral truths are not ‘discovered’ and ‘out there’, but rather ‘invented’ and ‘created’ by people. It could seem odd to think that if enough people agree to something, it becomes true, and furthermore, it becomes true for them, but not for others. Truth and knowledge in other fields – for example, science and history – don’t work like this, so why should we think it does in morality?

In relation to this, to speak of something being ‘true’ means that something is actually the case. But how could x be good in one culture, and be bad in another culture – perhaps one that is geographically very close? By simply stepping over a cultural border, the truth about morality would change, even though x is the same thing in both places. Again, truths of other kinds don’t work in this way, and it would be extremely bizarre to think that they did, so why should morality be a special case?

This objection to morality being different in different places could be responded to in the following way. Normative relativists are likely to restate the central point that cultures determine their own morality. They may go on to add that the circumstances of each culture are different, and therefore their moral truths are also different. For example, consider how modern, wealthy industrialised cultures treat the old and infirm compared to less technologically advanced, nomadic cultures. In such cultures, it may not be morally objectionable to leave such people behind while everyone else travels onward, fatally exposing them to the elements rather than to have them become what is judged to be an unnecessary burden to the rest of the community. In the first type of culture, it can be argued that it is true that ‘Leaving the infirm to die alone is wrong’, while in the second type of culture it is not true.

28. For each of the six criticisms given of normative relativism, (i) briefly sum up what they are, and (ii) explain whether you think they provide significant problems for the theory. Give reasons for your claims, and take into consideration any possible responses which could be made to these criticisms.
We will return to the debate between normative relativism and absolutism in Appendix I, as by that point we will be further informed by the cognitivist theories we will have studied.

**The possibility of judging the abhorrent practices of cultures and individuals**

If we judge something as abhorrent, then we find it disgusting or loathsome. Consequently, if we judge something morally abhorrent, then we are strongly opposed to it, deeming it to be ‘wrong’, ‘bad’, ‘vicious’, ‘reprehensible’, ‘condemnable’ etc.

We now look at whether it is possible to justifiably make judgments about the practices of cultures and individuals that we find abhorrent with regard to the theories we have looked at so far. We might want to judge that another person or culture carrying out x is doing something that we find morally disgusting, but is there any reason why it could be considered an error to make such a judgment?

Firstly, if we accept the emotivist argument, there does not seem to be anything problematic in judging the abhorrent practices of cultures and individuals. After all, according to this theory, as moral judgments are expressions of emotion, it is entirely appropriate to pass negative moral judgment on that which we find repugnant and undesirable.
Secondly, if we accept the prescriptivist argument, it seems that provided we give moral judgments that are coherent and universalised, then we can give a negative judgment of practices we find abhorrent. A key point to remember here is Hare’s argument that we must pass the same judgment on things that are ‘relevantly similar’ to each other. Therefore, we would be making a logical/linguistic error if we were to judge two relevantly similar actions in different ways – for example, stating that one was good, and another bad.

Thirdly, if we accept the cultural relativist argument, it seems there are greater restrictions on our passing judgment on practices we find abhorrent. This is because the theory argues that what is moral is relative to culture. Therefore, if our judgments go against what a culture judges to be moral – whether it is our own culture or one we are not part of – then we are in error, and should not pass such a judgment at all. For example, if another culture judges that ‘x is right’, and we abhor x, we should not pass negative judgment on the culture or the individuals within it who practice x. To take another example, if our culture judges that ‘x is good’, and we abhor x, we would be wrong to hold a hostile moral judgment towards it.

Fourthly, if we accept cognitivist or absolutist arguments, then we can only rightly make negative judgments of practices we are opposed to iff they actually are immoral. For example, if we abhor x, and go on to judge that ‘x is wrong’, then we are only correct in doing so if it is actually true that ‘x is wrong’.

The possibility of moral progress and moral mistakes

Moral progress and regress - first definition

Moral progress is a term typically used to describe the movement towards a greater knowledge of morality. (Although an alternative definition can be held - see below.) For example, if it is true that ‘x is wrong’, and a culture or individual once held the judgment ‘x is right’, and now holds the judgment ‘x is wrong’, it can be said that they have undergone moral progress. That is, they once lacked moral knowledge about x, and now they have it.

Conversely, moral regress can also be spoken of. If moral progression refers to moving towards ethical knowledge, then moral regression refers to moving away from it.

If we accept these definitions, it can be said that cognitivist theories, given that they argue for the existence of moral knowledge, will also argue for the possibility of ethical progress and regress, as well as the possibility of our making moral mistakes.

Non-cognitivism, if we accept these definitions, does not seem to allow for moral progress or regress. After all, non-cognitivist theories deny the existence of moral knowledge, so it is impossible to have less or more of it. Equally, the possibility of making a moral mistake seems difficult to conceive of under non-cognitivism, as there is no right or wrong.

If this is the case, non-cognitivism appears to lead to the possibly counter-intuitive conclusion that while the moral judgments of individuals and cultures have changed, none of them are more or less knowledgeable, correct or ‘progressive’ in their ethical views and conduct than they ever were. For example, cultures moving away from accepting slavery could not be described as morally progressive or regressive. Also, it cannot be said that such cultures have made a moral mistake that has now been corrected. Instead, it is simply a change – and neither a ‘better’ or ‘worse’ change, as such terms do not refer to any knowable qualities.

We will now look with more regard to the specific meta-ethical theories we have studied. Firstly, emotivism would argue that what is happening when an individual or culture changes their moral judgments is simply that their emotional expressions have altered. Nobody can be mistaken, as there is nothing to be mistaken about.
Secondly, prescriptivism would argue that what is happening when an individual or culture changes their judgments is that the actions they wish to prescribe to others have altered. As with emotivism and other non-cognitivist positions, it could not be said that anyone is mistaken, as there is nothing to be mistaken about. However, it is still possible for linguistic or logical errors to be made, in that an individual or culture could hold moral judgments which are not universalised or coherent.

Thirdly, cultural relativism is also unable to make the claim that moral progress or regress has occurred at a cultural level, as anything a culture makes a moral judgment about is true (relative to the culture). Therefore, if a culture at one time judges that ‘x is bad’, and later judges that ‘x is good’, all that can be said is that the judgments of the culture have changed. The judgments were (relatively) true on both occasions, not being mistaken in either instance.

However, cultural relativism could claim that an individual has made moral progression or regression. For example, if a culture judges that ‘x is just’, then it is true that ‘x is just’, relative to that culture. If an individual in that culture moves from the early personal judgment that ‘x is unjust’ to ‘x is just’, then their judgment has become more in line with that of their culture, and so they can be said to have progressed – they are no longer mistaken about what is morally true relative to their culture. Equally, if an individual goes from a position of having their moral judgments in correlation with their culture, and then moves away from this, then it could be said from a relativist point of view that they have regressed, and are now in a more mistaken ethical position.

**Moral progress and regress – second definition**

However, another account of what is meant by moral progress and regress also exists. In this definition, progress has occurred if our judgments become less contradictory. For instance, if we once held that ‘All Africans should be killed’, and ‘People from Sudan should not be killed’, and have since altered our judgments in some way that there is no longer a contradiction, then we can be said to have progressed. Conversely, if we were once in a state of moral non-contradiction and are now contradicting ourselves, then by this definition we have regressed.

In the previous definition, we can be said to have made a moral mistake when our judgments do not correlate with what is true (whether relatively or absolutely true). In this alternative definition, we can be said to have made a moral mistake when we have contradicted ourselves.

This definition of what moral progress and regress involves has particular implications for prescriptivism. According to the previous definition, we can only have moral progress if we move towards attaining moral knowledge. In prescriptivism, this kind of progress is of course impossible, given that it is a non-cognitivist theory. However, if we accept this second definition, then this is very much in keeping with Hare’s arguments in favour of avoiding incoherence in our moral judgments. Consequently, it can be said that moral progress and regress is possible, even though moral knowledge does not exist.

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In the exam, questions about moral progress are likely to focus on whether such a thing is possible. Key points to consider here are the different ways in which moral progress can be defined and thought of, and the wider issue of whether moral truth is possible. Because of this, questions on moral progress are likely to allow for discussion of the broader concern of whether cognitivist or non-cognitivist approaches are more persuasive.
If cognitivism is correct, then moral knowledge is possible. Therefore, there are limits on what we can morally value. For example, if it is true that ‘x is good’, and someone judges that ‘x is bad’, then they are mistaken.

The bigger question is whether or not there are limits on what we can value if non-cognitivism is correct. At first glance, it may seem that taking a non-cognitivist position would be compatible with the view that there is no such thing as moral knowledge, then we can place moral value on whatever we want. In other words, if no moral judgment is true or false, then it seems we are free to make whatever moral judgments we wish to support.

However, it is not necessarily the case that a non-cognitivist will support this position. For instance, we have already seen that prescriptivism argues against our holding a body of non-universalised or contradictory moral judgments. Hare notes that we should consider ‘relevantly similar’ situations, in that if we judge situation p to be good, then other situations which are similar to p should also be judged as being good. To illustrate this point, Hare writes:

`Suppose that we say ‘St Francis was a good man’. It is logically impossible to say this and to maintain at the same time that there might have been another man placed exactly in the same circumstances as St Francis, and who behaved in exactly the same way, but who differed from St Francis in this respect only, that he was not a good man.`

We have also seen normative relativism argue that we can make moral mistakes by holding judgments in opposition to those supported by our culture. Both of these theories suggest that there is a clear extent to which we can value what we like.

**Thick and thin concepts**

Another argument that has relevance for this question is the division made between ‘thick’ concepts and ‘thin’ concepts. **Thick concepts** in ethics are moral terms that do not allow for very much disagreement as to whether they are moral or immoral, as they hold particular evaluative connotations. Examples include:

- ‘Murder’ – descriptive of killing another; has a negative moral connotation.
- ‘Generous’ – likely to entail giving to others; has a positive moral connotation.
- ‘Cruel’ – likely to involve harm to others; has a negative moral connotation.
- ‘Deceitful’ – likely to involve being untruthful; has a negative moral connotation.
- ‘Charitable’ – likely to involve giving to others; has a positive moral connotation.

The point here is that some moral judgments involving thick concepts seem contradictory. For instance, given the connotations these concepts have, it appears mistaken to hold judgments such as ‘Murder is good’, ‘Generosity is wrong’, ‘Cruelty should be encouraged’, ‘We should be deceitful’, and so on. Therefore, this places limits on our ability to value what we like.
Note that all of these points do not require moral knowledge to exist. Even if moral judgments cannot be true or false, as non-cognitivists argue, it can still be said that the very meanings of terms used in our moral language prevent us from unproblematically supporting judgments like ‘We should commit murder’.

Conversely, thin concepts in ethics are moral terms that do allow for disagreement as to what they mean. Our understanding of what these concepts relate to may differ greatly. Examples include ‘good’, ‘right’, ‘wrong’, ‘bad’, ‘virtuous’, ‘vicious’, ‘just’, and ‘unjust’. With all of these terms, there is much debate as to what, if anything, they relate to, which is not really the case with thick concepts.

Nonetheless, as with the application of thick concepts, it can also be argued that there are limits on how we can make use of thin concepts in our moral judgments. For instance, it seems mistaken to hold such judgments as ‘We should not do what is good’, ‘It is wrong to act rightly’, ‘We ought not to kill others, so we should kill others’, and so on. Therefore, this also places limits on our ability to value what we like.

29. Using your own examples, explain in detail why a commitment to non-cognitivism does not necessarily mean that we can judge whatever we like.

**Moral Truth**

**Moral truth as God-independent truth**

To refer to something as transcendent means that it is beyond what can be perceived using our senses, although it does still exist. Use of this term may also suggest that what is being described is ‘higher’ or superior to things which can be perceived.

The argument that moral truth is transcendent is the idea that it separate to or ‘above’ empirical realm of the senses, and in some way superior to it. Many philosophers have noticed that we commonly experience a conflict between what we believe is morally right and what we want to do or how we feel. In this conflict, morality is ‘higher’, is ‘better’ for us. Morality is viewed as having ‘authority’ over us, while immoral desires are a ‘lower’ or ‘animal’ part of our natures which it is right – but difficult – to resist. It is commonly thought by transcendentalists that to become moral, we have to temper or overcome our selfish desires and immediate emotional reactions and learn to consider others.

Furthermore, it can be argued that because we don’t perceive morality in the rest of nature, among the other animals, the moral or ‘higher’ part of ourselves, we can argue, must have a different origin, outside the
empirical world. Morality, on this view, is not part of the natural world, but exists beyond it. Therefore, they cannot be perceived through such things as sense perception or scientific investigation. We will not ‘find’ goodness, for example, in the physical world.

The most common way of understanding this is through belief in God. In this view, values are part of the ‘supernatural’ world, which is also the origin of the ‘higher’ part of ourselves – our souls, perhaps.

However, this interpretation of transcendence isn’t the only one that we can appeal to. The specifications place an emphasis on God-independent transcendent truth in morality, so we will now turn to theories of this type. To describe a theory in this way means it argues that moral knowledge comes from beyond the perceivable realm of the senses, but does not have its source in a higher power such as God.

Therefore, transcendentalism in meta-ethics is a cognitivist, realist theory. It argues that moral knowledge is possible, and that moral properties such as ‘right’ and ‘good’ do exist, although they are transcendental rather than physical. As transcendentalists argue that our understanding of moral truths comes through reason rather than experience, they would support the view that moral knowledge is a priori.

The analogy with mathematical truths

It can certainly be said that transcendentalism is an unusual thing to consider. As we saw when we studied empiricism, it is a common-sense idea that our knowledge is rooted in the realm of experience, and that any claim to say that we know an object exists can be justified by reference to our having perceived it. But to argue, as transcendentalism does, for moral properties which exist but are non-perceivable, is a claim that can be harder to accept. How can we have knowledge of something which exists that is not part of the physical world?

To answer this question, an analogy between knowledge of mathematical truths and knowledge of moral truths can help. Intuitively, mathematical truths are about numbers and other mathematical objects, such as geometrical shapes. For example, the proposition ‘2+2=4’ is about the numbers ‘2’ and ‘4’.

But what are numbers? No physical object is a number. As for geometric shapes, what are they? For example, what is a triangle? Mathematicians don’t study triangles physically. For instance, the belief that ‘The three internal angles of a triangle add up to 180°’ doesn’t rely on measuring lots of different triangles to establish whether it is true or false.

One view is that mathematical objects are abstract objects, or ‘intelligible objects’. This means that they exist, but as abstract things rather than physical things. They are eternal, meaning they do not exist in space and time or have a finite lifespan, like physical objects do. For instance, it can be argued that the proposition ‘2+2=4’ was true even before we thought of the concepts of ‘2’ and ‘4’. It can be said that we make mathematical discoveries – these are discoveries about numbers. Mathematical truths are known a priori, being established through reason rather than experience.
How do we discover the truth about numbers and other mathematical objects? Many mathematicians believe that we have a form of mathematical intuition, which is a part of our ability to reason. Although this is not based on the senses, it is a form of thought that we tend to describe by analogy with perception. For example, we talk of ‘seeing’ a mathematical proof. Like other fields which we can form beliefs about, our mathematical propositions can be true or false. Our mathematical reasoning is not infallible, and it can be trained. Linking this back to meta-ethics, an analogy can be drawn between the abstract objects of mathematical knowledge, and the abstract objects of moral knowledge. Moral values such as ‘good’ and ‘wrong’, like mathematical objects, can be thought of as transcendent, having an eternal existence outside of space and time. They are objective, existing independently of us, meaning that this view is compatible with that of moral realism. We come to know about these moral values using a form of rational intuition. This intuition is fallible, so we are not always truthful in our judgments, but we can train ourselves to become more accurate in how we use it.

**The belief in Platonic forms as the archetypal example of this view**

Plato (b. 428 BCE d. 347 BCE in Athens, Greece) provides a cognitivist, realist theory of meta-ethics which argues that moral values are transcendent and knowable objects. That’s all we’re going to hear about that right now, as we will be covering this in detail when we study Republic later in the year for PHIL4. Let’s move on, while at the same time admiring what an anti-climax this was.

30. Outline how transcendentalism can argue that an analogy can be drawn between mathematical objects and moral properties.

**Moral elitism**

If we accept the view that moral knowledge is possible, then a likely consequence is that some people will have moral knowledge, and some people will not. This has led to some philosophers criticising moral cognitivism, arguing that it has an elitist view of morality. In short, the problem is that it suggests some people know better than others how to live their lives in the right way. Furthermore, it suggests that people with moral knowledge could, maybe even should, pass judgment on others, pointing out their moral mistakes and criticising their ethical errors. This may, for example, make it difficult to combine moral knowledge with tolerance. However, it can be argued that this is an empty criticism of cognitivism. If we consider other fields of knowledge, such as science, mathematics or theology, it does not seem to be a problem to suggest that some people know more than others. In fact, it can be said that if knowledge is possible in any field, then it is likely to result in some people having true, justified beliefs while others don’t. This is not an elitist point, it is just a consequence of individuals not having knowledge of everything it is possible to know. Some people, therefore, could rightly be labelled ‘moral experts’.
Nonetheless, it is perhaps understandable why the idea of moral knowledge creates this reaction, while for example historical knowledge does not. While someone who possesses other types of knowledge may only be able to pick up on the factual errors of others, moral knowledge seems to go further, in that it can lead to telling people that their whole way of living is wrong.

Even so, while it is certainly true that the way in which someone goes about informing others of their failing to know something in any topic can be elitist, arguments for the existence of knowledge, of any other kind, are not necessarily elitist. Furthermore, there is no reason why moral knowledge and being tolerant could not be combined.

Another point worth noting here is that the AQA specifications seem to be associating this elitist position with Plato in particular. As we will later see when we study PHIL4, one of Plato’s arguments is that those with moral knowledge should be placed in political power, with complete control over every aspect of the state and its citizens. Furthermore, Plato argues that moral knowledge is very difficult to attain, and will only be achieved by the very best of people. So it’s perhaps not surprising that some people think of Plato as supporting a morally elitist position.

31. To what extent do you think that cognitivism implies elitism? Explain why.

Moral knowledge and weakness of will

Another key word in moral philosophy is the ancient Greek term *akrasia*, often translated as ‘weakness of will’ or, a bit more confusingly, ‘incontinence’. An *akratic* individual is a person who knows what the morally right thing to do is, but acts otherwise. This is in contrast to someone who has ‘strength of will’, in that they know what the morally right thing to do is, and they act on this knowledge.

*Akrasia* is a concept that is discussed in many areas of cognitivist moral philosophy, but it is particularly associated with virtue ethics. Some virtue ethicists argue that we can be *akratic* in our actions, while others do not.

**Plato and the impossibility of *akrasia***

The virtue ethicist Plato holds that it is impossible for a person to be *akratic*, because if we did possess moral knowledge, we would automatically act on it. Plato argues that as moral knowledge informs us of how we can achieve a *eudaimon* life, it follows that anyone acting in opposition to this knowledge would be very much acting against their self-interest. He believes that someone who claims to know what the right thing to do is, but who acts otherwise, clearly doesn’t know what the right thing to do is after all. He cannot conceive that someone would deliberately act in such a way that was not in their self-interest.
Aristotle and the possibility of akrasia

In opposition to this, the virtue ethicist Aristotle (b. 384 BCE in Stagira, Macedonia d. 322 BCE in Chalcis, Euboea), argues that akrasia is conceivable in an individual’s actions. One key reason why it may occur in us is when we recognise that acting in a certain way will contribute to our long-term flourishing, but we are compelled to act otherwise in order to achieve a shorter-term goal. For instance, achieving easy-to-achieve, immediate pleasure now, at the expense of more lasting, harder-to-achieve satisfaction later. For Aristotle, there is no contradiction between someone possessing moral knowledge and acting against it. Someone who is weak-willed is not without moral knowledge, but in the moment of being weak-willed, they do not fully grasp the significance or importance of their knowledge. In other words, the akratic individual is someone who fails to judge what is truly best for their eudaimonia.

32. Create two examples of situations in which people could be said to be exhibiting weakness of will (akrasia).

33. Explain whether you find Plato or Aristotle’s account of weakness of will more persuasive. Give reasons.

A wider issue here is whether or not having moral knowledge is sufficient to provide us with motivation to act. To put it another way, it certainly seems possible – unless you’re Plato – that someone could have knowledge of a moral truth, and yet not act morally. Crudely put, they might know what is moral, but not care.

If we reject Plato’s argument, and allow for the possibility of akrasia, then it seems that while we can have knowledge of moral truths, we still need the required desire to act on these truths.

Therefore, it seems that we’re back to the question ‘Why should I be moral?’ We shall return to this topic later on, in the section on the extent to which moral truths can motivate/justify action and our study of internalism and externalism. Before that, let’s look at some other cognitivist arguments.

Moral truth as based on natural facts

A number of meta-ethical theories are described as being examples of naturalism. Common features of naturalistic theories include their being cognitivist, realist, and denying the is/ought gap argument. This means naturalists argue that moral knowledge is possible, that moral properties such as ‘right’ and ‘good’ do exist, and that we can acquire moral knowledge through our understanding of other facts. As naturalists argue that our knowledge of moral truths comes through experience rather than reason, they would support the view that moral knowledge is a posteriori.
What further defines naturalistic theories is their argument that the kind of *a posteriori* knowledge we need to refer to in order to attain moral knowledge is to do with natural facts. This term refers to facts about the natural world, the observable universe we live in. Moral naturalists argue there is some form of connection between natural facts and moral properties. There is no gap!

Precisely what this connection is depends on the particular naturalistic theory. However, it is typical for the kinds of natural facts that are thought to be most morally relevant are to do with human nature and psychology. To take a simplistic example, a naturalistic argument might take an approach such as this: If it is true that ‘x causes distress’, because of how we feel about being distressed (i.e. we don’t like it), there could be some connection between this fact and knowing that ‘Causing distress is wrong’, meaning that action x shouldn’t be done.

As indicated above, because naturalistic theories argue moral knowledge is in some way based on natural facts, it can be said they are opposed to the is/ought gap argument. This is because naturalism is stating there is a connection between ‘is’ statements in the form of natural facts, and ‘ought’ statements. We can move from *a posteriori* facts to *a posteriori* moral values.

If naturalistic theories are correct, then morality and knowledge of it is not found in some unperceivable, transcendental realm. We can have understanding of it just as we can any other aspect of the perceivable world. This does not, however, mean that acquiring moral knowledge is going to necessarily be an easy thing. For example, scientific truths are also about the empirical world, but they are not necessarily easy to acquire. As stated above, many naturalists place emphasis on facts to do with human nature and psychology, which is not the most straightforward of areas, so perhaps we should not expect this to be completely simple.

Another way to describe the naturalist approach is to say that it is a *non-transcendental* meta-ethical theory, as it is arguing that moral truths can be found in the empirical world. Equally, transcendental meta-ethical theories can be described as *non-naturalist*, given that they don’t find moral truths in the empirical world. Referring back to theories we looked at before this, it could also be said that non-cognitivist theories are both *non-naturalist* and *non-transcendental*, in that they do not find moral truths anywhere (because there are none).

**What is morally desirable is to be understood in terms of what is in fact desired**

**John Stuart Mill, naturalism and utilitarianism**

Although interpretations of his theories differ, some philosophers have said that the utilitarianism of John Stuart Mill (b. 1806 in London, England d. 1873 in Avignon, France) is an example of naturalism. Mill’s version of what is known as utilitarianism argues that an action is good if it creates happiness, and that the right action to carry out is the one that is likely to create the greatest amount of possible happiness from the available options. Happiness is a natural property, and therefore so is goodness. To put it simply, ‘good’ = ‘happiness’.

Mill’s justification for the view that happiness is good can be put like this:

Firstly, it is true that we are all focused on attaining the end of happiness. This is a natural fact – there’s certainly nothing mysterious, supernatural or transcendent about this claim.

Secondly, because of this, it can be said that the ultimate end or goal in life that we all desire is happiness.
Therefore, because happiness is what we ultimately desire, happiness is the ultimate good.

To elaborate on this, it can be said that happiness is the only thing we ultimately desire, as all other things we seem to desire such as friendship, possessions or sunny fields, are all means to achieve the end of happiness. Because of this, Mill concludes that happiness is therefore good (and the only good).

What follows from this is that Mill would argue that people who believe that ‘Happiness is good’ have moral knowledge of this proposition, and that those who disagree with this association have made an error. This would lead further to mean that it is true that ‘There is good in x’ if it is also true that x contributes to happiness.

Other judgments that Mill could argue we have knowledge of would include ‘x is good’ if it is true that x causes happiness, and ‘x is bad’ if it is true that x causes unhappiness.

Note that all truths being referred to are a posteriori. Mill is arguing that we can attain moral knowledge through our observation of actions and events and the effect they have on people’s happiness. No form of abstract, a priori reasoning is required.

As we will see later on, Mill goes further with this theory, arguing for instance that when we have a choice between different courses of action, we should choose between the one which is likely to produce the greatest outcome of happiness. However, this is where Mill’s utilitarianism moves away from its meta-ethics, and into normative ethics, so we will stop here.

**Assessing Mill’s naturalism**

34. What points are made in Mill’s naturalism that might be convincing?

Mill and other naturalist utilitarians have received some support for arguing that we are ultimately moved to act to achieve the end of happiness. There is certainly a case for saying that it is a truth of human nature that happiness is what is ultimately desirable.

However, it can be objected that the word ‘desirable’ has two meanings. Firstly, if we say that ‘x is desirable’, one meaning of the term is that people simply desire or want x. A second meaning of the term is that x is worthy of desire – in other words, that we should desire x, or, more simply, that x is good.

What Mill is criticised for doing here is mixing up the two usages of ‘desirable’. While he might be right to state that we desire happiness, meaning that we want it, we can object that it does not follow that happiness is desirable, meaning that it is valuable or good. After all, just because we desire something doesn’t mean it is good.
Another way to put this objection is to rephrase in terms familiar from the is/ought gap argument. Mill is moving from the ‘is’ statement that ‘We desire happiness’ to the ‘ought’ statement ‘Happiness is desirable’, or ‘Happiness is good’.

In response to this objection, it could be argued that Mill is saying that people in general desire happiness. Although it can certainly be claimed that not every desire people might have is a ‘good’ desire, it could be fair to say that Mill is right in arguing that what people in general desire is worth desiring. In other words, the fact that some people’s desires are undesirable doesn’t mean that the extremely widespread desire for happiness that people have is also undesirable. Everyone wants happiness, so happiness is good.

Nonetheless, it is still possible to object to Mill that this form of argument is a democratic fallacy. He seems to be suggesting that because it is a common trait of human nature to desire happiness, this is what makes happiness good.

A possible response to this is to return to naturalistic assumptions, and reiterate the point that what is moral and what is not will depend on what the natural facts are – in particular, facts about ourselves, what we are like, what we desire, and so on. Given that, for example, happiness is desired, it may not be thought to be much of a jump across the ‘gap’ to say that it is also desirable. The universal desire people have for happiness is what makes it true that it is good. Therefore, this is not a democratic fallacy.

Other criticisms relating to the normative implications of utilitarianism will be discussed later.

**Aristotle, naturalism and virtue ethics**

Aristotle’s virtue ethics provides a different example of a naturalistic meta-ethical theory, and he presents us with a good contrast to both Mill and Plato.

Aristotle, Mill and Plato are all cognitivists and realists. Plato is a transcendentalist, and Aristotle and Mill are naturalists. Aristotle is a virtue ethicist, and Mill is a utilitarian.

Aristotle would agree with Mill to an extent that the ‘end’ for human life is happiness, although Aristotle’s definition of what this involves is arguably more involved. Like other virtue ethicists, Aristotle makes use of the term *eudaimonia*, arguing that happiness is not defined by the mood we happen to feel at a particular time, but in a more thorough assessment of how fulfilled and flourishing our lives are. The morally significant question is not ‘Do we feel good?’ but rather ‘Have we accomplished our potential as human beings?’

It is very important to remember that under virtue ethics, a moral life is considered identical with a *eudaimon* life. To be ‘good’ is to flourish, and vice versa. As we saw in AS, virtue ethicists argue that to achieve *eudaimonia* we must possess particular virtues – sometimes referred to as excellences – which are the necessary character traits required for a fulfilled, flourishing life.

Many of the virtues Aristotle argues for are connected to us having rewarding social lives – for example, the virtues of friendliness, wittiness, modesty and patience. This is because Aristotle argues that it is part of
human nature to find an active, engaged, social existence to be more fulfilling and rewarding than one which is not any of these things.

Therefore, Aristotle would claim that character traits that are virtuous – i.e. which contribute to *eudaimonia* – are desirable, and so therefore ‘good’. Character traits that are vicious – i.e. which impede *eudaimonia* – are undesirable, and so therefore ‘bad’. People who do not recognise which character traits are truly virtues and which are truly vices are consequently wrong in their moral judgments.

By Aristotle’s account of what being virtuous involves, a virtuous person will act in the right way that is conducive to their achieving *eudaimonia*. In other words, virtuous people will not be *akratic* – they will possess moral knowledge about how to live a fulfilling, moral life, and will act on this knowledge.

As we will see later on, Aristotle goes further with this theory, but this is where his virtue ethics moves away from meta-ethical arguments, and into normative ones, so we will stop here.

Criticisms of Aristotle’s meta-ethics can be made in a similar way as those we saw directed at Mill. For example, accusations that there is a distinction between what is desired and what is desirable, problems with moving from an ‘is’ to an ‘ought’, and claims that a democratic fallacy is being carried out by equating what people in general find fulfilling and what is therefore good. However, such criticisms can also be responded to in a way similar to how we saw them dealt with for Mill.

35. Give possible reasons for and against the view that Aristotle’s naturalism is more persuasive than Mill’s.

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**Moore’s arguments against naturalism**

In this section, we will look at the arguments of G E Moore (b. 1873 in London, England d. 1958 in Cambridge, England). He is a cognitivist and a realist, as he claims that moral knowledge is possible, and that moral properties do exist. We will be looking at his arguments in two parts. Firstly, the reason why he rejects naturalism in meta-ethics, which is covered by his theories of the ‘open question argument’, and the ‘naturalistic fallacy’. Secondly, what he suggests in its place, which is covered by his theory of ‘intuitionism’.

**The open question argument and the naturalistic fallacy**

Before we look at Moore’s anti-naturalist arguments, we need to firstly distinguish between two different types of question.

**Open questions** are ones which, if correctly answered, will provide us with new information which cannot be gained just from understanding what the terms of the question mean. For example, ‘What is behind that curtain?’, and ‘Did Julius Caesar live in a house?’

**Closed questions** are ones which, if correctly answered, will not provide us with any new information beyond what is already contained within the terms of the question. For example, ‘Are you in a relationship with your partner?’, and ‘Do you own your possessions?’
Moore holds that open questions are worth asking, and are a good way of acquiring new knowledge. Closed questions are essentially pointless.

36. Give two examples of open questions.

37. Give two examples of closed questions.

Along with the distinction between open and closed questions, another important idea that Moore makes use of in his attack on naturalism relates to terms which are unanalysable, meaning they cannot be defined using any other terms. As an example, Moore refers to ‘yellow’, which cannot be defined in any terms beyond what it is – i.e. ‘yellow’. To understand yellow, or any other colour, we have to have experience of it. You cannot satisfactorily explain to someone who hasn’t experienced yellow what yellow is like. In other words, it defies description.

Moore is aware that it could be objected that we can define yellow in other terms – for example, describing it in terms of wavelengths of light. However, someone who knows this kind of information about yellow does not understand yellow itself. For instance, someone who is blind but knew factual information about how light and the eye work together is still ‘missing something’, in that only the experience of yellow itself can bring them to understand what yellow is actually like. Therefore, Moore may be correct to say that colour is unanalysable.

Now, we shall look at precisely how Moore argues against naturalism, and how he refers to open and closed questions and unanalysability in doing so.

Moore notes that naturalistic theories define moral properties in terms of other properties/natural facts. Focusing on Mill’s approach, he states how Mill claims that ‘good’ = ‘making people happy’. Moore presents the following criticism against this aspect of naturalism, known as the open question argument.

Moore holds that if we were to ask ‘Is x the same as x?’ this would clearly be a closed question. It would be meaningless to ask it.

By claiming that ‘good’ = ‘making people happy’, naturalists like Mill are suggesting that the question ‘Is it good to make people happy?’ is the equivalent of asking ‘Is making people happy the same as making people happy?’

This is because ‘good’ and ‘making people happy’ are taken to be equivalent to each other. In other words, naturalist arguments suggest that ‘Is it good to make people happy?’ is a closed question, as it is like asking ‘Is x the same as x?’

Therefore, Moore claims that naturalism renders the question ‘Is it good to make people happy?’ a meaningless thing to ask.²

² Moore would agree that this point applies to any form of naturalism, not just Mill’s. For example, Aristotle can be said to be claiming that ‘good’ = ‘leading a fulfilled life’. But this would make the question ‘Is it good to lead a fulfilled life?’ the equivalent of asking ‘Is leading a fulfilled life the same as leading a fulfilled life?’ As with Mill’s definition, this looks to be the same as asking ‘Is x the same as x?’ – a closed, meaningless question.
It is with this point that Moore claims to identify a key flaw with naturalism. He argues that it is clearly the case that the question ‘Is it good to make people happy?’ is not closed at all. It is in fact an open question, as it does not seem the equivalent to asking ‘Is $x$ the same as $x$?’

Therefore, Moore’s open question argument is claiming that we can know that naturalism is false because it wrongly presents the question ‘Is it good to make people happy?’ as a closed question, when it is actually an open one. Furthermore, as Moore’s claims can be used to apply to any naturalistic definition of ‘good’, this shows that ‘good’ cannot be equal to, or defined in terms of, any natural facts at all.

Moore refers to naturalism’s attempt to define moral properties in terms of natural facts as the naturalistic fallacy. This leads Moore to claim, in opposition to naturalism, that moral properties such as ‘good’ are unanalysable, as they cannot be defined in other terms. This point now leads us to look at Moore’s theory of intuitionism.

**Intuitionism**

As stated above, Moore is a cognitivist and moral realist, so he holds that goodness is a real property we can have knowledge of. However, because of his open question argument, he also supports the view that moral properties cannot be defined by reference to other facts, meaning that he supports the is/ought gap argument.

Moral properties such as ‘good’ and colours such as ‘yellow’ are similar, in that they are both unanalysable. ‘Good’ is a real property, but it cannot be defined in reference to anything beyond itself. However, Moore argues that ‘good’ is a non-natural property, it not being part of the natural world. Nonetheless, ‘good’ is a real thing that we can have knowledge of.

Moore states that we come to know moral truths through a form of ethical intuition. Because of this claim, the meta-ethical theory associated with him is known as intuitionism. Moore does not argue that there is no relation between moral properties and natural properties. For instance, he thinks that in two situations, identical natural properties would lead to identical moral properties (similar to the claims made by Hare on ‘relevantly similar’ situations). So, moral properties are, in some way, related to natural properties. But they are not identical to them, and cannot be defined in terms of them.

**Assessing Moore’s arguments against naturalism**

Different aspects of Moore’s theories have received criticism. We will first focus on the open question argument and the naturalistic fallacy, and then the claim that we can acquire moral knowledge through intuition.

1. **The open question argument and the naturalistic fallacy**

Simply put, the open question argument doesn’t work. Consider the following argument, which uses the same structure as Moore’s:

The property of being water cannot be any natural property, such as the property of being H$_2$O. If it was, then the question ‘Is water the same as H$_2$O?’ would not make sense, as it would be the same as asking ‘Is H$_2$O the same as H$_2$O?’ Therefore, ‘water’ is an unanalysable property.
It is likely that you knew about water before you knew it was H₂O. During this time, you had the concept ‘water’, but not the concept ‘H₂O’. So, these are two different concepts, but they both refer to the same thing. Similarly, the concept ‘good’ is a different concept to ‘happiness’. But perhaps, contrary to Moore’s arguments, they are referring to exactly the same property in the world. Other reasons may cause us to doubt this equation between goodness and natural properties, but the open question argument cannot be one of them. Therefore, it is not enough to suggest that there is a naturalistic fallacy.

2. **Intuitionism**

Now, we look at the intuitionist part of Moore’s theory. It should be noted that even if he is incorrect about the open question argument, it could still be the case that we have knowledge of ethical properties like ‘good’ through a form of intuitive moral sense.

A significant reason to support Moore’s claims here is that it does seem a very difficult task to explain why a particular thing is moral or immoral, as the is/ought gap argument shows. For example, ‘What exactly is wrong with killing, and why is that wrong?’ Moore’s view that we nonetheless recognise what is good and what is bad when we see it could be found persuasive. For example, we may not, for instance, be able to conclusively explain why killing is wrong with regard to natural facts, but know that it just is wrong, don’t we?

However, an important difficulty for Moore here is the fact of moral disagreement. If recognising moral properties comes down to intuition, and references to facts to back up our judgments is largely irrelevant, then it is difficult to see how moral arguments could ever be entered into or resolved. Also, if two people intuitively come to contradictory moral conclusions, how are we to choose between them?

38. Explain whether you find Moore’s arguments on (i) the open question argument and the naturalistic fallacy, and (ii) intuitionism to be equally persuasive or unpersuasive. Give reasons.

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**The analogy with secondary properties**

Many philosophers have argued there is a distinction between what are called primary and secondary properties. Precisely what is meant by these terms is contested, as we will soon see, but one common definition of them runs as follows:

**Primary properties** – these are **objective**, meaning they do not depend on the perceiver of the object to exist. In other words, they are mind-independent. Primary properties are also **quantitative**, meaning they are measurable.

**Secondary properties** – these are **subjective**, meaning they do depend on the perceiver of the object to exist. In other words, they are mind-dependent. Secondary properties are also **qualitative**, meaning they are non-measurable.
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### Examples of primary properties
- Length (e.g. cm)
- Weight (e.g. kg)
- Speed (e.g. mph)
- Chemical composition (e.g. \( \text{H}_2\text{SO}_4 \))
- Temperature (e.g. Celsius)
- Spatial position (e.g. distance between the chair and the cupboard)

### Examples of secondary properties
- Smell (e.g. stinky/pleasing)
- Sound (e.g. too loud/too quiet)
- Temperature (e.g. feeling cold/hot)
- Speed (e.g. feeling fast/slow)
- Taste (e.g. lemony/brackish)
- Colour (e.g. brown/mauve)

Take care that you are clear on the specific meanings given to ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ here. Outside of philosophy, their usage can be less precise. For instance, ‘subjective’ is sometimes taken to be the same as ‘opinion’, while ‘objective’ is sometimes taken to mean ‘true’ or ‘factual’. It is important to recognise that these terms are used here to refer to whether or not something is dependent on the mind of the perceiver to exist.

39. Explain why any one example of a primary property should be described as primary.

40. Explain why any one example of a secondary property should be described as secondary.

Our focus now will be on secondary properties, because some philosophers have argued that there are analogous similarities between secondary properties like ‘green’ and moral properties like ‘good’.

As was noted above, the definition of primary and secondary properties we have just seen is one that many philosophers have agreed with. However, there is some dispute over whether it is quite so straightforward to describe secondary properties as being entirely subjective.

We will now look at two philosophers, who both agree that secondary properties are analogous to moral properties. However, where they disagree is with regard to whether secondary and moral properties are wholly subjective, or whether they can also be considered objective in any way.

The emphasis from this point will be on comparing moral properties to the secondary property of colour, but there is no reason why similar arguments could not be made for a range of other secondary properties, such as smell or taste.

1. **Moral properties are analogous to secondary properties, because they are subjective**

David Hume (b. 1711 d. 1776 in Edinburgh, Scotland) argues that colours and moral values are examples of secondary properties:

> When you pronounce any action or character to be vicious, you mean nothing, but that... you have a feeling... of blame from the contemplation of it. Vice and virtue, therefore, may be compared to sounds, colours, heat and cold, which... are not qualities in objects, but perceptions in the mind.
‘Vice’ and ‘virtue’ – like other moral properties such as ‘good’ or ‘wrong’ – are therefore not objective properties of actions or people, and so moral judgments are not true or false. Instead, moral properties, according to Hume, are subjective, wholly dependent on the judger for their existence, and are simply expressions of our approval or disapproval.

Hume argues that moral properties are not primary properties. This is because primary properties are clearly objective, as they do not rely on the perceiver to exist. The length of something, for example, exists whether we perceive it or not. It seems correct to say that people can have knowledge of primary properties, as they are real, true things. Our beliefs about primary properties are either true or false – our beliefs about them can describe how things really are, not just how things feel or appear to us as individuals.

In addition, Hume accepts that there is a causal relationship between primary and secondary properties. This is because the reason that a particular object appears red, for example, is caused by the particular primary properties it has. For instance, it can be argued that the primary properties of how the object reflects light cause the secondary property of its colour. After all, if it had a different physical structure, causing it to reflect light differently, the colour of the object would be different.

In connection with this, it can be said that the primary properties of the perceiver can also play a causal role in the secondary properties of the object being perceived. For instance, if an individual’s perceptual system was physically different – perhaps with regard to the arrangement and number of rods and cones in the eye – then the colours they perceived in objects would also be different.

Linking this to meta-ethics, on Hume’s account, it can be said that moral and secondary properties such as colour are analogous because they are entirely subjective things, requiring the mind of an individual to exist. Because they are subjective, they cannot be thought of as really existing – there are no truths or falsities about them. Therefore, we cannot have knowledge of secondary properties such as colour, or moral properties such as ‘good’.

In summary, it can be said that the arguments Hume gives here can be associated with a non-cognitivist, anti-realist position on morality. Furthermore, as Hume does not think we can gain moral knowledge through a consideration of any facts (because there is no moral knowledge), Hume is also clearly in favour of the is/ought gap argument.

41. Explain what might be considered persuasive about Hume’s argument secondary properties are wholly subjective.

42. Explain what might be considered persuasive about Hume’s argument that secondary properties are analogous to moral properties.
2. Moral properties are analogous to secondary properties, because they are subjective and objective

As we saw, to describe a property as ‘objective’ means that it exists independently of the mind, and to describe a property as ‘subjective’ means that its existence is mind-dependent. Hume’s argument suggests that secondary properties such as colour are subjective, and in this respect are analogous to moral properties like ‘good’.

However, an alternative argument suggests that secondary properties such as colour can be described as being both subjective and objective. This is a strange idea, as it seems rather contradictory, so let’s concentrate.

One philosopher who supports this alternative view is John McDowell (b. 1942 in Boksburg, South Africa). He claims that colour is subjective, in that it only comes into existence when an individual with a mind/perceptual system perceives it. In other words, objects only have a particular colour when there is a perceiver to perceive them.

On this point, he is in correlation with Hume and the account given of secondary properties which we saw above. However, McDowell goes on to argue that secondary properties such as colour are also objective, which is a significant difference.

A focus on facts and properties that are purely or solely objective could be argued to be the concern of physical sciences such as chemistry, biology and physics. They deal with facts and properties that exist independently of the human mind. For example, the makeup of a hydrocarbon, the action of photosynthesis, or the trajectory of a planetary body are all things which do not require a human mind for them to exist and to continue existing, and it can be said there is a clear distinction between these things and those which are purely subjective. From this, it can be said that if we were to take a completely ‘objectivist’ or ‘scientific’ view of the universe, we would only concern ourselves with primary properties such as these. However, McDowell notes that we do not experience our lives in this way. Human existence does not easily lend itself towards a wholly objectivist perspective, and colour provides a good example of this.

How McDowell argues that colour is objective is connected to it being what he calls a dispositional property. A property which is dispositional will exist when particular circumstances are in effect. In other words, the property is disposed to exist under certain conditions.

McDowell argues that colour is a dispositional property because objects, when perceived under particular conditions, are disposed to create the property of a particular colour for us when we perceive the object. For example, under the ‘normal’ conditions – which could be said to include such things as being viewed in sunlight by someone without colour blindness and their eyes open – grass is disposed to have the property of ‘green’.

This view can certainly be combined with the argument we saw Hume make, that the primary properties of an object (e.g. how it reflects light) cause its secondary properties (e.g. being green).

However, by arguing that secondary properties like colour are dispositional, McDowell builds on this view, and is able to argue that these properties have objectivity as well as subjectivity. As noted above, the colour of x is subjective because it does not exist without a perceiver. But the colour of x is also objective, because it is an objective fact that x is disposed to have that colour property under particular conditions. This is objective because the fact x is disposed to be a certain colour under particular conditions is something that is not dependent on the person perceiving x to be the case.

A significant implication of this is that because McDowell is speaking of there being what could be called ‘correct’ or ‘normal’ conditions under which a colour judgment can be made, then our judgments about colour can be true or false. The subjectivity of colour results in, for example, some people perceiving colours
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differently to others, perhaps because of their being in unusual lighting conditions, or their being colour blind. But because it is objectively true that there is a ‘normal’ set of conditions under which a colour judgment can be made, and if these conditions are met then the true colour will be perceived, then we can be right or wrong in our colour judgments.

Let’s now compare this view to that of Hume’s. Imagine someone looking at a garden in near-darkness. They will perceive the colours of the garden to be very dull, perhaps monochromatic. Their colour judgment might be that ‘The garden is grey’. Hume would argue that this is their subjective perception – colours only exist in our minds, so it would be a mistake to say to this person that their judgments about the colours in the garden are either true or false. For one thing, there are no colours ‘in’ the garden – the colours are only ‘in’ our perception.

McDowell, however, would make a different assessment. He would admit that it is true that without a perceiver, there is no colour. In this sense, colour is subjective. But there are objectively appropriate or inappropriate conditions under which to make a colour judgment. Being in near-darkness, for example, is not the ‘normal’ condition in which we should make colour judgments. Therefore, the person judging that ‘The garden is grey’ is incorrect to do so, because of colour having an objective, dispositional existence.

McDowell’s argument about colour – which can also be applied to other secondary properties such as smell or taste – is known as secondary property realism. This is, unsurprisingly, because he is claiming that secondary properties are real, having existence independent of our minds, due to their having objectivity because of their being dispositional.

43. Explain what might be considered persuasive about McDowell’s argument secondary properties are both subjective and objective.

But what about meta-ethics? As has been said, both Hume and McDowell argue that secondary properties are analogous to moral properties. We have already seen that the reason Hume thinks this is because he believes they are both subjective. McDowell agrees that the two types of property are analogous, but he also thinks that moral properties have subjectivity and objectivity.

What this means is that, like with colour, moral properties such as ‘good’ only have existence when there is someone to make the moral judgment – they are subjective. But moral properties are also dispositional, because it can be said that the facts of a particular situation, when judged under the ‘correct’ or ‘normal’ conditions, are objectively disposed to be morally judged in a particular way. To create one possible example as a way of illustrating how this might work, it could be said that an unprovoked stabbing, when judged under the right conditions – e.g. having emotional maturity, not having a vested interest in the stabbing, not being a psychopath, knowing that it was unprovoked, recognising that stabbing is undesirable, dangerous and painful – is objectively disposed to provoke the judgment that it is wrong.

As we speak of those who are colour blind, we can also think of there being people similarly deficient in their judgment of moral properties. Similarly, as we speak of there being inappropriate circumstances and conditions in which to make colour judgments – e.g. in darkness – we could also think of there being inappropriate circumstances in which we can make truthful moral judgments – e.g. when we are enraged, or not in possession of the relevant facts of the situation.
McDowell’s argument leads to the position that moral values objectively exist, although only within the world of human experience and perception. This means that if there were no valuers, there would be no values. However, he does not think this downgrades the reality or objectivity of moral values to any significant degree. After all, the world of our experience is the world we have to live in. While a more ‘purely’ objectivist, scientific account of the world might exclude talk of such things as moral properties and colour, it is right to say that they are real and objective enough to say that we can have beliefs about them that are either true or false. While primary properties can be conceived entirely independently of human experience, secondary properties rely on a perceiver more.

If secondary properties can be understood objectively, then we can use the analogy with secondary qualities to defend the view that there is moral truth. The idea that something has moral value makes sense only in relation to valuers, in the same way that something only has a secondary property in relation to perceivers. Moral judgments are defined in the context of human responses to the world. For example, under normal conditions, people judge that ‘The killing of defenceless people is wrong’. But what values there are doesn’t depend on what any single, individual person finds valuable or not, just as what colour something is is independent of any single, individual person’s perception of it.

The analogy between values and secondary properties can be taken further, by arguing that there is also a causal relationship between primary properties and moral properties. In the same way that the physical composition of an object and the perceptual system of a perceiver (primary properties) causes what colour the object has (a secondary property), the facts of x and the valuer of x (primary properties) causes what value x is judged to have (its moral property).

In making these claims, McDowell shows his theory to be cognitivist, as moral knowledge is possible. He is also a realist, as he is arguing that moral properties (like secondary properties) actually exist. He is against the is/ought gap, as he is claiming that it is possible to discover what we ‘ought’ to do in what ‘is’. And McDowell can also be argued to be a naturalist, as the kind of facts he thinks are important when aiming to discover what is moral are natural facts.

44. Explain what might be considered persuasive about McDowell’s argument that secondary properties are analogous to moral properties.

Assessing McDowell on the analogy with secondary properties

McDowell’s arguments raise some important questions. For example, it may be asked, what are the ‘normal’ or ‘suitable’ conditions for making moral judgments? What is the moral equivalent to having good colour vision within standard lighting conditions? What it means to be in the right position to make a colour judgment seems much clearer to establish than what it means to be in the right position to make a moral judgment.

An answer to this key question is likely to suggest that we need to develop a particular moral sensitivity, and focus on the morally relevant facts of the matter. If we do not give the correct moral response to the primary properties of x, then our sensibility is incomplete. And if we do not attend to the morally relevant primary properties of x, then we are likely to make false moral judgments about it.
This response clearly raises further questions, such as what we precisely need to do to have the ‘right’ kind of moral sensibilities, and how we know which facts about x are morally relevant, and which are not.

However, saying this does not necessarily mean that McDowell’s arguments are incorrect. It could be said that they serve as a starting point for moral discussion and investigation. It may well be the case that morality is a more complicated subject than colour – but who would be surprised to hear that?

Writing essays on the view that there is an analogy between moral properties and secondary properties can be challenging. Firstly, it is important to recognise how both Hume and McDowell agree that such an analogy can be made, but because of how they differently conceive of secondary properties, their arguments end up in quite oppositional places.

Secondly, either one of their arguments could be sufficient material for an entire essay, given the complexity of what they are claiming, and what can be said in response to them.

Thirdly, it is worth remembering that it is possible to agree with only part of either argument. For instance, you might agree with Hume that secondary properties such as colour are wholly subjective, but disagree that moral properties are the same. To take another example, you might agree with McDowell that moral properties are objective and subjective, but not believe this about secondary properties.

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A further implication of McDowell’s arguments here is that they could be used to argue that value judgments of other kinds – e.g. aesthetic judgments such as ‘This book is good’, and ‘You’re beautiful’ – could also be said to have ‘normal’ or ‘correct’ conditions in which they can be made, and that aesthetic properties such as ‘good’ and ‘beauty’ are also real things that we can have knowledge of.

Further still, McDowell’s arguments could perhaps also be extended to relate to other statements regarding secondary properties, ones which we might typically regard as expressions of preference or opinion. For example, statements such as ‘The meal tastes bitter’, ‘It’s cold in here’, or ‘This is boring’. In cases such as these, we may be able to say that there are ‘normal’ or ‘correct’ conditions in which they can be made, and properties such as ‘bitter’, ‘cold’, and ‘boring’ are also real things that we can have knowledge of. In other words, statements regarding the existence of secondary properties are not preferences or opinions; they can be true or false.

If we were to make these moves with McDowell’s arguments, this would also require a commitment to the view that as well as there being people who are in a better or worse position to be able to make an accurate judgment on colour or morality, that the same would be the case with regard to judging aesthetics, taste, how cold or boring something is, etc. For instance, it could be argued that in order to make an accurate aesthetic judgment, a person would need to be informed about such things as the type of artwork being judged, have a good understanding of a broad range of comparable artistic methods, and so on. To take another example, in order to make an accurate judgment about how cold something feels, a person would need to not be feverish, be wearing appropriate clothing etc.
Moral truth as based on relational properties which provide reasons for action

Look, everyone. A new section. Does that mean Hume and McDowell have gone away? No! The journey continues! As we did above, let’s move away from ethics for a moment, and introduce a couple of new things.

Firstly, relational properties. If a property is relational, then it only exists in relation to something else. For example:

- If you’re in London, Edinburgh has the property of being ‘to the North’. But the only reason it has this property is because of Edinburgh’s relation to you.
- If you’re 5’ 1”, and Jerome is 6’ 8”, then you have the property of being ‘shorter’. But the only reason you have this property is because of Jerome’s relation to you.
- The property of a piece of land being a ‘country’ only exists because of there being people who label the piece of land as being such as thing. In other words, there would be no countries without people to declare them as being countries. Therefore, a piece of land being a ‘country’ is a relational property.
- Following the arguments made above, it can also be said that colours, such as ‘red’, are relational properties. This is because colour only exists in relation to a perceptual system. To put this another way, colour is relational because it only exists in relation to us, to perceivers.
- As with colour, it can also be said that other secondary properties are relational, as they also exist only in relation to a perceptual system/perceivers. For instance, smells only exist in relation to beings which have olfactory abilities, and sounds only exist in relation to those who have auditory systems.

An important point that can be made about relational properties is that they are objective, and it is possible to have true or false beliefs about them. Although they only exist in relation to something else, they still have existence, and are therefore real properties. For example, although it can be said that countries only exist because people declare them to, we can still say true or false statements about countries.

45. Write down two other examples of relational properties. Explain why they are relational.

Linking this to meta-ethics, we can continue McDowell’s argument. He argues that moral properties are also relational. The reason for this is that moral properties only exist in relation to us – beings who are moral judges or valuers. Without us, he argues, there would be no moral properties. The reason for this connects with the subjective aspect of moral properties, as they do not have existence without someone to judge them. (Don’t forget McDowell’s other claims that moral properties also have objectivity, and are dispositional.)

On this particular point, it is worth noting that Hume would also be likely to agree with McDowell’s view that secondary properties and moral properties are relational. After all, he also argued that, due to their subjective nature, values such as ‘good’ and ‘vicious’ only arise when there is a judge to make a judgment involving them. However, as we also saw, where Hume and McDowell significantly part company is on the issue of whether moral properties have an objective character as well.
Secondly, another key point to consider here is the view that truths or facts can be reasons to believe something. Let’s use a non-moral example first, so we can get used to this idea:

When we have arguments about many topics, it is commonly accepted that truths or facts can be presented as *reasons* for holding a belief. For example, we may have the belief that ‘Professor Plum killed Doctor Black’. Facts can be provided as reasons for this belief. For example:

- ‘Professor Plum’s fingerprints are on the candlestick that killed Doctor Black’
- ‘Professor Plum has frequently stated how much he hated Doctor Black’
- ‘When asked about Doctor Black, Professor Plum stated in front of 40 witnesses ‘He’s dead, and I’m glad I killed him’’

Facts like these provide reasons for believing that ‘Professor Plum killed Doctor Black’. Because of this, it can be argued that it is *true or false* that a fact is a reason for believing something. For example:

- It is true that “‘Professor Plum has frequently stated how much he hated Doctor Black’ is a reason to believe that ‘Professor Plum killed Doctor Black’”
- It is false that “‘Doctor Black owns many briefcases’ is a reason to believe that ‘Professor Plum killed Doctor Black’”

Note that this is quite different from saying that ‘Professor Plum has frequently stated how much he hated Doctor Black’ is *the same* as ‘Professor Plum killed Doctor Black’. The two statements are not *equivalent* to each other, but the first provides a reason for believing the second.

Therefore, it can be argued there are *facts about reasons*, and that we can know these facts. For instance, if $x$ is a reason to believe that $y$, then the proposition ‘$x$ is a reason to believe that $y$’ is true.

As you may end up writing about this particular point in the exam, pay very close attention to how the two bullet points above are presented. By now, you should be in the good habit of indicating where any examples of propositions, beliefs, judgments, opinions and concepts begin and end through the use of speech marks. This makes it much clearer to the examiner.

As you can see from the examples above, they involve one major proposition, which has two propositions within it, clearly indicated through speech marks where it begins and ends. The format these examples are taking is this:

- It is true/false that ‘$x$ is a reason to believe that $y$’

If you need to use similar examples in the exam, make sure that you are equally precise in how you present them.

Furthermore, it is objectively factual that something is either a reason to believe another thing, or it isn’t. For example, if it is true that ‘$x$ is a reason to believe that $y$’, and someone thinks that it’s false, then they are wrong. So, if Reverend Green believes that:

- “‘Professor Plum has frequently stated how much he hated Doctor Black’ is not a reason to believe that ‘Professor Plum killed Doctor Black’”
then it can rightly be said that Reverend Green is wrong, as this proposition he believes is false. This is because although Reverend Green believes that ‘Professor Plum has frequently stated how much he hated Doctor Black’ is not a reason to believe that ‘Professor Plum killed Doctor Black’, this does not alter the objective fact that ‘Professor Plum has frequently stated how much he hated Doctor Black’ is a reason to believe that ‘Professor Plum killed Doctor Black’. What makes something a reason here is not subjective to Professor Plum, it is objective – something either is a reason to believe something else, or it isn’t. It’s not decided by him as an individual.

46. Complete the following sections to provide your own example of how there can be facts about reasons

Main proposition
Give examples of at least two other propositions of which it would be true to say they are reasons to believe the main proposition

Give examples of at least two other propositions of which it would be false to say they are reasons to believe the main proposition

Linking this to meta-ethics, McDowell argues that moral truths are based on relational properties which provide reasons for action. This is a complicated point, so let’s look carefully at what it means.

According to McDowell, natural facts are capable of providing us with reasons to act in certain ways. This is because facts can provide us with reasons to believe moral judgments. Therefore, if \( n \) is a natural fact (or collection of facts), and \( j \) is a moral judgment, then it could be said that:

- It is true that ‘\( n \) is a reason to believe that \( j \)’

McDowell notes that if a natural fact provides us with a reason to believe a moral judgment, this is a relational property of that fact. This is because something can only be a reason in relation to us, in relation to rational beings or persons. In other words, without us, these natural facts would not be reasons, as something only becomes a reason for people to act if there are people in the first place. Or, more specifically, ‘moral agents’ – beings who are capable of being motivated to action by reasons.4

Let’s make a deliberately simple, hypothetical example to illustrate this. The following could be said:

- It is true that ‘\( x \) causes great suffering’ is a reason to believe that ‘\( x \) is wrong’

What this means is that because it is a natural fact that ‘\( x \) causes great suffering’, this provides us with a reason to believe that ‘\( x \) is wrong’. This is a truth that is relational to people, as without people existing, it could not be said this provides people with a reason to believe it. These relational reasons are objective and true, but specific to us as moral agents.

An implication of this is that if someone believes that ‘\( x \) causes great suffering’ is a reason to believe that ‘\( x \) is wrong’, then they have an example of moral knowledge. However, note that this is not the same as saying they know that ‘\( x \) is wrong’. For McDowell, moral knowledge involves knowing that particular facts provide reasons for us to act in certain ways.

4 The term ‘moral agent’ will make a more significant return when we look at normative and practical ethics.
As with non-moral topics, it could well be the case that a great deal of facts need to be appealed to as reasons, and that some reasons will be stronger than others. This is not a problem for the theory.

Also like with other topics, in meta-ethics, facts about reasons are facts about justification and reasoning. Furthermore, there is no way of engaging in scientific or empirical investigation into what reasons there are. We cannot, after all, perceive reasons — they are not something which can be seen, heard or felt. A purely ‘objective’ or ‘scientific’ view of the world cannot reveal facts about reasons on any topic, morality or otherwise.

Let’s summarise. We can now understand moral judgments like this: To say that ‘x is wrong’ is to say that the moral reasons against doing x are stronger than any moral reasons in favour of doing x. Because whether something is a reason or not is a statement of fact, moral judgments can therefore be true or false. Someone who ignores facts that provide them with a reason to act a certain way is lacking moral knowledge.

Of course, it can be difficult to establish whether a natural fact constitutes a reason for action, and how strong this reason is. But the truth is often difficult to discover.

A further point to note is that all of this further highlights how McDowell is making a cognitivist, realist and naturalist argument. It also makes it clearer how he is arguing against the is/ought gap. Because he is claiming that natural facts provide reasons for us to act, this means there can be a connection between what ‘is’, and what we ‘ought’ to do.

Finally, it is worth noting a difference between McDowell’s claims here, and other naturalist arguments put forward by philosophers like Mill. In Mill’s theory, we saw him argue that ‘good’ is equal or equivalent to certain natural facts — in particular, the presence of happiness. McDowell is not equating any moral value with any natural fact. He is instead arguing that facts provide reasons for our acting in particular ways.

47. Complete the following sections to provide your own example of how there can be facts about reasons, this time in a moral situation

Moral judgment: ‘x is’

Give examples of at least two other propositions of which it would be true to say they are reasons to believe the moral judgment

Give examples of at least two other propositions of which it would be false to say they are reasons to believe the moral judgment

Assessing McDowell on moral truth being based on relational properties which provide reasons for action

We shall now look at some critical questions for this theory.

Firstly, in response to McDowell’s claims, it could be argued that it is very difficult to determine whether a natural fact provides a reason for x being right, virtuous, immoral, or any other moral value. Simply put, how are we supposed to find out what are reasons and what are not? This seems particularly difficult given that it is
not obvious, and is indeed a source of great controversy in many areas of moral debate, what might constitute a reason for acting a particular way. Consider, for example, attitudes towards facts about foetal development in the abortion debate, or attitudes towards facts about patient consent and medical prognoses in ethical discussions on euthanasia.

Against this objection, it could be argued that this difficulty is simply reflective of the complexity of morality. Why, after all, would we think that determining what is right and wrong would be simple to do?

Furthermore, it certainly seems possible that a great number of facts can be eliminated as being reasons. Consider the abortion debate again. It is highly unlikely that any of the following natural facts surrounding any case of potential abortion are going to be reasons for or against it being a moral action:

- ‘The baby is going to be called Gavin’
- ‘The surgeon went to primary school in Wiltshire’
- ‘The abortion is being performed in the NW6 postal area’
- ‘When it was decided to have an abortion, it was raining outside’
- ‘The pregnant woman is unable to accurately spell ‘cervical dilation’’

One popular ‘type’ of fact that philosophers persuaded by these arguments focus on is that of facts about human nature and psychology. To take some very simple examples, if ‘x is likely to lead to suffering’, this is a reason to believe that ‘x is wrong’. If ‘x is likely to promote fulfilment and well-being’, this is a reason to believe that ‘x is good’.

On this basis, a complex area like abortion could be ‘morally investigated’ by focusing on such things as the psychological development of the foetus, the emotional impact of abortions on those affected by them, the wider effects on a culture if abortion has a particular legal status, and so on. Admittedly, even with such a focal point, there is clearly still a great deal of work to be done in this and other controversial moral topics, but, again, nobody said it would be easy. What meta-ethics can do here is provide us with a starting point for further analysis.

Therefore, McDowell’s theory can be developed as an indicator of the areas we should be looking to in order to find out what is moral and what is not. Truths about human nature and psychology as a whole, how we think and feel and respond to things, are vital matters to focus on in our investigation of what facts provide us with reasons for action.

Secondly, as with other naturalist arguments, McDowell can be criticised for attempting to jump from ‘is’ to ‘ought’, through his claim that natural facts (‘is’ statements) provide us with reasons to act in certain ways (‘ought’ statements).

In response to this, McDowell could make a point similar to that of other naturalist moral philosophers when they are presented with this objection. In short, that it is a convincing claim to say that there is a necessary connection between facts about human nature and psychology, and how we should behave. To take a simple example, to say something like ‘x’s tendency to cause great pain to others is a reason not to do x’, is to make a claim that crosses the gap between ‘is’ and ‘ought’ in an arguably acceptable way.
Supporters of McDowell are likely to accept that using natural facts as reasons for moral judgments doesn’t prove a moral judgment to be true or false. After all, we cannot deduce moral judgments from natural facts. Instead, we must weigh up the reasons that natural facts give us to live in a particular way. But once we recognise that whether a natural fact counts as a reason for believing a particular value judgment is itself a matter of objective fact, we can then cross the gap.

Thirdly, it can be argued that the idea of there being ‘facts about reasons’ is a strange one. The claim could be made that surely a fact is only a reason for us to act in a certain way if we already care about being moral. For example, if someone is indifferent to the suffering of others, can it truly be said that x’s tendency to cause great pain to others is a reason not to do x? For any truth to motivate us, don’t we already need to be in a mindset where we are open to being motivated in a moral way?

Therefore, another possible problem for McDowell is his claim that because facts can provide us with reasons to believe moral judgments, it is therefore the case that facts can provide us with reasons to act. But we might disagree that believing a moral judgment necessarily means that we are provided with the motivation to act on that belief. We return to this problem later on in this handbook, in the section on the extent to which moral truths can motivate/justify action.

**The problem of how knowledge of moral truth is possible**

We have now looked at several meta-ethical arguments, both cognitivist and non-cognitivist. There are plenty more, but that’s enough for an A2 course. As they each give a different account, there are therefore different answers to the question ‘Is moral truth possible?’

For example, naturalism, the view that goodness is a natural property, can provide the most straightforward answer to this question, as we know about natural properties empirically. Once we have established which natural properties are morally relevant, there is no special problem about how moral knowledge is possible. With Mill, for instance, where there is happiness, there will also be goodness, as they are one and the same thing.

However, as we have seen, establishing the connection between moral properties and the relevant natural facts and/or reasons is very contentious, and a matter not of empirical investigation, but of philosophical reasoning.

Can Mill establish that happiness is the only good thing? Can Aristotle establish what counts as a eudaimon life for human beings? Can McDowell establish which facts count as reasons to motivate our actions? Such questions need to be addressed by naturalist philosophers if they are to establish that moral truth is possible.

As we saw, some cognitivist theories do not take natural facts as being the source of moral knowledge. Plato’s transcendentalism and Moore’s intuitionism look elsewhere, and so do not have the reliance on empirical knowledge that naturalistic theories do.

However, we also saw that such theories have their own difficulties. For one thing, claiming to have knowledge about anything that cannot be empirically observed faces questions regarding such claims can justifiably be made. How can I have knowledge of that which cannot be observed? How do I know
if my intuitions are correct, and can they be tested? These are the types of questions which non-naturalists need to deal with.

Of course, if we instead favour a non-cognitivist position, then the problem of how knowledge of moral truth is possible is not an issue, as you don’t claim that such a thing exists in the first place.

As we saw earlier, though, non-cognitivism raises some concerns of its own.

**The possibility of agreement over moral truth**

When two people disagree over a matter of fact, whether it is about the objective natural world (e.g. dinosaurs existing) or the subjective human world (e.g. whether someone is in love or not), we normally know how we could give evidence for the matter one way or the other. But if two people agree over, for example, all the natural facts about an action or event, but still disagree over its morality, it may seem we cannot appeal to any more facts in the same way.

Therefore, we could conclude that value judgments always go beyond facts. As we saw earlier, Hume argues that moral judgments don’t pick out facts, they express a feeling, which is why we can’t reach moral agreement just by discussing the facts. We should consequently doubt that there is such a thing as moral truth.

Cognitivism can respond to this by saying that it oversimplifies moral arguments. For example, we could argue that if two people agree on the natural facts but still disagree morally, it could be said that they disagree about whether the natural facts are reasons. For instance, in the case of abortion, the disagreement could be about whether suffering is or can be caused by it, or whether carrying it out contributes to or goes against a eudaimon life.
Therefore, it may be possible to say that when two people disagree morally, at least one of them is making a mistake, because they are not seeing natural facts as the reasons they are. If, as some cognitivists claim, we need both virtues and experience of life to make the correct the moral judgments, then it is not surprising that so many people make mistakes.

However, if we insist that moral knowledge requires considerable effort, we may end not too far from Plato’s position, in which he insists that very few people will possess it. If this is the case, then it can be said that the possibility of moral agreement is low, despite the fact that there are moral truths. In which case, morality could be viewed as something which everybody has beliefs about, but not many people have true beliefs.

This view is likely to raise criticisms of moral elitism – see above.

But, as we saw during the discussion of elitism, just because somebody possesses knowledge that not everyone has doesn’t necessarily make them elitist. They just know something that not everyone else knows.

The extent to which moral truths can motivate/justify action

Moral truths justifying action

Justifying and motivating action are not the same thing. To justify an action is to show why it is morally right or good. If moral truths do exist, it is not contentious to argue that they justify action. For example, if it is true that ‘x is wrong’, this is sufficient reason to provide justification for not doing x.

Moral truths motivating action

A more difficult question is whether moral truths motivate moral action. If we consider truths about topics other than morality, it can be argued that they don’t, in and of themselves, necessarily lead to action. For example, For example, I might believe ‘It is raining’ and ‘If I put on a coat, I will not get wet’, but I will only be motivated to put on a coat if I also possess a desire like ‘I don’t want to get wet’. It seems that I need to care about the truth, and the motivating force to act comes from this caring.

Hume argues that in order to act, we need a belief, which is passive – about how the world is, and possibly how to change it – and a desire, which is active – to be motivated to change it.

From this, we can ask whether moral truths are motivating in their own right. For example, if we believe the judgment ‘x is good’, does this also automatically motivate us to do x? If it does, then it could be said that moral judgments act like desires as well as beliefs. Therefore, moral truths are not like other kinds of truth, because other kinds of truth don’t come ‘pre-packaged’ with a desire to act in a particular way.
Different responses to this question have emerged, which tend to have been grouped with one of these two terms:

**Externalist** moral theories argue that our holding a moral judgment does not, in and of itself, motivate us to action. Therefore, we could judge that ‘x is good’, but still not be motivated to do x. Hume and Aristotle are examples of externalists.

**Internalist** moral theories argue that our holding a moral judgment, in and of itself, does motivate us to action. Therefore, if we judge that ‘x is good’, this also entails that we will be motivated to do x. Ayer and Plato are examples of internalists.

One thing it is important to note is that describing a theory as externalist/internalist does not tell us whether it is cognitivist/non-cognitivist or not. For instance, Aristotle is an externalist cognitivist, and Hume is an externalist non-cognitivist.

In favour of externalism, if we agree with Hume that beliefs/judgments are a separate thing to desires, then we are likely to find persuasive the idea that holding a particular moral judgment does not mean we will necessarily act in accordance with it. Following this, it can be said that moral judgments are only motivating to people who care about morality.

Internalism may seem a harder position to defend than externalism. For instance, if we take the view that moral properties are the same as natural facts – e.g. good = happiness/eudaimonia – then it seems entirely possible to form moral judgments without also being motivated to act on them. For instance, with reference to Mill’s arguments, i may believe that something causes a lot of happiness, but have no desire to carry it out.

However, it becomes easier to argue that moral judgments are motivating if we instead hold the view that facts provide us with reasons to act – as McDowell argues. If moral judgments are about what we have reason to do, they will be motivating, because judgments about reasons are reasons for us, as human beings. For example, if it is true that ‘n is a reason to believe that ‘x is wrong’’, then it can be argued that we will be motivated to not do x. As long as we are rational, reasons will motivate us directly.

To this, it can be objected that it is possible to believe that ‘n is a reason to believe that ‘x is wrong’’, and yet still do x. We may be acting akratically, or we might just not care that p provides us with a reason not to do x. In such a situation, though, we still recognise that we are doing the wrong thing, in that we are acting against reasons.

Possible responses to this could include pointing out inconsistencies and incoherence in our moral judgments. For example, it is unlikely that someone feels that all kinds of suffering are acceptable, so some contradictory moral judgments could perhaps be found in their moral ‘belief system’. If they are motivated not to do p because it causes suffering, and yet they are persisting in doing the equally suffering-causing q, this logical inconsistency could be presented to them.

Even so, it is still conceivable that someone could be aware of their incoherent moral judgments, and still be unmoved to act in such a way that avoids this incoherence.

Internalism may be an easier position to defend if we turn away from cognitivist arguments and back to the position that there is no moral knowledge. For example, emotivists are likely to support internalism. This is because they hold that moral judgments are expressions of emotion, so if someone judges that ‘x is wrong’, this means that they are emotionally opposed to x, and will consequently be motivated to act against it. If
moral judgments mean nothing more than this, then it would seem odd for someone to then go and do x, given that they have an emotional reaction against it.

49. Explain whether you think externalism or internalism is more persuasive. Give reasons.

Meta-ethics summary

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>THEORY</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>NON-COGNITIVISM</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Emotivism – Ayer</td>
<td>Moral judgments cannot be known, as they cannot be empirically verified – they do not describe the world. They are just expressions of emotion. When people make use of facts in moral arguments, their purpose is to emotionally manipulate their opponent into changing their feelings. There is no connection between ‘is’ and ‘ought’, as no moral judgments can be known.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prescriptivism – Hare</td>
<td>Moral judgments cannot be known, as they are prescriptions or commands rather than descriptions of the world. Because of how moral judgments linguistically function, it is logically necessary that we universalise them, and ensure they are coherent with each other. There is no connection between ‘is’ and ‘ought’, as no moral judgments can be known.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Moral relativism</td>
<td>Moral judgments are not absolutely true. Instead, their truth is relative to what cultures decide. Each culture determines its own (relative) moral truth.</td>
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<td><strong>COGNITIVISM</strong></td>
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<td>Transcendentalism – Plato</td>
<td>Moral judgments can be known <em>a priori</em>. An analogy can be drawn between moral truths and mathematical truths, as moral properties and mathematical objects are both intelligible rather than empirical, understood through reason rather than our senses. Both types of truth are eternal, not finite.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intuitionism – Moore</td>
<td>Moral judgments can be known <em>a priori</em>. It is a fallacy to equate or define moral properties in terms of natural facts. We acquire moral knowledge through a form of intuitive understanding. Therefore, there is no connection between ‘is’ and ‘ought’, as we do not reach moral knowledge through a consideration of (natural) facts.</td>
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<td>Naturalism – Mill</td>
<td>Moral judgments can be known <em>a posteriori</em>. We desire happiness, so happiness is what is good. Therefore, ‘happiness’ and ‘good’ are equivalent properties, meaning it is possible to cross the gap between ‘is’ and ‘ought’.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Naturalism – Aristotle</td>
<td>Moral judgments can be known <em>a posteriori</em>. We desire and benefit from a <em>eudaimon</em> life, so the things which contribute to this – i.e. virtues – are good. Therefore, there is equivalence between things which contribute to <em>eudaimonia</em> and what is ‘good’, meaning it is possible to cross the gap between ‘is’ and ‘ought’.</td>
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<td>Naturalism/ secondary property realism – McDowell</td>
<td>Moral judgments can be known <em>a posteriori</em>. Like secondary properties, moral properties are subjective and objective. They are subjective as they only exist where there is someone to judge them – which makes their existence relational to human beings. They are also objective as it is true there are particular conditions in which they will come about – which makes their existence dispositional. It is true that certain facts provide reasons for believing moral judgments. It is possible to cross the gap between ‘is’ and ‘ought’.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Moral absolutism</td>
<td>Moral judgments are absolutely true. Their truth is not relative to what cultures decide.</td>
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Moral Decisions

Up until this point, the focus has been on meta-ethics, outlining a range of theories that provide a response to the question of whether moral knowledge is possible, and also whether moral knowledge can motivate us to action. We now move on to normative ethics, which is concerned with how we should make moral decisions and live our lives, and practical/applied ethics, which is the application of normative theories to specific moral problems. The practical ethics topic we will be looking at is the value of life, with specific application to our treatment of non-human animals.

One important point to make at this stage is that the meta-ethical position we take does not necessarily impact on what normative and practical viewpoints we hold. For example, someone who is a cognitivist could be a utilitarian, virtue ethicist, or take some other normative standpoint. Furthermore, someone could be a utilitarian and conclude that it is acceptable to eat animals, while another utilitarian could hold an oppositional moral judgment on this topic.

In other words, if we know what someone’s meta-ethical views are, we will not necessarily be able to conclude what specific normative theory they will agree with. Equally, if we know what someone’s normative views are, this does not in itself give a clear indication of what judgments they will arrive at on a matter of practical ethics.

Normative ethics

As stated, normative theories focus on how we should live our lives. We will be looking at a range of normative theories, which fall into the following groups:

- **Consequentialist** theories argue that what makes an action moral depends on the consequences that it produces, rather than the action itself. We will be studying types of utilitarianism, a kind of consequentialist theory.

- **Deontological** theories argue that what makes an action moral is the action itself, rather than the consequences it produces. Our main focus will be on Kant’s categorical imperative, which will be familiar from AS. Also, in both moral and political philosophy we will look at rights theory, which can be said to follow a deontological approach.

- **Virtue ethics** argues that morality is found more in the character of a person than in whether they follow a specific set of rules. Character traits that contribute to *eudaimonia* – meaning a flourishing, fulfilled life – are moral, known as ‘virtues’ or ‘excellences’. Character traits that work against *eudaimonia* are known as ‘vices’. There is particular emphasis in virtue ethics on the virtue of practical wisdom, as we shall see. Our main focus will be on Aristotle’s virtue theory, which will also be familiar from AS. Furthermore, the material we will cover in PHIL4 on Plato’s moral arguments can also be used here.

50. At first glance of these different normative approaches, what strengths or weaknesses might you expect any of them to have? Explain why.
Utilitarianism

The consequentialist theory that we will be studying is utilitarianism. There are a variety of utilitarian theories, which we will look at in more detail later. However, they all share the following characteristics:

- The moral value of an action is based on the utility that it brings about. ‘Utility’ means what is useful. Utilitarians argue that the greater the likely utility produced by an action, the more moral it is. Therefore, when we have a choice of actions we should make our decision based on the utility that our options are likely to bring about.

- They are egalitarian, meaning that they treat everyone with equal value. One person’s utility is no more or less important than another’s – including the individual carrying out the action. Therefore, when we act we should consider equally the utility of everyone affected.

- Although it is difficult, perhaps impossible, to know what the likely consequences of our actions will be, we should make the best prediction we can of what will happen and be guided by that. If consequences occur that could not have been reasonably foreseen and/or were beyond our control, we are not morally accountable for them. Therefore, we have done what is moral if we have performed the action that we had the most reason to expect would lead to the most utility, given the options and knowledge available to us at the time.

Classical utilitarianism

Jeremy Bentham (b. 1748 d. 1832 in London, England) is one of the early utilitarian philosophers. His particular theory is known as classical utilitarianism, or ‘hedonistic utilitarianism’.

Bentham equates utility with happiness, and argues that happiness comes from pleasure. Bentham’s reasoning for this is that all people desire happiness, and that what brings people happiness is pleasure – and the avoidance of its opposite, pain.

Therefore, for Bentham:

Utility = happiness = gaining of pleasure + avoidance of pain

Bentham devised the greatest happiness principle, also known as the ‘principle of utility’. In this, he states that when choosing between different actions, we should carry out the one which is likely to produce the greatest happiness – i.e. pleasure – for the greatest number. When this is impossible, we should aim to reduce the unhappiness – i.e. pain – for the greatest number.

Bentham is aware that people gain pleasure from many different sources. He argues that the actions themselves are not morally important, only the likely consequences of the actions are. Bentham is only concerned with the quantity of pleasure produced – he is not concerned with the quality of pleasure. In other words, the type of pleasure caused is unimportant – whether it be from physics equations or rolling around in the mud does not make a difference. The more pleasure experienced by more individuals, the better! As AQA puts it, classical utilitarianism holds that the extent to which an action maximises happiness is the sole criterion by which its value can be judged. Considerations of happiness are all that should morally concern us.

There are of course people who enjoy the sensation of physical pain. Therefore, Bentham is best interpreted as arguing that people desire pleasure and wish to avoid pain in a psychological sense. Therefore, if somebody is experiencing physical pain but is in a state of enjoyment which they value, then it is a form of pleasure for them.

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5 There are of course people who enjoy the sensation of physical pain. Therefore, Bentham is best interpreted as arguing that people desire pleasure and wish to avoid pain in a psychological sense. Therefore, if somebody is experiencing physical pain but is in a state of enjoyment which they value, then it is a form of pleasure for them.
Bentham argues that it is possible to compare the likely happiness that different actions will bring about. He devised the felicific calculus, also known as the ‘hedonic calculus’ in order to assist with this. Each of the elements of the felicific calculus should be considered when deciding which action to carry out. We should go through these considerations each time we act.\(^6\)

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<th>Bentham’s felicific calculus</th>
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51. Select three possible options for activities you could carry out this weekend. Use Bentham’s felicific calculus to compare them, noting the expected levels of intensity, duration etc. From this, work out which would be the most and least moral of your options.

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<td><strong>Intensity</strong></td>
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CONCLUSIONS:
The most moral option is 
The least moral option is

**What are classical utilitarianism’s strengths? (Includes some weaknesses)**

As we will later see, a great number of negative criticisms have been made of utilitarianism. However, as with any theory, we should bear in mind that the amount of objections made does not mean they are necessarily good objections, or ones that outweigh the positive aspects.

Firstly, utilitarianism provides a clear decision procedure. This means that there is a method we can go through to determine what we should be doing. As we will see, other utilitarian philosophers have departed from Bentham’s use of the felicific calculus, and in some cases, the equation of utility with pleasure or happiness. Nonetheless, as all utilitarian theories would equally argue that we should seek to maximise the amount of utility produced by our actions, therefore all utilitarian theories provide a decision procedure.

\(^6\) In many cases, this will not take much time or effort. Consider comparing giving an unhappy person a hug or an axe in the face. It does not take long to reach the conclusion as to which action is likely to create the most utility.
However, it is worth noting that deontological theories also provide a decision procedure. For example, rights theory would insist that we can act as we wish, providing no rights are violated. Equally, Kant’s deontological theory specifies that we should follow the categorical imperative.

Despite this, it can be argued that deontological decision procedures are more problematic in their application than consequentialist ones. For example, there may well arise a situation in which it seems two rights are in conflict, and we cannot uphold one without violating another. Also, applying the categorical imperative can arguably result in cases where it is unclear which maxim or duty applies to us. We shall return to this problem when we look at deontology later.

Utilitarianism seems to have a clearer advantage over virtue ethics in this area, which notably lacks a decision procedure. The closest virtue ethics gets to such a thing is to insist that we should develop certain virtuous characteristics, and steer away from vicious ones. Utilitarians may well argue that virtue ethics is consequently of less practical application, due to the absence of a decision procedure.

One response virtue ethicists are likely to give to this is that morality is too complicated for decision procedures, and that ‘happiness’ is too simplistic a description of what is ultimately useful in life. They would contest that eudaimonia is a better thing to focus on, as it gives a deeper account of what fulfilment truly involves. We shall return to this problem when we look at virtue ethics later.

However, in the face of a more detailed account of fulfilment than simple ‘happiness’, Bentham could respond that any alternative list of what makes life worth living – for example, friendship, wisdom, courage, temperance, witiness, respect etc. – is just ‘happiness’ under another name. In other words, the reason why supposedly virtuous characteristics are fulfilling is that they all contribute to happiness. Therefore, happiness is the ultimate good that we can achieve, and its absence is a bad thing.

For instance, a reasonable response to the question ‘Why is being courageous desirable?’ could be ‘It contributes to happiness’. This suggests that the value of courage is not courage itself, but happiness. However, it is difficult to know how to answer the question ‘Why is happiness desirable?’ as it just seems that it simply is desirable. Consequently, happiness can be said to be our ultimate good, the end to which everything else is a means.

To this, it can be argued that there is more to value than just happiness. For example, a greater importance might be placed on truth. The novel ‘Brave New World’ provides an illustration of this, in its depiction of a population kept in a blissful state through drugs. Some of the characters find this unsatisfying, and ultimately rebel against it. We may wish to argue that happiness in general or as a mood is not the best thing we can achieve, but genuine happiness is, that we have gained through actually achieving things in reality. But if we go down this route, what is being valued sounds more like eudaimonia than the simple feeling of happiness.
Secondly, Bentham’s version of utilitarianism has found a great deal of support for its central argument that we should focus on maximising the happiness of everyone. This also applies to other utilitarian theories which equate utility with happiness. Reasons for this support include the feeling that he is correct in his claim that happiness or pleasure is something that all people desire, and that unhappiness or pain is something that all people wish to avoid. The idea that it is morally important and good to make others happy also ties in with many people’s common-sense ideas about morality.

Bentham states that we are governed by two ‘sovereign masters’, pleasure and pain, and that these guide everything we do. That is, we seek pleasure and avoid pain. Although a brief account of human psychology, it is a compelling one.

Thirdly, this focus can be said to correlate with our common-sense understanding of how some actions are morally better or worse than others. For example, we typically regard murder as morally worse than insulting someone. Classical utilitarianism can explain this by linking the actions to the amount of happiness or unhappiness they produce. That is, the more happiness, the morally better it is, and the more unhappiness, the morally worse it is.

Fourthly, utilitarianism has also been praised for its egalitarianism – that it regards everyone’s utility as being of equal consideration. This treats all individuals equally, including the person carrying out the action. Therefore, it requires that we look past any favouritism or prejudices we might have and focus solely on the utility produced. The contemporary utilitarian Peter Singer (b. 1946 in Victoria, Australia) argues this:

*If I have seen from an ethical point of view I am just one person among the many in my society, and my interests are no more important, from the point of view of the whole, than the similar interests of others within my society, I am ready to see that, from a still larger point of view, my society is just one among other societies, and the interests of members of my society are no more important, from that larger perspective, than the similar interests of members of other societies . . . Taking the impartial element in ethical reasoning to its logical conclusion means, first, accepting that we ought to have equal concern for all human beings.*

Therefore, it can be said that adopting a utilitarian outlook is conducive to adopting a non-prejudicial attitude. For example, people of other genders, ethnicities, cultures, beliefs and political groupings should not have their utility regarded as being less important than our own, from the simple fact that their interest in their own utility is no less important than our interest in our own utility.

**What are classical utilitarianism’s weaknesses? (Includes some strengths)**

Firstly, following the last point, some philosophers have argued utilitarianism is too egalitarian. For example, if you were forced to choose between saving a loved one or a stranger from certain death, and you calculated the loved one’s continued existence were to result in less utility than the stranger’s, utilitarianism would clearly conclude you should save the stranger. Critics of the theory have argued utilitarianism is wrong to not consider those close to us with special regard.

In response to this criticism, some utilitarians have countered that although we may feel stronger ties to particular individuals, and would *like* their utility to be favoured over others, there is no *moral* reason why this should be done.

Secondly, Bentham requires that we carry out a utilitarian calculation every time we are faced with options. A number of philosophers have countered that this is too demanding. Furthermore, this means in practical terms we will have to consider what we are doing a lot more.
A possible utilitarian response to this criticism could point out three things. (1) In most cases, it will not take us too long to calculate which action we should or should not do. It may only be necessary to carefully go through the felicific calculus when two or more possibilities are judged to be a close call, and we need a bit more precision.

(2) Following the critics’ complaint that leading a moral life places demands on us, a utilitarian could simply reply that, yes, it does. Did you expect being good to be easy?

(3) If we ever find ourselves ‘pressed for time’ in making a moral decision, we can only ever operate based on the information we have. A committed utilitarian may well insist that where there is uncertainty regarding the likely consequences of our actions, we should take the time to investigate further. If, for whatever reason, this really cannot be done, then we will simply have to do the best with what we have. There is no excuse for completely ignoring the demands of the utilitarian decision procedure.

Continuing this criticism, the implications of utilitarianism seem to suggest that if I am wealthy, I will forever be giving to the less fortunate, rather than lavishing money on personal luxuries.

Singer, for one, accepts this implication, arguing that if we impartially consider the happiness of the majority, then affluent individuals should deny themselves trivial pleasures of marginal utility, in order to significantly increase the happiness of the starving and oppressed. After all, a dollar is worth much more to someone who only has one dollar than someone who has several thousand. Satisfying the basic needs of people and improving their life chances is more important than things like the personal entertainment and luxuries of the already privileged.

Thirdly, utilitarianism has further received criticism for its requirement that we act on what the most likely consequences of our actions are. Some philosophers have argued that we can never be certain what our actions are going to bring about, so utilitarianism’s decision procedure is not particularly useful. How do you measure the possibility of utility?

However, in response to this, many utilitarians have countered that we are frequently able to predict the level of utility our actions will bring, so the theory does have considerable practical use. In difficult and uncertain situations, we should aim to do the best we can with the information we have. If we are struck by unfortunate and unforeseen consequences, we are not morally to blame.

Fourthly, another criticism of utilitarianism that has been made is that utilitarianism fails to recognise the importance of moral obligations such as our loyalties to others, established by such things as friendship/family ties and the promises we make to people. The following scenario is sometimes put forward to illustrate this:

At noon, you promise to meet x for an appointment at 6pm. However, on your way to the appointment you receive another offer of a way to spend your evening. You have no way of contacting x at this point, and must make your decision immediately. Comparing the likely utility gain of taking up this new offer against the utility loss of letting down x, you calculate that it is better to abandon x and take up the new offer.

Therefore, it is argued utilitarianism would state we should break our promise in this situation. Critics have argued a normative theory should recognise the importance moral obligations have beyond their utility value.

A possible utilitarian response to this is that, when the utility value of breaking an obligation outweighs the utility of carrying it out, then it is indeed the moral course of action to take.
Fifthly, utilitarianism has also been criticised for failing to regard any individuals as having any moral value beyond what they contribute to utility. Two scenarios are sometimes put forward to illustrate this:

1. Six patients are admitted to hospital. Five of them are urgently in need of organ transplants. If they do not receive them, they will die. The sixth patient is in for a non-threatening, routine operation. The utilitarian surgeon notices that this sixth person is biologically compatible with the other five. Realising that saving five lives at the expense of one will bring about the most happiness, the surgeon kills the sixth patient – ensuring that it looks like natural causes so as not to upset anyone else – and donates her organs to the other five.

2. A murder has taken place in a town, and is being investigated by a utilitarian detective. The locals are convinced that a much-hated man has committed the crime, and demand that he be arrested. The detective has no evidence that the much-hated man is guilty, and has good reason to believe that if this demand is not met a riot will break out in which many people will be injured, possibly killed. Realising that the unhappiness of the much-hated man will be greatly outweighed by the happiness and avoidance of pain among the locals if he is arrested, the detective falsifies evidence and ensures that he is put away for a crime he did not commit.

In these cases, critics of classical utilitarianism are arguing that if such moral reasoning is employed, it can lead to highly counter-intuitive and unacceptable conclusions. The people in these scenarios are sometimes referred to as utility monsters, because although they are maximising utility, they are behaving in ways which could be considered monstrous. Similar situations – ones which are not necessarily as extreme – could be appealed to, such as the persecution of an individual or minorities for the enjoyment of many others, injuring/killing a person whom a great number of people truly despise, or torturing someone in order to prevent an atrocity that affects a larger population.

Utilitarians have generally considered this objection potentially damaging, and have mainly responded to it in one of two ways.

(1), some utilitarians have responded by denying that such situations could ever occur, and so they are too extreme and/or ridiculous to be considered a serious objection to the theory. For example, if a hospital carried out such policies, or if a police department operated in such a way, this would be found out, and would lead to a highly significant amount of unhappiness among all those who knew of it and were affected by it.

However, an objection to this response is it appears to be making the unusual argument that what makes such actions wrong is other people’s reactions when they find out about them, not the actions themselves. In other words, as long as nobody finds out about something, then it must be okay to do it.

(2), some utilitarians have responded by saying that in highly unusual and extreme circumstances such as these, then these moral conclusions are the right ones to carry out. However, they frequently

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7 Arguments of this type are known as reductio ad absurdum, meaning ‘reduction to the absurd’. Such a move involves taking an argument to logical but absurd conclusions, in order to show what unacceptable situations might come about if it were followed.
note the unlikelihood of such situations taking place, so we should not be overly concerned by them. Nonetheless, if they did, the surgeon and detective have acted morally.

Sixthly, a further objection that has been made against utilitarianism is that it is too paternalist, particularly if the theory is used to make political decisions. (This, in fact, was Bentham’s intention.) This means it can be used as justification to defend arguments and policies that are done for people’s ‘own good’, without giving them the opportunity to make their own choices autonomously.

For example, a utilitarian may well conclude that if junk food and cigarettes were banned, people would lead healthier, happier lives as a result – therefore, they should be banned. This can be criticised for being too paternalistic in that it prevents individuals from making their own decisions on such matters.

In response to this criticism, a utilitarian could respond that if something is ultimately in people's best interests, then they shouldn’t be doing it, shouldn’t they? So what’s the problem?

Seventhly, Bentham has been criticised for not distinguishing between different types of pleasure. As stated above, he regards the quantity of pleasure to be the most important thing, not the quality of pleasure. Therefore, how we achieve our pleasure is of no concern, with all pleasures being equal. An objection to this is that some types of pleasure are more valuable than others. This idea will be continued when we go on to look at Mill’s version of utilitarianism, below. Virtue ethics can also be said to support this criticism of utilitarianism, as it presents particular character traits as being more fulfilling than others – even ones that people may claim to enjoy, such as selfishness or buffoonery.

However, any claim that some pleasures are better than others is likely to be accused of elitism, in stating that some ways of living are superior to others.

Of course, a response to this is to insist that some ways of living are superior to others – it is possible to be right without being elitist about it.

Eighthly, it can be argued that if we find ourselves to be in a minority group in a utilitarian society, we may frequently find our interests are not met. For example, if we are Christian in a society where everyone else is perfectly happy to outlaw Christianity, then it is hard to see how utilitarianism would have a problem with this. After all, the happiness of the majority ‘wins out’ against the minority. This could be a reason to embrace deontology, perhaps through the language of individual rights, which more clearly can be seen to protect minority interests.

In political philosophy, we will look at the theory of utility rights, which can be seen as a possible response to this problem from a utilitarian perspective.

Ninethly, utilitarianism makes no distinction between acts and omissions. For example, when we personally kill another person, this is an act – one that results in the death of another. When we omit to act, for example by allowing someone to die (e.g. not saving their life when it is safely possible for us to do so), this also results in the death of another. From a utilitarian perspective, there is no way the act can be judged as morally different from the omission, as the sole focus is on the likely consequences we bring about. But this may seem counter-intuitive, as many would argue there is a moral difference between killing someone and failing to stop them from being killed.

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8 Such a response is referred to as biting the bullet, as it involves coming to an unpleasant conclusion in the face of a strong criticism.
In response to this, utilitarianism is likely to insist there is no moral difference between such actions, as the amount of utility produced is the same. Even though this may seem counter-intuitive, this does not present a strong enough reason to suggest they are morally unequal.

Tenthly, another argument against utilitarianism is that it is not sufficiently focused on the moral character or integrity of the moral agent, meaning how we view ourselves as a person, particularly with regard to our having specific values and moral character — in other words, our moral self-image. A moral decision involves a consideration of motives, ethical history and life projects, not just a calculation of consequences. That is, it impacts on our integrity.

To illustrate this, Bernard Williams (b. 1929 in Essex, England d. 2003 in Rome, Italy) constructs the story of Jim, who enters a small town in South America to find 20 Indians about to be executed by soldiers. Jim is offered the chance to save 19 of the Indians, if he will shoot the other one himself. The utilitarian, Williams argues, would very quickly come to the conclusion that Jim should do this, as the single person he kills will more than balance out against the 19 he saves.

In connection with the point regarding acts and omissions above, Williams argues the bad consequences of Jim not accepting this offer are, importantly, about what other people will do, not Jim himself. If Jim accepts, he will become a killer. If he declines, someone else will kill 20 people, not him. Surely if Jim declines, his responsibility is much less for the death of others than if he accepted. If it is integral to Jim’s view of himself that he is not a killer, could we expect him to give up his most deeply cherished beliefs and self-image, which are integral to his identity as a person and a moral agent?

Classical utilitarians could respond to this problem by stating that all of these considerations can and should be taken into account when calculating what to do, as they all connect to the happiness of those concerned.

However, it could be said that individual moral responsibility goes deeper than just feelings of unhappiness. It is about moral integrity and a person’s whole character. Why should someone ruin their own life project and sense of moral identity, because of other people’s actions? Such thinking is more in line with arguments made by virtue ethicists.

Also, we may argue Jim has a moral right not to accept the offer, regardless of the likely consequences of utility for doing so. This move, of course, steps over into a deontological approach to ethics.

**Act and rule utilitarianism**

As stated, utilitarianism seeks to maximise utility, meaning what is useful. So far, we have considered Bentham’s classical utilitarianism, which defined utility as pleasure, or happiness, and argued we should make use of the hedonic calculus. From there, we looked at a number of critical points made of utilitarianism, all of which can apply to classical utilitarianism.

However, classical utilitarianism is not the only kind of utilitarianism, and we will now look at other variants of the theory. It is important to note that not all of the critical points – positive and negative – made above in relation to classical utilitarianism apply to these variant theories. Therefore, in the exam, be careful of how you evaluate them.

Since Bentham’s early writings on utilitarianism, a distinction has been made between two oppositional approaches:
Act utilitarianism requires that every time we are presented with a decision between different options, we should apply a utilitarian calculation, and proceed accordingly.¹⁹

Rule utilitarianism regards act utilitarianism as too demanding, in that it firstly demands too much time from us, and secondly it is too difficult to determine what the likely utility outcomes will be of all our many individual actions.

Rule utilitarianism instead argues we should follow rules of behaviour based on the typical utility outcomes of performing specific actions.

Another way of putting this is to say that an act is morally right if and only if it complies with rules that, if everyone followed them, would lead to greater utility than if they didn’t follow them.

For example, a rule utilitarian is likely to argue if everyone avoids stealing, there would be more utility gained than lost. Therefore, we should follow the rule ‘Do not steal’. A similar case could be made for rules such as ‘Do not kill’. ‘Be kind to others’ could also be argued for as being a rule that would lead to gains in utility if it were followed by everyone.

This clearly brings rule utilitarianism closer to deontology, as it is putting forward specific actions to carry out or avoid through its argument that we follow these utility rules. However, rule utilitarianism is not a deontological theory, because the reasons for the rules it devises are based on the consequences of following those rules.

52. Create at least three other examples of utility rules which rule utilitarians are likely to support.

Some rule utilitarians argue when two or more rules conflict, we should follow the one that brings about the most utility. For example, if lying were to result in saving a person’s life – an axe murderer, perhaps, demanding to know where their intended victim is hiding – then we should lie, as it produces more utility than helping to bring about someone’s death. Therefore, although the rules ‘Do not lie’ and ‘Do not help bring about someone’s death’ are likely to be supported by rule utilitarianism, in a case like this where they cannot both be followed, a utilitarian calculation should be carried out. A deontological theory would be unlikely to employ such a method.¹⁰

53. (i) Create another situation to illustrate a conflict between two utility rules, (ii) explain how and why rule utilitarianism might argue the conflict could be resolved, and (iii) which action rule utilitarianism could claim to be the moral one to do, and why.

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¹⁹ It is clear from Bentham’s writings that he supports the act utilitarian approach. However, this does not mean classical utilitarianism and act utilitarianism are the same thing. For example, someone could be an act utilitarian, but deny that utility = happiness or pleasure, and/or that the best way to work out what we should do is to employ Bentham’s felicific calculus.

¹⁰ The rules that rule utilitarianism suggests are typically considered ‘rules of thumb’, as they provide general guidelines for action rather than inviolable commandments, unlike, for example, Kant’s perfect duties.
Critically comparing act and rule utilitarianism

Firstly, as we saw earlier, one of the things that has gained support for utilitarianism is its use of a clear decision procedure. However, it can be argued that act utilitarianism’s decision procedure places too many demands on us, and is difficult to carry out with any accuracy. Therefore, rule utilitarianism may be preferable.

In response to this, an act utilitarian is likely to respond in most cases we can work out whether action \( x \) is likely to bring about more or less utility than action \( y \), and where this is difficult, we should consider it carefully as best we can.

Secondly, act utilitarianism sometimes accuses rule utilitarianism of rules fetishism, because it focuses more on following rules above all other concerns, rather than, for example, maximising utility in every situation. After all, in many cases where there aren’t conflicts between ‘utility rules’, it can be seen that following a rule will result in less rather than more utility.

Rule utilitarianism is likely to reiterate the point here that, if everyone followed these rules, greater utility would be the result, so they are therefore good rules to follow.

However, this ‘rules fetishism’ criticism can be pressed further, by making the argument that if it is clear that following a rule would likely result in losses rather than gains to utility, then surely we should break the rule. After all, if our concern is maximising utility, it seems wrong to act in any other way.

However, it should be noted if we go about assessing each time whether following or breaking a rule is going to create more or less utility, then we have arrived back at act utilitarianism again.

54. Explain whether you think act utilitarianism is a more convincing theory than rule utilitarianism. Give reasons.

Preference utilitarianism

Preference utilitarianism (a.k.a. ‘interest utilitarianism’) is another variation of utilitarianism. It agrees with classical utilitarianism that we should maximise utility. However, it disagrees with the claim that utility is to be defined as happiness or pleasure.

Instead, preference utilitarianism argues that what provides us with utility is having our preferences satisfied. In other words, if there is an option between two courses of action, and carrying out \( x \) will result in the preferences – which can also be thought of as interests, desires, wishes, or wants – of more people being satisfied than \( y \), then \( x \) should be carried out.

Therefore, unlike classical utilitarianism, preference utilitarianism does not argue that the extent to which an action maximises happiness is the sole criterion by which its value can be judged.
55. Create an example of a situation to show how classical utilitarianism and preference utilitarianism might arrive at different moral conclusions over what action should be done.

Assessing preference utilitarianism

Firstly, in favour of preference utilitarianism, it can be said to provide a much more straightforward decision procedure than classical utilitarianism. This is because it is much easier to establish what people’s preferences are and whether they have been met, than whether or not an action is likely to bring about a particular quantity of happiness or pleasure. After all, we simply have to ask people what their preferences are. No predictions regarding pleasure production have to be carried out.

Secondly, this theory may also have greater appeal for those who value autonomy, meaning it is important that people have the power to make their own choices and decisions about what happens in their lives. This may well be considered more valuable than focusing on people’s pleasure, as it can be argued that what has even more value than this is that people get what they want.

Thirdly, and in connection with this, preference utilitarianism also has appeal to those who are against paternalism, as it is far less likely to be used as justification for carrying out actions – particularly on a legal, political level – that are motivated by ‘the greater good’, even when this goes against people’s wishes. For example, it was mentioned earlier that classical utilitarianism could argue that banning unhealthy lifestyles is the moral thing to do, because it will produce more pleasure for people, regardless of whether people would support such a policy. In contrast, preference utilitarianism would be more concerned with ‘giving the people what they want’, and if that’s bad food, cigarettes, and alcohol, then that’s what they should be allowed to have.

To put all this another way, it can be said the dispute between classical and preference utilitarianism centres on oppositional responses to the question ‘Is it right to give people what they want, or is it right to give people what they need’?

However, those in favour of paternalism are more likely to be against preference utilitarianism than classical utilitarianism. Such a viewpoint may arise because it is felt that people are wrongly influenced by ‘false needs’ (e.g. as Marxism may argue), or because people are simply too irrational to make the right decisions for themselves (e.g. as conservatism may argue). In either case, the picture is of individuals who do not truly know what is best for themselves. It is no surprise that Bentham comes from the liberal tradition, a political ideology which holds people are rational and in able to make informed choices about what to do with their lives.

A different objection to preference utilitarianism goes against the theory’s claim that working out what the interests of others are is always going to be simpler than deciding how they will likely be affected in terms of happiness or pleasure. For example, if morality is to focus on entities beyond articulate adult humans – e.g. foetuses, animals, severely disadvantaged people – then working out what their interests are, or whether they even have (meaningful) preferences to speak of at all, is going to be a challenge. Therefore, although the case can be made that the calculations a preference utilitarian has to carry out are, in general, going to be easier than those of a classical utilitarian, difficult situations will still arise.
56. Explain whether you think preference utilitarianism is a more convincing theory than classical utilitarianism. Give reasons.

Deontology

As we saw, the various types of utilitarianism are all consequentialist normative theories. They argue that what makes an action moral is related to the consequences it is likely to bring about. A different approach to normative ethics is deontology. As stated at the beginning of this handbook, deontological theories argue that what makes an action moral is the action itself, rather than the consequences it produces.

Although deontological theories will, by their nature, specify certain actions we should or shouldn’t do, precisely what these actions will be depends on the details of the individual deontological theory.

In studying deontological arguments, we will be looking at a number of what are called rights theories, which are characterised by their position that some beings possess particular rights. Simply put, if an entity possesses a right, then others have an obligation not to violate that right. For example, if someone has a right to life, then others should not kill them. But before that, we return to look at the deontological argument of Kant’s categorical imperative, which we first met in AS.

Some deontological theories avoid reference to rights, while still holding the general principle that it is actions, not consequences, which determine morality. An alternative to rights is to focus on duties or principles – actions we should or shouldn’t do – instead. Like rights, duties and principles are often argued to be inviolable, meaning they cannot be broken or violated, regardless of the consequences that failure to uphold them may bring about. Kant is an example of a non-rights focused, deontological approach to normative ethics.

Kant’s categorical imperative

Immanuel Kant (b. 1724 d. 1804 in Konigsberg, Prussia) attempts to provide a rational grounding for a deontological ethics, as he firstly claims that morality is based on reason alone, and once we understood this, we will see that acting morally is the same as acting rationally. He also claims that we can discover moral knowledge a priori. Saying this distinguishes Kant from other moral philosophers, such as the naturalists, who carry out moral investigation within what can be perceived.

Kant argues morality can’t be defined by what makes people happy. A key reason he gives for this is that sometimes happiness is morally bad. For instance, if someone enjoys hurting other people, the happiness they get from doing this is morally bad. It is right to say that it is bad to hurt someone, but surely it is even worse to hurt someone and enjoy it. But if morality was about producing happiness, we would have to say ‘If you’re going to hurt someone, it is better to enjoy it. At least that way, someone is happy’. Kant believes this just seems wrong.
So if morality is not based on happiness then there must be something else that is capable of influencing our choices apart from happiness. And Kant argues there is – reason. We are able to think about and reflect on different actions, and decide between them. We are not forced by our desires to act in any particular way. We have the ability to use our reason and power of will to overcome our self-interested desires. To illustrate this, Kant points out that if you knew that acting on your desires would lead to your being executed, you would be able to use your reason to both decide that you should not do this, and also hold yourself back from doing so. Therefore, reason can overcome our desires.

Kant provides an answer to the question ‘Why should I be moral’? Being immoral, he claims, is irrational. It is therefore reasonable to conform to the expectations of morality even though it may not be in our self-interest to do so, because morality is based on reason and shows us what it is rational to do.

The importance of motivation in making moral decisions

Kant states that to be moral, it is essential that we are motivated by what he calls the good will. This means we perform an action because we are motivated by our duty to do it.

Kant notices some people naturally enjoy performing good actions. Equally, some people naturally enjoy performing bad actions. As Kant puts it, ‘our inclination cannot be commanded’, so we cannot be praised or blamed for how we feel about doing particular things. Given that you haven’t decided or created your natural inclinations, you cannot be held morally accountable for them. However, while you are not accountable for what you feel, you are certainly accountable for what you do.

Kant argues that if someone performs good actions only because they enjoy doing so, they cannot be said to be acting morally, as their motivation is the pleasure they get from acting in such a way, not from devotion to duty. After all, why should someone be praised for doing something they do for pleasure?

Kant says the same thing about individuals motivated by feelings of sympathy or concern for others. As they naturally have these feelings anyway, and would feel bad if they went against these tendencies, they cannot be considered moral for being motivated by them in their actions.

It is important to note that Kant is not saying that we should avoid taking pleasure in performing good actions. It is just that if our motivation for acting in such a way does not involve duty at all, we cannot be said to be acting morally.

As stated, Kant argues that while we cannot control our feelings – and therefore cannot be praised or blamed for them – we can control our will. Therefore, we are not morally responsible for our natural feelings, but we are morally responsible for what we choose to motivate our actions. Therefore, if someone performs bad actions because they enjoy doing so, Kant argues they can be blamed, and therefore be considered immoral, because they are failing to be motivated by duty. (However, he does admit it is preferable for someone to do good actions than bad, but we can only be moral if we have a good will.)

57. Create an example to illustrate Kant’s arguments on the good will, in which you detail one case in which it is present, and another in which it is not.
The only way we can ensure we act morally is if we are guided by duty. Through the use of reason, we can work out what our duties are. This is what gives Kant’s deontology a rational grounding, as opposed to, for example, focusing on bringing about a particular desired consequence.

Before we look at the types of duty which Kant argues we all have, it is worth bringing in a criticism from virtue ethics at this point. As just mentioned, Kant suggests it is morally more important that we choose to act in certain ways, rather than be characteristically inclined to want to act in those ways. To give an example, Kant would be likely to consider moral someone who has desires to kill, but chooses to act against them.

Virtue ethicists may well be opposed to this argument. This is because a primary concern of all virtue-based theories is that, for us to be moral, we must have a moral character. Because of this, someone who has desires to kill is unlikely to be considered moral from a virtue perspective, as on their account a truly moral person would surely not have such desires in the first place.

This disagreement between Kant and virtue ethics can arguably be traced back to their opposing claims about whether we can be praised or blamed for the nature or character that we have. Given that Kant states we are not accountable for our feelings and desires, it seems he regards our natures as being fixed and beyond our control. Virtue ethics takes a different view, regarding our nature or character as something we can control and change, and so consequently we are morally accountable for it. In short, Kant and virtue ethicists can be seen as giving oppositional answers to the question ‘Can we change our natural inclinations’?

**Kantian duties**

Kant argues we have particular duties, which relate to actions that we should or shouldn’t do. He argues our duties are categorial imperatives – meaning they are commands (imperatives) we must carry out, regardless of whether we want to or not (categorical).

Kant argues that when we perform actions, we do so because we have made a choice, which we then act on. He states that whenever we make a choice, we act on a maxim. A maxim is a general rule or principle someone acts on. For example, ‘To have as much fun as I can’, ‘To kill’, ‘To cheat’, ‘To be charitable’, or ‘To respect people’ are all maxims.

Kant’s categorial imperative is formulated in different ways, one of which is the formula of universal law. It is used to test whether a particular action is moral or not:

\[ \text{I ought never to act in such a way that I cannot also will that my maxim should become a universal law.} \]

Note that ‘will’ here is used in the sense of wanting or desiring something. Therefore, if I ‘will’ that my maxim should become a universal law, then this is what I want or desire to happen.

In this formula, Kant is using the idea of universalisability. In Kant’s usage of the term, if a maxim is universalised, this means that everyone carries it out, including ourselves. Kant argues that some maxims cannot be willed universally without facing a contradiction. If a contradiction does arise, then the action is immoral.
Remember in prescriptivism how Hare used ‘universalisability’ differently:

Universalise (Hare) – Applying a moral judgment to all relevantly similar cases.

Universalise (Kant) – Universally willing a maxim without logical or rational contradiction.

Don’t mix up these two usages of the term!

Kant states there are two ways in which universalising a maxim can lead to a contradiction. These two types of contradiction create different types of duty – perfect and imperfect duties. Specific details are given below, but in order to work out whether our maxim is moral, we should apply these tests:

- Firstly, test if our maxim can be ‘logically universalised’ without contradiction. If it cannot, we have a ‘perfect duty’ not to do it, and we do not need to go on to the next two tests.
- Secondly, assuming it is possible to logically universalise our maxim, we should then test whether it can be ‘rationally universalised’ without contradiction. If it cannot, we have an ‘imperfect duty’ not to do it.
- Thirdly, we should also test our maxim with reference to the ‘formula of humanity’ (also described below), regardless of whether it is possible to rationally universalize it without contradiction.

1. **The logical contradiction test**

If a maxim cannot logically be universalised, then this logical contradiction creates what Kant calls a perfect duty not to do it. What Kant means by a logical contradiction is that universalising the maxim would create some kind of logical problem or impossibility. In other words, it can’t logically be done. (See the examples below for further illustration.)

A perfect duty means that there are no circumstances in which it is acceptable to carry out the action. This means that perfect duties are inviolable.

Note that here Kant is not saying for every maxim we should ask ourselves ‘What if everybody did that?’ or if we would like to see the maxim universalised. He is asking if it is possible for us to will its universalisability without contradiction.

For example, take the maxim ‘To kill’. If this maxim were universalised, as everyone kills, then we ourselves would be dead. Therefore, it is not possible for us to will ‘To kill’, as we cannot will anything if we are not alive. Therefore, ‘To kill’ leads to a logical contradiction. Consequently, killing is always wrong.

Take another example of a maxim – ‘To steal’. If this maxim were universalised, Kant argues if everyone helped themselves to anything they wanted, then the whole idea of owning things would become meaningless. In other words, it would not be logically possible to ‘steal’ anything. Consequently, this maxim leads to a logical contradiction, and the act of stealing is therefore immoral in all circumstances.

Another example Kant gives focuses on a man who promises that he will return money that he has borrowed, even though he knows that he cannot. He states the maxim being acted on here is ‘To make lying promises’. Kant argues making lying promises cannot logically be universalised. If every promise made was a lie, then nobody would trust anyone who made a promise. Therefore, the whole notion of what a promise is would be
undermined, so promises would no longer mean anything. Kant states this therefore presents a logical contradiction. Consequently, it is wrong to make lying promises at any time.

If our maxim fails the logical contradiction test, we know we shouldn’t perform the action, so we do not need to perform any more tests. However, if the maxim passes the logical contradiction test, we should next see if it also passes the rational contradiction test.

2. The rational contradiction test

If a maxim cannot rationally be universalised, then this rational contradiction creates what Kant calls an imperfect duty not to do it. What Kant means by a rational contradiction is that universalising the maxim would prevent the goals and desires held by other rational individuals being achieved in a world where everyone follows the maxim. (See the examples below for further illustration.)

An imperfect duty means although it is immoral to perform the action, there may be exceptions when it is permissible to do so. In other words, in some circumstances, imperfect duties are violable.

To illustrate this, Kant provides the example of someone wanting to avoid helping others. Therefore, the maxim is ‘To not help others in need’. This can logically be universalised – see above – and so does not create a perfect duty not to help others.

However, Kant argues if ‘To not help others in need’ were carried out universally, this would prevent other rational individuals from achieving their goals, as others often need assistance. In other words, it is not something that we could rationally will on a universal level. Therefore, we have an imperfect duty to help others.

The argument of imperfect duties raises the key question of precisely when they are violable. For instance, if it is not always a moral requirement that we help others, precisely when will there be exceptions, and how can we identify them?

Finally, we should also test to see if our maxim passes the requirements set out by the formula of humanity. We should do this regardless of whether the maxim passes the rational contradiction test or not, as its success or failure at this third stage can give us a more decisive view of whether we should carry out the action.

3. The formula of humanity

Another formulation Kant gives of the categorical imperative is known as the formula of humanity (a.k.a. the ‘formula of the end in itself’):

Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or that of another always as an end and never as a means only.

Kant argues humans have moral value because they have the ability to reason. Because of our reasoning ability, we are able to make decisions for ourselves and give ourselves goals to work towards. This rational aspect of our natures gives us dignity. Kant argues someone’s dignity is something that should be respected at all times.

The formula of humanity makes a distinction between treating people (i.e. beings with dignity) as ends and treating them as means. To treat people as ends is to respect their dignity, treating them as reasoning,
valuable beings who have their own lives and goals. To treat people as means is to fail to respect their dignity, merely using them for our own purposes. Kant argues we have a duty to treat other humans as ends, not means.

It should be noted Kant is not saying it is always wrong to treat people as a means for fulfilling goals. For example, you might hire a taxi driver to take you to the station. In this case, you are using somebody’s services and knowledge to aid you, but you are not necessarily treating them as if they lacked dignity. In other words, you are not necessarily treating them only as a means. Therefore, as long as you do not treat a person only as a means, then the formula of humanity has not been violated.

Therefore, if the maxim fails to meet the demands of the formula of humanity, then we should not carry out the action.

Rights theory

The handbook for political philosophy looks at this topic in more detail, in the section ‘Rights’, so you should also look at that when revising moral philosophy. However, as you’ll be examined on both subjects at the same time, that’s not too much bother, is it?

The theories of natural rights and utility rights that are mentioned in the political philosophy handbook are definitely applicable here. However, the theory of positive rights detailed there isn’t as applicable to this topic, as it’s more of a legal argument than a moral one.

Another example of relevant crossover between moral and political philosophy can be found in the section of the political philosophy handbook entitled ‘Justice’, where Nozick and Marx both present rights-based arguments – although they do somewhat narrowly focus on property rights.

What makes rights theories deontological rather than consequentialist is they are not arguing that upholding rights is moral because doing so will necessarily lead to desirable consequences (with the odd exception of the theory of utility rights). In fact, the opposite may well be the case. Take for instance the hypothetical scenarios used above to argue against utilitarianism, in which the much-hated innocent suspect is imprisoned in order to meet the demands of the vengeful populace, or the case of the organ-farming doctor who reasons that the loss of one life to save several others is the moral thing to do. A rights-based theory is likely to argue that even if the consequences of these actions have greater utility value than other available options, imprisoning or organ-harvesting the innocent violates their rights, and is therefore immoral. The beneficial consequences of doing either of these actions are beside the point – rights are inviolable, meaning they cannot be broken or violated. It is the actions themselves, not their consequences, which determine what is moral. As stated, if an action violates a right, then it is wrong. That doing so in some cases may promote utility is ethically irrelevant.

What are deontology’s strengths? (Includes some weaknesses)

As we have seen, the focus of deontological theories is on the actions we carry out, not the consequences of those actions. This shift of focus from consequentialist theories like utilitarianism has received both support and disapproval from philosophers. Let’s start by being nice.
Firstly, Kant’s theory, along with many other deontological arguments presents very clear constraints on particular actions. The actions these theories pick out as being immoral are ones that frequently tie in with how people tend to view morality. For instance, Kant argues firmly we should not kill, cheat, lie or steal. Equally, natural rights theories often speak out strongly against such things as killing, torturing, silencing the speech of others, theft, preventing people from entering education or assembling peacefully.

Secondly, and in connection with this, an arguably persuasive point about deontology is it is better at labeling particular actions as ‘wrong’ or ‘bad’ than consequentialism. For example, suppose we determine that carrying out a lie or a killing will result in high utility gains. A utilitarian theory would characteristically declare such an action to be ‘good’, and would do so without regarding this to be a problem. In contrast, a deontological theory is more likely to recognize that, even though they might be beneficial to utility, there is still something about actions like lying and killing that means they will always be, on some level, wrong.

Thirdly, another argued positive of deontology is that it avoids situations involving ‘utility monsters’. This term refers to individuals who carry out actions that, although they cause gains for utility, involve people acting in ways many would find monstrous. The organ-removing doctor and the detective framing the hated but innocent suspect would not be labeled as ‘moral’ by Kant or many other deontologists, as the fact that duties or rights have been violated would automatically mean they had done something immoral, regardless of the utility gains they had brought about.

Fourthly, another argued positive of deontological ethics is it generates a set of clear, easy-to-follow rules. Typically, the decision procedure used in deontological theories will be simpler to use than a consequentialist one. For example, once you’ve worked out which duties and rights there are, you just need to make sure you don’t violate them. You don’t need to carry out a calculation every time you act.

Fifthly, in comparison to consequentialism, deontology can be said to have more respect for moral obligations. For instance, deontology is far less likely to label ‘moral’ someone who breaks a promise because doing so will create a greater amount of utility than sticking to it.

Of course, a utilitarian could respond that the moral action is precisely the one which is most likely to bring about the most utility. Utilitarians would regard deontology’s insistence with sticking to set moral rules, no matter what the consequences, as unacceptable.

Sixthly, another arguably persuasive aspect of deontology which has also gained it favour over utilitarianism is the position that individual persons have value beyond the amount of utility they produce. For instance, Kant argues the dignity of everyone must be respected at all times. Similarly, rights theorists typically claim the rights people possess are inviolable, and should not be taken away from them, even if doing so would provide great utility benefits for others (although the theory of utility rights provides an exception to this).

To consider this on a wider, political level, it can be argued a society which operates on deontological principles is less likely to have a populace who know that potentially any action could be carried out on them for ‘the greater good’ than one which operates on a consequentialist morality. Deontology places very clear limits on what can and cannot be done to people, and one result of this could be a population feeling more secure and satisfied about there being clear moral boundaries of what can and can’t be done to them.

Utilitarianism can of course respond that it seems ridiculous to uphold a right or carry out a duty if doing so is going to have a negative impact on the amount of utility produced. Furthermore, with regard to the claim that a deontological society is going to feel safer and more secure than a consequentialist one, it is important to remember that people’s feelings in this regard will be taken into account when making utilitarian calculations. Therefore, a government policy that produces a great deal of fear and upset in people is unlikely to be passed.
Seventhly, and following the last point, it can be argued a normative focus on deontology is less likely – compared to utilitarianism – to produce situations where there is, to use Mill’s phrase, a tyranny of the majority. The moral value of everyone is considered equal in deontology, so individuals and minority groups are unlikely to find their interests overlooked.

Utilitarians could just repeat that last response they made, above.

Also, with regard to the tyranny of the majority, particular deontological theories have come under related criticism here. For example, Kant holds that animals do not possess rationality, and so do not have dignity. Therefore, we do not have any direct moral duties towards animals. To take another example, Marxism argues that rights theories – particularly those that emphasise property rights – operate in the interests of those who already have material wealth, and against those who don’t.

In other words, some deontological theories have faced objection because the specific principles or rights they put forward are seen to exclude or work against the interests of some individuals or groups. If this is an appropriate criticism, then it could be said that deontology is no more immune than utilitarianism to giving moral legitimacy to situations where there is a tyranny of the majority.

However, it should be noted that this is not a particular criticism of deontology in general, and more a criticism of how some deontological theorists have approached morality. For instance, with regard to animals, it can be seen that some utilitarian theorists have regarded the utility value of them as less important, or of no importance, compared to that of humans. Again, this does not point to a specific problem with utilitarianism, just a concern about how it has sometimes been applied.

What are deontology’s weaknesses? (Includes some strengths, and, perhaps ultimately, confusion)

Firstly, these aspects of deontology have also resulted in it being criticized. If utility is going to be maximized by carrying out a particular action, a utilitarian might say, then surely that is all that matters? What people want is utility (whether this is characterized as happiness or having our preferences satisfied), so let’s have more of it!

Secondly, in connection with this criticism, deontology has been accused of being too restrictive in its morality. For example, take the issue of lying, which Kant argues is always wrong. A utilitarian would argue that if a lie promotes utility, then this is surely a good lie, and one that should be carried out. Looking to the consequences allows for more flexibility, and a recognition that what is moral is not so clearly black-and-white, which is what a deontological approach encourages us to think. Other actions besides lying, such as cheating, and possibly even torture and killing, could be approached in the same, flexible way.

Of course, if we accept this consequentialist criticism, it seems we are right back at the point of giving moral approval to the ‘utility monster’. Furthermore, this highlights another troublesome aspect of consequentialism, which allows not just for such things as ‘a good lie’ or ‘a good cheat’, but also the possibility of ‘a good genocide’ or ‘a good rape’. Deontology at least recognizes that, even if there are occasional utility benefits in carrying out such actions, there is always an immorality to them.

Thirdly, a problem for the decision procedure in deontology arises when duties or rights conflict with each other. This is something that will not happen in, for example, classical utilitarianism, as all you have to focus on for being moral is the maximization of happiness. For duty-based theories like Kant’s, there may be situations where carrying out one duty means we fail to carry out another. For rights-based theories, we may find we cannot uphold a right without violating another. In such cases, what are we to do?
with regard to Kant’s theory, this criticism could be responded to by noting that a perfect duty is more important to uphold than an imperfect duty. For example, while it may be sometimes morally acceptable to avoid helping others, it is never morally acceptable to steal. For situations where two equally important duties conflict (i.e. two perfect, or two imperfect), Kant argues reason will tell us which is the one we should uphold the most.

In response to Kant in this final point, it could be said this offers us little practical guidance when confronted with difficult moral dilemmas, particularly when contrasted with consequentialist theories.

(2), for other deontological theories which do not make this perfect/imperfect distinction (e.g. rights theories), they could potentially respond in the same way, stating we need to basically think the dilemma through in a reasonable manner, using our reason to work out which is the more important principle to uphold. For example, if it is argued that everyone has a right to freedom of speech, and also a right to not have others prejudice a legal trial they are part of with slanderous criticism, this clearly presents a conflict between rights. How do we decide which is the most important one to uphold when they come into conflict?

Fourthly, this last point brings up the question of exactly how deontologists attempt to resolve conflicts between rights, duties or principles. One tempting way of resolving such conflicts might be to look to what the likely consequences of the available options are. For instance, to return to the example used above, we might think it is appropriate to consider what is likely to happen if we either (a) have complete freedom of speech, or (b) declare slanderous speech immoral.

However, if we do turn our mind to the consequences of our options, this pushes us more towards a consequentialist way of thinking. And if this is how we are to ultimately resolve moral dilemmas, this could suggest that a consequentialist approach is the method we should be using all the time.

Perhaps another alternative is to somehow make a list which ‘ranks’ the various duties or rights that are argued to exist. For instance, placing the right to life above the right to property, so that when conflicts between these two come about, concerns for life take precedence over property.

Again, though, on what basis are we to determine the relative importance of different rights and duties? As above, if we appeal to the consequences in providing an answer to this problem, then why don’t we just consider the consequences all the time?

Also, even if we do manage to lay out such a ranking of rights or principles, this still leaves the problem of conflicts within the same right or duty. For example, if we have to choose between killing two people, or that if no matter what option we carry out we are going to end up violating someone’s dignity, how do we work out what we should do?
Virtue ethics

To sum up so far, we have looked at two contrasting approaches to normative ethics – a range of utilitarian theories, which are all part of the consequentialist approach, and a range of theories concerned either with rights or duties/principles, which are all part of the deontological approach.

We now move on to look at a third normative approach – virtue ethics. As with consequentialism and deontology, there are a variety of virtue theories, but they all share certain key principles. We will go into more detail soon, but at a basic level any virtue theory will argue that the focus of morality is less the consequences of the actions (as in consequentialism), or the actions themselves (as in deontology), and more on our character – the kind of people we are.

We will look at the virtue theories of Plato and Aristotle, but first we will look at the main arguments common to all virtue theories.

Arguments common to all virtue theories – Part I: The soul, virtue, and eudaimonia

One of the most important points to bear in mind when discussing virtue ethics is how the term ‘moral’ has a different usage compared to consequentialist and deontological theories. Given these two types of theories have had a more dominant influence on how we view morality in the modern West, it is necessary to see that virtue ethics does not make the same assumptions we are likely to here and now. Before this, though, we need to get a few other things out the way.

Central to all virtue theories is how they conceive of the soul. This term is used because it is the most common translation from the ancient Greek term ‘psuchê’. Given that in modern usage ‘soul’ comes with a degree of what could be called religious baggage, it is important to note it does not necessarily have these associations in virtue ethics. A more fitting translation is personality, character, nature, or psychology.

Humans, it is argued, have a certain type of soul, which can be taken as saying there is such a thing as human nature. Precisely what this nature is said to be differs between particular virtue theories, but they all agree that what our nature is determines what kind of life is going to be the most fulfilling for us. In other words, there will be some ways of living which are in more accordance with our natures, and so are more rewarding, than others.

To illustrate the point a bit more, consider lions. Or bears. Or raccoons. Or horses. Or dogs. It doesn’t matter which. They can be said to have a soul as well, and some ways of living will be more fulfilling and beneficial to a bear/raccoon/horse/dog than others. For instance, it’s reasonable to say that a life lived in the company of a like-minded group of others is something that is going to be fulfilling and rewarding to dogs, because of the kind of nature these animals have. For great white sharks, as they have a different kind of soul, this kind of life is not going to be the one that fulfils them the most. The point here is the kind of being we are determines the kind of life that is desirable for us. To put it another way, virtue ethics suggests there is a way of living as humans qua humans.

Once we have established what the nature of our soul is, it can then be determined what kind of life we need to live to become fulfilled. The Greek word arête is used by all virtue theorists, and it is commonly translated as virtue or ‘excellence’. In some ways, ‘excellence’ is a more appropriate translation, as ‘virtue’ – like ‘soul’ – now has religious connotations which are not necessarily present in virtue ethics.
The argument here is there will be particular virtues that will allow us to fulfill our nature effectively, and live as humans *qua* humans. This means if we develop the right kind of character, we will be more fulfilled, as we will be the kind of being our nature equips or ‘intends’ us to be. To return to the dog example, a dog that is uncooperative with others, and is disinclined to be sociable, is not going to have a rewarding life *as a dog* that other dogs might, as they do not have the kind of character that is conducive to living the pack-centred life it is in the nature of dogs to find most fulfilling.

Following this, it can be said that a virtuous or excellent human is one that has the right kind of character to live a fulfilling human life. Living virtuously is to live the most rewarding life there is.

Being virtuous, and therein fulfilling our natural function and being fulfilled by it – constitutes *eudaimonia*. This term is often translated as ‘flourishing’, ‘fulfillment’, ‘the good life’, ‘living well’, or ‘happiness’. Of these, ‘happiness’ provides perhaps the least satisfactory definition, as we tend to associate happiness with a particular mood or feeling – something that can come and go. To describe someone as living a *eudaimon* life is saying something quite different to simply describing them as ‘happy’. *Eudaimonia* describes someone’s existence as a whole, not just how they happen to be feeling at a particular time. If a human being is virtuous, meaning they are flourishing because they have the right character to live the best kind of life for humans to live, they are *eudaimon*. Virtue ethicists argue this is clearly more than just being ‘happy’.

To return to our earlier point, when virtue ethicists speak of someone leading a moral life, they mean it in the sense that it is virtuous, and therefore *eudaimon*. A moral life *constitutes* – is the same thing as – a fulfilled life. This is why it is nonsensical to ask a virtue theorist whether being moral will make them happier, or if there is a conflict between self-interest and morality. A moral but unfulfilled person is inconceivable from a virtue ethics perspective. This is a very important point to remember when making use of the term ‘moral’ in examination.

To sum up: Our soul determines what kind of nature we have, and therefore what kind of life we will find most fulfilling. By developing our character in such a way that we can meet the potential that has been determined by our nature, we will be able to actually live this fulfilling life. Finally, such a life is a moral life.

**Arguments common to all virtue theories – Part II: What being virtuous involves**

The following extract comes from the ‘Virtue Ethics’ entry in the online ‘Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy’. This section deals with honesty or truthfulness, which a number of virtue theorists have argued is a virtue (though not all of them do – Plato, for instance). It further illustrates what it means to say that someone has a virtuous character:

An honest person’s reasons and choices with respect to honest and dishonest actions reflect her views about honesty and truth… Valuing honesty as she does, she chooses, where possible, to work with honest people, to have honest friends, to bring up her children to be honest. She disapproves of, dislikes, deplores dishonesty, is not amused by certain tales of chicanery, despises or pities those who succeed by dishonest means rather than thinking

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11 It is worth noting that virtue ethicists are not necessarily arguing that what makes our life more fulfilling is determined by some ‘external’ source, such as God. Our nature – i.e. the natural facts of what our species is like - determines the kind of life that will fulfill us. You could go on to argue God has provided us with our nature, but this is by no means a view that all virtue ethicists share.
they have been clever, is unsurprised, or pleased (as appropriate) when honesty triumphs, is shocked or distressed when those near and dear to her do what is dishonest, and so on.

Therefore, having a virtue is not just about acting in a certain way, it is about having a particular type of character, of being a particular kind of person. And the virtuous are the kind of people who have the right kind of nature to function well as a human being, and therefore be fulfilled.

As we saw in the previous topic on moral truth, some virtue theorists, such as Aristotle, talk about people who are akратic or incontinent, which refers to those who are sometimes able to do the right thing, but for whom it is a struggle. They are conflicted between, for example, meeting short-term desires and temptations that are not conducive to eudaimonia, and doing what is truly moral. While the incontinent know what the best course of action truly is, they are weak-willed, and can be led astray by non-virtuous concerns. In other words, they can be described as people who possess moral knowledge, but who do not necessarily act on it. However, for the genuinely virtuous, there is no such struggle within themselves – they have come to develop the kind of character where moral behaviour comes naturally to them.¹²

Virtue can be said to guide our actions, but they are also related to our emotional responses to things. Virtue theorists recognise that altering our emotions is difficult, but note that as, by their definition, being ‘moral’ means we are living our lives in the most fulfilling way possible, we should not expect this to be an easy thing to do. Virtuous living is a lifelong task.

From this, it can certainly be said that meeting the criteria to be ‘moral’ is a tougher task for us than under the demands of consequentialism and deontology. According to those theories, we simply have to alter our actions. Under virtue ethics, we have a bigger task ahead of us – we have to work hard on our personalities. Kant, as we saw, felt that our desires and inclinations were beyond our control, and so not something we could be morally accountable for. But virtue ethics disputes this. The kind of person we are is not immutable, it claims. We can change!

Arguments common to all virtue theories – Part III: The role of practical wisdom in living well

As virtuous living requires a well-developed character, we need to have had a good deal of life experience and practice in living well. For this reason, supporters of these arguments are frequently highly sceptical of the possibility of young people being moral, as inculcating virtues into their character is not something they are equipped to fully do yet. However, it’s certainly something they can, and should, work towards.

AQA has placed a particular emphasis on the role of practical wisdom in virtue ethics, from the Greek phronesis, and sometimes referred to as ‘moral wisdom’ or ‘prudence’ (a person who has prudence can therefore be described as ‘prudential’). Therefore, we’re going to look at this virtue in a bit more detail. One important thing to say is that the prudential person will be capable of making informed, rational judgments in what they do. Let’s now return to stealing things from the ‘Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy’, which starts by considering Aristotle’s account of phronesis:

¹² Note that some virtue theorists, such as Plato, deny the possibility of akrasia, because they argue that those who possess moral knowledge will necessarily act accordingly.
Aristotle makes a number of specific remarks about phronesis that are the subject of much scholarly debate, but the (related) modern concept is best understood by thinking of what the virtuous morally mature adult has that nice children, including nice adolescents, lack. Both the virtuous adult and the nice child have good intentions, but the child is much more prone to mess things up because he is ignorant of what he needs to know in order to do what he intends. A virtuous adult is not, of course, infallible and may also, on occasion, fail to do what she intended to do through lack of knowledge, but only on those occasions on which the lack of knowledge is not culpable ignorance.

So, for example, children and adolescents often harm those they intend to benefit either because they do not know how to set about securing the benefit or, more importantly, because their understanding of what is beneficial and harmful is limited and often mistaken. Such ignorance in small children is rarely, if ever culpable, and frequently not in adolescents, but it usually is in adults. Adults are culpable if they mess things up by being thoughtless, insensitive, reckless, impulsive, shortsighted, and by assuming that what suits them will suit everyone instead of taking a more objective viewpoint. They are also, importantly, culpable if their understanding of what is beneficial and harmful is mistaken. It is part of practical wisdom to know how to secure real benefits effectively; those who have practical wisdom will not make the mistake of concealing the hurtful truth from the person who really needs to know it in the belief that they are benefiting him.

Quite generally, given that good intentions are intentions to act well or ‘do the right thing’, we may say that practical wisdom is the knowledge or understanding that enables its possessor, unlike the nice adolescents, to do just that, in any given situation.

...[Practical wisdom] characteristically comes only with experience of life. Amongst the morally relevant features of a situation may be the likely consequences, for the people involved, of a certain action, and this is something that adolescents are notoriously clueless about precisely because they are inexperienced. It is part of practical wisdom to be wise about human beings and human life. (It should go without saying that the virtuous are mindful of the consequences of possible actions. How could they fail to be reckless, thoughtless and short-sighted if they were not?)

...[P]рактически мудрые [people have the capacity to] recognise some features of a situation as more important than others, or indeed, in that situation, as the only relevant ones. The wise do not see things in the same way as the nice adolescents who, with their imperfect virtues, still tend to see the personally disadvantageous nature of a certain action as competing in importance with its honesty or benevolence or justice.

These aspects coalesce in the description of the practically wise as those who understand what is truly worthwhile, truly important, and thereby truly advantageous in life, who know, in short, how to live well. In the Aristotelian ‘eudaimonist’ tradition, this is expressed in the claim that they have a true grasp of eudaimonia.

Aristotle and virtue ethics

Like Plato, Aristotle is also a virtue theorist and a moral cognitivist. Therefore, he argues there is a goal to human life – eudaimonia – that is achieved through acquisition of virtues, and it is true there are particular character traits that are more rewarding and fulfilling to humans – i.e. more ‘moral’ – than others. Like Plato, Aristotle places importance on the role of practical wisdom in helping us to live a moral life.

Also like Plato, Aristotle states that somebody can be said to possess a particular virtue when they are (1) disposed to act a certain way when it is appropriate to do so, and (2) that they furthermore enjoy and gain fulfilment from doing so.

[82]
For example, one of the character traits which Aristotle considers to be a virtue is ‘friendliness’. Someone who possesses ‘friendliness’ will be friendly when it is appropriate to do so. They will not be friendly no matter what – they will do so appropriately, in a way most conducive to achieving eudaimonia. After all, sometimes it will be appropriate, and more virtuous, to not be friendly. Someone who possesses the virtue of ‘friendliness’ will know when such situations arise, and act accordingly.

Those who are vicious – that is, having a life of vice, or lacking in virtues – do not act appropriately, and so are less moral and less fulfilled. The vicious are not eudaimon.

Aristotle states we have to train ourselves to act and respond correctly. He disagrees with Plato that knowing what the right thing to do is enough – we have to also get into the habit of acting virtuously. Taking instruction and inspiration from virtuous role models can greatly assist with this. If we succeed, we will possess the virtues required for a eudaimon life. We will know how to act in the best way, and we will also want to act like this, as we come to understand the benefits it brings to ourselves as well as others.

Another difference with Plato is that while Plato advocates that reason should rule the emotions, for Aristotle, reason guides our feelings to an appropriate degree, suitable to the situation.

Aristotle argues a satisfying, fulfilling life is not one spent enjoying passive pleasures, but one of action and engagement. Eudaimonia requires using one’s mental faculties to their highest degree and engaging in good relations with others. Aristotle places a significant emphasis on developing virtues that relate to our social connections with other people, as this area is very important with regard to reaching fulfilment. By nature, we are capable of deriving great satisfaction from our social relations with other people, so many of the virtues relate to this.

In total, Aristotle identifies twelve moral virtues that must be developed in order to achieve eudaimonia. Each virtue relates to a specific sphere of action or feelings. In each of these areas a virtuous person will act appropriately, what Aristotle calls the doctrine of the mean. People who lack virtue tend to act in a vicious way, being either in excess or deficiency of what is appropriate. In other words, virtuous people act appropriately in each of the key areas of life, and vicious people act inappropriately. While virtues are character traits that help us to lead a good and fulfilled life, vices are character traits that do not. Here is a selection of some of Aristotle’s moral virtues, and their corresponding vices:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vice (excess)</th>
<th>Virtue</th>
<th>Vice (deficiency)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rashness</td>
<td>Courage</td>
<td>Cowardice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excessively foolhardy</td>
<td>Appropriately brave, knows when to confront and when to retreat</td>
<td>Lacking in courage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irascibility</td>
<td>Patience</td>
<td>Lack of spirit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too quick to anger</td>
<td>Angry and patient when it is appropriate</td>
<td>Spineless, allow others to walk over them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obsequiousness</td>
<td>Friendliness</td>
<td>Cantankerousness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over-friendly</td>
<td>Appropriately friendly</td>
<td>Lacking in friendliness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boastfulness</td>
<td>Truthfulness</td>
<td>Understatement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too free with the truth, tactless</td>
<td>Tells the truth (and lies) appropriately</td>
<td>Too restrained with the truth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buffoonery</td>
<td>Wittiness</td>
<td>Boorishness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Will inappropriately take humour too far</td>
<td>Uses wit and humour appropriately</td>
<td>Unable to be funny, take offence at those who are witty</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
PHIL3 Key Themes in Philosophy: Moral Philosophy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prodigality</th>
<th>Liberality</th>
<th>Illiberality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Over-generous, spends to excess</td>
<td>Generosity, giving and receiving wealth appropriately</td>
<td>Lacking in generosity, giving too little and taking too much</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Shyness</th>
<th>Modesty</th>
<th>Shamelessness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Too easily feels shame</td>
<td>Appropriately modest – does not feel shame, as virtuous people do not act in ways that should cause them to feel this way</td>
<td>Doesn’t feel shame when it is appropriate to do so</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is worth stressing that Aristotle does not mean a virtuous person will always take the middle ground in any situation – he means they will act appropriately. Aristotle argues that while immorality is possible in many ways, morality is only possible in one way, and our use of practical wisdom will inform us what the mean action is in any given circumstance.

**Plato and virtue ethics**

As was said in the section on moral truth, Plato’s virtue theory is a good example of transcendentalist cognitivism. It is also, unsurprisingly, a good example of a virtue theory. Therefore, Plato’s arguments that are made in Republic will also have relevance for this exam topic. So when you come to revise virtue theory, make sure you look at your PHIL4 notes on Plato as well.

**Evaluating virtue ethics (strengths and weaknesses)**

Firstly, as has been seen, virtue ethics interprets ‘moral’ in a way that is noticeably different from consequentialist and utilitarian approaches, using it as a term to describe life as a whole, rather than to label any specific action. Virtue ethicists’ resistance to drawing up any set list of moral ‘rules’ is greatly influenced by their view that life is too difficult and complex for this to be practically possible. Therefore, virtue theories notably lack a formal decision procedure. Instead, we are asked to focus on developing our characters in the right way, cultivating the necessary virtues through the exercise of practical wisdom. If we do this, we will be moral individuals, and will make judgments that are informed and rational. In other words, if we have the right kind of character, we will automatically do the right kind of things.

This central aspect of virtue ethics has met with a mixture of support and resistance. Those in favour agree that ‘morality’ – as virtue ethics defines it – does not lend itself to a decision procedure. Those against argue, firstly, we can have a decision procedure for morality (see any of the other normative theories mentioned in this handbook for examples), and, secondly, the lack of a specific decision procedure means that virtue ethics is of little or no practical assistance in making moral decisions.

Secondly, a connected criticism of virtue ethics relates to its use of terms such as ‘practical wisdom’, ‘virtue’, and ‘eudaimonia’. With other theories, it is argued, it is clear when the ‘rules’ are being kept to, and when you are being moral or not. However, this is not the case with any of these terms. How can we know when we or other people have practical wisdom, are virtuous, or are eudaimon?

Virtue ethicists could respond that this problem reflects the difficulty of defining morality as a term that is descriptive of our character rather than descriptive of our individual actions. Outside of morality, we use terms such as ‘wise’, ‘immature’, ‘perceptive’, ‘kind’, ‘arrogant’, and so on, to describe people’s personalities. These terms are perhaps equally hard to define – but just because, for example, it is difficult to specify the precise difference between ‘mature’ and ‘immature’, it does not
mean that these are useless or meaningless terms. Similarly, that it is extremely hard to think of some kind of test that could be done to establish if someone has practical wisdom or is *eudaimon* does not mean that these are terms which relate to nothing. In short, virtue ethicists would argue that some people are leading virtuous, fulfilled lives in which they are reaching their potential as human beings, and some people aren’t. The fact that these terms are hard to pin down doesn’t change this fact.

Thirdly, despite this response, it could still be argued an appeal to practical wisdom is unable to give us specific assistance when considering what the right course of action is in any area. For example, if we accept human rights theory, then to be moral we simply have to avoid violating the rights of others. If we accept preference utilitarianism, we have to maximise the preference satisfaction of everyone involved. But if we accept virtue theory, what exactly are we supposed to do? This can be considered an even bigger problem when it looks like there is a conflict between two or more virtues. For example, does a particular situation call on me to be courageous or witty? If by taking the time to be courageous I have to put aside being witty, then what should I do?

Again, the virtue ethicist could respond that life is too complicated to provide such generalised advice as ‘always tell the truth’, or ‘satisfy as many people as possible’, because rules like these will not apply in all cases. We will only know what the right thing to do is if we work on developing our characters in a moral way, with practical reason as our guide.

In connection with this, virtue ethicists would claim someone who is truly virtuous would not be faced with irresolvable conflicts between virtues, as a truly virtuous person has the kind of character that means they will know how to act appropriately in different situations. For such a person, situations that others consider to be conflicting would not be as big a problem for them – they will better know what to do than those who are vicious. (For examples of people who haven’t focused on developing their characters in virtuous ways, and consequently go on to make poorly informed, ridiculous life choices that others simply wouldn’t do, try watching a programme hosted by Jeremy Kyle.)

All of this opens up virtue theory to the accusation of circularity, because it is arguing a virtuous/moral person is someone who develops the right traits of character and flourishes because of them, and to know what the rights traits of character are, we need to be a virtuous/moral person.

However, it may be possible to argue that this circularity is not *viciously* circular. For instance, we could compare being virtuous to having a skill, such as piano playing. What makes a good piano player? They are good at playing the piano. And how do you get to be a good piano player? You practice at piano playing. This is circular, but seems a reasonable account. Similarly, it could be asked, what makes a virtuous person? They are good at being virtuous. And how do you get to be a virtuous person? You practice at being virtuous.

Fourthly, virtue ethics has received some support for having a more developed account of human satisfaction than other normative theories, such as utilitarianism. *Eudaimonia*, it is argued, gives a fuller, more accurate picture of what it means to be a fulfilled human than a simple reference to utility value does. While Bentham, for example, is just concerned with the quantity of pleasure we achieve, virtue ethics argues that not all pleasures lead to true fulfillment. Indeed, some pleasures are vicious rather than virtuous, in that they stop us from being wholly fulfilled. For instance, someone who puts all of their focus into the pleasures of material
wealth or crushing the lives of those beneath them will not be as genuinely satisfied, say virtue ethicists, as someone who leads a virtuous life. By our nature, some ways of living are more fulfilling than others.

A possible response to this, and one Bentham would be likely to support, is to say that virtue ethics is perhaps unnecessarily complicated in its account of what is required for human satisfaction. Bentham would argue the only thing we need to be morally concerned with is the amount of pleasure or pain that is produced. If there exist some things that don't truly satisfy us, which virtue ethicists might describe as vices, then these will produce a lower level of utility, particularly when considered in the long term. Therefore, discussion of individual virtues, vices and the concept of *eudaimonia* add nothing to what the concept of utility already contains.

Fifthly, another reason virtue ethics has gained support is because it takes what could be described as a holistic approach to morality. In other words, that it judges a person by their whole character, inclinations and feelings, not just on whether they follow a set of ethical rules. Each moral decision we make is not a separate thing, but part of our life as a whole. A virtuous person is in the habit of doing the right thing, and finds doing the right thing wholly rewarding – morality is constitutive of self-interest. It's what's inside that counts!

However, it may be argued (e.g. by Kant) that to be truly moral we have to be motivated by duty. To take an extreme case, someone with thieving tendencies who overcomes their urges because they recognise their duty not to steal could be viewed as a more moral person than one who doesn’t steal because they have no inclination to do so in the first place.

To this, virtue ethicists are likely to respond that a truly moral person is one who does not have such an inner struggle with themselves over doing the right thing. Being moral needs to be a genuine part of who they are.

Sixthly, virtue ethics has also been criticised for its claim that a flourishing life and a moral life are the same thing. Is it not possible for someone to be wholly fulfilled while leading a decidedly immoral life – by anyone’s definition of the term? For example, could someone be a fully satisfied sadist?

A possible response to this is to reiterate the point that, in virtue theory, a moral life and a *eudaimon* life are one and the same thing, so by definition it is impossible for someone to flourish while being immoral.

However, this response is somewhat disingenuous, as it avoids the potential problem of a person carrying out actions that other normative approaches would condemn (e.g. mass killings, extortion, blackmail etc.), with their justification being that it leads to a flourishing life for them, and so it is consequently the moral thing for them to do.

As has been seen, many virtue theorists, perhaps most notably Aristotle, have emphasised the social side of a moral life. Someone who is friendly, witty, generous etc. is not going to act in such a way. Furthermore, virtue ethicists would be inclined to outright deny that a life spent abusing other people is one that can be described as moral, because it simply does not lead to the true levels of satisfaction and flourishing a genuinely virtuous life does.
## Normative ethics summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THEORY</th>
<th>KEY POINTS</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Utilitarianism</strong></td>
<td>The morality of an action is based on the amount of utility it is likely to bring about. Everyone’s utility value is of equal consideration.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classical utilitarianism</td>
<td>Utility = happiness i.e. pleasure, and should be maximised for the greatest number of people possible. Unhappiness i.e. pain should be minimised for the greatest number of people possible. The felicific calculus should be consulted when making decisions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act utilitarianism</td>
<td>Utility calculations should be performed prior to every action.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rule utilitarianism</td>
<td>Utility calculations do not need to be performed prior to every action. Actions are morally right iff they comply with utility rules that, if everyone followed them, would lead to greater utility than if they didn’t follow them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preference utilitarianism</td>
<td>Utility = having our preferences satisfied. When acting, we should maximise the number of preferences satisfied.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Deontology</strong></td>
<td>The morality of an action relates to what the action is itself, not the consequences it is likely to bring about.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deontology – Kant’s categorical imperative</td>
<td>We have moral duties which can be determined rationally i.e. they can be known a priori. To be moral, we must be motivated by the good will. We have a perfect duty not to violate maxims which cannot be logically universalised. We have an imperfect duty not to violate maxims which cannot be rationally universalised. We should respect people’s dignity i.e. treating them as ends, not means only.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deontology – rights theory</td>
<td>To be moral, we must violate any moral rights.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Virtue ethics</strong></td>
<td>Our soul determines the kind of life which will be the most fulfilling i.e. the most moral. Virtues are fulfilling characteristics which, if attained, constitute this eudaimon life. Practical wisdom is the virtue which enables us to exercise rational judgment in making the right, most fulfilling, choices in life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virtue ethics – Plato</td>
<td>See PHIL4 notes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virtue ethics – Aristotle</td>
<td>If we possess a virtue, we will act appropriately in relevant situations, following the doctrine of the mean, and avoiding vice. Given our nature as social beings, many virtues are to do with our relationships with others.</td>
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**Practical ethics**

**The value of life: our treatment of non-human animals**

In this section, we turn to the issue of practical or applied ethics. We will be looking at arguments relating to what the value of life is, and to do this we will specifically be investigating our treatment of non-human animals. Doing this will help to explain further what ethical criteria can be considered important when deciding what makes a life morally valuable, and why/why not it can be argued it is wrong to kill.

We will look at some arguments on the treatment of non-human animals from utilitarianism, deontology and virtue ethics. As we will see, the theories that have been selected here regard the value of non-human animal life quite highly. Remember, though, that other positions are possible from within each tradition. For instance, just because the deontological theory below argues in favour of non-human animals having rights, it should not be thought that all deontological arguments on non-human animals come to the same conclusions.

However, one thing that practical ethics theories on this topic will have in common is the kinds of questions they are concerned with. For example:

- **Utilitarian theories** on the treatment of non-human animals will ask questions like ‘Do non-human animals have utility?’ ‘If so, should their utility be concerned equal/lesser/greater than humans?’ Utilitarian theories will predominantly argue that the reason life has value is because of its utility.

- **Deontological theories** on the treatment of non-human animals will ask questions like ‘Do non-human animals have rights?’ ‘Do we have any duties towards non-human animals?’ Deontological theories will predominantly argue that the reason life has value is because of such things as there being a right to life, our having a duty not to kill etc.

- **Virtue theories** on the treatment of non-human animals will ask questions like ‘Are our virtues and flourishing affected by the way we treat animals?’ ‘Can animals have fulfilling/unfulfilling lives?’ Virtue theories will predominantly argue that the reason life has value is because of the moral importance of achieving eudaimonia.

**Utilitarianism and our treatment of non-human animals: Peter Singer – ‘All Animals are Equal’**

Following liberation movements relating to race and gender, Singer urges that we extend to other species the basic principle of equality that most of us recognise should be extended to all members of our own species.

This is not to call for equality in all areas. For example, it made sense to demand women have the vote, just as men did, because they are just as capable of making rational decisions as men are. Non-human animals are completely unable to comprehend and/or care about what is involved in political decision-making, so it makes no sense to talk of the moral importance of giving them the vote. Therefore, Singer is not suggesting animals receive equality of treatment – i.e. we treat non-human animals the same as humans. Instead, what Singer is referring to a utilitarian and egalitarian equality of consideration – i.e. their utility should be taken into account just as much as our own.
To make his argument, Singer looks at moral discrimination made by humans towards other humans – for example, racism and sexism. He states that even if it could be established that any group or individual were deficient to others in terms of such things as intelligence, moral agency, or physical strength, this would not justify giving them unequal consideration compared to others.

For example, if it were conclusively established that women as a gender, or any individual woman, possessed less intelligence than men, Singer claims there is no reason to think this justifies any difference in the amount of consideration we give to satisfy their needs and interests. In other words, just because one person is smarter than another does not mean reason to consider them less morally valuable.

Singer appeals to Bentham’s utilitarian principles of equality of consideration, in which the interests of every being affected by an action are to be taken into account and given the same weight as the like interests of any other being. Singer goes on to say:

It is an implication of this principle of equality that our concern for others ought not to depend on what they are like, or what abilities they possess... It is on this basis that the case against racism and the case against sexism must both ultimately rest; and it is in accordance with this principle that speciesism is also to be condemned. If possessing a higher degree of intelligence does not entitle one human to use another for his own ends, how can it entitle humans to exploit nonhumans?

Singer quotes Bentham, who wrote that a full-grown horse or dog is beyond comparison a more rational, as well as a more conversable animal, than [a human] infant of a day, or a week, or even a month, old. But suppose they were otherwise, what would it avail? The question is not, Can they reason? nor Can they talk? but, Can they suffer?

With this, Singer focuses on what he argues is the primary moral concern – whether a being can feel pain or suffering, pleasure or enjoyment. What Singer is referring to here is sometimes described as emotionality – the ability to experience emotional states, to have wants and desires, and to have these wants and desires fulfilled or thwarted – and sentience – the ability to perceive. He adds:

The capacity for suffering and enjoying things is a prerequisite for having interests at all, a condition that must be satisfied before we can speak of interests in any meaningful way. It would be nonsense to say that it was not in the interests of a stone to be kicked along the road by a schoolboy. A stone does not have interests because it cannot suffer. Nothing that we can do to it can possibly make any difference to its welfare. A mouse, on the other hand, does have an interest in not being tormented, because it will suffer if it is.

If a being suffers, there can be no moral justification for refusing to take that suffering into consideration. No matter what the nature of the being, the principle of equality requires that its suffering be counted equally with the like suffering – in so far as rough comparisons can be made – of any other being.

The racist violates the principle of equality by giving greater weight to the interests of members of his own race, when there is a clash between their interests and the interests of those of another race. Similarly the speciesist allows the interest of his own species to override the greater interests of members of other species. The pattern is the same in each case.

Following this, Singer argues we should not eat animals, because doing so puts our (comparatively minor) interests in having a tasty meal ahead of the animals’ (comparatively major) interests in not being killed. He dismisses arguments that eating meat is a necessity, as all nutritional requirements can be met with a plant-based diet. Furthermore, the treatment of animals in the agricultural industry is very much against their interests in having a comfortable, pain-free life.
To avoid speciesism we must stop this practice, and each of us has a moral obligation to cease supporting the practice. Our custom is all the support that the meat-industry needs. The decision to cease giving it that support may be difficult, but it is no more difficult than it would have been for a white Southerner to go against the traditions of his society and free his slaves; if we do not change our dietary habits, how can we censure those slaveholders who would not change their own way of living?

Singer then turns to the use of animals in medical experimentation, including those that have been essential in producing life-saving treatments for humans. He notes it has often been asked of those who take an abolitionist approach to animal experimentation – i.e. the demand that it end completely – whether they would be prepared to let thousands die if they could be saved by experimenting on a single animal.

In response to this, Singer questions whether those who carry out the experiments would be prepared to have orphaned human infants as their test subjects. (He specifies orphans to avoid the complications of parental feelings.) If they refuse, and instead opt to use a non-human animal, Singer takes this to be a case of discrimination, and not taking into equal consideration the interests of the animals and human infants.

Singer also discusses permanently retarded humans, by which he means those with severe and irreparable brain damage. Such individuals arguably have a mental life equivalent to, or less complex than, the kinds of animals commonly used in agriculture and science. He notes it would be considered unacceptable to make use of these people in a similar way. But given they have a like level of emotionality and sentience to other animals, what moral difference is there? If we reply ‘But they’re humans!’, is this any different to a racist or sexist demanding special treatment for those of their own favoured group? Singer thinks not.

Singer has often been misinterpreted on these points, with his critics claiming he supports experimentation on and/or eating orphans and the mentally disabled. It should be stressed that Singer’s aim is to argue that being killed or undergoing a painful/fatal medical experiment is against the shared interests of both animal and human test subjects. He goes on to say if we were to, rightly, consider the suffering of animals as much as we consider the suffering of our own species, the number of such experiments performed would be a minute fraction of the number performed today.

If Singer’s utilitarian approach of regarding the like interests of animals and humans equally were followed, meat eating would be unjustifiable in the significant majority of cases, and certainly for those living comfortably in first-world nations. Experimentation for cosmetic purposes is likely to receive the same moral condemnation. However, with regard to medical experimentation, particularly that which is focused on the alleviation of serious illness, the case is not so clear. If, for example, thousands of lives are lost due to experimentation in order to save millions, then on utilitarian terms this is highly likely to be acceptable. However, Singer’s key point here is that by solely experimenting on other species, we are guilty of unjustifiable discrimination, by not taking animals into equal consideration: Surely every sentient being is capable of leading a life that is happier or less miserable than some alternative life, and hence has a claim to be taken into account. Utilitarianism may well justify the suffering of the few to aid the many, but it does not justify speciesism.

Assessing Singer on our treatment of non-human animals

Singer’s essay has received a substantial amount of critical response, both positive and negative, of which there is not enough time to go into detail here. However, at least two key points can be raised against him.

Firstly, it could be argued the utility value of animals is lower than that of humans. The reason for this is the emotional life and range of understanding an animal has is less than that of a human. Consequently, it can be said animals are able to experience a reduced range of emotional responses – in other words, compared to
humans, fewer things give them pleasure, and in smaller quantities, and fewer things give them pain, also in smaller quantities. Therefore, although the question ‘Can they suffer?’ is still a morally important one, the answer is ‘Yes, but not as much as us’. From a utilitarian point of view, this means that the pleasure or pain of a human would ‘count more’ than that of an animal.

However, a utilitarian sympathetic to Singer’s argument could make two critical responses to this. (1), although some humans have a greater emotional capacity for pleasure and pain than animals do, this does not apply to all humans. The same can be said of human infants and those with significant mental disabilities. Consequently, although it could be conceded that fully able adult humans can have greater wrongs carried out against them than most, perhaps all, other animals, all this suggests is that we should consider inflicting suffering on animals as morally equivalent to inflicting suffering on humans who are at a similar mental level. Overall, this does not affect Singer’s main arguments all that much.

(2), even if animals cannot reach the extensive highs and lows of emotional response that humans can, this does not alter that they can experience pleasure that they greatly value, and suffering they find traumatic and wholly unwanted. To illustrate this point further, imagine a human of the same limited emotional responses as a typical farm or lab animal. Perhaps they are unmoved by art, fail to see the value of friendship and conversation, and are not as affected by grief or love as the rest of us. This does not seem sufficient justification to experiment on them or kill them, as these last two actions are things they do very much care about.

Secondly, Singer’s utilitarianism makes it easier for him to take what is described as a welfarist position than an abolitionist one. In other words, utilitarianism is better able to argue in favour of promoting improved living conditions for animals in science and agriculture than it is to argue against their deaths. The reason for this is utilitarianism is less able to criticise the actual killing of animals, and most particularly humane killing. After all, if a killing is painless, then it can be said that no suffering has been experienced. From a utility point of view, this is therefore not a problem. So, rather than stop eating meat and cut down heavily on animal experimentation, we should just focus on improving their welfare while alive.13

However, an important response to make here is that utilitarianism faces a similar problem in explaining why painlessly killing humans is morally unacceptable as well. So, if this is a difficulty for Singer when discussing animals, it is equally a difficulty for all utilitarians when discussing the killing of our own species. If this criticism leaves us in the position of only focusing our moral concern on the welfare of animals rather than the fact they are killed, then we would surely also have to morally excuse murderers of humans who use humane methods. The flaw here seems to be with utilitarianism in general, rather than utilitarianism applied to the treatment of animals.

Furthermore, it could be said here that a deontological approach is far less likely to face such problems, and for this reason may be preferable to consequentialism. For example, arguments about inherent dignity or the right not to be harmed or killed will not face this objection.

One response utilitarians have offered to this problem is to argue that in killing a sentient, emotional being you are robbing it of an existence which it is able to place great utility value in – arguably the greatest utility value of all. Therefore, it is possible to be a utilitarian who judges humane killing as being extremely immoral.

13Indeed, Singer’s more recent writings have seen him take a more explicitly welfarist position. He still maintains, for example, that an animal-free diet is the morally right thing to do, but principally because the treatment of animals in even the best commercial farms puts them through a level of suffering that is not justified by the pleasure we can get from eating them.
Deontology and our treatment of non-human animals: Tom Regan – ‘The Case for Animal Rights’

Tom Regan (b. 1938 in Pennsylvania, USA) begins by drawing attention to the distinction between moral agents – beings which are able to understand and consider morality, and are therefore culpable for what they do – and moral patients – those who should be taken into ethical consideration by moral agents when they perform actions which affect them. Regan states those who are only moral patients cannot do what is right, nor can they do what is wrong. It can be noted that moral patients may bring about actions where others are aided, harmed, saved or even killed, but such actions cannot be described as having any particular moral quality. Only the actions of moral agents can be right, wrong, good, or bad.

Regan states not all humans are moral agents. Human infants, young children, and the mentally deranged or enfeebled of all ages are paradigm cases of human moral patients. Such individuals lack moral understanding and culpability, but they should still be treated by moral agents in an ethical way. Human moral patients, argues Regan, have the following morally important mental traits:

- Consciousness
- Sentience
- Value their own welfare/well-being
- Wants, preferences, beliefs, desires, feelings and recollections
- Can feel pleasure, pain, enjoyment, frustration
- Recognise their own continuing existence

It is these qualities, Regan argues, that cause human moral patients to be moral patients. This is because possession of them means we have interests, and consequently we have rights. In other words, these traits are necessary conditions for being a moral patient. However, being human is not on the list of necessary properties. This is because being human is not a requirement for having interests, as other beings also have interests. Therefore, being human is not a necessary condition for possessing rights.14

A being which possesses these mental characteristics is what Regan terms a subject-of-a-life. He admits there are many cases – human and non-human – where it is difficult to conclusively determine who possess some of these traits and who does not. But just because this difficulty exists does not mean that some beings have them and some don’t.

Regan argues subjects-of-a-life have what he describes as inherent value. By this, he means that have an equal moral worth to all other moral patients. It does not matter if, for example, the range of experiences they have lived through has been limited, or they have a happier or more pleasant life than others, or that their desires are more cultivated ones, such as for arts and letters. One moral patient has as much moral value as any other moral patient:

_They have value in their own right, a value that is distinct from, not reducible to... the values of those experiences which, as receptacles, they have or undergo._

In saying this, Regan draws a distinction between his deontological, rights-based approach and that of what he refers to as the utilitarian-receptacle view of value, in which it is what goes into the cup (the pleasures or preference-satisfactions, for example) that has value; what does not have value is the cup itself (i.e. the individual himself or herself). In making his argument on the equality of individuals, Regan claims his approach

14 Note that ‘interests’ is not the same as ‘hobbies’ – having interests means there are things that matter to you. This does mean a human being that lacks these characteristics could be said not to have any interests, and would therefore have no rights either. Of course, such cases are rare.
is preferable because, analogously speaking, It’s the cup, not just what goes into it, that has value. In other words, utilitarianism is only concerned with individuals based on their utility value, not on their value as individuals.

The criterion of inherent value does not assert or imply that those who meet it have the status of subject of a life to a greater or lesser degree, depending on the degree to which they have or lack some favoured ability... (e.g. the ability for higher mathematics or... artistic excellence). One either is a subject of a life, in the sense explained, or one is not. All those who are, are so equally.

What all this indicates, argues Regan, is we should treat those individuals who have inherent value in ways that respect their inherent value. This is, as already indicated, regardless of what species they are a member of.

It is not an act of kindness to treat animals respectfully. It is an act of justice. It is not ‘the sentimental interests’ of moral agents that grounds our duties of justice to children, the retarded, the senile, or other moral patients, including animals. It is respect for their inherent value.

Furthermore, Regan writes:

Some... resist the idea that animals have inherent value. ‘Only humans have such value,’ they profess. How might this narrow view be defended? Shall we say that only humans have the requisite intelligence, or autonomy, or reason? But there are many, many humans who fail to meet these standards and yet are reasonably viewed as having value above and beyond their usefulness to others. Shall we claim that only humans belong to the right species, the species Homo sapiens? But this is blatant speciesism.

...Well, perhaps some will say that animals have some inherent value, only less than we have. Once again, however, attempts to defend this view can be shown to lack rational justification. What could be the basis of our having more inherent value than animals? Their lack of reason, or autonomy, or intellect? Only if we are willing to make the same judgment in the case of humans who are similarly deficient. But it is not true that such humans – the retarded child, for example, or the mentally deranged – have less inherent value than you or I. Neither, then, can we rationally sustain the view that animals that are like them in being the experiencing subjects of a life have less inherent value. All who have inherent value have it equally, whether they be human animals or not.

Some central rights that all subjects-of-a-life possess are the right not to be harmed and the right not to be killed. Violating these rights conflicts with two of their key interests – i.e. their interests not to be harmed or killed. Regan argues that human subjects-of-a-life have these rights, because they are subjects-of-a-life, not because they are humans. Equally, other beings that are subjects-of-a-life also have these rights.

Regan goes on to conclude that his argument’s implications for farming and science, among other fields, are both clear and uncompromising. In the case of the use of animals in science, the rights view is categorically abolitionist... Because these animals are treated... as if their value were reducible to their usefulness to others, they are... treated with a lack of respect, and thus are their rights routinely, systematically violated. This is just as true when they are used in trivial... unnecessary or unwise research as it is when they are used in studies that hold our real promise of human benefits. We can’t justify harming or killing a human... just for these sorts of reason. Neither can we do so even in the case of so lowly a creature as a laboratory rat. It is not just reduction or refinement that is called for, not just larger, cleaner cages... not just tidying up the system. It is complete replacement. The best we can do when it comes to using animals in science is – not to use them.

...As for commercial animal agriculture, the rights view takes a similar abolitionist position. The fundamental moral wrong here is not that animals are kept in stressful close confinement or in isolation, or that their pain and suffering, their needs and preferences are ignored or discounted. All these are wrong, of course, but they
are not the fundamental wrong. Regan calls for nothing less than the total dissolution of commercial animal agriculture.

Assessing Regan on our treatment of non-human animals

As with Singer, Regan’s arguments have received a lot of critical reaction, of all kinds. As with the discussion on Singer, just a couple of key points will be raised here.

Firstly, Regan has been criticised for his view that all beings which possess the criteria necessary to be regarded subjects-of-a-life should have equal rights. The reason for this is that although, for example, a pig and an adult human could be said to both be conscious, sentient, able to value their own welfare etc., humans have a greater level of consciousness, sentience etc. Therefore, while it could be argued animals have rights, those of humans are stronger, and take precedence over them. Therefore, if our options are limited to violating the right to life of a human or the right to life of a pig, then the pig’s right should be violated, because the interests of the pig are not as developed as those of the human. That is, while both can be labelled ‘subjects-of-a-life’, the human has a stronger claim to this status, with correspondingly stronger rights.

This is a very similar criticism to that directed to Singer, above, with regard to animals having lesser utility value to humans because of their comparatively less-developed mentality and ability to be pleased and pained. And the criticism can be responded to in similar ways.

(1), it can be noted that not all humans have a wider, more developed range of interests than all other animals. Consequently, application of this criticism would have to lead to the view that beings of any species that have weaker claims to being a subject-of-a-life have correspondingly weaker rights.

(2), and, once more, similarly to the response given to Singer’s critics – even if an animal like a pig has a lesser claim to being a subject-of-a-life than a fully-developed human, it still has significant interests in not being harmed or killed, possessing as it does a life it is able to find value in. Consequently, although it may be the right thing to do to kill a pig when the only alternative is killing a human, this does not provide justification for the use of them in agriculture. The use of animals in medical research may be more justified, it could be argued, but only in circumstances when not harming or killing an animal would directly lead to greater harm and death of humans. And even in circumstances such as this, there would still be no moral difference between experimenting on an animal and a human of similar ‘subject-of-a-life’ status.

Secondly, Regan has been criticised for the categorically abolitionist approach that he takes. As he argues the rights of subjects-of-a-life not to be harmed or killed are inviolable, welfarist concerns are of little importance. Instead, what is morally required is the end of animal agriculture and experimentation. Some have taken this to be too extremist, arguing that in cases where the consequences of experimentation outweigh the harm and death caused, surely this justifies acting in such a way.

As we saw when looking at Singer, objecting to his arguments on the grounds that they seem to legitimise humane killing opened up critical problems for the utilitarian approach as a whole, not just for his particular application of it. A similar thing can be seen here for Regan’s use of the deontological, rights-based approach.
The reason for this is that arguing for any inviolable rights – for humans or animals – is going to have similar problems to those made in the objection. In circumstances where harming or killing produces greater overall benefits, the consequentialist will argue, it is surely right to act in such a way. If this criticism of Regan is correct to suggest that his argument will result in upholding animals rights no matter what the consequences, it will do the same for human rights as well. The point of a right is it is inviolable. And this dispute highlights the tension between consequentialist and deontological approaches.

As we have seen, a consequentialist approach is far less likely to face such problems, and for this reason may be preferable to deontology. For example, arguments about maximising utility and the greater good for all will not face this objection.

**Virtue ethics and our treatment of non-human animals**

Here, I’m just going to lift stuff out of the ‘Stanford Encyclopedia’ of Philosophy again, from their entry on ‘The Moral Status of Animals’:

> Some, in the neo-Aristotelian or ‘virtue ethics’ tradition, have argued that while our behavior towards animals is indeed subject to moral scrutiny, the kinds of arguments that have been presented frame the issues in the wrong way. According to many in this tradition, rational argumentation fails to capture those features of moral experience that allow us to really see why treating animals badly is wrong. The point, according to commentators such as Stephen R.L. Clark and Cora Diamond, for example, is that members of our communities, however we conceive of them, pull on us and it is in virtue of this indescribable pull that we recognize what is wrong with cruelty. Animals are individuals with whom we share a common life and this recognition allows us to see them as they are. A person striving for virtue comes to see that eating animals is wrong not because it is a violation of the animal’s rights or because on balance such an act creates more suffering than other acts, but rather because in eating animals or using them in other harmful ways, we do not display the traits of character that kind, sensitive, compassionate, mature, and thoughtful members of a moral community should display. And carefully worked out arguments in which the moral considerability and moral significance of animals are laid out will have little if any grip on our thoughts and actions. Rather, by perceiving the attitudes that underlie the use and abuse of non-human animals as shallow or cruel, one interested in living a virtuous life will change their attitudes and come to reject treating animals as food or tools for research. As Rosalind Hursthouse recognized after having been exposed to alternative ways of seeing animals:

> ‘I began to see [my attitudes] that related to my conception of flesh-foods as unnecessary, greedy, self-indulgent, childish, my attitude to shopping and cooking in order to produce lavish dinner parties as parochial, gross, even dissolute. I saw my interest and delight in nature programmes about the lives of animals on television and my enjoyment of meat as side by side at odds with one another...Without thinking animals had rights, I began to see both the wild ones and the ones we usually eat as having lives of their own, which they should be left to enjoy. And so I changed. My perception of the moral landscape and where I and the other animals were situated in it shifted’.
Appendix I – Further implications of relativism and absolutism

Where we left off, we saw a distinction between moral relativism – the view that cultures determine their own moral truths – and moral absolutism – the view that they do not. We will now look at how absolutism can make the claim that what is morally true may be different at different times and in different places, but without collapsing into relativism. This may seem a difficult, perhaps contradictory position to hold, but an absolutist could construct their argument along the following lines:

It can be said that whether an action is moral or not is affected by certain facts about it. In different places, the facts relating to an action can differ. To return to an example used where we left off the discussion before, the effect of continuing to care for an infirm or elderly individual in a non-industrialised nomadic culture is likely to be much more dangerous for others than in a place like modern England, because doing so may hold up the group and divert a disproportionate amount of limited resources. This may prevent a greater number of people from surviving effectively, if at all. Such an outcome will not apply in modern England. Consequently, the morality of such an action could be different, depending on the circumstances involved. Therefore, ‘Leaving the infirm to die alone is wrong’ may be true in places like England, but false in other places of differing technological advancement.\(^\text{15}\)

At first sight of such a line of reasoning, it may look as if this coincides with the relativist’s argument – that in different cultures there are different moralities. However, the absolutist is making the general point that what defines the morality of \(x\) is the factors surrounding it.

Therefore, an absolutist could say it is true that:

\[
\text{If culture } C \text{ is affected by factor(s) } F, \text{ then it is true that ‘} x \text{ is wrong’}
\]

In other words, it is not incompatible with absolutism to argue there are different moral truths in different cultures. However, this is not because what is morally true is \textit{decided} by these cultures, as normative relativism argues. Instead, what is morally true is determined by the factors affecting that culture. Wherever such factors are found, it is absolutely true that a particular moral judgment applies.

Clearly, absolutists who take this direction are arguing that there is a connection between ‘is’ and ‘ought’, and are taking a firmly cognitivist position, perhaps a naturalistic one. To return to the earlier example, an absolutist \textit{could} argue that what makes leaving the infirm and elderly alone to die moral or immoral are factors such as available resources, the impact it has on the wider community, how able others are to successfully care for them, and so on. As the facts surrounding these matters can be significantly different between cultures, so will the morality of acting in such a way.

**Additional problems: relativism, tolerance and ethnocentrism**

Some philosophers who argue in favour of relativism state that because cultures have different moral truths – i.e. morality is relative – we should tolerate and/or not interfere with how other cultures behave.

However, this viewpoint is incoherent, as it seems to be arguing two oppositional things: (1) There are no absolute moral truths, and (2) It is wrong to interfere with other cultures.

\(^\text{15}\) It should be remembered that this example regarding the treatment of the infirm and elderly is for illustrative purposes. As stated above, being an absolutist does not tie you to any particular moral judgment. Therefore, it is not necessarily the case that an absolutist will accept such euthanising practices. The example is given purely to show the general approach that this kind of absolutist reasoning would take, not the specific normative conclusions they would support.
If (1) is true, it is impossible to hold (2), as it is making an absolutist claim about how people should act. If (1) is correct, then no moral judgment can be derived from it.

In relation to this, normative relativists also sometimes argue that to impose a particular set of moral values onto others is ethnocentric, which refers to the belief that your own moral values are superior and truer than those of other cultures.

It is perhaps understandable why concerns of ethnocentrism arise, and they can particularly be found with relation to the issue of industrialised Western cultures making judgments of other societies. It may be felt that states such as England are unavoidably tainted with their colonial, imperialist past (and, arguably, present). A recognition of the imbalance of power and influence some states have held over others may make it feel especially uncomfortable to pass judgment on those who have been at the receiving end of colonial rule and oppression.

But such a move seems equally guilty of a similar problem, in that it is suggesting the following oppositional views:

(1) There are no absolute moral truths, and (2) It is wrong to place greater importance on your (culture's) moral values than those of others and/or impose your (culture's) moral judgments on others.

Although the varying levels of global power and the brutal facts of history may make it feel like a continuation of racism and imperialism to pass moral judgment on some cultures, it can still be said that some people and cultures are correct in their ethical statements, and some are not. The oppressive actions of a state in its foreign policy in the past and present do not mean that all of the moral judgments it supports are false, and the fact that a state has been a victim of the actions of others does not mean that its own moral judgments are true.

All of this relates to one very difficult area for normative relativism – that of interaction between different cultures. For example, suppose culture A judges that ‘Invasion of other cultures is good’, while culture B judges that ‘Invasion of other cultures is wrong’. If culture A were to invade culture B, it is unclear how normative relativism would be able to decide which judgment is to take moral precedence. If it resorts to the above claim that ‘It is wrong to interfere with other cultures’, then relativism can be rightly accused of being inconsistent, in arguing both that there are no absolute moral truths, and that there is one we should all abide by.

**Other forms of relativism**

There is also individual moral relativism, which argues that individual people – rather than cultures – determine their own moral truths. Therefore, what is morally true for one person may not be true for another person. This has many similar strengths and weaknesses to cultural relativism. For example:

Compared to normative relativism, one problem individual relativism avoids is the question of what determines a culture. This is because no claims about cultures and their judgments are made by individual relativists, so the issue is irrelevant. In this respect, then, individual relativism can be seen to have an advantage over cultural relativism.

It also avoids the problem of cultures not being homogenous in their moral judgments, as the only individual that needs to agree with a moral judgment is the individual in question. Unless you are in the incoherent position of disagreeing with the judgments you yourself support, this will not be a concern, so individual relativism can be argued to have a further advantage over cultural relativism.
However, many of the other criticisms made against normative relativism can apply equally to individual relativism. For one thing, it certainly seems difficult to imagine how individual relativists could make judgments such as ‘x is wrong’ or ‘x is bad’ in relation to things that other people do. After all, if individuals determine what is morally true for them, it seems to follow that we cannot judge them as being moral or immoral, because these terms only have truth on a level relative to the individual.

Finally, it is worth noting that relativism turns up in many areas of philosophy, not just morality. For example, ‘aesthetic relativism’ is the view that aesthetic judgments such as ‘x is beautiful’ or ‘x is a good film’ in the artistic sense of the term ‘good’, are also relative in their truth, either culturally or individually.

Taking this philosophical outlook even further is ‘epistemic relativism’ which argues that all propositional statements are relative, to either cultures or individuals. In other words, all truth is relative. For critical analysis of these positions, look somewhere else.

**Appendix II – Further implications of secondary property realism**

As we saw earlier, McDowell’s theory of secondary property realism can be used to argue there are facts about reasons to believe moral judgments. This meant that we can talk of there being appropriate and inappropriate conditions under which someone is able to accurately make a moral judgment. If McDowell is correct, moral cognitivism follows. But there are further implications for his claims, beyond moral philosophy.

For example, it could further be argued that value judgments of other kinds – e.g. aesthetic judgments such as ‘This book is good’, and ‘You’re beautiful’ – could also be said to have ‘normal’ or ‘correct’ conditions in which they can be made, and that aesthetic properties such as ‘good’ and ‘beauty’ are also real things we can have knowledge of.

Further still, McDowell’s arguments could perhaps also be extended to relate to many examples of what we typically regard as expressions of preference or opinion. For example, statements such as ‘The meal tastes bitter’, ‘It’s cold in here’, or ‘This is boring’. In cases such as these, we may be able to say there are ‘normal’ or ‘correct’ conditions in which they can be made, and properties such as ‘bitter’, ‘cold’, and ‘boring’ are also real things we can have knowledge of.

If we were to make these moves with McDowell’s arguments, this would also require a commitment to the view that as well as there being people who are in a better or worse position to be able to make an accurate judgment on colour or morality, the same could be the case with regard to judging aesthetics, taste, how cold or boring something is, etc. For instance, it could be argued that in order to make an accurate aesthetic judgment, a person would need to be informed about such things as the type of artwork being judged, have a good understanding of a broad range of comparable artistic methods, and so on.

**Appendix III – Mill on higher and lower pleasures**

As we saw, Bentham argues the only concern of utilitarianism should be the amount of pleasure (or pain) an action is likely to produce. It was mentioned this shows a focus only on the *quantity* of pleasure, rather than the *quality*.
However, not all utilitarians have argued all pleasures are equal in quality. John Stuart Mill (b. 1806 in London, England d. 1873 in Avignon, France), for instance, argues there is a distinction between different qualities of pleasure.

Some types of pleasure, he claims, are higher pleasures, meaning they are higher than other, lower pleasures. To determine which kind of pleasure something is, he proposes an objective test: If the majority of knowledgeable people (i.e. those who know what they are talking about) compare two pleasures and agree that one of them is ‘more desirable and valuable’ than the other, then it is a higher pleasure.

Importantly, the person who knows what they’re talking about is someone who has experienced both the pleasures being discussed. For example, if the comparison is between listening to Wagner operas and going for a run, the judgment as to which is more valuable can only be really made by someone who has experienced both.

Mill is not proposing that a list of ‘higher pleasures’ be drawn up alongside a list of ‘lower pleasures’. The two terms are comparative, in that one kind of pleasure is either higher or lower (or possibly the same) than another kind of pleasure. To use a term we met when looking at meta-ethics, it can be said that being ‘higher’ or ‘lower’ is a relational property, as it only applies in relation to a pleasure it is being compared to. Therefore, Mill would not say something like ‘Eating is a lower pleasure’, because to label a pleasure ‘lower’ only makes sense when comparing it to a pleasure it is lower than.

It is important to note that Mill is not simply saying that what makes a pleasure higher or lower is the quantity of pleasure produced. The concern is the quality of pleasure. For a pleasure to be more valuable – i.e. it has more quality – than another, people have to prefer it even if that pleasure brings more pain with it. For example, the pleasure of being in love carries the pain of longing and the possible pain of rejection or breaking up. But knowledgeable people overall still prefer being in love to, for example, eating a curry. Contrary to Bentham, Mill argues simple contentment – that is, having a high quantity of pleasure – is not enough to make us happy. Some types of pleasure have more quality than others.

When making our moral decisions, Mill argues we should take into account the quality of pleasures. Therefore, if we have to choose between two courses of action, and one is likely to result in a greater quantity of pleasure than the other, this may not be enough reason to choose it. The quality of pleasure – i.e. whether it is higher or lower – also needs to be considered.

Appendix IV – Kant and meta-ethics

As you may have noticed, Kant did not make an appearance in the sections on meta-ethics. This was because he didn’t need to. However, it is worth briefly looking at where Kant’s theories fit within meta-ethics. The following claims can be made:

- Kant is a cognitivist, as he argues we can have moral knowledge. Specifically, he believes that through the use of our rationality, we can come to know a priori what our duties are.

- Kant is an anti-realist, as he does not believe moral properties like ‘good’ and ‘wrong’ actually exist. Because of this, Kant does not fit in with either transcendentalism (the view that moral properties are real, but non-perceivable), or naturalism (the view that moral properties are real, and related to the empirical world).
Appendix V – R M Hare on what moral argument can do

The following comes from a discussion between Bryan Magee and the prescriptivist utilitarian R M Hare. They've already been talking for a while, but we join them at this point:

MAGEE
You’ve made the point... that it’s no good basing a moral approach on intuition, because different people have different intuitions – but does that mean you reject intuition? Do you think we ought to push it aside?

HARE
No, not for a moment. Intuitions are very important, but they’re not the only thing. The reason they’re important is that in most moral dilemmas we don’t have time to think, and sometimes it would be dangerous to think, as Hamlet discovered. Therefore those who brought us up implanted in us, very wisely, certain dispositions of character which make most of us, for example, extremely reluctant to tell lies, and very ready to say, if somebody else tells a lie, that he has done wrong. The same applies to cruelty. If nowadays in this country you find somebody mercilessly whipping a dog – let alone a person – you at once say he’s doing wrong.

We have been brought up, that is to say, with an intuitive sense of what’s right and what’s wrong; and it’s highly desirable that we should be so brought up. If we weren’t brought up that way we’d behave much worse. So I’m certainly in favour of having intuitions. But the question is: ‘What intuitions?’ Suppose you’re asking yourself, when you’re bringing up your children, ‘Is it right to bring them up with an intuition that men with long hair are worse than men with short hair?’, or, more seriously, ‘Is it right to bring them up to think it’s wrong to have sex outside marriage?’, how do you decide? If you’re wondering whether the intuitions you yourself have are really the best ones; and if your children or other people challenge them; what then? Intuitionism – the view that moral judgments are known to be true by intuition and can’t be challenged – is at a loss to answer this question. We need a higher level of moral thinking, which can criticise intuitions – a critical level, at which we can take various opposing intuitions, either of the same person or of different people, and judge them, to see which is the best one to have.

MAGEE
How is this higher-level thinking to be done? If you reject intuition as a way of deciding between incompatible arguments, and you don’t believe, either, that moral judgments can be derived from facts, what function is there for reason and rational argument in specifically moral matters?

HARE
I’d like to take this, if I may, in stages. I think that argument can help here – it can help much more than it has helped so far – but let us take the first stage. This is that, as I said earlier, logic is applied to clarify the concepts which are used in these controversies, like the concept fair or just, and to elucidate their logical properties. The second stage is this: once you have clarified these concepts, you will be able to tell one sort of question from another. All these political and moral questions come to us an amalgam or melange of several different kinds of question. We have, first of all, plain ordinary questions of fact about the situation we are in and the circumstances of the actions or policies open to us. Next, there are the logical questions I have just mentioned, about the nature of the concepts being used – the meanings of the words – and people do very easily get at cross purposes by taking these for factual questions when they aren’t. For example, in the controversy about abortion, they think it’s a question of fact at what stage the foetus turns into a human being. But actually there are three questions (or classes of questions) here, not one. There are questions of fact in the narrow sense – mainly medical questions about the present condition of the foetus and its mother and their probable futures if the foetus is not aborted; and there are questions about how we are going to use the words ‘human being’; and lastly, the third class of questions I haven’t yet mentioned, there are questions of value like ‘How ought foetuses, as so described, or human beings, in the various senses of the words, to be treated?’ By mixing up these kinds of questions people run round in circles and never get on to grappling the third kind, which of course is the crucial kind. The... contribution of the philosopher is to take all these different questions apart; and then we see that the factual questions can be settled by the methods of empirical investigation, and the logical and conceptual questions sorted out, if necessary with the help of philosophical logicians, by deciding what the words mean, or, if we want to change their meaning, what we are going to mean by them. And that leaves us with the evaluative questions which, when we have got rid of the rest, may be easier to answer, because at last we can see them clearly and distinct from these other kinds of question.
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<td>Normative relativism (a.k.a. cultural relativism, moral relativism)</td>
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<td>Objective</td>
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<td>Omission (as opposed to ‘act’)</td>
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<td>Perfect duty</td>
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<td>Practical ethics (a.k.a. applied ethics)</td>
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<td>Practical wisdom (a.k.a. phronesis, moral wisdom, prudence)</td>
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<td>Preference (a.k.a. opinion)</td>
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### PHIL3 Key Themes in Philosophy: Moral Philosophy

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<td><em>Reductio ad absurdum</em></td>
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[106]
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<tr>
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<td>Universalise (Kant)</td>
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[107]
| Utilitarianism |  |
| Utility |  |
| Utility monster |  |
| Utility rule |  |
| Verification principle |  |
| Vice |  |
| Virtue (a.k.a. excellence) |  |
| Virtue ethics |  |
| Welfarism (re. the use of animals) |  |

**Sources**

PRINT


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