

KNOW
THYSELF

SOCRATES

5th Transitions Starting A-level T&P

This booklet is to help introduce you to some basic philosophy in preparation for starting your RS A-level next year. It is completely optional, but will help give you an idea of what we get up to and how to get started.

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Introducing Philosophy, Ethics and Developments in Christian Thought

Philosophy is an academic discipline that exercises reason and logic in an attempt to understand reality and answer fundamental questions about knowledge, life, morality and human nature. The ancient Greeks, who were among the first to practice philosophy, coined the term, which means “love of wisdom.” Those who study philosophy are called philosophers. Through the ages, philosophers have sought to answer such questions as, what is the meaning and purpose of life? How do we know what we know? Does God exist? What does it mean to possess consciousness? And, what is the value of morals?

Philosophers attempt to answer such questions through the philosophical method. The method usually begins when a philosopher examines his own beliefs and begins to doubt their validity. From his doubt, questions emerge. Before answering a question, the philosopher thoroughly analyzes it to ensure it is clearly and properly defined. This helps narrow the path to the most precise answer. Next, the philosopher proposes possible answers to the question and provides reasoned arguments to support each one. The arguments are then critiqued by other philosophers, who may give rebuttals. Through this process of criticism and judgment, known as dialectic, philosophers attempt to prove the rationality of their beliefs and discover fundamental truths.

It's no coincidence that the philosophical method has much in common with the scientific method. Indeed, early science was known as “natural philosophy.” Philosophers like Aristotle developed the concepts of inductive and deductive reasoning that form the basis of modern scientific study. The roots of the physical sciences like physics and geology can be traced back to ancient philosophy.

From <http://www.whatisphilosophy.net/>

Going further: BBC Why study Philosophy? <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0344x6k>

What is the purpose of the A-level?

To:

1. Develop your interest in a rigorous study of religion and belief and relate it to the wider world
2. Develop knowledge and understanding appropriate to a specialist study of religion
3. Develop an understanding and appreciation of religious thought and its contribution to individuals, communities and societies
4. Adopt an enquiring, critical and reflective approach to the study of religion
5. Reflect on and develop your own values, opinions and attitudes in the light of their study.



Philosophy begins after all the empirical facts have been gathered, and there are still questions.



What will I learn?

The course is divided into three sections: Philosophy, Ethics and Developments in Christian Thought

In Philosophy you will study:

1. Ancient philosophical influences
2. The nature of the soul, mind and body
3. Arguments about the existence or non-existence of God
4. The nature and impact of religious experience
5. The challenge for religious belief of the problem of evil
6. Ideas about the nature of God
7. Issues in religious language.

In Religion and ethics you will study:

1. Normative ethical theories- Natural Law, Situation Ethics, Kant Utilitarianism
2. The application of ethical theory to two contemporary issues of importance- Euthanasia and Business ethics to those theories
3. Ethical language- Meta Ethics and thought
4. Debates surrounding the significant idea of conscience
5. Sexual ethics and the influence on ethical thought of developments in religious beliefs.

In Developments in Christian thought you will study:

1. Christian beliefs, values and teachings, their interconnections and how they vary historically and in the contemporary world
2. Sources of religious wisdom and authority
3. Practices which shape and express religious identity, and how these vary within a tradition
4. Significant social and historical developments in theology and religious thought
5. Key themes related to the relationship between religion and society



Philosophy

This explores philosophical issues and questions raised by religion and belief.

- ▶ Ancient philosophical influences provides important foundational knowledge for the study of philosophy of religion.
- ▶ This and Soul, mind and body enable the exploration of philosophical language and thought through significant concepts and the works of key thinkers.
- ▶ You will critically analyse three contrasting arguments regarding the existence of God. Such arguments are a fundamental element of philosophy of religion, as well as key to the personal beliefs of many individuals.
- ▶ You will also be introduced to different types of religious experience, and will be encouraged to discuss and debate the significance and meaning of such experiences, as well as how they can shape religious belief.
- ▶ The problem of evil and suffering will also be explored. Debated for millennia, this issue is still relevant and problematic for many today.
- ▶ Through studying the nature of God, you will explore how ideas within philosophy of religion have developed over time, and make comparisons between the ideas presented in works of key scholars.
- ▶ Finally, the two sections that focus on religious language give you the opportunity to examine issues such as whether religious teachings should be understood symbolically or analogically, or whether religious language should be regarded cognitively or non-cognitively.

Going further: Crash Course What is Philosophy?

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1A_CAKYt3GY

How is Philosophy Defined?

What are some of the question raised?

What is metaphysics?

What is Value Theory?

Why is Logic important?

What is the 'two step method? Why is it important?

What areas are there to philosophy?

Philosophy, (from Greek, by way of Latin, philosophia, “love of wisdom”) the rational, abstract, and methodical consideration of reality as a whole or of fundamental dimensions of human existence and experience.

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/philosophy>

Studying philosophy of religion

*Are there reasonable grounds for bolding
religious beliefs?*

*Can religious beliefs and teachings stand up
to philosophical investigation?*

Why study philosophy of religion?

Philosophy of religion can be quite difficult to define, as people have different views about what philosophy is, and also about what counts as a religion. It is usually understood to be a discipline which applies the methods and tools of philosophical inquiry to the subject matter of religion. These methods include rigorous questioning. A philosopher takes an idea, such as 'justice' or 'existence', holds it up to the light, looks at it closely and asks what it really means. A philosopher will look for any assumptions in the idea, whether obvious or hidden, and question whether it is reasonable to hold those assumptions. A philosopher will try to find counter-arguments and counter-examples to see whether the idea can still stand up, even if faced with criticisms.

Some people find the philosophy of religion quite difficult and challenging: not because the subject matter is academically demanding, but because it calls into question ideas and beliefs that might be very precious and important to them. Someone who has grown up with a firm faith in God might be uncomfortable when asked to justify the grounds for that belief and when presented with alternative, perhaps quite persuasive, arguments supporting an atheist position. People might also feel uncomfortable when they realise that they have been repeating words during worship for a long time but, when they think about it, they are not entirely sure what those words signify. Similarly, people who have been confident of the non-existence of God, or the wrongness of a belief system different from their own, might find it challenging to be presented with a religious belief or idea which makes a lot of sense or which sheds new light on something they had always rejected.

So why study philosophy of religion at all? The answer to this question, perhaps, is that religion deals with many of the most important questions of human existence, and, therefore, trying to find truthful,

or at least reasonable, answers to such questions is an extremely valuable quest. Perhaps it is better not to hang on to a belief which does not stand up when challenged, or a belief which makes little coherent sense, however uncomfortable this might be. Perhaps ideas, doctrines and teachings which are alien to our usual ways of thinking should not be too readily dismissed.

What kinds of questions are addressed by the philosophy of religion?

The philosophy of religion looks at all kinds of aspects of religious belief and practice, through a philosophical lens. Probably the most fundamental question for philosophers of religion is the question of whether a God, or gods, exist at all. This also involves the exploration of other, related questions: what does it mean, for a God or gods, to 'exist'? Is it the same kind of existence that we have as humans? Is there, or could there be, any kind of existence beyond the existence of material things?

And then there are questions of what such a God, or gods, might be like: what are the attributes traditionally ascribed to God, and do they make sense, and are they compatible with each other? If we were looking for the existence of a God, or gods, how would we know when we had found what we were looking for? Should we expect a God, or gods, to allow humans and other animals to suffer?

Questions of the place of humanity in the world are also addressed by the philosophy of religion. Are human beings on the earth for any reason? Do human beings have any kind of fundamental value, beyond their importance to their family and friends? Are human beings any more than physical matter? Can human consciousness be satisfactorily explained? Does human suffering have any explanation or purpose? Can humans expect to continue in some way after their own death?

These questions, too, lead to further areas of exploration. Religious experience is a fascinating phenomenon, which invites consideration of the extent to which it has any evidential force, and whether it should be considered equally as reliable or unreliable as other kinds of human experience. The language used to convey religious ideas is also interesting to philosophers of religion, who ask whether it makes any sense to try to describe in ordinary, everyday terms the objects of beliefs in the supernatural and extraordinary.

Can the philosophy of religion provide firm answers to its questions?

Studying philosophy of religion might leave you with more questions and less certainty than you had when you began. Philosophy does not often, if at all, lead people to single, conclusive, firm answers to the questions it raises. However, as a discipline it does develop valuable thinking skills, equipping people with a greater ability to make judgements, to be more precise in their thoughts and the language they use, to be less willing to accept the views of others without challenging them, and to develop their own ideas, which will be more robust and capable of being defended.

Philosophy and its methods

1 Introduction

Chapter checklist

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



2 Philosophy is a conversation

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

We have all heard ourselves and others use sentences like these. We ask questions, both of ourselves and others, and we think about for an action, we tend to ask more questions and try to probe more deeply.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Learn this!'

Rather, the philosopher asks a question:

'What do you think of this?'

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

Key term

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

Key quote



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

Søren Kierkegaard 1813–55

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

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

(b) Logic

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

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

(c) The syllogism

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

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

The most famous example of a syllogism is:

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

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

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

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

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

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

Key terms

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

Metaphysics Branch of philosophy which asks what it is for something to be, to exist. Ethics Branch of philosophy concerned with moral questions, not simply what we should do but also such things as the meaning and justification of goodness.

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

Key person

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

Key terms

Syllogism Basic structure of an argument as set out by Aristotle, containing at least one major premise and one minor premise. **Major premise** In a syllogism, a sentence which is all or nothing, with no exceptions. **Minor premise** In a syllogism, a sentence containing an individual piece of information.

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

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

The unexamined life is not worth living.'

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

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

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

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

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

3 Naming the parts – essential vocabulary for philosophical thinking

Key term

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

(a) Four branches of philosophy

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

4 Sense experience and its problems



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

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

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

(a) Philosophical doubt

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

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

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

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

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

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

Key quote

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

Aristotle

(d) Three logical principles

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

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

(e) Epistemology

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

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

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

Key quote



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

Christopher Hitchens (1949–2011)

(b) Knowledge and belief

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

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

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

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

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

5 Metaphysics

The name 'metaphysics' has an odd history.

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

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

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

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

Ethics

In this component, you have the opportunity to study key concepts related to religion and ethics.

- ▶ As part of your study, you will study four normative ethical theories, providing a range of approaches: deontological and teleological, religious and non-religious.
- ▶ These theories will then be applied to two issues of importance; euthanasia and business ethics. This allows you to explore contemporary issues and deepen their understanding of the ethical theories.
- ▶ Within Ethical Language: Meta-ethics, you will explore how ethical language has changed over time and been interpreted by different individuals.
- ▶ To develop your awareness of the importance of significant concepts within the study of ethics, you will be required to examine the significant ethical concept of conscience, through a comparison of the works of two key thinkers; Aquinas and Freud.
- ▶ Finally, in Developments in Ethical Thought, you will examine areas of sexual ethics, a highly relevant and interesting area of study. You will explore how attitudes to pre and extra marital sex and homosexuality have influenced and been influenced by developments in religious beliefs, and also how the four normative theories they previously studied can be applied to these areas

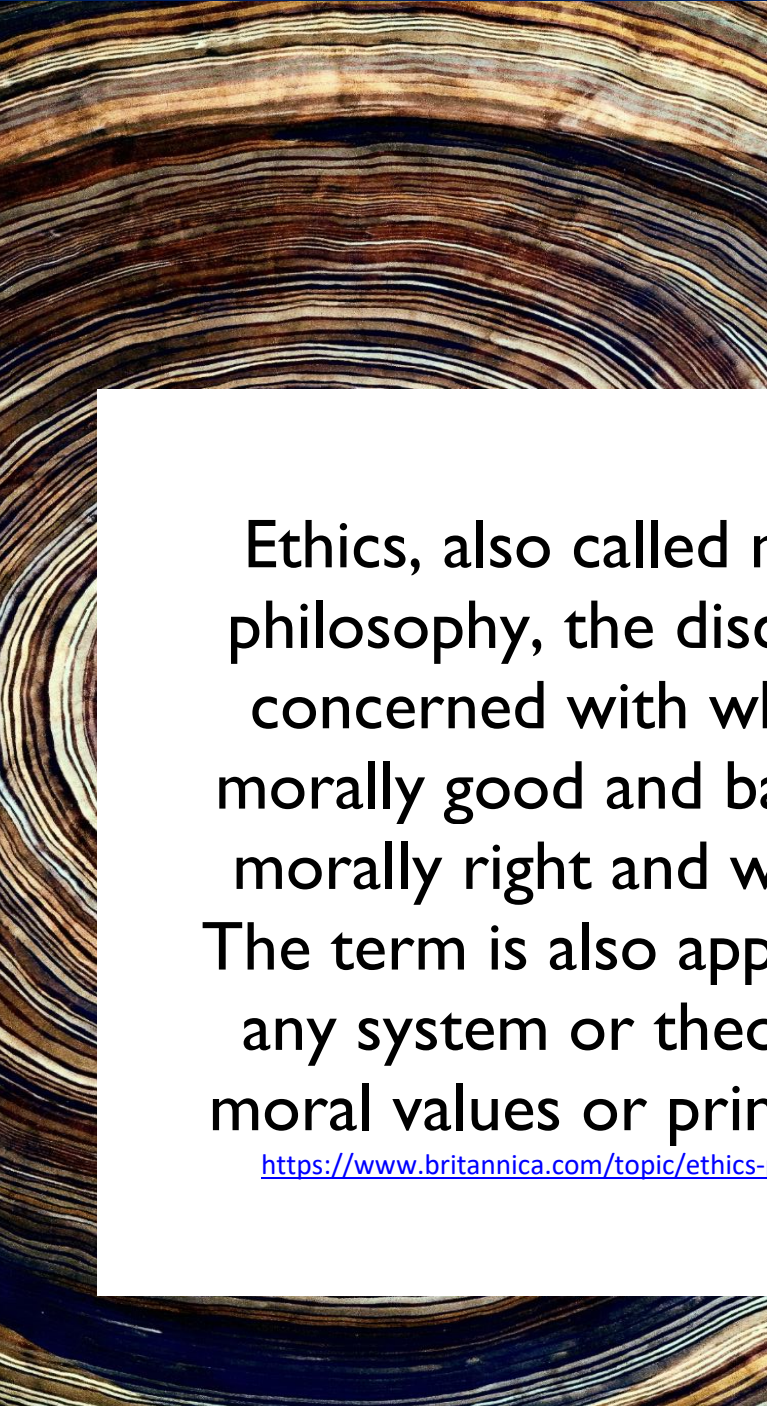
Going further: Would you sacrifice one person to save five? - Eleanor Nelsen

<https://ed.ted.com/lessons/would-you-sacrifice-one-person-to-save-five-eleanor-nelsen#watch>

What is the trolley problem?

What does it suggest about Ethical decision making?

What are the problems with it as an analogy?



Ethics, also called moral philosophy, the discipline concerned with what is morally good and bad and morally right and wrong. The term is also applied to any system or theory of moral values or principles.

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/ethics-philosophy>

Studying religion and ethics

What is goodness?

What does it mean to be a moral person?

Why study religion and ethics?

Making moral decisions is something every human being does throughout life. How we live has an impact on others. Not just whether we are kind or unpleasant to the people we meet, but also in terms of the sort of relationships we cultivate, the behaviours we adopt or avoid and the principles we choose to live by.

Ethics are often linked to things we believe in, whether that means religious ideas or philosophical principles. For some vegetarians their decision to not eat meat arises from a belief that it is wrong to use animals in that way. For some religious people, charity is not an option but a duty because of features of doctrine, sacred text or religious teaching. Ethics brings responsibilities from beyond our private preferences. It is found in the commitments people make, as well as in their intuitions.

To study ethics we need to examine theories, which are different approaches to making moral decisions that thinkers have proposed. These apply certain principles, rules or ways of thinking about how moral decisions are made. The theories make assumptions about life and how we think, and we can ask whether they are the right assumptions or the right way of thinking. It is important that we don't just take the ideas theories give us for granted, but really look at those ideas to check they seem reasonable. For some, ethics is a logical, rational thing that, above all, is about some kind of clear thinking (not driven by desire or emotion). For others it is about obedience to a higher authority or power (natural law) or a sense of duty (Kant). Others still see ethical thinking as driven by essential human feelings like love (situation ethics). There are some theories that see ethics as a product of human psychology – our desire for happiness and wish to avoid harm (utilitarianism). Once we understand a theory we can ask what it does to make moral decisions easier and what it misses out that makes moral decisions harder? Does it miss things which seem morally important? We can explore theories by applying them to particular issues. Do they provide compelling answers to the moral problems of our time, like whether it is right to give people the chance to decide the manner

and timing of their own death (euthanasia), or whether certain kinds of business decisions are wrong (business ethics)? Ethics is a practical subject, about making sense of decisions, consequences, human beings and human life.

Sometimes when trying to make sense of ethics we can use hypotheticals or 'what if' scenarios. What if you only had one meal and two people were starving? What if you were with a group of people on a life raft, but there were too many people on board and it was starting to sink? 'What ifs' may be realistic or unrealistic, but they help us to think through ethical ideas and theories. We can also think about historical events and things happening right now and wonder whether the right thing was, or is, being done. Finally, we can think ethical systems through – what sorts of assumptions do they make about the world? Are these assumptions correct?

Is ethics more about the actions or the consequences?

When approaching a moral issue, is it better to focus on the actions or the consequences? For example, consider the boy who steals from the rich tourist. Stealing is the action. One approach to ethics is to refer to rules about actions. So the rule 'do not steal' might be followed, in which case the boy in this example is wrong to do what he does. This is a deontological approach to ethics, one focused on actions. The rightness or wrongness of an action is found inside the act itself – it is intrinsic (within) to the action. Right and wrong is **absolutely** determined by the action itself – there is no question of special circumstances or situations.

Another way of thinking about the issue is to look at the results of the action. In the case of the boy stealing from the rich tourist, the tourist loses money, which seems bad. However, perhaps there is a reason for the theft that should be considered. Maybe the boy needs money to feed his family. Maybe there are no other sources of money, apart from picking the pockets of wealthy and well-insured tourists. Perhaps his family is starving. Ethical thinkers who are interested in consequences might be prepared to set aside the rule 'do not steal' if the outcome is better. If stealing is the only way to survive and if that means a family survives, perhaps stealing in this case is right. This is a **teleological approach**. Rightness or wrongness in this sort of ethic is extrinsic – it places rightness or wrongness outside the action in the consequence/result. Goodness is **relative** to the ends.

The issue here is not to worry too much about the example, but to see that each of these approaches is different. Each leads to different questions being asked about the moral issue. They may reach similar or different conclusions, but perhaps one is better than the other; perhaps one seems more reasonable

Are morals universal or do they change according to the situation?

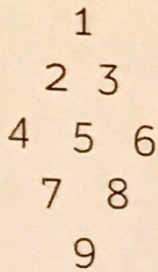
Another division between moral theories is between those who think that there are rules or principles that cover all situations, all places, all times and all people – universal laws – and those who think that the best approach to morality is to set aside rules and focus on the situation. Immanuel Kant believed in universal ethics, while Joseph Fletcher thought we should focus on the situation.

Consider this example: after the death of a beloved father, two brothers are sorting through some personal possessions, private letters and documents, as they prepare to say something about their father at the funeral. They know that their father was loving and attentive to their mother, and that she misses him terribly. They discover a stash of letters in the attic and are shocked to realise these record a long-running affair between their father and another person. After considering their options, they place the stash back into its hiding place and write the eulogy for the funeral extolling their father's virtues. They agree to say nothing to their mother.

A universal approach to morality is not going to like this deceit. If honesty is the best policy then it is always the best policy and they should tell their mother. But someone who takes a situational approach might choose a different path. Maybe it is not the most loving thing to do, to reveal such letters. Perhaps it is compassionate not to put their mother through such a trauma. Perhaps keeping secrets can sometimes be good.

What sort of ethics do you want?

1. Do you think ethics should tell us what is right and tell us what to do, or is it more of a guide? Would you prefer clear direction when faced by moral decisions or choice about what to do?



1 = the mini theory
you most like;
9 = the mini theory
you least like.

2. Are you the kind of person who uses your head to make decisions, or your heart?
3. Do you believe ethics come from beliefs (religious or philosophical ones) human psychology or something else?
4. Do you think ethics really exist?

How do we live a good life?

There are many ethical theories explored in this book. Consider the mini ethical theories below, which link to the book's chapters. Think about them and arrange them in a diamond nine shape.

- A. A moral is a personal opinion, or something linked to a particular culture. People are different and cultures are different, so morals are different. There is no right or wrong answer, only right for you or right for your culture. When in Rome, do as the Romans do! When in Japan, do as the Japanese! Morals are relative.
- B. Morals are fixed rules, standing apart from our opinions. They are there to challenge us to live better lives. They are there to protect people from the damage that can be done when lines are crossed.
- C. There are some things we should just not do. It is always wrong to rape and abuse children, the poor, the sick, and the elderly. Morals are about understanding that some acts should never be carried out.
- D. There are better ways of living and worse ways of living. We need to look at the most important things in life: how precious life is, how important it is to look after each other, how important it is to learn from each other. We need to do things that support the most important things in life, and avoid doing those things which do not support them.
- E. The good life is not just about following rules; it is about practicing a way of life. Taking on certain attitudes and behaviours that we can exercise to become good people – honesty, courage, justice, integrity, etc. The attitudes and behaviours which are right, are those which lead to the best overall result. This is something we all do together, not as individuals, so that the behaviours we adopt are shared by our communities.
- F. You cannot always predict what the right thing to do is. Sometimes you just have to look at the situation and make a decision at that moment. Rules can get in the way because, in the situation you face, following the rules may do harm. So just try to do the loving thing, and forget about the rules. Being moral is about acting with the most important principles in mind – ultimately you have to decide on a course of action that you think fits these principles.
- G. Morals are there to try and get us to think about other people, rather than ourselves all the time. They are there to force us to think about what life is like for people who are not like us, but different from us, maybe even strange to us. It is easy to be nice to people who are like us, but life involves meeting many other people who are not like us. That is when we need morals.
- H. We always have to think of the bigger picture. It is easy to rely on rules from the rulebook of life, but life throws up situations where the rules don't seem to help, so we need to think about what happens as a result of what we do. We need to look beyond the moment when we act to the consequence of our actions and ask ourselves – what is the best outcome? Once we have agreed on what that is, we should do whatever it takes to get that outcome, even if that means breaking rules.
- I. Human beings are selfish creatures and left to our own devices, society would break down and become a frightening place. We see that in parts of the world where there is no law and order, things become terrible. It could be a dog-eat-dog world if we are not careful. We need a strong moral authority to stop us from tearing each other apart for our own selfish interests.

1 Introduction

Chapter checklist

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

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

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

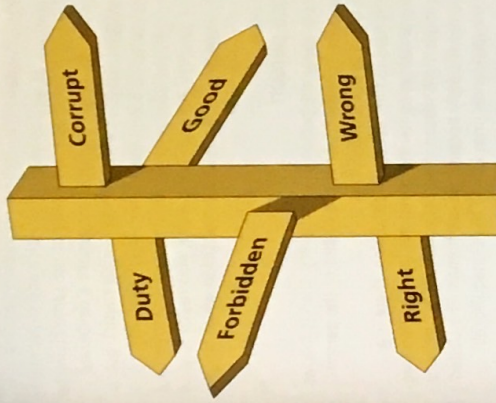
Even when we have listed all these, there are other activities which are part of the moral life. We raise young people. How should we do that? What is the good we want those children to have? Sometimes we are asked to advise others. What is the 'right' thing to seek when doing this? Should we advise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

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

Key person

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

2 Person and community



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

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

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

3 Ethical life

(a) Ethics and practical reasoning

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

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

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

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

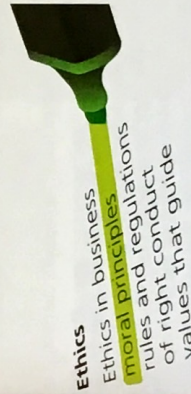
(c) Ethics and language

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

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

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

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



(d) Ethics and religion

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

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

restricted in the size of canvas he may use, and by many other factors. He brings not only intellectual skill to the creation of his painting, but accumulated experience of materials, awareness of his own painting abilities and their limitations, as well as years of practice and experience. If Aristotle is right, moral thinking has something of the same character although there are differences. In art, the artist may make a deliberate error as part of the art. (Josef Haydn loved to do this in his music). But deliberate error seems not to be acceptable in morality in that way. Nevertheless, moral judgement does seem to require careful thought about the ability to work out what is right and wrong. But it also needs to work out what is practically manageable, in the circumstances in which people find themselves.

(b) Ethics and the person

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

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

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

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

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

Against such views, Ingolf Dalfeth (b. 1948) has argued that basic rights and above all human dignity, are central. Human dignity is not a possession that can be taken away, as freedom may be in some circumstances. We are dignified in being ourselves. It is the essence of being human. Religious views emphasise that we are children of God. From this they derive an insistence on the sacredness of life and the infinite value of the human person.

Key person

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

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

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

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

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

Romans 2:14

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

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

William Temple: *The Kingdom of God* (1914), p. 6

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

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

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

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



Archbishop William Temple

Key person

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

4 Theories of ethics

Key term

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

Key terms

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

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

Key quote

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

Socrates

Key person

Martin Luther (1483–1546):

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

Key term

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

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

- **Subjectivism:** the view that *x* is right because I say so and for no other reason. This view is held most notably by Existentialists such as Jean-Paul Sartre or Martin Heidegger.

■ **Relativism:** the view that 'rightness' is culturally or religiously determined. Incompatible positions are justifiable by their cultural roots. This view is surprisingly common today, especially in the form of **vulgar relativism**, which holds that as all beliefs are relative, all should be tolerated. The theory has only to be stated for its absurdity to be apparent: if there is a requirement to be tolerant, then there is, after all, a universal principle of tolerance. If there is a single universal principle, then this version of relativism is contradictory.

■ **Divine command theory:** the view that *x* is right because God commands it. This view is rejected by most Christian philosophers, including St Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther and Pope St John Paul II. It is sometimes found in some – but not all – Evangelical circles.

■ **Natural law theory:** believes that moral rightness can be determined through careful reflection on the facts of the world: 'right reason in accordance with nature'. Aristotle, Cicero, St Thomas Aquinas, Richard Hooker, Hugo Grotius and, today, John Finnis, support this view.

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

Key terms

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

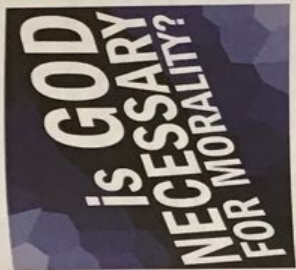
Key terms

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

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

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

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



See Chapter 12 for a discussion of Kantian ethics.

Key persons

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

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

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

Deontic ethics are normally split into two kinds:

- 1 **Teleological theories** (often called consequentialist) determine what is good by outcomes: x is seen as good because it leads to good results. Some well-known theories of this kind include:
 - **Utilitarianism** which holds that we should seek always the greatest balance of good over evil. This does not mean 'the greatest good of the greatest number' as the theory is sometimes inaccurately described. It is important to notice that this theory stresses the idea that we should always follow this one principle. The theory has no room for any view of natural rights. Rights get in the way of utility. Supporters of this theory include Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, Henry Sidgwick, and, more recently, Derek Parfit and Peter Singer.

- **Egoism** (not egotism, which is not a moral theory, but simply refers to complete selfishness) is an ethical theory which believes that we should all seek to act in our own best interests. It argues that if everyone did this, we would all achieve the best results. This approach is presupposed in many theories of economics, including some types of free market theory.
- **Situation ethics**, generally associated with Joseph Fletcher, argues that in each situation we should do that which will produce the most loving outcome. This approach is sceptical about rules, arguing that always following rules can lead to cruel and unloving consequences.

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

Categorical imperatives are discussed in Chapter 12.

Background

Teleological and deontological theories: a word of caution

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

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

An obvious example was in Kantian ethics. Frankena labelled this deontological, which has led many to understand Kant as strictly unconcerned with consequences. But this is to misread him. As you will see when you study him, he says that we should always do our duty because it is our duty, not because it leads to good outcomes. This is deontological, but, at the same time, when he comes to working out what our duty is, he becomes consequentialist. The principle of universalisation says that we can only treat as

moral an action that we are willing for everyone to do. Also we should treat people always as ends, never as means only. Both these principles are consequentialist, and do not make sense without thinking about outcomes. William Temple always treated Kant consequentially and there are interesting essays taking this view in *Essays on Derek Parfit's On What Matters* (2009). Perhaps we can say of Kant that the right-making feature of his theory is whether we have done our duty, which is deontological, but determining that duty requires a teleological approach.

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

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

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

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

For a discussion of act utilitarianism, see Chapter 11.

Background

A note on relativism and situationalism

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

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

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

Study advice

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

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

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

Take just one of these assertions: 'It is all a matter of opinion.' The point being made here is that we can make no certain ethical judgements and it is a personal matter to decide. In philosophical terms, the student is arguing for subjectivism, the theory that something is right for me because I say so, or choose it as right, and for no other reason. There is no requirement not to hold the position you have taken, but you need to defend the point. It is not a self-evident truth that there are

Chapter 9 The issues of ethics

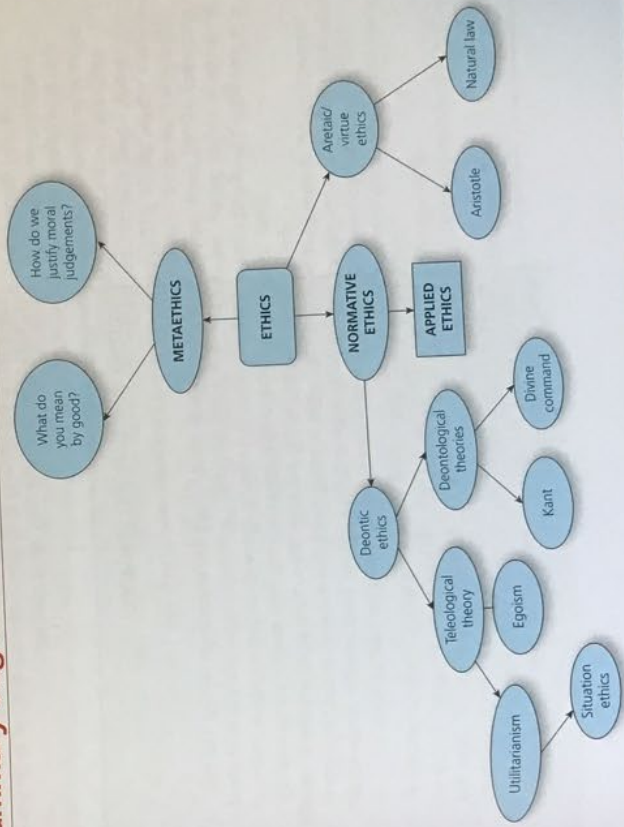
no objective reasons for moral judgements. Your case has to be made and sustained. How should you go about doing so?

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

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

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

Summary diagram: The issue of ethics



CHRISTIANITY

Christianity, major religion stemming from the life, teachings, and death of Jesus of Nazareth (the Christ, or the Anointed One of God) in the 1st century CE. It has become the largest of the world's religions and, geographically, the most widely diffused of all faiths.

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Christianity>



Developments in Christian Thought

In this Section, you'll have the opportunity to undertake a systematic study of key concepts within the development of Christian thought.

You will explore religious beliefs, values and teachings, their interconnections, how they have developed historically and how they are presently discussed.

The first section explores human nature in the context of the purpose of life, the self and immortality.

- ▶ You will explore Augustine's ideas regarding the human condition, as well as different Christian interpretations of the promise and nature of the afterlife.

- ▶ In Knowledge of God, both natural and revealed theology will be studied, including the relationship between faith and reason. This will enable discussion of how Christians may understand their relationship with God.
- ▶ You will also explore historical and theological understandings of the person of Jesus Christ. You will consider Jesus as the Son of God, teacher of wisdom and a liberator, which will give you an insight into both traditional and contemporary Christian theology.
- ▶ In the topic Christian Moral Principles, you will consider the Bible, Church and reason as sources of wisdom and authority. Through considering the use of these in shaping Christian moral values and practice, this topic will allow you to investigate the principles that shape and express religious identity, and the diversity of practice within Christianity.
- ▶ In Christian Moral Action, you will undertake a detailed study of the ideas and impact of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. This study of Christian moral principles in action will place moral principles in a real-world context, making the study of Christianity more tangible for you.
- ▶ A significant development in Christian thought studied is that of pluralism, a vital concept in this age of migration and multi-cultural societies. The two topics which explore this concept enable the consideration of the ways that Christian traditions view other religious and non-religious worldviews. This raises issues of the nature of salvation, religious tolerance, respect and recognition of opposing views.
- ▶ The changing roles of men and women, and feminist approaches to theology, form the basis of the two further topics. These topics encourage you to reflect on issues of gender identity, equality and discrimination and the social influence of religious institutions, and provide the opportunity to compare the works of two key scholars.
- ▶ Finally, this component explores the challenges posed by secularism, and a range of responses to this. These topics enable the study of how developments in beliefs and practices have, over time, influenced and been influenced by developments in philosophy, politics and studies of religion, as well as an investigation into the diversity within Christian practice through the theology of Liberation.

Going further: Bible Project Series

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XzWpa0gcPyo&list=PLH0SznIyYNec-HZjVHooeb4BSDSeHhEoh>

Using these videos and your own additional research you need to find out about the following Biblical stories, events or characters.

1. **The Story of the Fall?**

What happens?

How does this story link with Christian ideas about Jesus?

2. **The story of Exile**

Where, when and why were the Israelites exiled to?

What does the prophet Jeremiah teach about exile in Babylon?

What is the link with Jesus?

3. **The Suffering Servant passages of Isaiah**

Who was Isaiah?

What is the background to Isaiah's writings?

What does Isaiah write about the suffering servant?

What is the link with Jesus?

4. **The Prophets (there is a Bible project video called prophets)**

What do prophets do? Who are they?

What do they teach about the covenant?

What is the Day of the Lord? What is the link with Jesus?

5. **The Messiah**

What does the Old Testament teach about the Messiah?

Why do Christians believe that Jesus was the Messiah?

What Jewish expectations of the Messiah does Jesus not fulfil?

6. **Jesus**

What are the main events in Jesus' life?

What does Jesus teach in the Sermon on the Mount?

What does Jesus mean when he calls himself the Son of Man?

What is the day of the Lord?

Studying developments in Christian thought

.....
What are the fundamental questions of life?
Why study Christianity in a theological way?
.....

Why study developments in Christian thought?

'Theology at its broadest is thinking about questions raised by and about religions' (D.F. Ford, *Theology, A Very Short Introduction*, 2000, p. 3). At a time when religion is debated and challenged in the world, it seems important to explore question raised by and about religions.

To study theology is to attempt to look at religion from the inside, using the methods, the language and the view of the world from the insider's perspective. It explores the doctrines, dogmas and teachings that Christians live by.

This does not mean there is no debate. From the beginning of Christianity there has been debate, in different attempts to make sense of a Christian life and the fundamental questions that distinguish Christianity: What is the nature and purpose of human life? Is there something unique about a person, and does anything continue of that person beyond death? How is it possible to know anything about these questions? Who is Jesus Christ and what does it mean to live a life of Christian moral principles and actions?

Over time, some have tried to answer these questions, sometimes in strikingly different ways, influenced by the ways of thinking and history of their times, and possibly influenced by something else, something beyond their limitations.

To understand these theological ideas and beliefs it is helpful to cultivate an open mind to the

possibility that there might be something meaningful within them. This does not mean surrendering personal belief or opinion, but being disposed to listen to the voices of others, to take seriously their own insights and convictions, and to decide how to stand in relation to this way of understanding meaning and purpose in the world.

The life and the self

Arguably the first question we might ask is what does it mean to be a human being? Is there some purpose to human behaviour or relationships? Is there a development that can happen that might change a human life? The idea that human beings are created, have a purpose and a need to fulfil that purpose is a key aspect of Christian theology. If it is possible to become something more, if it is possible to live a better life than the one already lived, then these questions provoke exploration. What kind of life, what kind of being, can a person become?

Is there something more than the physical, the limited life that a human lives on earth? Is there a future beyond death where something that is meaningfully human continues to exist? These questions are explored through Christian theology on human nature and the purpose of life, life after death and immortality.

Knowledge of God

Religion is a complex aspect of life in today's world. Though religion is declining in some Western countries, religion and belief is becoming more prominent globally. The numbers of people aligning themselves to a religious belief worldwide is greater than ever before.

Given these changes the question of what we can know about God becomes key. What can be known of God, if indeed such a being exists? What is the role of faith? Can such truths be revealed and if so, in what ways?

Jesus

The central figure of Christianity is Jesus. The key doctrines, beliefs and teachings of Christian faith relate in some way to Jesus. The nature of God is interpreted through a sense of the connection between the divine and the human in the possibility that Jesus may be God as well as a man. Whether Jesus was a figure of an ancient world or whether he is encountered in life today, is thought to be crucial to any understanding of a Christian way of life. The question of the identity of Jesus remains a compelling one for people beyond Christian faith. He is a figure who has marked the development of human civilisation like few others.

Christian moral principles and action

Another starting place is to ask what sort of life should a Christian live? What ideals and principles should drive actions in day-to-day life. What would those actions look like?

Christianity is a tradition with a number of moral ideas linked to beliefs about the world – about the place of love and forgiveness, about what it means to live a pure life, a good life. Christianity is not a theoretical system but an applied one. Belief leads to changes in attitudes and behaviour.

At the heart of Christian belief is the idea that there is a communication from God to humanity, a revelation of something that is worth knowing, that contains certain truths which, if followed, make a difference to life.

How to be a theologian

The student of Christianity becomes a theologian. Traditionally theologians were always Christian, and always held Christians beliefs themselves. Theology was an exploration of those beliefs, and this included debate and sometimes argument. However, theology in modern times has developed beyond the confines of Christian belief with some who consider themselves to be outside conventional Christian belief.

Could anyone be a theologian irrespective of belief? Perhaps the student of theology today could be thought of as someone who makes an enquiry from where they stand, looking intently into the mysteries of belief, doctrine and religious life, open to the possibilities that those mysteries might offer

people, and with some sense of how they themselves relate to those beliefs, doctrines and approaches to religious life. Perhaps a theologian is an interpreter of religion – one who actively enquires and seeks to comprehend. Taken in this way, the student of Christian theology might be of any belief or religion, or none that is fixed.

In trying to interpret a religion or text there are a number of things you could try to do. These are drawn from scholars of hermeneutics:

- Be attentive to the texts you study. What do they say to you? How do others perceive them?
- Try to spot preconceived ideas affecting how you interpret the sources you are examining. Are you bringing pre-formed decisions and attitudes into your interpretation of what you perceive?
- Be self-critical about your interpretation of the sources. Is it serving your own interests?
- Learn to become aware about how different theological perspectives engage with the different sources and ideas.
- Look out for examples where the sources present something counter-intuitive, or subversive, where something new is provoked. These could be signs that you are making a connection to ideas in those sources, not simply your own preconceptions.
- Try to adopt a charitable approach to interpret the sources and ideas you experience. Try to seek out the meaning that others give before you decide and judge for yourself.

Questions for thought and reflection

- What is the nature of human life?
- How, if at all, can human beings learn about the existence and nature of God?
- How do different beliefs about Jesus influence other beliefs about the Christian faith?
- What are the implications of Christian beliefs and teachings on ethics?

These are big questions which frame the chapters in this section of the book. Return to them as you explore the different ideas in this section. Give space and time to how you relate to these questions, as well as the ideas presented in this text.

Developing your study skills:

Note taking methods:

One of the most important skills is being able to take notes, as A-level is a lot more 'lecture' style in that the teacher will talk, but won't always tell you what to write down, so you must make notes as you go along. Here are some suggested techniques:

1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=njstk6xlrh0>
2. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AffuwjZTQQ>
3. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ErSjclPEGKE>

Reading Philosophy:

The other important skill is reading (and understanding) Philosophy. It is essential to remember that philosophy is notoriously difficult to understand. This means that the first time you hear/ read or learn about philosophy it is really hard to know what is going on. This is often because you are dealing with not only the subject matter itself- but its existential impact upon yourself- what does this mean for me and my reality. The trick is often to read/ hear/ see the argument a couple of times. Just go through it first, without necessarily attempting to understand it, then go through it a second time taking the time to pick apart what is being said.

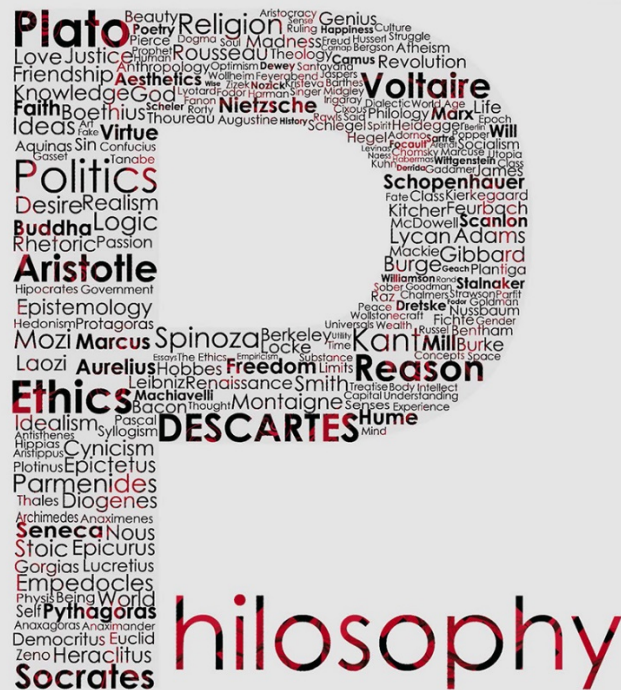
This a useful website to help guide you on some of the trickier ones:

<https://www.sparknotes.com/philosophy/>

"Strong minds discuss ideas,
average minds discuss events, weak
minds discuss people."

Socrates





Other Media Resources

Watch:

Crash Course Philosophy?

<https://thecrashcourse.com/courses/philosophy>

TED talks Philosophy:

<https://www.ted.com/topics/philosophy>

<https://ed.ted.com/lessons?category=philosophy>

Story of God (Netflix)

<https://www.netflix.com/gb/title/80178897>

The School of Life (Western Philosophy)

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLwxNMb28XmpeypJMhfNbJ4RAfRtmAN3P>

Listen:

In our time (Philosophy):

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p01f0vzr>

In our time (Religion):

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p01gvqlg>

The Moral Maze:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b006qk11/episodes/player>

Morality in the 21st Century:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0bh7jkr/episodes/player>

Philosophy and Understanding:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0344x49/episodes/guide>

Infinite Monkey Cage:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00snr0w/episodes/player>

Words of Faith:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0376vr9/episodes/guide>

The Philosopher's Arms:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01lyb82/episodes/player>

The Public Philosopher:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01nmlh2/episodes/player>

Website:

Panpsycast:

<https://thepanpsycast.com/home>

Philosophy Dungeon:

<https://philosophydungeon.weebly.com/philosophy-of-religion.html>

Read:

Introductory Reading:

Blackburn, S. *Think*, OUP 2001

Gaarder, J. *Sophie's World*, London: Phoenix House 1995

Nagel, T. *What Does It All Mean?* OUP 1987 (reprinted 2004)

Warburton, N. *Philosophy: The Basics* (5th ed.), Routledge 2012

Philosophy of Religion:

Vardy, P. *The Puzzle of God*, Harper Collins (1999)

Davies, B. *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, OUP 1993

Keller, T. *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Scepticism*, Hodder and Stoughton, 2009

Christianity:

Lewis, C.S. *Mere Christianity*, HarpurCollins (also free on Audible Audiobooks and as a pdf downloadable here

<https://www.dacc.edu/assets/pdfs/PCM/merechristianitylewis.pdf>)

McGrath, A. *Christianity: An Introduction*, Blackwell Publishing 2015

Ethics:

Dimmock, M. and Fisher, A. *Ethics for A Level*, Open Book Publishing

Palmer, M. *Moral Problems: a Coursebook for Schools and Colleges*, James Clarke and Co., 2005

Wilcockson, M. *Issues of Life and Death*, Hodder Education, 2009