

T1

Ethical thought

This section covers AO1 content and skills

Specification content

Meta-ethical theory.

Key terms

Applied ethics: the debates that arise when ethical *issues* are considered

Ethics: from the Greek 'ethike' meaning habit or behaviour and closely related to the word ethos, it is a study of the framework of guiding principles that direct an action

Meta-ethics: the debates that arise when the *nature* of ethics is considered

Moral: a term used to describe ethical behaviour

Normative ethics: the debates that arise when ethical *theories* are considered

Key quotes

The unexamined life is not worth living. (Socrates)

Two things fill me with wonder: the starry sky above and the moral law within. (Kant)

Our duty can be defined as that action which will cause more good to exist in the universe than any possible alternative. (Moore)

A man without ethics is a wild beast loosed upon this world. (Camus)

quickfire

- 1.1 What does meta-ethics study? Give an example.

A: Divine Command theory

An introduction to ethics

The study of **ethics** examines the guiding principles that direct an action. Ethics as a discipline is a study of the various systems of **moral** values that exist today. Ethics analyses not only how these values direct a person's actions if they wish to be morally good, but it also identifies the obligations behind the purpose of doing right rather than wrong.

The framework of guiding principles that is identified through a study of ethics is called an ethical theory. For those involved, acting consistently within this framework is acting morally, or sometimes referred to as right behaviour. Sometimes a person, sometimes referred to as a 'moral agent' in ethics, may choose to act contrary to a given framework and so be said to be acting immorally or wrongly. In ethics, right and wrong generally have stronger meanings than just error or misjudgement. There is often an implied 'going against character' or failing to be the sort of person required in relation to set expectations – a standard of which the moral agent has fallen short. There is an indication that the moral agent has done something he or she is obliged *not* to do.

Meta-ethical theory

In the study of ethics there is a distinction made between meta-ethics and normative ethics. **Meta-ethics** is the study of the nature of ethical thinking, for example a consideration of why we act as we do, or, whether or not 'right' and 'wrong' are dependent upon self-interest, subjective view or objective standards.

Normative ethics is the study of the content of, or the principles that underlie, a specific ethical theory. **Applied ethics** is the term used to describe the debates that arise when normative ethical theories are applied to issues that arise in practice in the real world.

Ethics, then, considers meaning behind terms such as 'moral' and 'right', studies proposed theories that outline what is considered as 'moral' and 'right' behaviour, and, considers how such theories work in practice.

This first Theme of your course will consider three meta-ethical questions:

Section A: Whether or not ethical behaviour is independent of a divine being?

Section B: Whether or not ethical behaviour is to do with virtues more than rules?

Section C: Whether or not ethical behaviour originates with self-interest?

Key terms used in categorising ethical theories

Philosophers have identified common links between the various ethical theories and have categorised them into groups. It is important to have an understanding of these terms as they will arise throughout the A Level course.

Absolutists believe that there exists a standard of right and wrong that is fully and totally binding on all human beings. Those who are religious may feel that this absolute standard proceeds from the mind and will of a supreme being. Those who are not religious may believe that the standard simply exists.

Relativists believe that there is no absolute right or wrong. They do not see morality as imposing a binding obligation on human beings to behave in a particular way. They see morality as the response of human communities to issues of how to behave in relation to each other. There are no absolute rules, but there are norms of behaviour that promote goodwill and happiness or some other desirable objective.

A relativist can say that she finds a certain course of action unjust or morally wrong, but it is difficult for her to conclude that someone else should feel that this action was wrong. To the absolutist, a wrong course of action is something that they are under a binding and absolute obligation *not* to do.

Whereas the absolutist would have to say: 'This is wrong for me and for you and for everyone', the relativist could say: 'This is wrong for me but may be right for you,' which is something the absolutist could never say.

There is some ambiguity in the terms absolutist and relativist in that they are not always mutually exclusive but can overlap; for example, relativist systems may have an absolutist element. Hence, moral relativists might agree on very basic human values, such as respect for property, even though they may interpret this very differently.

In ethics, a theory is described as **subjective** if its truth is dependent on the person's view. Mackie observes: 'What is often called moral subjectivism is the doctrine that, for example, "This action is right" means "I approve of this action", or more generally that moral judgements are equivalent to reports of the speaker's own feelings or attitudes.'

A theory is described as **objective** if its truth is independent of a person's view. This is sometimes referred to as moral realism and the idea is that moral values are like mathematical numbers. Julia Driver comments: 'Moral truth can have a basis similar to mathematical truth. I can't see $2 + 2 = 4$; I know it to be true nevertheless. When I see four apples grouped out there in the world, I know "There are four apples" is true, even though I don't see a big fat "4" flashing over them. Am I justified in believing in moral facts? If I am justified believing in numbers, this line of reasoning goes, then yes.'

It seems natural to link subjective with relativist, since both terms imply freedom of choice of the individual: nothing is fixed and immovable. However, there is also a sense in which subjective can be linked to absolutist. For example, you might conclude that no ethical theory can be absolutist since our values stem from our own feelings and choices. However, you may also think that some of those feelings and choices are universal to human beings, and so apply to everyone. This implies that it is not a contradiction to have an ethical theory that is subjectively grounded but holds to absolute values.

quickfire

1.2 What is a moral agent?

Key terms

Absolutist: an ethical system that believes there exists a standard of right and wrong that is fully and totally binding on all human beings

Objective: a theory that is independent of personal view

Relativist: an ethical system that believes there is no absolute right or wrong

Subjective: a theory that is dependent on a personal view

Key quote

At the descriptive level, certainly, you would expect different cultures to develop different sorts of ethics and obviously they have; that doesn't mean that you can't think of overarching ethical principles you would want people to follow in all kinds of places. (Singer)

Key terms

Consequentialism: an ethical theory based on considering consequences

Deontological: a theory that explores obligation or duty

Teleological: a theory concerned with the end purpose or goal of an action

Key quote

An ethical dilemma arises when two or more causes of conduct may be justifiable in any given set of circumstances, possibly resulting in diametrically opposed outcomes. (Mason and Laurie)

Specification content

God as the origin and regulator of morality; right or wrong as objective truths based on God's will/command, moral goodness is achieved by complying with Divine Command; Divine Command a requirement of God's omnipotence; Divine Command as an objective meta-physical foundation for morality.

An ethical dilemma often raises questions about the consequences of various actions that could be taken. Indeed, it is often the case that thinking about the goal of a particular action persuades us whether or not to take that action. Such an approach that focuses on the consequences is called a **teleological** ethical theory.

Teleological comes from the Greek, meaning end or purpose. In such theories, the rightness or wrongness of an action is identified by the consequences it produces. If the theory held that the action that best resulted in 'the good of the majority' was the criterion for judging right action, then the right action would be the one that produces the most good for the majority. It is the result and not the action, which directs the right course of behaviour. This approach is also called **consequentialism**, since it claims that the value of the consequences of our actions is decisive for their moral status as right or wrong.

Deontological comes from the Greek, meaning obligation or duty. In such theories there is a relationship between duty and the morality of human actions. Therefore, deontological ethical theories are concerned with the acts themselves, irrespective of any consequences of those acts. For instance, a deontologist might argue that murder was wrong whatever the situation or consequence, and therefore euthanasia was morally wrong.

The study of applied ethics is complex and difficult because it is the point at which principles are tested in the real world. Applied ethics often involves an ethical dilemma, that is, the potential conflicting nature of set principles. This sometimes challenges a person to re-examine and re-interpret these principles.

AO1 Activity

Create some study cards with some key terms you have learned about in this section.

Study tip

It is important when writing an answer in ethics to use the correct terminology with reference to ethical theories.

Divine Command theory: God as the origin and regulator of morality

Plato wrote a dialogue entitled *Euthyphro*, in which a character named Euthyphro takes his father to court, charging him with murder. His father failed in care and attention and allowed a worker to die. Socrates, a philosopher, is at the court awaiting his own trial, and so he engages Euthyphro in dialogue about moral goodness. In the dialogue Socrates poses the question that has become known as the Euthyphro dilemma:

Euthyphro: 'Well, I should certainly say that what's holy is whatever all the Gods approve of, and that its opposite, what all the Gods disapprove of, is unholy...'

Socrates: 'We'll soon be in a better position to judge, my good chap. Consider the following point: is the holy approved by the Gods because it's holy, or is it holy because it's approved?' (Plato)

In other words, Socrates is asking whether God

Socrates 469–399 BCE

