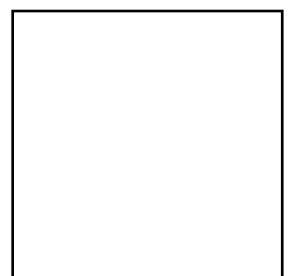
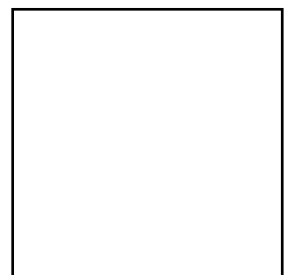
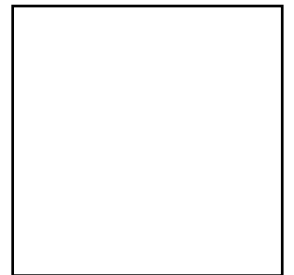


Nelson Thornes
Distance Learning

A2 Philosophy

Robert Ellis



Nelson Thornes

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Study Calendar



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Study Week	Unit start date	Title	Unit	Tutor-assessed assignment	Work due date
			Introduction		
1			Unit 3.1 Types of moral truth		
2			Unit 3.2 Issues of moral truth	Assignment 3.2	
3			Unit 3.3 The denial of moral truth		
4			Unit 3.4 Problems of moral relativism	Assignment 3.4	
5			Unit 3.5 Utilitarianism		
6			Unit 3.6 Deontological ethics		
7			Unit 3.7 Practical wisdom		
8			Unit 3.8 Environmental ethics	Assignment 3.8	
9			Unit 3.9 Do we need a government?		
10			Unit 3.10 Liberty		
11			Unit 3.11 Defending liberty	Assignment 3.11	
12			Unit 3.12 Rights		
13			Unit 3.13 Rights, social utility, and law	Assignment 3.13	

Study Week	Unit start date	Title	Unit	Tutor-assessed assignment	Work due date
14			Unit 3.14 Distributive justice		
15			Unit 3.15 Can we justify redistribution?	Assignment 3.15	
16			Unit 3.16 Nation states		
17			Unit 4.1 Introduction to Plato		
18			Unit 4.2 Justice 1: Thrasymachus		
19			Unit 4.3 Justice 2: Glaucon and Adeimantus	Assignment 4.3	
20			Unit 4.4 The theory of forms		
21			Unit 4.5 The divided line		
22			Unit 4.6 Assessing Plato's view of knowledge	Assignment 4.6	
23			Unit 4.7 The form of the good		
24			Unit 4.8 The simile of the cave	Assignment 4.8	
25			Unit 4.9 Philosopher kings		
26			Unit 4.10 The philosopher's present status	Assignment 4.10	
27			Unit 4.11 Plato's criticisms of democracy		
28			Revision week 1 (if available)		
29			Revision week 2 (if available)		
30			Revision week 3 (if available)		

Key to icons used throughout this pack:



Assignments



Kerboodle activity

Introduction



Welcome to A2 Philosophy!

This introduction contains the following sections:

- the structure of the A2 course and exams
- resources
- assignments
- summary of course expectations.

You should also find a study calendar near the beginning of your folder, for quick reference as to the structure of the course throughout the year.

The structure of the A2 course and exams

Your A2 course is divided into two modules, 3 and 4, but these are of unequal importance, with Module 3 comprising 60 per cent of your A2 and Module 4 comprising 40 per cent. Module 3 requires the study of two areas of philosophy, and the two we will be studying are **Moral Philosophy** and **Political Philosophy**. Module 4 requires the study of a philosophical text, and for this we will be studying **Plato's Republic**. Each of the two modules is assessed through an exam paper.

Table 1
The two A2 modules

Module no.	Exam unit code and title	Topics covered	% of A2 marks (% of A level)	Length of exam
3	AQA PHIL3: Key Themes in Philosophy	Moral Philosophy Political Philosophy	60% (30%)	2 hours
4	AQA PHIL4: Philosophical Problems	Plato's <i>Republic</i>	40% (20%)	1 hour 30 minutes

Module 3

Module 3 is split into two topics. Both of these require a substantial amount of study, so we will be giving them eight units each in the folder. These topics are whole areas of philosophy, rather than the smaller topic areas you studied at AS. For Moral Philosophy, we will be looking at the whole area of moral truth and how to make moral decisions, while in Political Philosophy, we will be considering a wide range of issues concerning how individuals and governments should relate to each other, including the concepts of freedom, rights and justice.

In the exam, you will need to answer one essay question on each of these two topics (out of a choice of two), which means you will have one hour for each essay question.

One difference you will notice between AS and A2 is a greater emphasis on substantial essays. In Module 3, there will be no short explanatory answers, only evaluative essay answers. In an hour's work in the exam, you might reasonably be expected to write 1,000 words or more. To make good use of this time and produce the kind of substantial essay that will be expected, you need to plan your response carefully, and have a detailed understanding of the material to draw on.

A greater emphasis on evaluative essays is also reflected in the relative weighting of the assessment objectives that are used to mark your essays. The third assessment objective (assessment and evaluation) now has a heavier weighting than either of the other two, as you will see from the mark table.

Table 2
Assessment objectives used in marking Module 3 essays

Assessment Objective 1	Assessment Objective 2	Assessment Objective 3	Total
Knowledge and understanding	Interpretation, analysis and application	Assessment and evaluation	
15 marks per essay	15 marks per essay	20 marks per essay	50 marks per essay

Module 4

While Module 4 has a shorter exam than Module 3, and is worth a slightly lower proportion of the total marks, it is still important enough to make a big difference to your final grade, and it contains a number of new challenges.

The first of these challenges is that we will be studying a philosophical text. This is a rather different experience from studying a theme, because it involves becoming familiar with that text and understanding it in relation to its background. To study Plato's *Republic*, we will need to become familiar with its context in the philosophical scene of Ancient Greece.

You will need to become closely familiar with the set parts of the text and the arguments in it, which will require reading and interpretation skills. In the examination, your knowledge of the arguments in the text is tested through a short descriptive question.

Nevertheless, the text also contains ideas and arguments of crucial importance and which has influenced the development of Western philosophy ever since. This means that we will still be studying philosophical themes as well, but we will have to relate them to each other as well as to the text. In Plato's *Republic*, there are issues of metaphysics, knowledge, ethics and political philosophy, and all are inter-related. We will also need to ask ourselves how Plato's arguments about these themes are applicable today.

Module 4 also contains a **synoptic** element. This means that it requires you to see the material on Plato in relation to the ideas you have already studied in other parts of your course. This will particularly mean making connections between Plato's *Republic* and the topics of reason and experience, moral philosophy and political philosophy.

As well as the short descriptive question mentioned above, the Module 4 exam also contains a substantial essay question. As in Module 3, you will be able to choose this question out of two possibilities. You will also have over an hour to write it. As in Module 3, assessment and evaluation are heavily emphasised in the marking of this essay question.

Table 3
Assessment objectives used in marking Module 4 answers

	Assessment Objective 1	Assessment Objective 2	Assessment Objective 3	Total marks per question in Module 4
	Knowledge and understanding	Interpretation, analysis and application	Assessment and evaluation	
Question (a) – explaining an argument in the text: marks available	8	7	0	15
Question (b) – essay: marks available	10	11	24	45
Total marks per assessment objective in module	18	18	24	60 (whole paper)

Resources

Essential books

You **must** have the following books, to use in conjunction with this folder, for the satisfactory completion of the A2 Philosophy distance-learning course. Your school should provide you with copies of these books. The first two are required from the

beginning of the course, and the later two for the Module 4 section, from week 17 onwards. If by any chance your school does not loan you these books, you are recommended to purchase them, so that you are not disadvantaged in your course.

<i>AQA A2 Philosophy Student's Book</i>	John Appleby, Mike Atherton, Chris Cluett, & David Rawlinson	Nelson Thornes (2009)	978-0-7487-9904-6
<i>Moral Philosophy</i> (Philosophy in Focus series)	Gerald Jones, Daniel Cardinal & Jeremy Hayward	Hodder Murray (2006)	978-0340-88805-9
<i>The Republic</i>	Plato (translated by Desmond Lee)	Penguin (2007)	978-0140-44048-5
<i>The Republic: Plato</i> (Philosophy in Focus series)	Jeremy Hayward, Daniel Cardinal & Gerald Jones	Hodder Murray (2007)	978-0340-88803-2

Recommended books for further reading

In addition, the following books are recommended for further reading in Module 3. Schools are recommended to have them available in the library. If they are not in your school library, please remind your link teacher or librarian that you may need to refer to them for your distance-learning course.

<i>An Introduction to Political Philosophy</i>	Jonathan Wolff	Oxford University Press (2006)	978-0199-2960-9
<i>Introduction to Political Philosophy</i>	Geoffrey Thomas	Duckworth (2000)	978-0715-62644-3
<i>The Puzzle of Ethics</i>	Peter Vardy & Paul Grosch	Fount (1994)	978-0006-28144-3
<i>Environmental Ethics</i> (Access to Philosophy series)	Joe Walker	Hodder & Stoughton (2000)	978-0340-75770-3

Online resources

Websites

There are a good many useful resources for philosophy on the internet. You should be able to easily find further resources on the topics covered in this course on some of the following sites:

- Episteme Links www.epistemelinks.com/index.asp
- Guide to Philosophy on the Internet www.earlham.edu/~peters/gpi/index.htm
- Philosophy for Everyone www.pdcnet.org/think.html
- Philosophy Pages www.philosophypages.com
- Philosophy Now Magazine www.philosophynow.org
- Philosophy Resources www.valdosta.edu/~rbarnett/phi/resource.html
- Resource Central Philosophy www.resourcehelp.com/qserphilos.htm
- Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy www.seop.leeds.ac.uk/contents.html
- Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy www.utm.edu/research/iep
- The Philosophers' Magazine www.philosophersnet.com
- The Tree of Philosophy www.hkbu.edu.hk/~ppp/top/toc.html
- A Level Philosophy www.alevelphilosophy.co.uk
- Squashed Philosophers www.squashedphilosophers.com
- Sparknotes www.sparknotes.com/philosophy
- Intute accredited philosophy resources www.intute.ac.uk/artsandhumanities/philosophy/

An online guide to how to get the best out of philosophy resources on the web is available at www.vts.intute.ac.uk/he/tutorial/philosophy

Kerboodle

A further online resource, which you may find very useful during the course, is Kerboodle. This contains further materials, designed specifically for this course, for further consolidation or revision of the topics.

The web address for the Kerboodle login is <http://live.kerboodle.com/NT3/common/Login.aspx>. You will need a user name, password and organisation code, which should be made available to you by your tutor or link teacher. Some activities in this file will require the use of Kerboodle.

Assignments

During the course of the year, you will be asked to do a total of ten assignments: six for Module 3 and four for Module 4. These provide you with essential practice in exam-style answers. Look at your study calendar for exact details on the frequency and timing of these assignments.

Most of these assignments involve a substantial, A2-level essay of 1,000 words or more. However well you understand the material studied in the units, you are unlikely to be able to fulfil your potential in the exam unless you have practised applying this understanding in the way required, got to grips with this new level of question and its increased expectations, and responded to your tutor's feedback on your answers. Assignments allow you to do all of this, so it is essential to keep up with them.

Crucial tips for assignment writing

- Answer the question, the whole question and nothing but the question. Keep your focus only on what is directly relevant throughout, and do not allow yourself to gradually deviate ('go off at a tangent') onto anything less relevant.
- Note and fulfil the minimum recommended word limit.
- The key to a successful explanatory text question in Module 4 is to break down the argument in the text to explain it clearly and in sufficient detail. Read the relevant section of text carefully before you start, but summarise it rather than quote it.
- Essays in Modules 3 or 4 need to be **planned**. You need a structure that has been thought through beforehand to get you through a longer essay clearly and coherently, and rambling through whatever pops into your mind next is not a good way to get high marks. Even if you got away with not planning last year, try planning this time.
- In essay questions, try to avoid the two extremes of either just blurting out your view without justification, or on the other hand being afraid to reach any opinion. Find a position in between these two extremes by experimenting with views and thinking about what kind of justification can be given for them. You don't have to deeply believe in a position to put it forward in your answer and see whether you can justify it.
- In essay questions, also show awareness of the opposite side of the case and take into account the likely opposing arguments that will be made against yours, saying exactly why they are mistaken.
- Pay close attention to the quality of English in your answers and check it before you hand it in. Correct faults in grammar and spelling. These do affect the marks you are given for your work and need to be considered.

Writing formats and submission of assignments

Your tutor will advise you as to the formats he/she would like you to use for assignments. There are usually two options in distance learning, but some tutors prefer one or the other. These are:

- word-processed assignments written on computer and either submitted by email or printed out and posted
- handwritten work that is posted.

If your tutor accepts assignments submitted by email, please make sure that you write them using software that he/she can open. This will usually mean Microsoft Word®, but check with your tutor which programmes are acceptable. If in doubt, save your document as rich text format (rtf) and submit it in that form.

Do not hand-write a document and then scan it so that you can send it by email. This creates a large file as it is still in a graphic format, and it has to be printed out by the tutor to be marked. If you have handwritten your assignment, then please send it by post.

Normally assignments sent by post are first handed in to the link teacher at your school, who will send all the assignments from your group together in one envelope.

Make sure that you include the following details on all assignments:

- Write your name and the name of your school on the first page.
- Write out the question(s) you are answering above your answers.
- If there are multiple sheets, make sure that these are numbered and attached, and that all have your name on in case they are separated.

As the exams approach, it is a good idea to do at least some of your assignments in a handwritten form, and also in timed conditions, allowing the same amount of time you will have in the exam. You will have to hand-write in the exam (unless you have authorisation to use a laptop due to special needs) and it is a good idea to practise this.

Returned assignments

Your tutor will normally mark your assignments within two weeks of receiving them. Emailed assignments may be marked and returned electronically. Assignments marked by hand and returned by post obviously take longer. They have to be sent each way and also be given back to you by the link teacher, so please be patient if it takes a while for your assignment to be returned. Nevertheless, if you haven't had it back after three or four weeks, allowing for postal delays, do please check with your link teacher and email your tutor to find out what has happened to it.

When you get your assignment back, please look at the comments carefully and act so as to improve the weaknesses pointed out the next time you write an assignment. If you need more explanation, feel free to email your tutor and ask. If there are particularly big weaknesses, or your assignment has received a fail grade, it is recommended that you rewrite and resubmit your assignment.

Put your returned assignment in your file next to the relevant topic, so that you can return to it and reconsider it in the course of your revision.

Mock exams

After you have completed each module, you will normally sit a mock exam on it in the school. You will need to arrange the timing of this with your link teacher. The mock exam papers will then be sent to your tutor to be marked, in the same way that assignments are marked, and you should act similarly on the feedback received.

Summary of course expectations

It is assumed here that you already have a year's experience of distance learning and know how it works. You should already know about the preparation for tutorials, organising your time, the role of your tutor and link teacher, and the role of tutor visits. Here, then, is just a brief summary to remind you of the expectations of the course:

- You are expected to prepare for each video tutorial through up to four or five hours study. You should schedule this time clearly in your week. Normally, this means one of the units in the folder each week, but there may be exceptions to this pattern.
- Arrive at each tutorial with the unit fully prepared – which means full answers to each activity question written in, and all necessary reading completed. Bring your folder with you, and for Module 4 you will also need to bring the text of Plato's *Republic*.
- You will need to complete regular assignments, in addition to the preparation mentioned above. These assignments should be submitted to your tutor or link teacher by the due date.
- Review returned assignments carefully and note ways that you need to improve your work.
- You will need to consolidate and revise your work in preparation for mock exams and the final exam.
- You are also highly recommended to do some of the recommended further reading, which is noted at the end of most units. This will give you a broader and deeper understanding of the topic. Doing this may well make the difference between a high grade in the exam and a mediocre one.

Acknowledgement

Some of the assignment questions used in these resources are taken with permission from AQA specimen questions. These are all labelled 'AQA specimen question'. Those not labelled in this way have been devised by the author.

Module 3
Key themes in philosophy

Topic 1 Moral philosophy

Unit 3.1 Types of moral truth

In this first unit, we will be considering the most basic question of moral philosophy: is there a morality at all? If so, what kind of a thing is it?

By the end of this unit you should be able to:

- Explain the concept of moral truth.
- Explain the Platonic view of moral truth as transcendent.
- Explain the naturalistic view of truth as factual.
- Explain the account of moral truth as based on relational properties.
- Identify some key philosophical problems with these different accounts of moral truth.

Key terms:

- Moral truth
- Moral realism
- Transcendent truth
- Platonic forms
- Moral elitism
- Moral knowledge
- Weakness of will
- Moral naturalism
- Moral hedonism
- Open-question argument
- Naturalistic fallacy
- Relational properties
- Secondary properties

What is moral truth?

Whether there is a moral truth, and if so what it consists of, is one of the major problems of philosophy. Whenever we choose one action rather than another and justify our choice because it is 'right', we seem to assume that there is some sense in which it is really right, and not just a question of individual preference.

Here is an example of a moral choice and its 'rightness':

Tom finds a purse containing £150 in cash on the train, and hands it in to the train conductor.

His friend Dave is incredulous. 'Why don't you just keep the cash?' he says, 'You could have spent that and nobody would know the difference!'

*'That wouldn't be **right**.' says Tom.*

'Right! It'd be right for you to have it' says Dave.

'You shouldn't take other people's money. My Grandad taught me that,' replies Tom.

In what sense is it true that it is wrong to take other people's money? According to Tom, his immediate reason for believing this is that this is what his Grandad taught him. One can imagine Tom's Grandad as an upright old man trying to drill some good old-fashioned morality into his grandson, and complaining about the lack of morality around these days. But Tom's Grandad could be wrong. How does he know that it is a **moral truth** that it is wrong to take other people's money?

Let's imagine that Tom interrogates his Grandad on this point.

Tom: Grandad, you know you always used to tell me it was wrong to take other people's money?

Grandad: Yes.

Tom: Well, I found a purse on the train with £150 in, and I handed it in to the conductor.

Grandad: Good for you! That was the right thing to do. There's not everyone would do that these days, I'm sad to say, but at least you've been brought up right.

Tom: But Dave said I was an idiot and I could have spent it!

Grandad: Don't listen to him. It's him who's the idiot if he doesn't know right from wrong.

Tom: But why's it wrong, Grandad? I could have spent the money in town, and that would have been right for me, wouldn't it?

Grandad: Everyone knows that honesty is the best policy. How would you like it if someone found your money and just took it? It would be stealing. In the Bible, it says 'Thou shalt not steal', and that's the morality you should believe in!

Grandad is now giving us several claimed moral facts or moral truths. A person who believes in moral truths of this kind is known philosophically as a **moral realist**.

First, he says that everyone knows that honesty is the best policy. Some people have claimed that morality is true, either because it's accepted by society, or because everyone knows it intuitively. So, perhaps morality is true because it's socially acceptable, or because of our intuitions.

Then Grandad uses the 'How would you like it?' strategy, which appeals to Tom's imagination to get him to consider someone else's viewpoint as though it was his own. He claims that Tom should be concerned about other people's money because he would like them to be concerned with his money if the roles were reversed. Perhaps morality is true on these lines because of our feelings of sympathy for other people, or because it is more rationally consistent to treat others in the way we would like to be treated ourselves.

Finally, Grandad appeals to the Bible, and to the idea that God gave a command, recorded in the Bible, not to steal. This is a traditional way of justifying morality.

All of these are commonplace ways of justifying moral truths, which satisfy millions of people in their daily moral choices. Once we start probing them philosophically, however, we will find that there are problems with all these kinds of approaches.

Moral truth as transcendent truth

A **transcendent truth** is one that is true due to universal, necessary states of affairs beyond the ordinary world of the senses. Transcendent truth is *a priori* and must be the case regardless of individual circumstances. This means that it is not true due to physical states in the world that can be observed. If moral truth is transcendent truth, then, for example, it can't be true because Tom's Grandad says so, or because it would make us all happier. It must be true for some higher and more general reason. Morality has traditionally been thought of as transcendent – as ultimately binding and absolutely true.

Religious forms of transcendent truth

The strongest traditional way of thinking of moral truth as transcendent is in religious terms. In the monotheistic religions (Christianity, Judaism and Islam), this means that what is right or wrong is right or wrong because God commands it. This way of thinking about morality has had a large effect on our culture, and still determines, or at least influences, many people's thinking about moral truth today. However, the debate about God is a huge one – a whole branch of philosophy in itself – and to follow it too far would sidetrack us from the debate about moral truth.

In addition, it can be argued that if moral truth is transcendent truth, then it should stand by itself even for those who believe in God. If a person who believes in God claims that, for example, lying is wrong because that is God's will, then, lying will still be wrong in their eyes even for another person who does not believe in God. One can also ask whether lying is wrong because God wills it, or whether God wills it because it is wrong: if it's only wrong because God wills it, then God looks like a despot who could order anything he liked, but if it's wrong regardless of God, then we do not need God in the equation at all.

For these kinds of reasons, philosophers, whether they believe in God or not, have looked for *God-independent* transcendent sources of moral truth; that is, ways in which they can justify moral truth without appealing to God or to other religious beliefs.

The analogy with mathematical truths

For rationalist philosophers, the chief way of doing this has been to see moral truth on similar lines to mathematics. Why is it true that $2+2=4$? If you remember the work you did on *a priori* ideas and innate knowledge for the AS course, you will recall that mathematical truths were treated by rationalist philosophers (such as Plato and Descartes) as absolute truths about the universe known through reason alone, independently of experience. The sum $2+2=4$ is self-evidently true, using consistent mathematical laws known through reasoning, and reflecting the underlying structure of the universe.

So could moral truth be like this? That would mean that moral truths are known through reason alone, and are absolutely and self-evidently true. This was perhaps easier to believe in the past, by philosophers brought up in one dominant religious culture, than it is now, when we have become much more aware of moral plurality. People don't seriously argue about $2+2=4$, but they argue all the time about moral questions, in a way that suggests that these questions are not as straightforward as mathematics. Imagine a group of moral thinkers arguing vehemently about abortion: one side are convinced abortion is right, and the other that it is wrong. Can you really imagine a similar group of mathematicians, with one set arguing vehemently that $2+2=4$ and the other with equal conviction that $2+2=5$?

That moral truths are much more disputable than mathematical truths is thus a strong argument against the analogy with mathematics. It can be added to this that moral beliefs vary in different cultures, whereas mathematical beliefs do not. Although it can be argued that there are similarities in moral views across the world (for example, that respect for others as persons is basic to all morality), such similarities do not offer the same absolute consistency that mathematics offers. Many cultures may consider murder wrong, for example,

but we can always argue about euthanasia, infanticide, war, capital punishment and manslaughter, making it very difficult to tell absolutely what is murder and what is not. There will also be variations in exactly how bad murder is taken to be, according to the context. Mathematical truths suffer from none of these variations or vague boundaries.

Platonic forms

Plato's 'forms' are an example of the view of moral truth as being like mathematical truth that you will be studying in more detail in Module 4. Plato thought that all objects have an essential nature which is their 'form', and gives them their specific identity. **Platonic forms** were only known innately through reason, not through experience. So, for example, a horse that you may see in a field is only truly a horse insofar as it fits the *form* of the horse, the essential nature of horseness known through reason. You could only identify it as a horse by applying the form (absolute idea) of a 'horse' in your mind to fit the thing in front of you. True knowledge, for Plato, consisted in knowing the forms, that is, what things are essentially like, rather than knowledge of specific things found in experience.

For Plato, knowledge of the good was the most abstract and essential type of true knowledge. By finding out what was essentially true, we would also discover what was essentially right or wrong. The idea of a link between what things essentially are and what they should be is preserved in the way we often use the English word 'ideal'. The ideal horse could be an essential horse representing what makes a horse what it is. However, an ideal horse could also be the best imaginable horse: perhaps one that could run faster, bear heavier loads, or look more beautiful than any other horse. If we wanted to represent the essential horse, we would not choose an ugly, slow horse with three legs, but a horse that we thought represented the best as well as the most typical of what horses are like.

These ideal forms can be seen as like mathematical truths, because mathematical truths are also about essential features. If we were asked what the features of a triangle were, we wouldn't say 'red', 'drawn in pencil', or 'on squared paper' but things like 'has three angles', 'has three sides' and 'the angles add up to 180°'. These would be the features of an ideal triangle, both in the sense of an essential triangle and of what triangles *ought* to be like. If you drew a 'triangle' without these features, it would be wrong, and similarly Plato would have thought that ordinary horses seen in a nearby field are morally imperfect because they do not fulfil the ideal.

However, Plato's forms are still subject to the criticisms we considered above. Ideal horses, like ideal saucepans, ideal pianos, or ideal people, seem to be disputable and variable. An ideal horse, for example, would depend on the purpose you wanted a horse for: a superb thoroughbred racehorse would not be ideal for a small child to learn to ride on, and a big, ugly carthorse might be the ideal thing for heavy loads. What you consider to be a 'good' horse or a 'good' anything else does not seem to be an essential, mathematical truth so much as a matter of context and culture.

Activity 2

1. Why have philosophers tended to try to find transcendent moral truth independently of appeals to God?

3. Consider the following example. Do you think it is an example of weakness of will, or of moral ignorance? Explain precisely why it might be seen as either, and your reasons for preferring one interpretation or the other.

Deirdre had a serious weight problem, and her doctor warned her that her health would suffer if she didn't lose some weight. Her weight problem also affected others, making it harder for her to look after her children and meet her other social obligations. She had a serious discussion with a dietician, and they agreed on a realistic diet that she should stick to in order to lose weight. For the first few days, she was OK with this, but then severe cravings for sweet, fatty foods kicked in. She knew she shouldn't yield to the craving, but it just got too much. She remembered the diet, but it just didn't seem as important as her cravings. So one night after her children were in bed, she went round to the local convenience store, loaded up with sweet things, and gorged herself.



Moral naturalism

If we reject the idea that moral truths are transcendent truths known through reason, the most obvious alternative is to claim that moral truths are to be found in our experience. *Natural facts* are facts that can be checked through experience, otherwise known as scientific facts. **Moral naturalism** is the view that moral truths are equivalent to natural facts. So, we can work out what is right or wrong by looking at the world around us and finding out certain sorts of facts that tell us what is right or wrong.

What sorts of facts could these be? Some of the most commonly appealed to are facts about pleasure and pain. So, according to **moral hedonism**, it is facts about what sort of actions would lead to pain that are equivalent to the moral truth of those actions being wrong. Likewise, facts about what sorts of actions would lead to pleasure are equivalent to moral truths about them being right or good. So 'good', for a moral hedonist, just means bringing about more pleasure and/or less pain. For example, killing next door's rabbit and eating it for lunch (without their permission) would be wrong because of the pain it would bring not only to the rabbit, but also to its owners, and to the killer in the future (due to ensuing bad neighbourly relations). This would far outweigh any pleasure involved in eating the rabbit. This way of looking at ethics is known as utilitarianism, and we will examine it in more detail in Unit 3.5.

Moral hedonism is not the only possible form of moral naturalism. All sorts of possible facts could be claimed as the ones that are the basis of moral truth: facts about rational consistency, facts about virtue or vice (the good or bad habitual ways of behaving that we have), facts about beauty, facts about scientific value, or facts about social acceptability. If, for example, I claim that whatever leads to scientific progress is good, then this might justify any kind of inhumane experiment (e.g. testing dangerous drugs on people in the knowledge that it might kill them), which might result in scientific progress even at the expense of great human suffering.

This shows one immediate difficulty with moral naturalism: the nature of the facts to be appealed to is disputable, and also culturally relative. Take the conflict between beauty and other kinds of pleasure. Suppose that there is a proposal to bulldoze a local beauty spot to build much-needed houses for local people. Is it

right to support this proposal? How do we know which kind of fact is to take precedence here: the fact that many people take great pleasure in the beauty of the woods and fields in this area, or the fact that some people need housing? Ideas about housing requirements, and about beautiful landscapes, also vary a good deal between different cultures and in different environments.

The open-question argument and the naturalistic fallacy

However, a deeper criticism of moral naturalism comes from the early 20th century philosopher G.E. Moore. Moore was concerned with the question of whether what we *mean* by 'good' can ever be captured by any natural fact. He believed that 'good' actually referred to something more subtle and intuitive than could ever be equated with a natural fact, so he set out to disprove moral naturalism.

One of his key arguments is known as the **open-question argument**. Let's take the example of moral hedonism again as a type of moral naturalism. Moral hedonism claims that what 'good' really means is 'pleasure', so that the natural fact of people experiencing pleasure is equivalent to goodness. However, Moore argues that we cannot possibly accept this claim because we are thinking of other possible things that could be good, not just pleasure, when we use the word 'good'. It can be shown that we are thinking of other possible goods, because if we were assuming that good was only pleasure, it would not make sense to ask whether pleasure was good – to do so would be like asking 'Is pleasure pleasure?' However, it is not like this. It does make sense to ask whether pleasure is good.

Moore argues that there is a similar *open question* about any natural facts that are claimed to be the basis of moral truth. We can always ask whether those natural facts are in fact good, and it remains an open question. If it is not just tautological (i.e. saying exactly what has been said already) to ask whether a particular set of natural facts is good, then there must be something else in the sense of 'good', beyond just those natural facts.

To assume that a natural fact implies a moral truth involves what Moore called the **naturalistic fallacy**. A fallacy is an error of reasoning, and he thought that there was a common error of reasoning involved in assuming that any given natural fact is good without any further questioning. Hume, who argued that you cannot logically derive a moral statement from a factual statement, had earlier recognised this problem. Take this example:

The nuclear bomb dropped on Hiroshima led to huge destruction and immense suffering.

So the nuclear bomb should not have been dropped on Hiroshima.

In this example argument, we start off with a factual statement about the suffering caused by Hiroshima, but then the conclusion drawn is a moral one. The conclusion may or may not be correct, but it cannot be derived from the factual statement, and is not necessarily true just because the initial factual statement is true. In order to make the argument valid and avoid the naturalistic fallacy, we need to include a moral premise as well as a factual one, as in this example:

The nuclear bomb dropped on Hiroshima led to huge destruction and immense suffering.

Any action that leads to huge destruction and immense suffering is wrong.

So the nuclear bomb should not have been dropped on Hiroshima.

It is now clear what the moral assumption is, whether or not you agree with it. Moore, of course, would say that it is an open question whether the moral assumption in the second premise is true, so we cannot assume that it is *necessarily* true.

Various philosophers have attempted to contest Moore's arguments and defend moral naturalism. What they have in common is the insistence that there are some kinds of natural facts that really must imply moral truths. For example, John Searle argued that the idea of a *promise* was an example of what he called an 'institutional fact' that implied a moral truth, that is, that it would be right to keep the promise and wrong to break it. Whether this is correct depends on whether it is ever right to break a promise, which is the kind of more practical moral question we will return to later.

Relational moral truth

So far, we have been asking what moral truths *are*, whether they are *a priori* facts or observable facts about the universe. This has not led us into any definite conclusions, though. An alternative approach is to think about moral truths as truths about the relationship *between* a person's actions and the world in which they act. It can be argued that we do not behave in a certain way because of facts, but because of how we are as people with minds: our mental states, emotions, character, will, and so on, all play a part in deciding how we should act. This also means thinking about moral truths as *properties* (i.e. qualities or features of things) rather than as facts or 'things'. Moral properties are **relational properties**.

Let's take the example of the debate about vegetarianism. Vegetarians argue that it is wrong to eat meat for a variety of reasons, such as the suffering caused to animals in being confined and slaughtered, the excessive land, water and energy used in meat production compared to crop growing, and the bad effects of meat-eating on human health. These are facts that perhaps some meat-eaters would want to argue about; but these facts, even if correct, would not be enough to convince many people that they should give up meat, because they don't base their feelings about morality purely on facts. So, perhaps instead of just looking at the facts and arguing about them, we should also look at the people: how do they feel about eating meat and why? What are their motives for eating meat or not eating meat?

For those who want to see moral truth as relational, the moral truth about this issue will not just be a product of the facts of the case, nor just about the inner states of the people, but about the relationship between them. If it is true that we should or should not all be vegetarian, this will be because the relationship between people's inner states and the outward facts is a moral one. For example, perhaps it is not 'right' for an uneducated African villager to become a vegetarian, because it just doesn't appear on her mental horizon – she has too many other pressing immediate concerns, and she is probably too poor to afford much meat in any case. For a Westerner with enough time, money and education, however, it could be argued that there is a responsibility to at least consider the issues, and act in a morally reflective way. The facts of the case (the effects of meat-eating) are similar in both cases, but the respective relationships of the two people to those facts are different.

Deciding what is right or wrong on the basis of relational moral truth obviously becomes a much more complex business than if you were just consulting a rational ideal or a set of agreed facts. However, it can be argued that we get much closer to the complexity of our moral feelings that way. A simple example of the way that our inner states influence our moral feelings is the way in which we feel less responsible for 'accidents' than 'deliberate actions'; even if there are ways we could have acted differently to prevent the accident. Very often, however, all that distinguishes an 'accident' from a 'deliberate action' is an inner motive or feeling about the action.

One of the main problems with seeing moral truths in this relational way is the complexity it creates. It makes it much more difficult to establish what the moral truth is, and some people would prefer to argue that moral truths are simple, external, and easily understood. For example, 'adultery is wrong', or 'you should be polite to others because it leads to more pleasurable relationships with them'. These may be claimed as simple moral truths that a relational view will muddy with complexity by taking into account every individual mental state.

Moral properties as secondary properties

Another way of understanding the status of relational moral truths is by analogy with **secondary properties**. Secondary properties are a concept from the philosophy of perception that try to explain the relationship between some of the properties of objects and the ways in which they are seen, or otherwise sensed, by viewers. Primary properties are qualities that are found in an object itself and

You should now be able to:

- Explain the concept of moral truth.
- Explain the Platonic view of moral truth as transcendent.
- Explain the naturalistic view of truth as factual.
- Explain the account of moral truth as based on relational properties.
- Identify some key philosophical problems with these different accounts of moral truth.

Key terms: test yourself

- Moral truth
- Moral realism
- Transcendent truth
- Platonic forms
- Moral elitism
- Moral knowledge
- Weakness of will
- Moral naturalism
- Moral hedonism
- Open-question argument
- Naturalistic fallacy
- Relational properties
- Secondary properties

Further reading

Jones, Cardinal & Hayward, *Moral Philosophy* (Hodder Murray, 2006), pp.132–43.

Appleby *et al.*, *AQA A2 Philosophy Student's Book*, (Nelson Thornes, 2009), pp.138–145.

Topic 1 Moral philosophy

Unit 3.2 Issues of moral truth

In this unit, we will be considering three major challenges to any type of moral realism, and trying to assess how serious these challenges are. In general, these three challenges **can be applied to any of the accounts of moral truth considered in Unit 3.1**, though it is possible to argue for some exceptions.

By the end of this unit you should be able to:

- Explain and evaluate the problem of moral knowledge as a challenge to the idea of moral truth.
- Explain and evaluate the problem of moral disagreement as a challenge to the idea of moral truth.
- Explain and evaluate the question of whether moral truth can motivate or justify action.

Key terms

- Problem of moral knowledge
- Pure reason
- Practical reason
- Duty
- Problem of moral disagreement
- Normativity
- Second-order desire

The problem of moral knowledge

How do we know what is right? Whether we think of moral truth as transcendent, or as factual, or as relational, how is it possible to reach any certainty that this really *is* moral truth, and not just subjective feeling, fantasy or illusion?

Reasons for moral scepticism

This problem is related to the question of scepticism, which you may remember coming up in the reason and experience work at AS-level. Scepticism is an attitude of consistent philosophical doubt applied to any kind of knowledge claim. If scepticism can lead you to doubt whether the object in front of your eyes is actually there, it can certainly also doubt moral claims. Whenever anyone brings up the claim that such-and-such is good, bad, right or wrong, all the moral sceptic needs to respond is 'How do you know that?' Any possible basis of moral knowledge can be questioned in some way.

- Transcendent claims of moral truth can be questioned by doubting the rational assumptions on which they are based. For example, if it is claimed that moral truth comes from God, it can be asked how we know whether God exists. If God does exist, it can be asked whether we know that any given moral command that is believed to be from God is actually from God. If it is claimed that moral truth is known through reason alone, it can be asked whether reason is just a human construction, not reflecting any reality but just a set of human illusions about it. It can also be doubted whether what is rationally known is necessarily moral. If $2+2=4$ is not morally significant, why should any other purely a priori claim be morally significant?
- **Naturalistic claims of moral truth** can be questioned, firstly by doubting whether there are any facts known by human beings. Just because we observe something to be the case, even if we do so many times, it does not mean that it is definitely true. The supposed natural facts on which morality can be built (such as facts about pleasure and pain) may be wrong. For example, what we take to be expressions of pleasure may be put on by others to give a false impression – the great aunt who gives you horrible spotty socks every Christmas probably carries on doing it because you express pleasure every time, even though you don't feel it. We could all be like great aunts, with a completely wrong idea about what actually gives people pleasure or pain. Secondly, as we discussed in Unit 3.1 under the headings of 'the naturalistic fallacy' and 'the open-question argument', even if we do know the facts, there is no way of knowing for sure that these facts are the right facts that are morally significant. It is always possible to ask 'Is pleasure good?' and it makes sense to do so.
- **Relational claims of moral truth** can be questioned by asking how we know which sorts of relations are moral relations. The supposed moral relations have to be between facts out there, which of course may not exist in the way we think of them, and states of people in relation to those facts. How do we know that we have selected the right sorts of states of people to participate in moral relations? For example, if the idea of taking a kidney out of the body of one person who has recently died and putting it in a different living person produces feelings of revulsion, are those feelings an indication of a moral relation between facts about transplantation and a person considering their attitude to it? You could make a case for revulsion being morally significant, and say that it is morally significant that we find some things revolting, or you could argue that it has nothing to do with the real issues, which should be decided purely on the basis of human need. It does not seem all that clear whether or not feelings of revulsion are part of a moral relation.

As in all sceptical arguments, the significance of these arguments is purely to cast doubt on the matter. If we cannot be sure, then that is enough for the moral sceptic to make his or her point. If there is no way of determining moral truth, and all the attempts to determine it have failed to find certainty, then we must conclude that even if there is in some sense a moral truth, it is beyond our reach and unavailable to us. We will always be in doubt about what that moral truth actually is.

Activity 1

Explain how a moral sceptic could cast doubt on the following claimed moral truths:

1. We should all keep our promises. It is part of the rational basis of the idea of a promise that it should be kept, and if we don't keep our promises, we undermine the very concept of a promise.
2. It is wrong to be cruel to animals by inflicting unnecessary pain on them. We know that the nervous systems of animals respond to pain, and often they express their pain to us through their behaviour.

Responses to moral scepticism

How can it be argued that we do actually have some moral knowledge? The likely responses to moral scepticism reflect those to scepticism in general. Apart from religious appeals to faith (which require a completely different discussion), there are two types of philosophical response, which we can identify with rationalism and empiricism. Many links can be made here with your work on reason and experience in the AS course.

Rationalist responses

Rationalists are likely to argue that although moral naturalism and relational claims, based on experience, are unreliable, moral truth derived from reason is not. Reason alone can yield 100 per cent certainty in matters of knowledge, and this may arguably also include moral knowledge. If moral truth is known *a priori* (as claimed, for example, by Plato), then it must be true universally without doubt or exception.

Above, however, we considered two sceptical responses to this. The sceptic can argue that reason could just be a human construction and not reflect any external reality, and can also argue that what is rationally true is not necessarily moral. We will look at these two arguments in turn.

Firstly, could reason merely reflect human assumptions, rather than truths about the world? One rationalist response to this is offered by Kant. Kant argues that

this is quite correct, but that it need not undermine claims of moral truth. For Kant, moral truth is built not on absolute truths known about the universe as it really is (what he called the *noumena*) but on the justifiable assumption that the world we inhabit is a moral one. He claims that rational consistency should lead us to act in a moral way, even though there are no absolute guarantees of the existence of God or any other source of morality.

Kant's answer is a relational kind of answer, because he recognises the role of human reasoning in creating a moral world. We create a moral world not just from what is out there, nor from our own minds, but from the interaction of both of these, shaped by consistent reason. So, reason according to Kant can still give us the key to moral truth even if moral truth is not in the universe out there.

The second problem for the rationalist, however, is why rational answers should be moral answers, any more than mathematical answers are moral answers. Kant also offered a response to this, agreeing that moral truths are indeed different from mathematical truths. Kant distinguished between **pure reason** and **practical reason**. Pure reason is *a priori* reasoning about things that must always be true regardless of experience. However, practical reasoning is consistent reasoning as the basis of decision-making. Given that we are self-aware beings acting in the world, thought Kant, we can choose whether to act according to our desires or whether to act according to **duty**. Duty is known through a set of consistent moral principles of a kind that we would also want everyone else to follow. Thus, it is only one particular type of reasoning that leads us to moral truth, not a mathematical type of reasoning but a specifically moral type of reasoning. Nevertheless, we should follow this rather than experience, as experience leads us only to follow our inconsistent desires.

Empiricist responses

Empiricists, on the other hand, often support some form of moral naturalism and believe that morality can be known through observable facts (though, as we will see, there are also more recent empiricists who deny moral truth altogether). They have to face two sceptical challenges that we mentioned above: firstly that we cannot claim to really know any of the facts that form the basis of naturalist moral truth, and secondly that it is always an open question whether any particular set of facts are actually moral facts.

As we saw in the AS-level work on reason and experience, empiricists have various ways of defending our knowledge of observable facts against sceptical doubt. One of these is to appeal to (epistemological) naturalism as Hume did, saying that although we can have no guarantee that our senses are correct, they offer the best source of knowledge available to us, and we can't help naturally believing in them. Another is the positivist tactic of questioning the entirely negative basis of sceptical doubts and requiring a positive basis of evidence rather than mere rational possibility to take a doubt seriously. Both of these tactics can be applied to support moral truth. We can argue that we instinctively have a sense of moral truth and really cannot help having one, and that although moral truths can be doubted in theory there is no positive reason to doubt the justifiability of the moral sense that everyone has.

If, for example, you want to argue that moral truth is based on facts about pleasure and pain, it can be asserted that there we all instinctively recognise the moral importance of pleasure and pain. Even though we could have intellectual doubts about this as the basis of morality, these doubts are merely abstract. When we are thirsty and see water, we drink it, and when someone threatens us with a knife, we recoil, regardless of what we may think intellectually about the value of pleasure and pain. The evidence of our experience seems plain: *in fact* what we value, it seems, is pleasure, and what we avoid is pain, and we have nothing better to go on than this.

However, the moral naturalist still faces G.E. Moore's open-question argument as to whether we can ever establish a given set of facts as moral facts. We can always ask whether pleasure is good and whether pain is bad. Again, the moral naturalist is likely to respond that experience itself tells us that we value pleasure and avoid

pain. This experience is seen as a far more reliable guide to what is in fact good than is abstract moral reasoning, and thus also offers the best answer available to the open question.

Activity 2

Complete the following dialogues between a sceptic and a rationalist, and a sceptic and an empiricist. Bring them to whatever conclusion you wish according to the arguments you find stronger.

1. **Sceptic:** How do you know that there's any such thing as 'good' or 'moral truth'? We really have no idea what is morally true, and we may have just invented morality for ourselves. It may just reflect our feelings or our culture for all we know.

Rationalist: We don't know what's morally true from experience, right enough. However, I think we can know through reason. If reason tells us something that is always true regardless of experience, then it's a certainty. That applies to morality as much as anything else.

Sceptic:

2. **Sceptic:** That Rationalist guy has failed to convince me that there's any moral truth, but I can't see how there can be any moral truth known through experience either. It's obvious that what we think we observe may be wrong. How can we be sure that we observe moral facts?

Empiricist: You're right, we can't be completely sure. But that doesn't mean there's no moral truth. Moral truth is created from the best information available to us, not from absolute guarantees about reality.

Sceptic:



The problem of moral disagreement

A further problem that affects all moral truth claims is the fact that people disagree about what those moral truth claims should be. If we do not agree about moral truth, this can be taken as an indication that moral truth is not universal, but just a product of our cultural background or perhaps even just our individual feelings and preferences.

There are many examples of **moral disagreement**, and probably some will spring to everyone's mind. Some of the most difficult to resolve are cultural disagreements, and the clash between deontology (the appeal to moral principles) and consequentialism (the appeal to the consequences of actions).

There are some striking examples of ways in which different cultures have completely different ideas about what is morally right and wrong. In traditional Inuit (Eskimo) culture in Greenland, male visitors were invited to sleep with the host's wife, perhaps because any children resulting from sex with a stranger would help to avoid inbreeding in the isolated Arctic communities. Obviously, this attitude contrasts sharply with the condemnation of adultery in many other cultures, and in the Ten Commandments in the Bible. Homosexuality, also condemned in the Bible, was taken for granted in ancient Greece. Similarly, cannibalism, viewed with horror in most Western society today, is traditionally the obvious thing to do with a vanquished enemy among some tribes in New Guinea. Can we really be so sure, in the light of these differences, that what we feel to be natural moral principles are really applicable to everyone in all times and places?

The clash between deontology and consequentialism, which you should have come across in the A2 starter work last summer, gives further bases for important moral disagreements. In some situations, there may be an important moral principle at stake, which a deontologist would urge us to stick by, but following

that principle is very likely to lead to a much worse consequence. Alternatively, a very good consequence may result from breaking a moral principle. Would you kill your mother to save a million other people? Should one injured climber be left behind to die so that the others can have a greater chance of survival? Would you have murdered Hitler in an attempt to stop the Second World War? Again, it does not seem obvious which is the moral truth in cases like this, but much more a matter of background conditioning, or of individual preference.

‘It’s just wrong!’: the absolutist answer to moral disagreement

To these kinds of problems, an absolutist defender of moral truth has an easy answer. Of course there’s a moral truth – we know what it is, and the other side are wrong! For example, a Western Christian might well say that traditional Inuit were just wrong to encourage adultery, however much it might have helped the genetic mix in their communities. It would also plainly be wrong to kill your mother to save a million people: in Exodus 20 in the Bible, we are commanded not to commit murder, not to commit adultery, and to honour our father and mother.

There is no way of either proving or disproving the correctness of this solution, for it depends on belief in certain sources of moral truth that some people believe in, as a matter of faith, while others do not. It is not only religious believers that might have faith in a particular kind of moral attitude, but also others, for example, consequentialists who think it is obviously always right to do what will produce the best consequences, and that adherence to moral principles is just wrong. It does seem that this kind of response is unlikely to offer any practical resolution of moral disagreement, but rather to increase it.

An alternative kind of response from philosophers like Plato, who believe in a transcendent moral truth on purely rational grounds, is moral elitism. Some people have a better understanding of moral truth than others, because of their superior reasoning powers. This means that all wrong action is due to ignorance. We have already discussed in Unit 3.1 the problems that this raises for explaining weakness of will: arguably it seems possible to understand what is right but still do wrong. At least Plato’s response here opens up the possibility that moral disagreement could be overcome in the future if everyone gains the level of understanding they need.

Appeal to the facts: a naturalist answer

Alternatively, moral naturalists might try to overcome moral disagreement by appealing to the facts. If moral truth depends on certain facts, such as facts about pleasure and pain, then once these facts are clearly understood, moral disagreement will fall away. Moral disagreement is due to ignorance, but not in the elitist sense of Plato. The true facts are accessible to everyone, but not everyone has yet received them.

For example, a moral naturalist who is a vegetarian might argue that the only reason not everyone is a vegetarian is just because they haven’t come to know the facts about the excessive resources used by animal farming, the suffering of farm animals and the effects of meat-eating on human health. Anyone who actually confronts those facts, they might argue, can hardly avoid drawing the moral conclusion that meat-eating is wrong. The education system and the media might well be blamed for not highlighting these particular facts sufficiently.

One of the difficulties with this solution is that, even when people do know all the facts, there often still seem to be differences in interpretation of those facts, particularly as to which are the morally significant facts to be highlighted. A defender of meat-eating, for example, might be acquainted with all the facts pointed out by the vegetarian, but might not consider animal suffering very significant, might think that additional land, energy and water use in meat-rearing was worth the sacrifices involved for the human pleasure that results, and might dispute the interpretation of studies suggesting that vegetarians are healthier. It seems that in cases like this, agreement about the facts is not always enough to secure moral agreement.

To press his or her case, the moral naturalist might need to also be an absolutist, by asserting that the opposing interpretation of the facts is just wrong. Perhaps the meat-eater does not consider animal suffering very significant due to lack of compassion, for example. The naturalist would then have to assert that the meat-eater *should* have that compassion and be morally concerned about animal suffering.

Activity 3

1. Give your own example of a significant moral disagreement. Does this seem to show that there is no moral truth?

2. How might a believer in transcendent moral truth defend its existence in the face of moral disagreement?

3. How might a moral naturalist attempt to resolve moral disagreements and discover moral truth?

4. In the example of arguments for vegetarianism, do you think that knowing and understanding facts about animal suffering, the resource use in meat production, and the effects of meat on human health are enough to bring about moral agreement? For a good presentation of these kinds of 'vegetarian facts', have a look at www.timetogoveggie.com. For a meat-eater's rebuttal, try www.lloydianaspects.co.uk/opinion/veggie.html. Do you think this rebuttal merely avoids the facts pointed out by vegetarians, or does it interpret them differently?

Does moral truth justify action?

Activity 4

Kerboodle

Log on to Kerboodle and do worksheet 4.1, 'Moral judgement and motivation'.



The final problem we will consider in this unit is the question of whether, if there is a moral truth, it would or should make any difference to anyone's behaviour. If it does not, moral truth is in any case irrelevant even if in some sense it exists.

The idea that a moral truth *should* lead us to behave in a certain way is a mysterious one. What is this 'should'? The idea of 'shouldness' is known as **normativity**, the concept that we would be morally justified in behaving in one way and not another. But why should we bother with moral justification at all? We don't, we just do what we want?

One traditional religious way of understanding 'should' is that it is like a rule given by God, the breaking of which will lead to punishment and the following of which will lead to reward. But 'should' doesn't seem to be only about reward and punishment, because we can still feel a sense of moral obligation even if we do not expect a reward or a punishment.

Another possibility is that 'should' is just a way of talking about social expectations, meaning 'other people in your society want you to behave in that way'. For example, you shouldn't pick your nose in public because (in our society, for no particular reason) many people don't like it and will disapprove. However, if social expectations are the only criteria, it would never be the case that we *should* do anything that goes against social expectations. Sometimes, however, we may feel that people *should* do things that go against social expectations, such as resisting Fascism in a Fascist society. Again, it seems that 'should' goes beyond social expectations, even if it often gets caught up in them.

Another perspective is that 'should' is a way of talking about things that one part of us actually wants to do. The reason we should do them is that we want to do them, at least when we see things in a moral perspective. In this sense, normativity is a **second-order desire**, that is, a desire that we have when we are in a particularly reflective state, that guides our other more immediate desires. If we have a moral sense because we want to do what it tells us, though, why do we sometimes still feel it even when we don't want to do what it tells us? Why do we still feel guilt even as we are eating that cream cake, or using the office stationery for private purposes, despite the fact that we want to do so? Perhaps because our desires are inconsistent: but if that is the case, we still seem to need to appeal to reason to explain which of our inconsistent desires we *should* be following.

If reason comes back into the picture at all, we will probably end up returning to the question of why we should bother doing what it tells us. Why should I do my moral duty? Why should I follow my better self? Even if reason tells me what I should do, what motivates me to do it?

Critics of moral truth will argue along these lines:

Premise 1: To exist, moral truth must have normative force and motivate moral action.

Premise 2: Supposed moral truth, however, does not always motivate us to moral action.

Conclusion 1: Therefore, this supposed moral truth is not actually moral truth.

Conclusion 2: Thus, moral truth does not exist.

One possible response to this is that Premise 1 does not always have to be true. Moral truth must *be able* to motivate moral action, but that does not mean that it *always* has to do so in order to exist. If it *always* led people to behave in the right way, then there would be no free will and no moral responsibility, and the whole point of morality would disappear. Normativity cannot be determining or it would lose its meaning. If we *choose* the right action, though, that means that the mysteries of normativity are bound into the mysteries of free will.

Activity 5

1. Why is the question of whether people should bother to be moral a philosophical problem?

2. In what sense might we actually want to be moral? Do you agree that we do?

3. Why do advocates of moral truth claim that it is more than just social expectation?

4. Why might belief in free will be claimed to offer a solution to the problem? Do you find this convincing?



You should now be able to:

- Explain and evaluate the problem of moral knowledge as a challenge to the idea of moral truth.
- Explain and evaluate the problem of moral disagreement as a challenge to the idea of moral truth.
- Explain and evaluate the question of whether moral truth can motivate or justify action.

Key terms: test yourself

- Problem of moral knowledge
- Pure reason
- Practical reason
- Duty
- Problem of moral disagreement
- Normativity
- Second-order desire

