

EDITED BY ELIZABETH BURNS AND STEPHEN LAW

# philosophy

FOR AS AND A2

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# philosophy

## FOR AS AND A2

- *Philosophy for AS and A2* is the definitive textbook for students of Advanced Subsidiary or Advanced Level courses, structured directly around the specification of the AQA – the only exam board to offer these courses. Following a lively foreword by Nigel Warburton, author of *Philosophy: The Basics*, a team of experienced teachers devote a chapter each to the six themes covered by the syllabus:

### AS

- Theory of Knowledge
- Moral Philosophy
- Philosophy of Religion

### A2

- Philosophy of Mind
- Political Philosophy
- Philosophy of Science

Each of the six themed chapters includes:

- A list of key concepts, to introduce students to the topic
- Bite-size sections corresponding to the syllabus topics
- Actual exam questions from previous years
- Suggested discussion questions to promote debate
- Text-boxes with helpful summaries, case-studies and examples
- An annotated further reading list directing students towards the best articles, books and websites
- A comprehensive glossary, providing a handy reference point

There is a final chapter on exam preparation, designed to help students get to grips with the examination board requirements.

*Philosophy for AS and A2* is written by a team of expert teachers based at Heythrop College – part of the University of London – which specialises in teaching philosophy and theology.

**The editors:** Elizabeth Burns is an experienced teacher of both GCSE and A Level, and Stephen Law is the author of three bestselling philosophy books: *The Philosophy Files*, *The Outer Limits* and *The Philosophy Gym*. **The contributors:** Michael Lacewing, Patrick Riordan, Janice Thomas and Nicholas Wilson.



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Patrick Riordan, Janice Thomas, Nicholas Wilson

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# • foreword

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Studying philosophy should be exciting and perhaps a little disturbing. Exciting because it can open up new perspectives on the world and ourselves and provide powerful tools for clear thinking in a wide range of contexts. Disturbing, perhaps, because when taken seriously, philosophy takes very little for granted. You may find that philosophy challenges what you have always believed. If you believe in God, for example, thinking about the supposed proofs and disproofs of God's existence can be unnerving (though it may ultimately also be reassuring). Philosophy can even challenge your perceptual beliefs. How do you know that you are really reading this book now and not, for example, lying in bed asleep dreaming that you are reading the book, or else plugged into some kind of experience machine, like the one in *The Matrix*? If you want to keep your assumptions intact, philosophy is probably not the subject for you. If, however, you want to develop your ability to think independently about a range of puzzling yet important questions, and to study and engage with the thought of some of the world's greatest thinkers, philosophy can be an empowering and intellectually liberating subject.

I wasn't able to study philosophy formally until I went to university, and even then began it as a subsidiary subject. I have to admit that it took me some time to work out what my teachers were getting at. Like many of my fellow undergraduates, I had very little idea of what I was letting myself in for when I attended my first lecture, even though I'd struggled through (and occasionally nodded off over) Bertrand Russell's *The Problems of Philosophy* the summer before my first university term.

The AS and A2 levels in philosophy didn't exist back then in the early 1980s. Students in Britain are now more fortunate than I was in that they can study philosophy to quite a high level before committing to the subject at university. The A level is demanding enough to give anyone studying it seriously an excellent grounding in the subject. Students are also much luckier than we were in the range and quality of introductory books that jostle for their attention in the bookshops (these include several excellent books by the co-editor of this book, Stephen Law). When I began teaching A level philosophy while finishing my Ph.D., there were, almost unbelievably, only two or three introductions to philosophy readily available. In the absence of a book that was pitched at an appropriate level for intelligent sixth-formers, I expanded and rewrote some of my teaching notes into the book *Philosophy: The Basics* (London: Routledge, 4th edn 2004). Part of my aim was to write the book I wished I'd been able to pick up when I was 16. It was also intended to give newcomers to the subject a framework for understanding the subject in their first year at university. Now there are half a dozen books at least that I'd wholeheartedly recommend to a sixth-former (or anyone else) interested in learning something about the subject. My personal list, in approximate order of difficulty, would include: Thomas Nagel's *What Does It All Mean?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), Stephen Law's *The Philosophy Gym* (London: Headline, 2003), Edward Craig's *Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), and Simon Blackburn's *Think: A Compelling Introduction to Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

The present book is different from those I've just mentioned in that it follows very closely the AS and A2 level syllabus. It is also written by a range of authors, each concentrating on their own specialist subject. University philosophers have been rather slow off the mark in providing teaching materials for the AS and A2 level. It is very heartening that the philosophers of Heythrop College, which is part of London University, have devoted the time and energy to create this textbook. Its strengths should be obvious. The authors' experience as teachers is demonstrated in the clarity of their explanations, something which is almost unnoticeable when done well, but which, as you will find if you read more widely in philosophy, is not as common as you might hope.

My advice to you is to read this book closely, but read it actively. Don't see yourself as passively absorbing its content. Try to think critically about what is written here. Philosophy should never be regurgitation. Nor is it a matter of strolling through a museum of dry and dusty ideas. Studying philosophy is learning to philosophise, not just learning what other people have said. Use your own examples, think it through from your own point of view, perhaps disagree with some of the authors here. Engage critically with what you read. What may

not be obvious while you are immersed in the detail is that when you study philosophy you aren't simply learning a body of ideas, what you are doing is learning to think for yourself about some of the most profound questions we can ask.

Nigel Warburton  
The Open University

# • acknowledgements

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Some of the material in Chapter 3 has been adapted and developed from material originally produced for the Bachelor of Divinity by distance learning offered by the University of London External Programme ([www.londonexternal.ac.uk](http://www.londonexternal.ac.uk)).

# • introduction

Michael Lacewing and Elizabeth Burns

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## ● WHY STUDY PHILOSOPHY?

In recent years, interest in studying philosophy at A Level has increased dramatically.

But why are people interested in philosophy? What use is the study of philosophy? The answers may include some of the following:

**1. Subject matter:** The questions that philosophy investigates are some of the most profound that we can ask. What can we know about the world we live in, and is certainty important? Is right and wrong 'simply' a matter of culture? Is it rational to believe in God? Are we just animals which have evolved, or do we have a spiritual dimension which will survive the death of our bodies?

**2. Independent thought:** Doing philosophy is an excellent training in thinking for yourself. Many people are quick to say that what people believe, especially on such philosophical matters as ethics or religion, depends on their upbringing. But very few people say this about themselves. Does what you think about abortion, or miracles, come straight from your parents and teachers? Or do you think you have good reasons to believe what you do? If you aren't thinking for yourself already, doing philosophy will provide you with the perfect opportunity.

**3. Character:** Because it encourages open-mindedness, doing philosophy can actually change your character. It can help you mature in your thoughts about and relations with people who are different from you, whether they are people

you meet or authors you read. It can give you not just new thoughts, but new ways of thinking – about yourself, about others, about the world.

**4. Reasoning:** Doing philosophy is not easy. It is difficult to understand the arguments and the ideas. As with doing anything that is difficult, you develop new skills which make it easier with practice. Some of the skills that doing philosophy can teach you are:

- understanding the relations between ideas: how one idea can imply another or contradict it
- the ability to spot flaws in arguments
- the ability to construct arguments
- imagination: coming up with novel solutions and ideas
- communication and conversation: philosophy is done through discussion and debate.

## ● **AS AND A2 PHILOSOPHY**

At the time of writing, there is only one syllabus for AS and A2 philosophy, set by the AQA. Each qualification is comprised of three units of study, as follows:

### **AS**

**Unit 1:** Theory of Knowledge

**Unit 2:** *either* Moral Philosophy *or* Philosophy of Religion

**Unit 3:** selections from *one* of the following set texts:

- Plato, *The Republic*
- Descartes, *Meditations*
- Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*
- Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*

### **A2**

**Unit 4:** *either* Philosophy of Mind *or* Political Philosophy *or* Philosophy of Science

**Unit 5:** selections from *one* of the following set texts:

- Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*
- Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*
- Mill, *On Liberty*
- Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*

- Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*
- Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*

**Unit 6:** Synoptic Study: a long essay on one of 12 studies that either bring together the thought of two different philosophers (comparative studies) or the thought of one philosopher in relation to one particular topic (complementary studies).

Each course has a similar structure in that one unit is compulsory (Theory of Knowledge and the Synoptic Study), one unit is a set text, and the remaining unit allows a choice of topic. This is a good combination for learning philosophy.

First, Unit 1, the Theory of Knowledge, with its arguments about what we know and how we can justify our beliefs, is a natural foundation for all of philosophy. We cannot argue about whether God exists, for example, unless we have some idea of how we could justify believing such a claim.

The range of options that are available in Units 2 and 4 are indicative of the Big Questions which philosophy tackles, including: What is right and wrong? Does God exist? How do our minds relate to our brains? What is it to live in freedom? and How does science work to produce knowledge? Studying any of the issues that these units explore exposes you to the breadth and depth of philosophical argument and therefore gives you a good idea of what philosophy really grapples with, what it tries to do.

Units 3 and 5 introduce another side to philosophy. Philosophy works with ideas, and ideas are communicated through texts. Learning how to read a text, how to really understand what the author wanted to communicate, is therefore very important. But when ideas are not obvious, the interpretation of the text becomes no easy matter. These two units encourage you to be sympathetic to texts and to be precise in your interpretation of them. In part, they are about the importance of language to arguments and the implications of saying one thing, rather than another that sounds quite similar. But they are much more than this. The texts that have been chosen are among the most influential that have ever been written. In studying them, you are introduced to examples of philosophy done at its very best. They demonstrate how ideas hang together, and how a whole view of the world is developed through the interconnections of ideas.

Unit 6 gives you the chance to demonstrate your skill at making such connections. Units 1–5 test your knowledge, either of arguments for or against a particular idea or of what a particular philosopher said. For Unit 6, this is not the main focus. It is true that there is more knowledge to be gained, for you will study one or two philosophers or issues in greater depth. But the main test is of



your ability to think deeply about two philosophers, or a philosopher and an issue, that you have learned about separately, and to bring them together so that you see the implications of one unit for another. More than any other unit, this is an exercise in making connections and evaluating the results. It is the unit that creates an organic whole out of the other units.

## ● ABOUT THIS BOOK

This book covers the syllabus for Units 1 and 2 of the AS, and Unit 4 of the A2. There is a chapter on each of the six topics: Theory of Knowledge, Moral Philosophy, Philosophy of Religion, Philosophy of Mind, Political Philosophy, and Philosophy of Science. Each of these chapters contains questions for discussion, placed throughout the text to stimulate understanding and reflection. Each chapter also contains past exam questions, given at the end of the section in which the material relevant to the question is discussed, and a glossary providing concise definitions of key terms. Words that appear in the glossary are in bold type the first time they are used in the text. The final chapter offers guidance on how to prepare for and do well in the examinations.

## ● RECOMMENDED READING

You will find some suggestions for further reading in the Foreword to this book. Three longer and more demanding introductions to philosophy, each a model of clarity, are M. Hollis's *Invitation to Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), A. Morton's *Philosophy in Practice* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), and J. Teichman's *Philosophy: A Beginner's Guide* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991). You may also find a philosophical dictionary helpful. Particularly recommended is Simon Blackburn's *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

# 1

## • theory of knowledge

UNIT 1 Janice Thomas

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### KEY CONCEPTS ◉

- ◉ knowledge
  - ◉ justification
  - ◉ rationalism
  - ◉ empiricism
  - ◉ scepticism
  - ◉ a priori and a posteriori knowledge
  - ◉ reliable methods
  - ◉ coherence
  - ◉ foundationalism
  - ◉ naive realism
  - ◉ representative realism
  - ◉ idealism
  - ◉ phenomenalism
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### ● INTRODUCTION

Plato was one of the earliest philosophers in western thought to discuss the nature of knowledge. At the beginning of the dialogue called the *Theaetetus*, Plato pictures Socrates asking a fellow teacher to introduce him to his brightest new student. Socrates asks the student (the Theaetetus of the title) what he thinks knowledge is. Not surprisingly Theaetetus has a few false starts. At first he suggests that knowledge is all the subjects he is taught by his teacher: such subjects as astronomy, natural history, mathematics and so on.

Socrates quickly helps Theaetetus see that all of these, although they are indeed *kinds* of knowledge, are just examples. Astronomy is knowledge of the stars and planets. Natural history is knowledge of animals and plants. But Socrates is looking for the nature of knowledge in general, independent of the particular concerns of this or that subject matter. He wants to know what makes any proposition at all, which someone might find in any science or context whatever, count as knowledge.

The Theory of Knowledge (the branch of philosophy also called **epistemology**) continues to take as one of its main aims the attempt to give an account of the nature of knowledge in general, just as Socrates and Plato tried to do. A number of difficult questions need to be addressed before we can be sure that any particular **belief** we hear expressed is *knowledge*, whatever the subject matter involved:

- Where does the supposed knowledge come from (reason? experience? some other source?)?
- Does the person who holds it believe it?
- Is it true?
- What is the nature of the justification that could or should be given in support of that belief?
- Are there any sceptical arguments that could threaten that supposed knowledge?
- Are there conclusive arguments that would defeat any and all such sceptical arguments?
- How reliable is the method – often sense perception – by which that belief was acquired?

These are very complex questions. They are also connected with each other in numerous subtle ways. Making a start on answering them requires realising that – although we often take ourselves to know things, whether in the various sciences or in everyday life – not all our beliefs are adequately justified. Even with the beliefs about which we feel most certain it is not always correct to think that we have a right to believe them.

### The word 'belief' in Theory of Knowledge

In ordinary conversation, talk of a person's beliefs is usually meant to refer to that person's religious, moral, political or even perhaps aesthetic convictions. They are often matters of faith rather than ones where proof or evidence is thought to be available or even relevant. Beliefs in non-philosophical talk are generally 'very firmly held convictions about very important matters'.

On the contrary, when philosophers talk about 'a belief', what is meant is 'any fact of the matter or proposition which might be held to be true'. So among your beliefs in this sense might be the belief

- that it is Monday
- that it is windy today
- that water boils at 100 degrees Celsius at sea level
- that you were born more than ten years ago
- that overeating causes obesity
- that  $2 + 2 = 4$

and so forth. A belief in this sense could be something utterly trivial as well as something serious. It could be something general or something particular. It could be something that might not have been true. (If weather fronts had behaved differently, today could have been calm rather than windy.) But equally, of course, a belief could be something that could not have been otherwise, something guaranteed true by logic (e.g. If *A* is taller than *B* and *B* is taller than *C* then *A* is taller than *C*.) The important thing is that beliefs have **truth value**. They are capable of being true or false.

We are about to embark on an exploration of the questions listed above. The intention is to draw out their implications and articulate the difficulties they raise. Philosophers specialising in Theory of Knowledge sometimes despair of giving a credible and well-defended account of the knowledge we all ordinarily and unreflectively take ourselves to have. You should try, as you make your study of epistemology, to form a reasoned judgement about whether the sceptic's despair has any sort of warrant.

## ● EMPIRICISM AND RATIONALISM

Assume for the moment that at least some of our beliefs (in the sense of 'belief' described in the box) are known to be true. This is to make the assumption that there is such a thing as knowledge at all, that we do know some things however trivial. Later in this chapter we will encounter sceptics who seriously maintain that we have no knowledge whatsoever. For the present we are going to assume that such sceptics can be defeated somehow.

Suppose you have some beliefs you are convinced are true and therefore that you know them. Asked what their source is (how you came by them) you might wonder how to avoid a false start similar to Theaetetus' false start mentioned earlier. The natural answer might seem to be something like 'Well, I know it's Monday because I looked at the calendar' or 'I can see that it's windy by looking out the window.' But would that take us very far in a philosophical enquiry of the sort we are doing?

Perhaps surprisingly, many philosophers have thought this natural approach is actually a good way to start. For we can in fact generalise fruitfully from such examples. In each of these two cases, different as they are in some ways, we come up with a belief that is a promising candidate to be knowledge simply by looking and seeing. Looking and seeing (indeed, using all of your senses) is one – very important – form of experience. These two examples thus suggest that one (very general) source of at least some knowledge is experience.

Of course it hardly needs saying that not every proposition suggested by or derived from experience constitutes knowledge. Some beliefs suggested by some experiences are not even true so they cannot be knowledge. Seeing the landscape through a window spattered with water droplets I may say 'It's raining' when in fact the rain stopped some time ago. Part of my experience seems to teach me that it is raining but in this case what I learn from (that part of) my experience is not knowledge but a mistake.

Here is a different example. If I know that a particular friend is taller than me and I hear that her younger brother has grown taller than her then I easily infer, even without seeing him, that her brother is taller than me as well. I do not need to see him to know that he is taller than me. This is not something I am taught by experience. Rather, it is a piece of knowledge whose source is reasoning. I *could* have learned it by visual comparison or measurement. But in the example as I told it simple reasoning was enough, independent of any investigation using my senses, to ascertain the truth.

The two sources of knowledge that have now been introduced – reasoning and experience – have been associated with two great movements or approaches in the history of philosophy.

**Rationalism** in its most extreme form is the view that all knowledge is ultimately derived from or depends upon truths obtained by the employment of unaided reason alone.

**Empiricism** in its most extreme form is the view that all knowledge is ultimately derived from or consists in truths obtained from experience alone.

It is doubtful whether anyone has ever been a rationalist or an empiricist in these extreme forms. History of philosophy textbooks and commentaries traditionally list the seventeenth-century philosophers René Descartes (1596–1650), Baruch Spinoza (1632–77) and Gottfried Leibniz (1646–1716) under the heading ‘Rationalists’. Sometimes Plato (428–348 BC) and Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) are grouped with them under the same heading. Similarly John Locke (1632–1704), George Berkeley (1685–1753) and David Hume (1711–76) are often described as ‘the British Empiricists’. Shortly we shall see that these titles need careful qualification if they are to be applied appropriately to any of the philosophers named.



## QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

Are there any possible sources of knowledge other than reason or experience?

### Rationalism

The reason why I have said that perhaps, strictly speaking, none of the philosophers just listed deserves the unqualified title ‘rationalist’ is because there are a number of distinct notions or principles associated with the term ‘rationalism’. Most of the philosophers labelled rationalists subscribe to only a subset of those principles or notions, not to all of them.

Here is a list of some of the main doctrines that have at different times been associated with the title rationalist:

- that it is possible to attain knowledge of the existence of things through the exercise of reason alone
- that some knowledge is innate (known from birth)
- that all knowledge is part of a single deductive system and that all phenomena can be explained within this system
- that empirically acquired knowledge (if there is any) is less certain and inferior in status to deductively acquired knowledge
- that rationalist views are opposed to those of the empiricists.

## Knowledge of existence

In some ways Descartes is the paradigmatic rationalist. Famously, he believes that at least his own existence can be known by the exercise of reason alone. Indeed, anyone who follows the procedure of systematic doubt that he describes in the *Meditations* can reason with complete certainty to his or her own existence. For as Descartes realised, however hard you try to doubt or question your own existence or to imagine that you don't really exist but are just dreaming or being tricked into believing that you do, it is always certain that *something* must exist to do that very doubting or questioning. There must be a dupe to *be* duped, a dreamer who dreams his own existence.

Descartes also holds that the existence of God can be proven by deductive argument involving only his innate ideas and premises he takes to be self-evident. This argument makes no appeal to sensory information or to experience.

## Innate knowledge

However, it would be controversial to say that Descartes – paradigmatic rationalist though he is – holds in a straightforward way any of the *other* four strands of rationalism summarised above.

For instance, it might be argued that Descartes does not believe in innate knowledge. As mentioned just above, it is certainly true that he thinks we all have a number of 'innate ideas': he thinks, for example, that we are all born with an innate idea of God. We may, however, need to reach the age of reason before we are able to employ our inborn ideas in a clear way in any of our thoughts and reflections.

And in any event an idea does not by itself constitute knowledge. Remember that knowledge requires truth. To know something is to know that something is the case. And it is only propositions or beliefs that can have a truth value. That is, only propositions can be true or false. So Descartes's belief in innate ideas cannot be read, without further argument, as a belief in innate knowledge.

It has to be admitted that some readers think Descartes's innate ideas are not just the single atoms of thought I have been taking them to be but, rather, that each of them incorporates several elements in a way that makes it more like a proposition than a single, uncombined notion or concept. So perhaps, after all, Descartes does subscribe to the view that we have some innate knowledge. This is a matter of interpretation. The important thing to realise at this point is that Descartes's status as a rationalist does not depend on his believing that there is such a thing as innate knowledge.

**Truth requires propositions**

A single idea on its own, not combined with any other idea, cannot be either true or false. To see what this means suppose I come up to you and say 'oranges'. Is what I have said true or false? You know what I am talking about. You know that oranges are a citrus fruit, orange in colour, tasting a certain way, and so forth. But have I said anything you could evaluate as being either true or false when I utter my single word, 'oranges'?

Obviously not. I would have to combine 'oranges' with some other idea, perhaps the predicate '. . . are fruits' or a subject like 'I am allergic to . . .', before I would have said anything that had a chance of being true (or false either).

Other philosophers on the other hand would count themselves as rationalists precisely because they do believe in innate knowledge. Among contemporary philosophers the American, Noam Chomsky, is well known for subscribing to a particular innatist doctrine. He is an expert in linguistics and his linguistic innatism holds that human beings, however different the natural languages that they learn as babies, share an innate 'deep grammar'. In other words he believes that, as a species, we have innate knowledge of the general grammatical principles governing production of all human languages, however different the surface features of those languages. We are born knowing which very general grammatical rules to follow as soon as we begin turning the very many bits of language we hear as newborn infants into utterances of our own.

Chomsky associates his linguistic innatism with classical rationalism and identifies himself explicitly with Descartes and Leibniz. He regards them as his philosophical ancestors in – as he interprets them – claiming that important areas of human knowledge are inborn.

Plato is another philosopher who is often described as a rationalist because of his doctrine that all knowledge worthy of the name is innate. This is not the place to explore Plato's doctrine in detail. Suffice it to say that on his view souls exist before they are incarnated in human beings. Before their time as embodied humans begins they are made acquainted with the eternal Platonic Ideas (or Forms), knowledge of which constitutes all the knowledge there is, on Plato's view. (How this acquaintance is achieved is mysterious and the subject of much speculation by commentators.)



Knowledge for Plato is thus inborn in the sense that it is already there in the newborn's mind even though it is made obscure and difficult to access by the effects of the soul's being united with the body. But the unique features of his epistemology just described mean that Plato, alone in the history of philosophy, is *both* an innatist and a thinker who believes that all knowledge is acquired in the course of – a very special kind of non-sensory, pre-natal – experience.



## QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

Are there any pieces or sorts of knowledge which you were born knowing?

### Knowledge as a deductive system

Another thread in rationalism is the suggestion that knowledge forms a deductive system, so that reason in the narrow sense of 'deductive power' or 'capacity to draw inferences' is all that is needed to acquire knowledge. This view could involve holding that *all* knowledge is enclosed in a deductive system. But it could also take the weaker form of holding that important truths of, for example, metaphysics, logic and morality are knowable but only by deducing them from other known truths. On such a weaker view there would also be the possibility of obtaining other knowledge from other sources (most likely, experience).

Of course deduction has to start somewhere. This is perhaps one reason why belief in inborn or innate knowledge is often held to be a part of rationalism. But the starting point for deducing all the rest of knowledge need not be something known innately. For Descartes, for example, it is the knowledge of his own existence, itself a piece of knowledge gained by reasoning and not known innately, which for him acts as the foundation of the rest of what can be known.

What is needed by the rationalist **foundationalist** is not a truth that you are born knowing but rather a truth that can be known independently of experience. This is what the logicians call a piece of ***a priori*** knowledge. To know something *a priori* is to know it without doing any research, without doing a field study or going into the lab, without doing any experiments. Indeed, *a priori* knowledge is knowledge of propositions that *could not* be proved or confirmed observationally. There is no experimental or sensory evidence you could assemble to show that such a proposition is true or to justify your belief in it.

Good candidates for knowability *a priori* are what logicians call **necessary truths**. These are ones that could not – logically could not – fail to be true. To understand

such a truth is to see that it could not fail to be the case. Geometry and logic provide numerous examples of such necessary truths which can be known *a priori*. So the example used above involving the 'taller than' relation can be known independently of any experience to express a necessary truth and that is why it is rightly said to be knowable *a priori*. (If *A* is taller than *B* and *B* is taller than *C*, *A cannot fail to be* taller than *C*.) Likewise, truths of arithmetic like  $2 + 2 = 4$  are knowable *a priori* because they can be seen straight off to state necessities. Arithmetic truths like this could not state a falsehood without changing the meanings of the symbols used to express them.

It should be noted that 'necessary truth' and 'known *a priori*' are not synonyms. They do not mean the same thing even if some truths that are necessary – meaning that they *could not* be false – happen also to give us examples of *a priori* knowledge. Some necessities are knowable only *a posteriori*. They cannot be known to be true without some help or support from experience but they state necessities nonetheless.

For example, to discover that what the ancients called 'the morning star' is the very same heavenly body as the one they called 'the evening star' you need what is called 'empirical evidence'; you must have used your senses. So this knowledge is *a posteriori* knowledge even though the proposition you know (that the morning star is the very same thing as the evening star) is something that must be true since a thing's identity with itself is something necessary, something it could not possibly escape.



## QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

Can you think of any other examples (other than identity statements) of truths that are knowable only *a posteriori* although they are necessary truths?

### Related examination question

(Part a) Explain and briefly illustrate the meaning of *a priori* and *a posteriori* knowledge. (6 marks) (2001)

### Contrasts with empiricism

Rationalists believe that most of our knowledge comes from reason unassisted by the senses. But they also think that any knowledge that does come – or appears to come – through the senses is inferior to what reason teaches. Plato, as we have

seen, believes that all knowledge comes from pre-natal acquaintance with the Ideas and that the senses can give us, at best, right opinion. Similarly, Descartes argues that reason alone gives us doubt-proof certainty.

But it is a serious misapprehension to think that rationalism and empiricism are necessarily mutually exclusive stances. Descartes also believed in the value of empirical research, in every discipline or science from physics and physiology to optics and musicology. He did not dismiss knowledge gained through the senses. Rather he regarded the deliverances of reason as *necessary prerequisites* to the safe acquisition of empirical knowledge. Reason must give me knowledge that a non-deceiving God exists before I can legitimately trust and claim to know what my senses tell me.

And if we are looking for scepticism about the possibility of gaining knowledge of truths through **inductive reasoning** built up from sensory observations, we will find it – not so much among the classical rationalists – but rather in the writings of Hume, the most celebrated of the British Empiricists. His quarrel with the rationalists was not with their respect for reason and demonstration but with their conviction that metaphysical and moral principles, every bit as much as mathematical and logical propositions, could be given justifications by reason.

## Related examination questions

(Part a) Briefly explain what is meant by rationalism. (6 marks) (2002)

(Part b) Explain and illustrate the rationalist view that some concepts are *not* drawn from experience. (15 marks) (2003)

## Empiricism

There is certainly a contrast between empiricism and rationalism. But this is not so much a contrast between diametrically opposed principles as a (sometimes quite profound) difference in emphasis. In what follows I will give an account of the empiricist stance by contrasting the central doctrines of empiricism with the views referred to in the previous section as five ‘strands’ of rationalist thought.

### No innate ideas or knowledge

To begin with, then, empiricists differ from some rationalists in believing that all ideas come from experience. For some empiricists there are no innate ideas. The

mind is a blank tablet (a *tabula rasa*) at birth. Thus the truths or propositions that make up our knowledge consist of ideas that have come to us exclusively through our senses. There is no such thing as inborn knowledge.

It should be noted, however, that empiricists recognise some form of inner sense as well as the outer senses (sight, hearing and the rest). This means that they accept that experience includes more than just sense perception. Introspection reveals a wealth of emotions, sensations, feelings and memories, which shape our knowledge of things.

That said, however, it must be admitted that the empiricist stance can be summarised without too much caricature in two simple slogans rooted firmly in the sensory realm: 'seeing is believing' and 'nothing in the mind that has not first been in the senses'.

### The rejection of reason?

The definition of extreme empiricism offered above (p. 9) suggests that such an extremist would differ from rationalists in claiming that there is no such thing as *a priori* knowledge, that all knowledge is *a posteriori* (it comes from experience).

This seems so obviously false, however (think of all the truths proven in Euclidean geometry), that we should not be surprised if we are unable to find any actual philosopher who ever held this extreme view. If innate ideas and knowledge are rejected and thus experience is regarded as the only source of ideas it is still possible for an empiricist to believe that some or even all knowledge is founded in or supported by reason.

Locke, for example, offers a theory of knowledge that maintains that all ideas come from experience but that all knowledge consists in discovering, with the use of reason, which ideas 'agree' with each other and which do not. Thus, officially, Locke accepts as knowledge only necessary truths that can be known *a priori*.

However, he also maintains that experience and experiment teach us many 'right opinions' about the world studied by the physical sciences. So although he stops short of calling such empirically discovered truth 'knowledge' he deserves to be regarded as an empiricist not only for his rejection of innate ideas but for his pioneering allegiance to the capacity of empirical science to justify (as 'right opinion') our claim to the truth of our beliefs about matters of fact. And unlike Plato, Locke is a great respecter of right opinion – especially that provided by empirical science!

Berkeley and Hume also have an allegiance to empirical as opposed to 'armchair' science and endorse its capacity to provide us with true beliefs about the world. Berkeley is famous, or perhaps notorious, for having denied the distinction between sensory appearance and reality (see below p. 38). He maintains that things are constituted by the ideas my senses give me when I see, hear and touch them. There is nothing more to know about the real nature of the objects of the senses than is given in sense experience.

Hume is also notorious. In his case it is for his scepticism about the possibility of our having knowledge about any of what he calls 'matters of fact'. 'Matters of fact' are those propositions that are not demonstrable, i.e. they are not knowable *a priori* or guaranteed by logic. Experience urges us to accept them as true and they would thus be *a posteriori* knowledge – if they were known.

But Hume's matters of fact cannot be known, on his view. And this is precisely because they cannot be demonstrated. For example, experience may teach me that bread is nourishing but there is no logical inference by which I can demonstrate (prove) the fact. Hume would say 'and rightly so', for logic certainly does not rule out the possibility that the next piece of bread I eat might fail to provide any nourishment at all.

However, Hume's allegiance to empirical science is shown by his devising rules for using inductive reasoning so as to have – if not knowledge of matters of scientific fact – the most highly probable and trustworthy opinions. Such opinions are, on Hume's view, safe guides to action. They are also ones that we are both wise to follow and prevented from ignoring by human nature.

### Reason cannot prove the existence of anything

Hume's empiricism does not show itself in a reluctance to acknowledge that some of our knowledge comes from reason for, as we have seen, he is quick to make that acknowledgement. Rather he is an empiricist because he denies that reason is capable of justifying our acceptance of numerous important (metaphysical) beliefs. These include:

- belief in the existence of the external world
- belief in necessary causal connections in nature
- belief in the existence of the self
- belief in the existence of either material or immaterial substance.

Unfortunately, as we have also seen, Hume does not believe that sensory evidence can establish the existence of any of these things either.

Hume's empiricist predecessors (i.e. Locke and Berkeley) on the other hand seem inclined to think

- either that we sense material things immediately and are thus justified in believing in their existence (Berkeley)
- or at least that our senses provide us with sensations from which we can infer the existence of material things as the causes of those sensations (Locke).

In the latter case Locke might say that we have only 'right opinion' but he never seriously questions that we are justified in believing in the existence of the material world of which we have sensory experience.

Hume's extreme scepticism has seemed to many to be an inevitable outcome of empiricism, one that Locke and after him Berkeley avoided only by blinding themselves to the implications of their shared notion of a perceptual idea. For the empiricist notion of a perceptual idea is the notion of a non-material entity which stands in for the material thing or property of which it is an idea. If sense perception can only furnish us with intermediaries, entities which are not the material objects themselves about which we are trying to know, there is always the chance that those intermediaries may fail to represent the world accurately. We will see below that this simple line of thought underpins all the standard forms of epistemological scepticism.

### Related examination question

(Part c) Assess empiricism. (24 marks) (2003)

## ● KNOWLEDGE AND JUSTIFICATION

If one of your firmly held beliefs is challenged how should you go about trying to justify it? We ordinarily assume that any proposition of which we feel certain is true. But my conviction, no matter how strong, that a particular belief of mine is true is not, and should not be, enough to convince me or anyone else that I am justified in holding it. For certainty is an emotional or subjective state of the would-be knower. It is not an evidential state. And even if knowing too is a mental state it is not the same sort of mental state. My feeling of certainty should never count all by itself as evidence for the truth of the proposition to which I subscribe.

### Certainty is not equivalent to knowledge

To see that certainty and knowledge do not amount to the same thing consider the following two examples:

Imagine a bigot who thinks members of a particular race or religion are inferior to other people. No matter how certain he is about the inferiority of those he looks down on you are bound to think that his certainty does not amount to knowledge. His certainty gives no justification or support to his (bigoted) belief.

Now consider a very able but very nervous student. She has worked hard and revised diligently. During the examination she may be so nervous that she feels wholly uncertain of the truth of what she is writing even though her excellent answers secure her a high mark. Her knowledge is not in any way diminished by her temporary uncertainty.

Clearly, the ideal state of affairs would be if certainty and knowledge were always found together. It is true that they have no intrinsic connection with each other. It would, however, be highly rational and desirable for people always to feel most sure of what they are genuinely entitled to claim to know. But certainty is no guarantee of knowledge. So how can we be sure that what we believe we also know?

Since Plato's time it has been held that knowing is not a subjective matter. It is at least a matter of being *justified* in a belief, of having what is sometimes called (in a phrase popularised by A. J. Ayer (1910–89)) 'a *right* to be sure' (Ayer 1956: 31ff.). Here are a number of objective criteria which have been proposed for distinguishing genuinely justified belief from that which, however strong, lacks justification:

- quantity and quality of evidence
- predictive and explanatory power
- reasonableness and probability
- acquisition by a reliable method
- deducibility or inferability from foundational pieces of knowledge
- coherence with a body of accepted beliefs
- immunity to doubt.

I will now look in detail at each of these proposed criteria in turn.

## Quantity and quality of evidence

Any proposition I believe on good evidence is *prima facie* one about which I have a right to be sure, something I am justified in believing. We could all give a fairly full list of the sorts of things that should count as good evidence and be taken seriously in any forum, for example a court of law:

- witnessing the event myself or receiving information from a reliable witness
- photographs, sound recordings, documents, DNA samples, fingerprints or other physical evidence that attests to what happened
- the word of a competent authority: one with the training, experience and expertise to make judgements in such a matter
- the use of appropriately sophisticated or refined equipment for making any relevant observations or tests
- sufficient numbers of tests or observations under differing circumstances producing the same results with no counter-instances.

This list makes no pretence to be exhaustive. In different circumstances different criteria might prove relevant or even crucial. What matters is that these are the sorts of evidential requirements that most of us would readily mention as needing to be met before a claim to know would be justified. At least some or all of these would need to be produced by anyone trying to justify any knowledge claim.

And the more such criteria are met the more we should be inclined to say the knowledge claim is supported or justified to a high degree or even that it is conclusively justified. These remarks may seem very commonsensical and uncontroversial – almost too obvious to mention. Later on we will look at the views of radical sceptics, those who say that even knowledge claims that meet all these criteria and more are insufficiently justified. At that point it will be worth remembering how undeniable these points seemed here.

## Predictive and explanatory power

In the previous section, the notion of a belief's being 'justified to a high degree' appeared. This hints at a difference between the *truth* of beliefs and their *justification*, which is very important to note explicitly. If you believe a proposition it must be either true or false and that exhausts the possibilities. But a belief may be justified to different degrees. When it is highly justified we say that it is 'reasonable' or perhaps 'well warranted'.

It is important to note also that even a very highly justified belief might fail to be true and thus fail to be knowledge. The other side of this coin is that a



true belief you happen to hold by accident or on insufficient grounds would not be knowledge even though it is true. True belief and knowledge need not coincide.

Now it seems only common sense that a belief will be justified just to the extent that that belief allows or helps us to predict and explain relevant phenomena. This seems right either in everyday life or in science. Suppose the belief I am claiming is true is that the walls of my kitchen are yellow. You would expect to see yellow walls when you enter that room. Again, if you claim to know that I have been painting, your claim is supported by the fact that, if true, that proposition would neatly explain why my hands and clothes are covered with wet paint.

Here is another example. If an astronomer believes some proposition that is suggested by a particular astronomical theory, his belief will be supported by the occurrence of a planetary movement predicted by that theory. The movement of that planet will be explained by the astronomer's theory.

### **Reasonableness and probability**

Reasonableness and probability, like the two criteria just discussed, are not by themselves conclusive. Obviously they are also to some extent relative. This does not mean that they cannot be part of a satisfactory case in support of the correctness or truth of some proposition. They can thus, together with evidence that other criteria from the list are met, provide a high degree of justification for believing that proposition.

For example, the British climate is such that weather predictions are very difficult to make at any time of year. Nonetheless I would be justified in believing that there will be rain in the Midlands sometime in the next four months. This is because past experience teaches that rain is highly probable. Rainfall statistics show that there has never been any four-month period since records began when that part of the country has been completely without rain. It is highly reasonable to be guided by the Met. Office records in such a case.

### **Reliable methods of belief acquisition**

If the method by which you acquired a particular belief is a method which, in general, reliably produces true beliefs it seems very reasonable to trust that belief. Such a belief seems highly justified and that in turn gives you good grounds for claiming knowledge.

For example, if you have looked up the time of an exam on the printed timetable issued by the examination board you should feel very confident about your belief

about the time of that exam. Having used a reliable method of belief formation you have a very high degree of justification for your belief. Asked if you know when that exam is going to be, you are likely to say you do know.

But which methods of acquiring beliefs are the reliable ones? The natural first response to this question is 'The ones that always give us true beliefs!' However, a method's track record turns out, on reflection, not to be a very good indicator for our purposes. This is because, as was pointed out earlier, some true beliefs can fail to be knowledge precisely because it is possible to hold, on poor grounds or no grounds at all, a belief that just *happens* to be true. That is to say, it is all too possible to be right by a kind of accident or luck.

Consider the following example. Imagine a soothsayer who makes predictions about the outcomes of sporting events by reading tea leaves. Ten times out of ten he successfully names the winners on the basis of the arrangement of leaves in the bottom of his teacup. Since his method of coming up with the winners' names has a 100 per cent success rate it would surely count as a reliable method if generating truths were all that mattered for judging reliability.

Yet it is impossible to see how there could be any causal connection whatever between the outcome of a distant sporting event and the pattern of some tea leaves. The reasonable view would appear to be that the successful predictions are a result of nothing but accident or coincidence.

Using a reliable method of acquiring true beliefs, if such a method can be found, is an excellent way of obtaining highly justified beliefs. But the example just given shows that we need some way of identifying reliable methods of belief-acquisition independently of their 'truth ratio', as it has been called. Appeal to 'reliable methods' does not take us beyond the notions of good evidence, reasonableness and probability, predictive and explanatory power, which we have already looked at. For these are the criteria that we have to employ when judging which methods of belief-acquisition or formation are plausibly regarded as the reliable ones, whose use justifies us in subscribing to a belief.



## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

What does good justification consist in? How can you be sure that you are justified in accepting the beliefs or propositions you take to be true?

### Foundational pieces of knowledge

Some epistemologists would say that what is needed to ground or justify many of our beliefs is that they have the right relationship to other beliefs that we

possess, namely our foundational beliefs or pieces of knowledge. Foundational beliefs on this view are ones that need no further support because they are known straight off to be true. They carry their truth 'on their surface' so to speak and so can act as the foundations upon which the edifice of knowledge is erected. For the foundationalist, all other justified beliefs are justified because they depend upon or are derived from the foundational propositions.

The phrases 'known straight off' or 'carry their truth on their surface' are not very precise. Some foundationalists mean by such phrases that basic beliefs must guarantee their own truth by being necessary truths, ones that are **incorrigible**. (This means they are not the sort of thing that is capable of being corrected.) Others think there are basic beliefs that are corrigible or fallible but are nonetheless somehow self-certifying or self-justifying. Their self-justification may be held to consist in the fact that they have been obtained using a generally reliable method and that there is no evidence against them. The risk they carry of being mistaken or untrue is utterly minimal.



## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

What is the difference between a foundational truth that is necessary and one that is fallible? Can you think of any examples?

So, historically, foundationalists differ from each other in the (types of) propositions they regard as foundational. For example, many analytic philosophers of the early twentieth century were persuaded that certain kinds of sensory reports can be known in a 'straight off', non-derived way. To them, reports like 'I see a red patch' or 'This seems smooth to me' seemed such simple expressions of what is given immediately in sense experience that they must be good candidates to be utterly basic or foundational beliefs. They seem to lie beyond the possibility of support by anything else. No further justification need or could be given for believing them.

The view just described takes **sense data** (the basic bits of experience given to the subject in sense perception) to furnish the elements upon which other beliefs depend. So my basic knowledge that I see something green and brown might serve, on such a foundationalist view, as the basis or premise from which I might infer that there is a tree.

Descartes, as we have seen, does not accord a foundational role to sense data. He does, however, regard at least the proposition 'I think therefore I am' as a non-derivative truth, which is basic in the sense that it cannot be doubted. Since it is indubitable, it can serve as a pattern for other truths. Any proposition as clear

and distinct as 'I think therefore I am' is equally to be trusted, on Descartes's view. Even empirical beliefs can be justified if they come to me as a result of the exercise of the senses I have been given by a god who does not deceive. And I can know that such a god exists because I can reason to that conclusion from the innate contents of my mind including my innate idea of God.

Various though the different types of foundationalism are, they share a central structural feature. For each such view there are only two kinds of beliefs. There are the fundamental, underived beliefs. There are also the less fundamental, derived or dependent beliefs supported by the fundamental beliefs. To be justified in believing one of the dependent or derived beliefs is to see how that belief is supported or generated by the fundamental true belief on which it rests.

Foundationalism of whatever sort has a picture of our knowledge as involving chains of justification. Derived knowledge rests on basic beliefs. Basic beliefs certify their own truth in some way and thus justify themselves. Thus, for foundationalism, if there is anything at all that is rightly called 'knowledge' it must be either foundational itself or based on some foundational knowledge. So the existence of any knowledge at all implies the existence of basic foundational knowledge. This gives us what is sometimes called the 'infinite regress argument' for foundationalism:

- If every justified belief were justified by inferring it from some other justified belief there would have to be an infinite regress (an unending succession) of justifications.
- But an infinite regress is impossible.
- So, if there is any knowledge at all there must be some beliefs that are self-justifying or foundational.

This suggests the two main criticisms which have been levelled at foundationalist theories of knowledge. First, there is the question of whether the foundationalist can give a convincing account of the nature of the inferential connection or dependence that he claims exists between basic and derived beliefs. Second, there is the question of how the foundationalist's basic beliefs manage to be intrinsically credible or self-certifying in the strong sense that the foundationalist needs.

## Coherence

The second difficult question just raised is particularly difficult for the foundationalist who regards reports of a subject's sense data or sensory experiences as the paradigm foundational propositions or basic beliefs. This is the

question of how there can be intrinsically credible, self-certifying beliefs or propositions. For sense data reports such as 'I see a red patch' or 'This feels smooth to me' do not pretend to be **self-evident truths**.

### The difference between the self-evident and the obvious

A self-evident truth, as philosophers use this term, is one that is true in virtue of logic. It could not fail to be true. In order to know that it is true all you need do is understand what it is saying. This means that the set of self-evident truths does not coincide with the set of obvious truths. For example, if you are standing unsheltered in open country in the middle of a force nine gale it will be obvious that it is windy. But if you then say 'It is windy' you are not uttering a proposition whose truth is guaranteed by logic. That proposition is a **contingent truth**. That it is windy is not a logical necessity – the weather could easily have been different. How it *is* is not how it logically *had to be*. It is obvious, but not self-evident, that it is windy.

Now consider an example invented by Quine and Ullian (Quine and Ullian 1970: 22–3). (They use the term 'demonstrable' as I use 'self-evident'.)

'If you help none who help themselves you do not help yourself.'

That this proposition is true is hardly obvious. Indeed it isn't even obvious what it means. Understanding it may take several readings. When you do succeed in working out what it is saying, however, you should see that it cannot fail to be true. It is self-evident in that to understand it is to see its logical necessity.

Sense data reports (sometimes called 'observation statements') may sometimes be obvious but they are not self-evident. The immediacy they possess is that of individual subjective experience. Their claims to be self-certifying or intrinsically credible rest on that immediacy together with their simplicity. Those who suggest them as candidates to be beliefs that are basic or foundational for all the rest of our knowledge are asking, 'How could I be wrong to trust a belief as unmediated and simple as "I see a red patch" or "This seems smooth to me"?''

Another way of expressing this question is 'How could I be mistaken in simply reporting how things seem to me?' As we shall see, radical sceptics find it all too

easy to raise doubts about supposedly basic beliefs that are not self-evident and rely – as all reports of appearances do – only on the authority of introspection.

Those epistemologists who are worried about the capacity of foundationalism to give a credible account of the basis and structure of our knowledge often turn to coherence as either an additional or an alternative way of providing justification for our beliefs. The sort of coherence they have in mind is the coherence beliefs can have with one another. It seems a reasonable suggestion that our beliefs do not stand or fall in isolation. Foundationalism is on the right track in seeing beliefs as related to one another in a system.

But it is wrong to think we must view this system as linear and one-directional. The foundationalist regards every justified belief as either justified by another, which is in turn justified by a further belief, etc., or as being itself an intrinsically credible point at which a chain of justification can terminate.

In contrast, the coherentist defines justification, not in terms of chains of dependency, but in terms of relations of mutual support. At any given time we have many beliefs that we accept as true. Accepting a new belief is a matter of examining the ‘fit’ between the new proposition and those already accepted as true. We are justified in accepting a new belief that coheres with our existing belief set. A net with many interconnections or an ecosystem with many different niches – either of these gives a better analogy in terms of which to understand our belief sets than does the image of a number of mutually independent chains.

But what does coherence actually amount to? Obviously propositions that contradict one another are not coherent with one another. But coherentists mean something much richer by their notion of coherence than ‘bare absence of contradiction’. Coherent beliefs are not merely ones that are not in head-on conflict. They lend each other support in a mutually reinforcing system. A foundationalist might, like Descartes, take seriously the idea of building up a system of justified beliefs one element at a time, perhaps even starting with a single proposition. But a coherentist views a belief system as a large set of beliefs that must be acquired, if not all at once, then at least largely at one time.

What criticisms challenge the coherentist view of justification? I have already raised one of the main difficulties: the difficulty of specifying in full detail and with precision exactly what the coherence relation consists in.

A second difficulty is the worry that a complete belief system might have a serious competitor. It seems easy to imagine the following. There are two distinct sets of mutually coherent beliefs, which are equally extensive and systematic. Each seems to accommodate basic observation reports equally well but they

differ crucially. The nature of the world of which one system of beliefs purports to give us knowledge is very different from the world pictured by the other.

If coherence is the sole criterion of a justified belief surely each belief in each of the imagined rival systems is equally justified and has an equal chance of giving us truth about the world. Yet there is only one world and surely we are not justified in having contradictory beliefs about it?

This is perhaps why many reject such strong coherentism in favour of a weaker coherentism. This is one that looks to sense perception, memory, even some kinds of intuition as additional sources of justification complementary to that afforded by coherence.



## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

What is a coherence theory of justification? What are its strengths and weaknesses?

### The tripartite definition of knowledge

So far I have been assuming that knowledge and highly justified belief go together. It is time to examine that assumption in some detail. Traditionally, propositional knowledge (which is the only kind in question in this chapter) has been defined as justified true belief. The three elements must all be present if a proposition *p* which the subject claims to know is to be judged a genuine piece of knowledge for that subject.

Belief is required only in the sense that the subject would assent to *p* if asked. The nervous examinee mentioned above would count as believing her answers because they were the ones she wrote, however un-confidently, in response to those questions.

Truth must be present in all but the most peripheral examples. In fact, it takes considerable ingenuity to think of a case where one could know something which was not the case. After all, why seek knowledge unless we take it to give us insight into the way things actually are?

However, it might be worth considering briefly one such example. A schoolboy in ancient Greece who is asked to say where the gods live replies that they live on Mount Olympus. Arguably it is right to say that he *knows* the answer. It may be that we feel sure that no such gods ever existed or lived anywhere. Nonetheless the boy had knowledge in that he was fully justified in his belief and got the answer right according to the standards then prevailing.

In general, however, knowledge involves truth and belief. But clearly, justification carries most of the weight in the tripartite definition of knowledge. This is one reason why there are theories of knowledge corresponding to each of the broad types of justification we have looked at. There are reliabilists, foundationalists and coherentists about knowledge as there are about belief.

The tripartite definition has held sway ever since Plato and deservedly so. Truth, belief and justification are all crucial features of knowledge. Equally important, but perhaps less attended to, however, are the relations that hold between these three features for any particular would-be knower. This last point came sharply into focus in 1963 when Edmund Gettier published his celebrated challenge to the tripartite definition in an article called 'Is justified true belief knowledge?'

Gettier's position, argued for by the use of counter-examples, is that a given subject might be justified in believing a true proposition and still fail to know that proposition. The subject might fail to have knowledge because his believing the true proposition in question might be an accident rather than a result of the justification he possesses. Gettier's challenge could be expressed as the view that truth, belief and justification, while they are all **necessary** for knowledge, are not jointly **sufficient**. Some other condition or conditions must be added to the definition of knowledge.

The simpler of Gettier's examples goes roughly as follows. Imagine a short-listed candidate for a job (Mr Smith) who overhears the president of the company say that one of the other candidates (Mr Jones) will be hired. Waiting to be interviewed, Smith watches Jones count his change at the drinks machine. Gloomily he reasons, 'Jones is going to get the job and Jones has ten coins in his pocket. Therefore the successful candidate has ten coins in his pocket.'

Does he know that the successful candidate has ten coins in his pocket? As it happens, the belief he has is true but only because he himself, surprisingly, is offered the job and, unknown to him, he has ten coins, uncounted, in his own pocket. His belief in the proposition that the successful candidate has ten coins in his pocket is a justified belief since he deduced it validly from two propositions he was justified in believing. There is nothing wrong with his reasoning. But it seems clear that he does not have knowledge of that proposition, justified and true though his belief is.

Since Gettier's famous challenge, epistemologists have laboured to repair or amend the tripartite definition. Some have suggested that *justification* needs more, ever more subtle, criteria and conditions. Others have suggested further conditions to add to the traditional three. Others still, as mentioned above, have



said that the *right* relation must exist between the belief's truth and the subject's belief.

So it has been said that there is knowledge only when the truth of the belief in question is causally responsible for the subject's believing it. If the truth of *p* is not at least part of the explanation of *why* I believe *p* then my belief in *p* is not knowledge. Later in this chapter we will see how attempts to meet Gettier counter-examples like the one above have merged with many recent attempts to disarm radical scepticism.



## QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

What further condition or conditions could be added to truth, belief and justification to make a satisfactory definition of knowledge?

### Related examination question

(Part c) Assess the view that justified true belief is *not* the same as knowledge. (24 marks) (2002)

## ● KNOWLEDGE AND SCEPTICISM

A radical sceptic might object at this point that most of the discussion of justification and knowledge so far has been a waste of time and energy. In the opinion of the most radical sort of sceptic there is no belief that is sufficiently justified to count as knowledge. This is because he is not prepared to call any proposition *that can be doubted* knowledge. And he is convinced that there are no propositions that cannot be called into doubt.

### Philosophical doubt

Even the sorts of axioms and basic premises that rationalist foundationalists wish to start from are vulnerable to the doubt which this severest of philosophical sceptics employs. For this kind of doubt is hyperbolic (i.e. extremely exaggerated) doubt. Descartes called such doubt, when he made use of it in the *Meditations*, 'metaphysical doubt', meaning that it went beyond mere ordinary feelings of uncertainty or psychological doubt. This kind of doubt is a tool designed to test our knowledge to the limit. It involves suspending judgement on anything that it is logically possible to suspend judgement about.

Famously, Descartes concluded that his *cogito ergo sum* was proof against this metaphysical doubt, so he did not rest in scepticism. But some sceptics find it possible to suspend judgement even here. They would say that experience by itself does not give knowledge. All knowledge involves the application of concepts and background information to experience. The best-entrenched concept may turn out to be vulnerable to conceptual revision.

'Witches', 'demons', the names of Greek gods, were once thought to be concepts and referring expressions in good standing. Now they are thought to have failed ever to refer to anything real. Perhaps the same could happen even to concepts like that of a thinker or a subject of experience.

Perhaps easier to grasp, or at least to agree with, is the caution of the philosophical sceptic whose philosophical doubt falls on the observation reports talked about in the section on foundationalism above. For surely it is true that I could always be mistaken in thinking I am seeing something red or feeling something smooth?

If, like this sort of sceptic, we refuse the title of knowledge to anything vulnerable to this kind of hyperbolic doubt there will be very few, if any, beliefs we are entitled to call knowledge.

## Global scepticism

There are philosophers who think, on just such grounds, that there is no such thing as knowledge. One title for this view is **global scepticism**. The global sceptic holds that no belief is immune to this sort of corrosive doubt, that no belief is sufficiently justified to count as knowledge.

It is sometimes thought that the global sceptic can be easily refuted. The sceptic who claimed to *know* that there was no such thing as knowledge would be defeated out of his own mouth. He would be claiming knowledge that there is no knowledge.

However, global scepticism is not so easily dealt with. Its challenge is, as in Descartes's case, mainly aimed at those who wish to defend the view that some kinds of knowledge exist. Its purpose is to make defenders of knowledge produce successful *arguments* for their position.

So the global sceptic can simply deny that there is any view or belief that lies outside the reach of doubt – including his own view that there is no knowledge. Now the burden of proof falls on the anti-sceptic. How is the anti-sceptic to respond? One minimal move I can make is to argue that it is not logically possible that all my beliefs be false or mistaken together. Some of the

propositions I believe and take myself to be justified in believing must be true and thus known by me even if I do not know which ones.

### **An argument against one kind of global scepticism**

To see that it is not logically possible for all your beliefs to be mistaken together, consider a belief that seems highly justified. For anyone reading this, the belief 'I am not at the North Pole' seems likely to be true and believed on excellent grounds. Now imagine with the sceptic that this belief of yours is mistaken, i.e. not true. If it is not true then that implies that it *is* true that you are at the North Pole.

But consider your belief that you are not at the South Pole. If this second belief is mistaken, that implies that it *is* true that you are at the South Pole.

Now put your two original beliefs together. You believe that you are not at the North Pole and that you are not at the South Pole. At least one of these beliefs must be true. There is no way for them *both* to be false simultaneously since there is no way you could be at both Poles at the same time. (Of course they can both be *true* together!)

So, if global scepticism is the view that all my beliefs might be false together, global scepticism is wrong.

Unfortunately for the anti-sceptic there is another version of global scepticism that is more robust. It might be agreed that all my beliefs cannot be false together but this hardly matters since I can never know which among any set of beliefs are the ones that are actually true. Of any single one of my beliefs I cannot know that it is correct. So each of my beliefs in turn might be mistaken and can be doubted even if all of them together cannot be. And, thus, I do not have knowledge of any one of them.

### **Related examination question**

(Part a) Briefly explain what is meant by global (or total) scepticism. (6 marks)  
(2003)



## QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

Should the fact that I can doubt any empirical proposition anyone cares to mention make me despair of ever having knowledge of matters of fact?

### Externalism and internalism about knowledge

Some epistemologists would take the view at this point that the sceptic's position is not as threatening as might at first be thought. What is called an **externalist** about knowledge would say that it is not necessary in order to have knowledge that the knower in question know that he knows. Knowledge is not a matter of the state of mind of the knower. It is a matter of the conditions for knowledge obtaining. It is a matter of the knower being justified in the right way in believing something true.

For the externalist, as long as the subject is related in the right way to the belief whose truth he is convinced of, and to the circumstances and relations that supply the justification of his belief, that is enough for knowledge. Conditions external to the knower – or at least independent of his awareness of their holding – make it true that a particular subject's particular belief on a particular occasion is knowledge. If it is justified, non-accidentally true belief, it is knowledge. This is so whether the knower knows that he knows or not.

Unsurprisingly the contrasting view about knowledge labelled **internalism** is more threatened by the kind of global scepticism we have been examining. For the internalist, knowledge consists of awareness that the conditions for knowledge are met in the given case. On this view a subject *S* knows *p* only if

- *p* is true
- *S* believes that *p*
- *S* is justified in believing *p*, and
- *there is no element of luck or accident in S's believing p on the basis of the justification he knows himself to have.*

At this point it becomes apparent that the sceptic's ground has been vastly strengthened by Gettier's challenge. For on reflection we can see that an element of luck or accident could be involved in practically every conceivable example of a piece of knowledge that we might think we possess. Two examples should suffice to clarify this point:

First, suppose I am looking at a vase on the table and claim to know the truth of the proposition (*p*), 'There is a vase on the table', based on my perception. Ordinarily we would take clear visual perception of something under standard

conditions to justify a perceptual claim. So *p* might seem the most uncontroversial piece of knowledge I could claim to have.

However, a sceptic could argue that – even if he grants the truth of *p* – my belief in it does not amount to knowledge despite my very good sensory evidence. For I have not ruled out the possibility that what I am seeing is a cunning hologram of a vase located just in front of (and obscuring my view of) the vase that is actually there. I have not defeated the possibility that my justified belief in my true proposition is mere accident. So I do not have knowledge.

Here is a second example. After days lost in the desert without water you have become blinded by the glare and are also beginning to hallucinate. You see an oasis in the distance and think ‘At last, there is water.’ Do you know that there is water there? Even if it is true that there is water exactly where you think you see it, it could be that you are right simply by freak accident. The possibility that you are just a lucky blind hallucinator defeats your claim to know the true justified belief that you possess.

For the internalist, knowledge requires not just *actually* non-accidental justified true belief. It requires non-accidental justified true belief *that is not defeated* by the possibility of any such contrived circumstances as those described in the two examples. Since the number of such contrived possible defeating circumstances is limited only by the very generous bounds of human imagination, knowledge for the internalist looks increasingly beyond everyone’s reach.



## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Does externalism provide a safe route out of radical scepticism? Could one be an internalist and still escape scepticism?

### The argument from illusion

The two examples just given and the sceptical consequences they are designed to support are in a way comparatively novel and exotic. Remember that they are aimed only at propositions conceded by the sceptic to be *true* and *highly justified* for the subject who believes them. Yet the sceptic has his reasons for thinking they nonetheless fail to be knowledge.

But there are a number of familiar sceptical arguments aiming to capitalise on our sense of our own imperfect capacity to acquire genuine knowledge. They aim

to make us doubt by comparing our present circumstances to ones in which we have turned out to be mistaken in the past although we then thought ourselves justified. This section will explain the so-called 'argument from illusion'. In the next two sections we will look at arguments to do with dreaming and the possibility of deception.

The argument from illusion is often used by sceptics about our knowledge of the **external world** (more on this shortly). It is designed specifically to undermine our trust in our senses. This argument can be broken down into three main steps. First the sceptic asks 'What is it of which I am immediately aware in sense experience?' He wants to get me to agree that the immediate objects of perception are what philosophers call 'sense data'. The Latin word 'data' (or 'datum' in the singular) means 'given'.

A sense datum is thus a simple piece of sensory given, for example a patch of red colour I see is a visual sense datum and a sweet sound I hear is an auditory sense datum. It seems difficult to resist the claim that what we are immediately aware of in sense perception are our sense data. The term was coined as a general label for exactly that.

Moreover, think of all the ways in which I could be wrong about my present experience. There are lots of illusions or misapprehensions I could be under. For example:

- A large jumbo jet in the distance looks small.
- If my hand is cold then water that is only lukewarm may feel hot to me.
- If the conditions, for example the lighting, were non-standard I might see, say, a purple object as black.
- If I am in an unusual condition – dehydrated, drugged, ill – everything may seem blurry to me.
- If I experience a mirage or other hallucination or an after-image I may have a rich array of sense data that have no external cause at all.

Yet surely, in all these cases, *something* really has the sensory features I wrongly attribute to the world. Something is really small, hot, black, blurry or whatever. The sceptic argues that in all these cases there must be sense data that are distinct from both the subject and the things in the world. That is, there must be sense data to have the sensory features the world only seems to have.

If I agree that I am aware of sense data in cases of illusion or misperception, then the sceptic will move to the second step in his argument. This consists in pointing out that it is the best policy, all other things being equal, to give a single account of all relevantly similar phenomena. We have agreed that cases of *misperception*

are best accounted for in terms of sense data mediating between the perceiver and the world. We should therefore agree that sense data mediate between perceiver and world in *all* cases of perception, even ones where there is no mistake. The latter are called **veridical perceptions**, meaning ‘truth-telling ones’ or ‘ones that tend to lead the perceiver to make a correct judgement about the nature of the thing perceived’.

The third and final step in the argument from illusion is as follows. We have agreed that sense perception always consists in sense data mediating between a perceiver and the world. These sense data are usually seen as a special sort of mental entities. But whatever their metaphysical status they are intermediaries. Their role is to represent the character of the things in the world outside the subject. And any intermediary can be either a faithful representative or a misleading one.

We know from cases of illusion and misapprehension that sense data sometimes mislead. Perhaps most sense data are veridical but how can we ever know? In the nature of the case, there is no position from which we can see (or otherwise sense) whether our sense data match the world or not. There is no perspective from which we can see whether or not they are faithful representatives.

This is because we must always use our senses in perception and they in turn always employ sense data. They seem (or so the sceptic would have us believe) to make a kind of veil which falls between us and the world, preventing us from telling the nature of the world. For all we know, occasionally or even all the time, there could be nothing beyond this **veil of perception**. Our sense data might be all there is.



## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

What is the argument from illusion? What do sceptics take it to prove? Can it be defeated?

### **Dreaming**

Many philosophers, famously including Descartes, have raised a sceptical puzzle regarding dreaming. This puzzle could be neatly put in terms of the point just reached in the previous section, the point that our sense data could, for all we know, be all there is.

We have all had the experience of waking from a dream to discover that something we thought we were seeing, hearing or otherwise sensing was not really there. While we were asleep our experience was exactly as if we were

seeing or hearing whatever it was. But now we have woken up to find that we were in a sense deluded.

The sceptic reminds us of this universal experience of mistaking the non-veridical seemings or sense data of dreams for veridical ones. Then he asks how I can ever be sure I am not now dreaming so that any sense data I may be experiencing are just the deceptive sense data of dreams.

Now we all know the difference between dreams and reality. The problem is that at any given point we have no test that we can apply to tell whether our present experience is a dream. For example, a dreamer can dream that she is pinching herself and thus establishing that she is awake. In fact, a dreamer can dream that he is applying *any* test of wakefulness that might be devised.

So the sceptic seems to have a good case for saying that no one ever knows anything on the evidence of his or her senses. My sense data might always be the products of dreaming rather than genuine waking experience.

## Deception

The argument from deception is another sceptical hypothesis which works in much the same way as the previous two. But, according to Descartes's version at least, it calls into doubt not just knowledge based on sensory reports but also the necessary truths of logic and mathematics. This is the hypothesis that for all I know someone may be deceiving me into believing even propositions that I think myself most justified in believing.

Descartes invented the notion of an arch-deceiver: an omnipotent and malign being bent on deceiving me in as many of my beliefs as possible. So, for example, I may think I am seeing some very familiar material object in good light when I am healthy and my eyes are in good working order. But it is logically possible that all the while the object does not exist and I am just being tricked into thinking I am seeing it. Perhaps *nothing* material exists and I am just an immaterial mind subject to a massive, systematic deception.

It must be said that Descartes does not believe that there is such an arch-deceiver. God would not allow such a being to exist. However, as far as what is logically possible goes, it does seem that we can never rule out *a priori* that any of our beliefs might be being caused, not by its apparent cause, but by trickery. So this sceptical argument too seems to give the radical sceptic's position a powerful support.

Recently, radical sceptics have employed a sceptical device, the 'brain in a vat hypothesis', which has much in common with Descartes's arch-deceiver. The sceptic



asks anyone who thinks he can know about his surroundings how he knows that he is not a brain which has been removed from its skull and body by a mad scientist, put into a vat of life-preserving chemicals and hooked up to a giant computer which feeds it sense data exactly as if it were still connected to working eyes, ears, taste buds, etc. A brain in a vat would be massively deluded about its real environment. It would believe, quite wrongly, that it was seeing, hearing and otherwise sensing the world through a complete living human body. It would not know it was just the comparatively small mass of material making up a human brain.



## QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

Is there any way to establish that you are not a brain in a vat who is massively deluded about the world it seems to you that you are experiencing?

## ● KNOWLEDGE AND THE EXTERNAL WORLD

In their most powerful forms the sceptical arguments discussed in the previous three subsections exploit the view that we do not experience the external world immediately. The proponent of the argument from illusion explicitly argues that sense perception always involves intermediaries or sense data which represent the world to the perceiver. The other two arguments presume that private experiences are independent of what they are experiences *of*, so that the two might fail to match. But must we concede that we always experience the world indirectly, through sense data?

### Realism

What philosophers of perception sometimes call ‘naive realism’ is the view that, contrary to what the sceptic thinks, we do perceive ordinary objects as they are, immediately and directly and without sense data or any element of inference or interpretation. The word ‘naive’ is not a criticism. It is there to signify that this view is held by the ordinary person in the street who has never engaged in philosophical reflection about perceptual knowledge. Naive realism is offered as the view of common sense.

A philosopher who adopts naive realism is saying that the pre-philosophical view is right, or at least has more to be said for it than the sort of view we have been looking at above. And it certainly does seem to answer to common sense in its claim that, at least in a large percentage of cases, contact with the world through the senses does *feel* as if it is direct and unmediated.

Certainly there seems something wrong with the 'veil of perception' view that regards sense data as screens or blindfolds that lie between the perceiver and the world. For a start it should be noted that there are different kinds and degrees of immediacy and also different ways in which an intermediary or representative can perform its function.

Think of the difference between attending a cup final yourself and being told about it by a lucky spectator. The first-hand experience has much more of one type of immediacy.

On the other hand, think of the difference between seeing a match from near the back of the stands and watching it on television. The televised match comes to you through your television set and numerous technical intermediaries – different camera angles, close up lenses, slow-motion replays and so forth. Yet these very interventions and devices make the experience more immediate. Certainly they ensure that you have more accurate knowledge of what happened than does the distant spectator.

The same could be said for the presence of my reading glasses, without which knowledge of the words I am reading would be impossible. There is no reason to feel that, if sense data are in fact part of the process of sense perception, they by their very existence make knowledge of the external world either doubtful or impossible. In fact the existence of these intermediaries could be regarded as essential.

It is a sense of the rightness of this last point that accounts for the existence of another realist view called 'representative realism'. This is, in fact, the view of sense perception as always involving sense data that the argument from illusion promotes. But the representative realist says that the sceptic is wrong. Sense perception can and does give us knowledge of the external world. One version of representative realism argues that sense perception gives me knowledge of an external object if my sense data representing that object are *caused, in the right sort of way, by the object in question*.

For example, suppose the following things are true. Your sense data are exactly as if you are seeing a cat on the mat. Also it is the case, in a perfectly straightforward way, that the cat on the mat is the cause of your having those very sense data. Light reflected off the cat travels to your eye and affects the optic nerve sending appropriate messages to your brain. In this situation the representative realist just mentioned would hold that it is right to say that you know the cat is on the mat.

However, think again of the example given above of seeing a vase on the table. It could be that the hologram that is in fact seen was only created at that exact spot in order to trick the viewer into wrongly thinking she knew of the existence

of a vase on the table when she did not. In that case, in a way, the real vase is part of the cause of the perceiver's sense data. It is part of the causal chain running from the intentions in the trickster's mind through the setting up of just that hologram to the production of the deceptive sense data in the perceiver's mind.

We know in this case, as was said earlier, that the perceiver does *not* know the vase is there and thus that the causal chain here is deviant. But how, in general, are deviant causal chains to be recognised as such? We seem to need a method for identifying them that is independent of our knowledge of which causal chains do, and which do not, produce genuine knowledge. But there seems to be no such independent method. So representative realism fails unless such a method can be found.

## Related examination questions

(Part a) Identify *two* differences between naive realism and representative realism. (6 marks) (2003)

(Part b) Explain and illustrate *one* criticism of naive realism. (15 marks) (2003)

(Part c) Assess representative realism. (24 marks) (2003)

## Idealism

External world scepticism is sometimes expressed very briefly as the view that we have no guarantee that appearance and reality coincide. Without such a guarantee we have no knowledge of the world. All we can ever know are appearances. We never get beyond our sense data.

Berkeley is one philosopher whose response to the threat posed by such scepticism is to deny that there is a distinction between appearance and reality. If reality simply consists of appearances and nothing else, we can know that things are exactly as our senses tell us they are. This is to make the deliverances of the senses immune to sceptical challenge by becoming what philosophers call an idealist.

It is important to try to keep clear what the metaphysical position known as idealism is (as opposed to its main rival, **materialism**). It is also important to distinguish realism about the external world from its opposite, anti-realism.

**Idealism** is the theory that reality consists solely of ideas and the minds in which they exist. **Materialism** is the view that the fundamental character of reality is

material (i.e. that things occupy space and are mind-independent). For the idealist there are no mind-independent things. For the materialist, whatever the nature of mind, there are also material things which would exist even if all the minds went out of existence.

Realism is the theory that things really are, in general, as they seem. They would be that way whether or not any perceiver came along to perceive them as being that way. Naive realism and representative realism agree in thinking that sense perception acquaints us with a reality whose nature does not depend on our interpretation or perception of it, i.e. an external world.

As we shall see, idealism is also a realist theory. For Berkeley, the ideas constituting what we think of as the objective physical world do not depend on any human mind or interpretation for their existence or nature. They are just as real as matter is for the naive realist or the representative realist. Which is to say that for any human subject – as far as Berkeley is concerned – the real objects with which he is acquainted by sense experience are not products of his imagination. They are *idea-l* (of the nature of ideas) but they are not brought into existence by his mind. Instead they depend for their existence on the mind of God.

Anti-realism in this context is the view that there is no fact of the matter about what the perceptible world is like. Rather the world is how we have, collectively, decided to interpret it as being. Berkeley's idealism is definitely not anti-realist in this sense.

It is easy to sympathise with Berkeley's motivation for his idealism. We have seen that the radical sceptic has a battery of arguments which seem to prove it possible that even substantial numbers of sensory reports about the appearances of things do not add up to knowledge of the existence and nature of the external world. Berkeley rightly accuses his predecessors, like Locke, of taking liberties in assuming that their empirical evidence is sufficient to entitle them to infer the existence and nature of material objects when that evidence consists only of appearances.

The troubles afflicting idealism are very numerous, however, and very difficult to overcome. Here we can mention only a few of the most serious. One is that Berkeley does not seem to have a way of accommodating in his theory the notion of a genuinely public world. If the apple in my hand consists of the ideas or sense data I experience when I look at, smell, touch and feel it, how can you see exactly the same apple or receive it from my hand?

Also, if everything in the physical world consists of God's ideas, what happened at creation? Presumably God had to make his ideas different in some way from

the ideas which he had of the as-yet-uncreated world before he brought it into existence. He had to turn 'mere' ideas in his mind into ideas that would be *perceptible* by the as-yet-uncreated minds of humans.



## QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

How can Berkeley be both an idealist and a realist – are these two notions not opposites?

### Related examination questions

(Part a) Identify *two* differences between idealism and representative realism. (6 marks) (2001)

(Part c) Assess the view that only minds and their ideas exist. (24 marks) (2001)

## Phenomenalism

**Phenomenalism** is the theory that all propositions about the material world can be translated without remainder into propositions about actual or possible sense experiences. Another way to put this is to say that all external-world propositions can be inferred from or analysed into propositions about appearances.

If phenomenalism were correct then the problem of external-world scepticism would seem to be solved without going quite the length of adopting idealism. Phenomenalism does not say that material things consist of ideas, perceptions or sense experiences. It says that material things consist of whatever it takes to be capable of being sensed, to be able to be the objects of sensory experience.

So adequate experience of the right sorts of sense data should be enough to establish the existence and nature of an object in the external world able to be responsible for a subject's perceiving such a thing.

But how many and which exact sense data would count as adequate? Once again it seems that the sceptic is able to counter the anti-sceptical suggestion. For no number of sense-data statements (propositions about actual sense experiences or hypothetical statements about possible perceptions) would together be enough to *entail* the conclusion that a material object of a certain kind exists. There is no logical contradiction between any number of reports along the lines of 'I am

experiencing something red and round and smooth and shiny and tomato-shaped' (said by numerous people) and the proposition 'There is no tomato on the table.'

It might take ingenuity to explain how so many observers could be deluded but there is not and should not be thought to be any entailment between statements about appearances and statements about how things actually are. For if there were, then illusions and delusions would be logically impossible. And we know from experience that this is not so.

### Related examination question

(Part c) Assess phenomenalism. (24 marks) (2002)

#### REFERENCES

- Ayer, A. J. (1956) *The Problem of Knowledge*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.  
Quine, W. V. O. and Ullian, J. S. (1970) *The Web of Belief*, New York: Random House.

#### RECOMMENDED READING

- Audi, R. (1998) *Epistemology: A Contemporary Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge* (London: Routledge) is a very accessible, clear, introductory text.
- Ayer, A. J. *The Problem of Knowledge* and Russell, B. *The Problems of Philosophy* are both classics of twentieth-century philosophical writing about many of the central problems of epistemology. Both are written in a clear, engaging style.
- Baggini, J. and Fosl, P. (2003) *The Philosopher's Toolkit* (Oxford: Blackwell) is a very good compendium of clear explanations of concepts and arguments, which any student of philosophy new or old would find useful.
- Dancy, J. and Sosa, E. (eds) (1997) *A Companion to Epistemology* (Oxford: Blackwell) is an excellent encyclopaedic reference work with an astonishing amount of useful material about different aspects of the subject in one volume.

- Lehrer, K. (1990) *Theory of Knowledge* (London: Routledge) is another good introduction, which should be accessible to readers who are less familiar with the theory of knowledge.
- Williams, M. (2001) *Problems of Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) is an excellent introduction, if a bit less easy than Audi.

## GLOSSARY

**a posteriori knowledge** – Knowledge which cannot be known to be true without some help or support from experience.

**a priori knowledge** – Knowledge which requires no confirmation from experience and, indeed, *could not* be proved or confirmed by observation. Many, though not all, necessary truths are knowable *a priori*, for example, 'A is A'.

**belief** – Any fact of the matter or proposition, whether trivial or serious, that might be held to be true.

**contingent truth** – One that might have been otherwise. For example, it is a contingent truth that it is sunny today; the weather could easily have been otherwise.

**empiricism** – In its most extreme form this is the view that all knowledge is ultimately derived from or consists in truths obtained from experience alone.

**epistemology** – An alternative name for the Theory of Knowledge, i.e. the branch of philosophy that studies what we can know and how we know it.

**external world** – The world outside my own mind about which my bodily senses furnish me with information. This may be held to include my own body since my senses give me sense data about my body as well as about my mind's wider environment.

**externalism and internalism about knowledge** – The externalist believes that someone might meet all the conditions necessary for possession of knowledge without realising that this was the case, without knowing that he knows. As long as the subject is justified in the right way in believing something true he is rightly said to have

knowledge. The internalist will say, however, that the true knower knows that all the conditions for knowledge have been met. This means that he knows that any element of 'getting hold of the truth by accident' has been defeated in this case. Arguably, however, the elimination of all possibility of accident from any given putative case of knowledge is impossible.

**foundationalism** – The view that knowledge forms a system that is like a building resting on a foundation. The foundational beliefs support themselves, they are self-justifying. They do not need – nor could they have – further justification. All other beliefs are derived from, and receive their justification from, the foundational beliefs.

**global scepticism** – The global sceptic holds that no belief is immune to the all-corrosive doubt that Descartes called 'metaphysical' doubt. Thus, on this view, no belief is sufficiently justified to count as knowledge.

**idealism** – The theory that reality consists solely of ideas and the minds in which they exist. For the idealist there are no mind-independent things. In contrast, the materialist believes that, whatever the nature of mind, there are also material things which would exist even if all the minds went out of existence.

**incorrigible propositions** – If there are any such, they are ones that are literally 'uncorrectable', beyond the reach of correction. A typical example offered is 'That appears red to me.' It is difficult to see how such a report of immediate experience could be mistaken, thus *capable* of being corrected.

**inductive reasoning** – That form of reasoning or inference that argues that if all previously

observed As have been Bs, and no previously observed As have failed to be Bs, future As are likely to be Bs as well.

**materialism** – The view that the fundamental character of reality is material (i.e. whatever basic things there are occupy space and are mind-independent). For the materialist, material things could exist even in the absence of all minds.

**necessary and sufficient conditions** – Necessary conditions of *p* are ones without which *p* would not occur. Sufficient conditions of *p* are ones that are enough to produce *p*. All of a thing's necessary conditions must obtain if it is to exist but a *single* sufficient condition guarantees that what it is sufficient for obtains.

**necessary truths** – These are ones that could not – logically could not – fail to be true. To understand such a truth is to see that it could not fail to be the case.

**phenomenalism** – The theory that all propositions about the material world can be translated without remainder into propositions about actual or possible sense experiences. For example, the proposition 'There is a cat on the mat' says no more than 'If anyone were to look at the mat (or feel it, etc.) he or she would have sense experiences of seeing (feeling) a cat.'

**rationalism** – In its most extreme form this is the view that all knowledge is ultimately derived from or depends upon truths obtained by the employment of unaided reason alone.

**self-evident truths** – A self-evident truth is one that is true in virtue of logic. It could not fail to be true. In order to know that it is true all you need do is understand what it is saying. However, this means that the set of self-evident truths does not coincide with the set of obvious truths. A proposition might be obviously true (like 'It's raining' said in a downpour) but not self-evident (it is contingent, not necessary). Alternatively, a proposition might be self-evident (to understand it is to see its logical necessity) but not obvious (to someone who had not worked out what it meant).

**sense data** – The basic bits of experience given to the subject in sense perception (the singular is 'a single sense datum').

**truth value** – The truth value of a proposition *p* is the answer to the question 'Is *p* true?' If the answer is 'Yes, *p* is true' then *p*'s truth value is 'true'. If *p* is false then its truth value is 'false'.

**veil of perception** – A metaphorical barrier (veil) that perceptions and sense data themselves are said to constitute between a perceiver and the object of perception so that the perceiver may make false judgements about what she perceives.

**veridical perceptions and sensations** – Ones that 'tell the truth' about the things they are perceptions or sensations of. Veridical perceptions make me disposed to judge correctly about the world. In contrast, non-veridical perceptions and sensations are misleading.



# 2

## • moral philosophy

UNIT 2 Michael Lacewing

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### KEY CONCEPTS ◉

- |                    |                   |
|--------------------|-------------------|
| ◉ good             | ◉ abortion        |
| ◉ bad              | ◉ euthanasia      |
| ◉ right            | ◉ speciesism      |
| ◉ wrong            | ◉ cognitivism     |
| ◉ practical ethics | ◉ moral realism   |
| ◉ normative ethics | ◉ intuitionism    |
| ◉ meta-ethics      | ◉ naturalism      |
| ◉ utilitarianism   | ◉ non-cognitivism |
| ◉ happiness        | ◉ emotivism       |
| ◉ deontology       | ◉ prescriptivism  |
| ◉ duty             | ◉ relativism      |
| ◉ virtue           |                   |
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### ● INTRODUCTION

Moral philosophy is the attempt to think critically about right and wrong, good and bad. There are three different ways we can think about these ideas.

First, we can think about whether a particular action or type of action is right or wrong. Is abortion right or wrong? Is euthanasia right or wrong? Is it right to treat other animals as food? This type of thinking is **practical ethics**.

How are we to find the answers to these types of questions? **Normative ethics**, the second way to think about right and wrong, good and bad, develops general theories about what is right and what is good, which we can use in practical cases. One such theory, **utilitarianism**, claims that the only thing that is good is happiness. Everything else that is good is only good because it contributes to happiness. It also claims that the right thing to do is whatever will bring about the most good, i.e. the most happiness. By contrast, **deontological** theories claim that some actions, e.g. murder, are just wrong, no matter how happy it might make people. It claims that what is right is not to be defined in terms of what is good. You have probably heard both these views expressed in conversation. A third view we will look at is **virtue theory**. This claims that the question 'What is a good person?' is more fundamental than the question 'What should I do?' If you knew what it was to be a good person, then you would know what a good person would do. A good person leads a good life. So in order to know what sort of person a good person is, we need to understand what a good life for people is.

The third way to think critically about right and wrong, good and bad, is **meta-ethics**. *Meta-* is a Greek word meaning 'above', 'beyond', or 'after'. In this case, meta-ethics is the study of the *very ideas* of right and wrong, good and bad, the concepts that ethics takes for granted. For example, if I say that abortion is wrong, am I making a statement that can be true or false in the same way that it is a true (or false) statement that you are holding this book in your hand? Or am I expressing a command, such as 'Do not commit abortion'? Or am I expressing a feeling, perhaps one that is shared with other people, but still just a feeling? Meta-ethics investigates whether terms like 'right' and 'wrong', 'good' and 'bad', correspond to facts about the world or whether they are simply expressions of human feeling.

Practical ethics is about what it is right or wrong to *do*, considering a particular type of action. Normative ethics provides *theories* about what is good or bad and what it is right or wrong to do in general. Meta-ethics is not about what to do at all; it is about the nature of the *concepts* 'right' and 'wrong', 'good' and 'bad', what they mean, and what their origin is.

A final note: throughout this chapter I talk about actions being right or wrong, good or bad. But of course, failing to act in a particular way can be just as good or bad as acting in a particular way. There are some actions that we should not fail to do, like feeding our children, and some actions we should never normally do, like murder. So whenever I talk of 'actions', I mean to cover 'omissions' as well.

## ● NORMATIVE ETHICS

### Deontological views

Deontologists believe that what is right or wrong is a matter of **duty**. We have moral duties to do things that it is right to do and moral duties not to do things that it is wrong to do. So far this might sound obvious. But what is 'duty'?

Deontologists deny that whether something is right or wrong depends on its consequences (see 'One example, three theories' on p. 47). A good way to understand deontological views, therefore, is by looking at the importance they give to actions in their own right, independent of consequences. It is something about any particular action that makes it right or wrong *in itself*. How can we tell whether an action is right or wrong in itself?

**Intuitionists** believe that there are many things that can make an action right or wrong, and we have to use our moral intuition to tell what these are. We shall discuss intuitionism further in the section 'META-ETHICS: COGNITIVISM'. Other theories derive duties from reason or from the commands of God.

### God and duty

One reason for believing that certain types of action are right or wrong in themselves is that God has commanded us to do or not to do them. In order to discover what is right and wrong, we need to discover what God has commanded. There are different ways that we might come to know what God commands. One way is through divine revelation: at some point, God has actually told somebody, and, very often, they have written it down as scripture. This is the model of the Ten Commandments. Each commandment tells us that a particular action is right or wrong ('Honour your parents', 'Do not commit adultery', and so on), and the tradition is that God revealed these moral laws to Moses.

Another way is through **natural law**. St Thomas Aquinas (1225–74) argued that we can discover what is right and wrong through nature: through the way the natural world is and through human nature, especially reason. For example, every action that we want to do, we want to do for some end or purpose, something that we find good about it (even if we are mistaken). It is natural, then, to desire what is good. This is part of natural law, that we seek what is good. Likewise, reason naturally seeks knowledge and truth, and when applied to actions, reason seeks harmony with other people. Our desires and our reason were created by God to seek what is good, and this is the way that we come to learn what God has commanded as right or wrong. This is not always easy, since this knowledge may require careful thought and wisdom or even further revelation from God.

**One example, three theories**

My friend has not done her homework on time, and in order to avoid getting into trouble, she has decided to stay at home, pretending that she is sick. She can get the homework done today and bring it tomorrow, and then no one will know that she didn't do it on time. She has asked me to lie for her, to tell the teacher that she is sick. Should I lie?

An act utilitarian might say that lying in this case is not wrong, because no one is hurt. In fact, it will save my friend from getting into trouble. If no other harm is done (let's suppose I'm a good liar and won't get caught), lying might not only be permissible, I would be wrong not to lie. But an act utilitarian could also say this doesn't take the longer-term consequences into account. This act might encourage both me and my friend to take lying too lightly, and we will lie in the future when it does have bad consequences. If this is true, I shouldn't lie.

A deontologist would say that we shouldn't look at the consequences of the lie, we should look at lying – the action – itself. If we have a moral duty not to lie, and deontologists normally argue we do, then we should not lie, even though the consequences of telling the truth may be more painful.

A virtue theorist would consider the virtues of honesty and of loyalty to one's friends. Someone who is honest does not lie over trivial matters. And loyalty to my friend means I have her good at heart; if I lie for her, am I encouraging her not to take responsibility for her choices? She will also miss a day of school. Perhaps I would be a better friend if I support her in coming to school and telling the truth.

Certain types of action, then, are in accordance with human nature and reason, and these are morally right. Other types of action are wrong, because they are not in accordance with human nature and reason. For example, Aquinas argues that lying goes against the nature of reason to seek the truth and that sexual practices that are not related to procreation go against the natural use of our reproductive organs.

### Kant: duties are determined by reason

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) argued that moral principles could be derived from practical reason (reasoning applied to practical matters) alone; no other standard, such as human nature or God's commands, is necessary. To understand his claim, we need to put some premises in place.

First, Kant believed that, as rational animals, we don't just 'do things', we make choices. Whenever we make a choice, we act on a **maxim**. Maxims are our personal principles that guide our choices, e.g. 'to have as much fun as possible', 'to marry only someone I truly love'. All our choices have some maxim or other behind them, which explains our reasons for that particular choice.

Second, morality is a set of 'laws' – rules, principles – that are the same for everyone and that apply to everyone. If this is true, it must be possible that everyone could act morally (even if it is very unlikely that they will).

Kant uses this idea to devise a clever test for whether acting on a particular maxim is right or wrong. Here's an example of how it works: Let us say that you want a gift to take to a party, but you can't afford it, so you steal it from the shop. What maxim have you acted on? Something like: 'If I can't afford something I want, I will steal it.' Kant says this can only be the right thing to do if everyone could do it, because it must be possible for everyone to do what is right. In his terms, 'Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law' (Kant 1991: 84).

If we could all just help ourselves to whatever we wanted, the idea of 'owning' things would disappear. But if I don't own something – because nobody owns anything – you can't really 'steal' it from me. You can only steal something if it isn't yours. Stealing assumes that people own things, and people can only own things if they don't all go around helping themselves whenever they want. So it is logically impossible for everyone to steal things just because they can't afford them. And so stealing the gift is wrong.

Kant called his test the 'Categorical Imperative'. An imperative is just a command. Morality commands us to act in certain ways. The command is categorical because we can't take it or leave it. It is not just morally wrong to disobey, Kant thought, it is also irrational. It must be possible for all rational animals to choose to behave rationally. So choosing to behave in a way that it is impossible for everyone to follow is irrational. So we must obey the Categorical Imperative because it is irrational not to.

So now we know what our duty is. It is our duty only to act on maxims that can be universalised.

It is very important to realise that Kant does *not* claim that an action (e.g. stealing) is wrong because we wouldn't like the consequences if everyone did it. His test is not whether we would like our personal maxim to be a universal law. His test is whether we could choose for our personal maxim to be a universal law. His test is about what it is possible to choose, not what we like to choose.



## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

What is the Categorical Imperative? Why does Kant claim it is irrational to disobey the Categorical Imperative?

Now for Kant the idea of 'duty' applies not only to right actions, but also to a particular kind of motive. Much of the time we do things just because we want to; and most of these things it is also morally permissible to do. Since we are doing them just because we want to, there is nothing particularly praiseworthy about doing them. Kant argued that our actions are morally worthy *only* if we do them 'from a sense of duty', i.e. we do them because it is our duty to do them. Our motive is to comply with what it is our duty to do. Kant compares two shopkeepers who both give correct change. The first is honest because he is scared of being caught if he tries to cheat his customers. The second is honest because it is morally right to be honest. Both do what is morally right. But only the second, says Kant, deserves our praise.

### Criticisms of Kant's theory

There have been many criticisms of Kant's theory. I shall consider just three popular ones here.

First, couldn't any action be justified on Kant's theory, as long as we phrase the maxim cleverly? In stealing the gift, I could claim that my maxim is 'To steal gifts from large shops and when there are seven letters in my name (Michael)'. Universalising this maxim, only people with seven letters in their name can steal only gifts and only from large shops. The case would apply so rarely that there would be no general breakdown in the concept of private property. So it would be perfectly possible for this law to apply to everyone. Kant's response is that his theory is concerned with my *actual* maxim, not some made-up one. It is not actually part of my choice that my name has seven letters, or perhaps even that it is a gift I steal (some people do, however, have 'principles' about only stealing from large shops). If I am honest with myself, I have to admit that it is a question of my taking what I want when I can't afford it. For Kant's test to work, we must be honest with ourselves about what our maxims are.

Second, Kant's test delivers some strange results. Say I am a hard-working shop assistant, who hates the work. One happy Saturday I win the lottery, and I vow 'never to sell anything to anyone again, but only ever to buy'. This is perhaps eccentric, but it doesn't seem morally wrong. But it cannot be universalised. If no one ever sold things, how could anyone buy them? It is logically impossible, which makes it wrong according to Kant's test. So perhaps it is not always wrong to do things that require other people to do the opposite. But then how can we tell when we must universalise our maxims, and when it is all right if they cannot be universalised?

Third, Kant is wrong about good motives. Surely, if I do something nice for you, like visit you in hospital, because I like you, that is also a morally worthy action. Much of the time we do good things because we feel warmly towards the people we benefit. Kant denies that this motive is good enough. We have to want to benefit people because it is our duty to do so. Some philosophers have thought that this doctrine, putting duty above feelings in our motives, is somehow inhuman.

There is one aspect of deontology that I haven't discussed yet, namely the importance of respect. I will say more about this when discussing euthanasia.

## Related examination question

(Part b) Explain and illustrate *one* criticism of a deontological approach to ethics.  
(15 marks) (2003)

## Utilitarianism

Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) is usually thought of as the father of utilitarianism. His main principle of ethics, which is known as the 'principle of utility' or 'greatest happiness principle', is 'that principle which approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever, according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question' (Bentham 1962: 34). Or again, 'that principle which states the greatest happiness of all those whose interest is in question, as being the right and proper . . . end of human action' (p. 33, n. 1).

If we simplify this a little, we can say that utilitarianism claims that happiness is the only good, and that an action is right if it leads to the greatest happiness of all those it affects, i.e. if it *maximises* happiness. Otherwise, the action is wrong. (This definition is only true for **act utilitarianism**. I will consider **rule utilitarianism** later.) The greatest happiness should be the goal of our actions,

what we hope to bring about. Our actions are judged not 'in themselves', but in terms of what *consequences* they have.

It is important to notice that 'greatest happiness' is comparative (great, greater, greatest). If an action leads to the greatest happiness of those it affects, no other action taken at that time could have led to greater happiness. So an action is right only if, out of all the actions you could have done, this action leads to more happiness than any other.

### Hedonistic and ideal utilitarianism

Bentham's idea of happiness is pleasure and the absence of pain. This theory of happiness is called **hedonism**. Bentham thought that it is possible to measure pleasures and pains and add them up on a single scale. His scheme for doing this is the 'felicific calculus'. If a pleasure is more intense, will last longer, is more certain to occur, will happen sooner rather than later, or will produce in turn many other pleasures and few pains, it counts for more. In thinking what to do, you also need to take into account how many people will be affected (the more you affect positively, and the fewer you affect negatively, the better). The total amount of happiness produced is the sum total of everyone's pleasures produced minus the sum total of everyone's pains. Whichever action produces the greatest happiness is the right action.

John Stuart Mill (1806–73), the son of James Mill, a close friend and disciple of Jeremy Bentham, rejected Bentham's ideas on happiness. He pointed out that there is a deeper dimension to human experience, which is missing in Bentham's account. There is no mention of love of honour, beauty, order, or freedom, and 'If [Bentham] thought at all of any of the deeper feelings of human nature, it was but as idiosyncrasies of taste' (Mill 1962a: 101).

Rather than all types of pleasure being of equal weight, Mill thought that some pleasures – the pleasures of thought, feeling, and imagination – were 'higher' than others. As long as our physical needs are met, Mill claims, we would prefer to experience a **higher pleasure** over any amount of lower pleasure. And this is what makes it a higher pleasure, that everyone who is 'competently acquainted' with both sorts of pleasure prefers this pleasure to another sort of pleasure. In introducing this distinction between higher and lower pleasures, Mill rejects the felicific calculus, and adds the element of quality to the quantitative analysis of happiness that Bentham puts forward.

Another way Mill argues for his theory of higher pleasures is by comparing a human being with a pig. As human beings, we are able to experience pleasures of deep personal relationships, art, and creative thought that pigs are not. But



these very capacities also mean we can experience terrible pain, boredom, dissatisfaction. Yet we don't think that this possibility would be a good reason for choosing to be a well-looked-after pig, rather than a human being. 'It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied' (Mill 1962b: 260). This must mean that quantity of pleasure is not the only factor in our happiness. The quality of the pleasure is important, too.

Some philosophers have argued that Mill's idea of higher pleasures actually introduces *ideals* into his account of happiness, so that happiness is composed of more than pleasure and the absence of pain. It is not the pleasure the ideal brings that is important, but the ideal itself. This interpretation or development of Mill's theory is known as 'ideal utilitarianism'.

### Related examination question

(Part a) Briefly distinguish between ideal and hedonistic utilitarianism. (6 marks) (2003)

### Preference and negative utilitarianism

A third variation on utilitarianism claims that it is not happiness as pleasure that we should try to maximise. It is the satisfaction of people's *preferences*. There are two reasons usually given for preferring talk about preferences to talk about pleasure. First, it is more difficult to know how much pleasure someone experiences than whether their preference has been satisfied. So it is easier to count up preference satisfaction than pleasure. Second, it can be right to satisfy someone's preferences even when he doesn't know this has happened, and so doesn't derive any pleasure from it. For example, I can want you to look after my ant farm when I die. Suppose you don't derive any pleasure from looking after ants, but you don't mind either, and suppose ants don't experience pleasure either. According to preference utilitarianism, you should still look after my ants, rather than kill them, even though no one gets any pleasure from it.

A fourth variation, known as 'negative utilitarianism', claims that maximising the good – happiness – is not as important as minimising the bad – suffering and unhappiness. On Bentham's formulation, these are supposedly the same thing (to decrease pain is to increase happiness). But negative utilitarianism counts suffering more heavily than happiness. Our main priority, in acting morally, is to decrease the suffering in the world. Bentham, by contrast, would give equal priority to decreasing suffering and increasing pleasure.

### Act and rule utilitarianism

So far we have considered the greatest happiness principle as applying to actions. Act utilitarianism, we have said, states that an action is right if it maximises happiness. But this faces two important objections.

First, how can we know or work out the consequences of an action, to discover whether it maximises happiness or not? If the felicific calculus – or anything like it – isn't ridiculous, it is at least very difficult actually to apply. How do I know exactly how happy each person affected by my action will be? However, notice that Bentham does not say that an action is right if it *actually* maximises happiness. He says it is right according to 'the tendency which it appears to have' to maximise happiness. We don't need to be able to work things out precisely. An action is right if we can reasonably expect that it will maximise happiness.

This still means we have to be able to work things out roughly. Mill thought this was still too demanding. Happiness is 'much too complex and indefinite' (Mill 1962a: 119) a standard to apply directly to actions. But we don't need to try, Mill claimed, because over time people have automatically, through trial and error, worked out which actions tend to produce happiness. This is what our inherited moral rules actually are: 'tell the truth', 'don't steal', and 'keep your promises' are embodiments of the wisdom of humanity, while lying, theft, and false promising tend to lead to unhappiness.

Mill called these moral rules 'secondary principles' (Mill 1962b: 278). It is only in cases of conflict between secondary principles (e.g. if by telling the truth you break your promise) that we need to apply the greatest happiness principle directly. Some philosophers argue that Mill's secondary principles are rules of thumb, i.e. not strict rules that we must follow, but helpful guidance in our thoughts about what to do.

The second criticism of act utilitarianism is that no type of action is ruled out as immoral. If torturing a small child produces the greatest happiness, then it is right to torture a small child. Suppose I am part of a group of child abusers who really enjoy torturing small children. But, for whatever reason, we only find and torture abandoned children. Only the child suffers pain (no one else knows about our activities). But we all derive a great deal of happiness. So more happiness is produced by our torturing the child than not, so it is morally right. This is clearly the wrong answer.

If we didn't apply the greatest happiness principle to actions, neither of these criticisms would work. Rule utilitarians argue that we should adopt those rules which, if everybody followed them, would lead to the greatest happiness (compared to any other rules). An action is right if it complies with those rules.

Clearly, the rule forbidding torture of children will cause more happiness if everyone followed it than the rule allowing torture of children. So it is wrong to torture children.

An objection to rule utilitarianism is that it amounts to 'rule-fetishism'. The point of the rules is to bring about the greatest happiness. But what if I know that, for example, lying in a particular situation will produce more happiness than telling the truth? It seems pointless to tell the truth, causing unhappiness, just because a rule says we should tell the truth, when the whole point of following that rule was to bring about happiness. It seems that there should be an exception to the rule in this case. But then whenever a particular action causes more happiness by breaking a rule than by following it, we should do that action. And then we are back with act utilitarianism, weighing up the consequences of each action in turn.

I end with an objection that applies to all utilitarian theories. They weigh the unhappiness of one person against the happiness of another, whether this is in deciding which action to do or which rule to adopt. We are not concerned with people as individuals, but as 'receptacles' for happiness. The distribution of that happiness – who gets happy by how much – is irrelevant. The objection is that this does not show the proper respect to people that they deserve as individuals.



## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

What are the main differences between act and rule utilitarianism? Which theory is more plausible? Can any form of utilitarianism successfully answer the objections raised above?

### Virtue theory

The distinct claim of virtue theory is that the question 'How shall I be?' comes before the question 'What should I do?' We can only know what to do when we have figured out what type of person a morally good, or virtuous, person is. An action is right, roughly, if it is an action that a virtuous person would do. A virtuous person is someone who has the **virtues**, morally good traits of character. A right action, then, will express morally good traits of character, and this is what makes it right. Telling the truth expresses honesty, standing up to a bully expresses courage, and so on. Our main aim, therefore, should be to develop the virtues, because then we will know what it is right to do and we will want to do it.

### Plato's theory

In his most famous work *The Republic*, Plato (c.429–c.347 BC) argued that the soul has three 'parts': reason, *thumos* or 'spirit', and desire. (We don't have a good word to translate what Plato meant by *thumos*. But we still sometimes use the word 'spirit' in a similar sense, when we say that an athlete showed real spirit, or that a politician gave a spirited response to criticism.) Each part has its own distinct virtue, and there is a fourth virtue for the soul as a whole. The virtue of reason is wisdom (sometimes translated as prudence), the virtue of spirit is courage, the virtue of desire is self-control. If reason rules the soul with wisdom, so that spirit moves us to courageously do what is right, and we only desire what is right, then the soul as a whole is just.

Plato developed this theory in response to the question 'Why should we be just?' Is the only reason not to cheat people because we might get caught? Plato argued that justice was its own reward, and that to understand why we should be just, we need to understand what justice is. A just person, who – of course – would not act unjustly, is someone with a just soul. When our souls are just, they are in the right state, every part as it is meant to be, 'healthy'. And if my soul is in a bad, unhealthy state, the person who suffers most is me. The desire for material wealth that leads me to cheat someone, for example, is out of control. If my desires are out of control, I can feel 'driven', 'forced' to do things by the strength of those desires. If I brought them under control, I would not want to act unjustly. And this state of the soul would be good for me; I will be calm and able to choose well.

But how do I know that cheating someone is wrong (unjust) in the first place? Plato argued that if you are wise, then you know what is good and what is bad. There are 'eternal Forms' for good and bad, and wisdom is knowledge of these (see the Analogy of the Cave, discussed in book VII). It is very unclear in Plato's argument, though, how having knowledge of something as abstract as the Forms can really help us in practical life.

These four virtues – wisdom, courage, self-control, and justice – became known as the 'cardinal' virtues. Plato put a lot of emphasis on the role of reason in the virtuous person. Later Christian thinkers, in particular Aquinas, developing a remark made by St Paul (1 Corinthians 13: 13) added three 'theological' virtues: faith, hope and charity (or self-giving love). These put less emphasis on reason, but are still concerned with the state of someone's soul.

### Aristotle's theory

What we are still lacking, though, is a general account of what a virtue is. Perhaps the most detailed, and certainly the most popular model for contemporary

theories, is offered by Aristotle (384–322 BC), a pupil of Plato. Both Plato and Aristotle thought that virtues are qualities of a person that help him to ‘flourish’ or ‘live well’. By this, they meant ‘in accordance with human nature’. For Plato, as we have seen, this means that each part of the human soul must perform its designated task well, and in particular, reason must be in charge. Aristotle agreed, as he also believed that reason is central to human nature. But he placed more emphasis than Plato on training (rather than curbing) our emotions, so that we automatically react and want to act in the best way.

Aristotle argued that there are two types of virtue, virtues of the intellect and virtues of character. A virtue of character is a character trait that disposes us to feel desires and emotions ‘well’, rather than ‘badly’. By ‘well’, he meant ‘at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way’ (Aristotle 1980: 38; 1106b). Of the different virtues of intellect – such as quick thinking and general intelligence – the one we are concerned with in ethics is *practical wisdom*. It is practical wisdom that allows us to know what right is in each case.

A car driver has just deliberately swerved in front of your friend’s car. Your friend beeped, and the other driver has stopped his car, got out, and has started swearing at your friend. What’s the right thing to do? You probably feel angry and a bit scared. Are you feeling these emotions ‘well’? Being angry towards a bully who is insulting a friend seems the right time, object, and person. But your anger could be too strong and motivate you to start a fight, in which case you are not feeling it in the right way. Or if you are too afraid, you might want to say something, but not be able to. To understand the right way to feel anger and fear, we need to understand the situation more: was this a once-off, or does this driver generally terrorise the neighbourhood? Is this person just a bad driver, or a bully you have come across before on other occasions? And to know what to do, you need to know yourself: if you say something, will you say it in a way that is helpful, or will you just be provocative, making the situation worse? Someone who is virtuous also has practical wisdom, which Aristotle says only comes with experience, and a wise person understands situations and how they develop, and what all the options are.

In this situation, you could feel angry or fearful too much or too little, ‘and in both cases not well’ (Aristotle 1980: 38; 1106b). Aristotle defended the ‘doctrine of the mean’, the idea that a virtuous response or action is ‘intermediate’. Just as there is a right time, object, person, etc. at which to feel angry (or any emotion), some people can feel angry too often, regarding too many objects, (perhaps they take a critical comment as an insult), and towards too many people or maybe whenever they get angry, they get very angry, even at minor things. Other people

can feel angry not often enough, with regard to too few objects and people (perhaps they don't understand how people are taking advantage of them). Aristotle's doctrine of the mean does *not* claim that when you get angry, you should only ever be moderately angry. You should be as angry as the situation demands, which can be very angry.

Someone who gets angry 'too much' is short-tempered. We don't have a name for someone who gets angry too little. Someone who has the virtue relating to anger is good-tempered. The virtue is the 'intermediate' state between the two vices of 'too much' and 'too little'. Many virtues fit this model, Aristotle argues. Some, like good temper, work with feelings. Other virtues, like honesty, work with motives for actions. Telling the truth 'too much' is tactlessness. Telling it 'too little' is lying when you shouldn't. The virtue of honesty involves telling the truth at the right times, to the right people, etc.

But, even if it is true, the doctrine of the mean isn't much help practically. First, 'too much' and 'too little' aren't quantities on a single scale. The list of 'right time, right object, right person, right motive, right way' shows that things are much more complicated than that. Second, to know whether a character trait or action is 'intermediate' is just to know it is virtuous. How often should we get angry, and how angry should we get? There is no independent sense of 'intermediate' that can help us answer these questions.

### Criticisms of virtue theory

This leads to the main criticism of virtue theory. It cannot provide enough guidance about what to do. If I am not a virtuous person, telling me to do what a virtuous person would do doesn't help me know what to do. This criticism is a little unfair, since virtue theory is not intended to be applied to actions directly in this way. It doesn't aim to provide an exact method for making decisions. But it can provide some guidance by helping us think about situations in terms of the virtues, rather than only duties or consequences.

What about cases in which virtues seem to conflict? Loyalty can require we stick up for our friends. If I get angry with the driver who insulted my friend, is that 'too much' anger but the right amount of loyalty to my friend? But if I don't get angry, is that 'too little' loyalty to my friend? Even if we can resolve this apparent conflict of virtues, will all such conflicts disappear? For example, when someone has done something wrong, and we are putting it right, can we show justice and mercy, or do we have to choose?



## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

What is Aristotle's doctrine of the mean? Which theory of virtue provides more guidance about what to do, Plato's or Aristotle's? Why?

Two final points on Aristotle's theory will bring out some differences between his ideas and our common-sense understanding of virtue. First, as we noted above, Aristotle and Plato thought that being virtuous was beneficial for the virtuous person. This was because they believed that human beings, as rational animals, live the best lives (best for themselves) when they act rationally. And Aristotle argued that being virtuous just is living rationally, because you do and feel things at the right time, etc., which is determined by the rational virtue of practical wisdom. By contrast, we sometimes feel that a virtuous life may not be a good life for the person living it.

Second, we all find it easiest to act according to our own character. Because a virtuous person has a virtuous character, he or she finds it easy to do the right thing. For Aristotle, only when the right thing comes naturally is it properly a virtuous action. By contrast, we often feel that someone who finds it difficult to do the right thing but does it anyway shows virtue. Aristotle would call this person 'strong-willed', but not virtuous.

### Related examination questions

(Part a) Identify and briefly describe *two* virtues. (6 marks) (2001)

(Part c) Assess whether it is useful to focus on virtue in order to explain why we should be moral. (24 marks) (2001)

(Part c) Assess virtue theory. (24 marks) (2003)

## ● PRACTICAL ETHICS

### Euthanasia

The *New Oxford Dictionary of English* defines 'euthanasia' as 'the painless killing of a patient suffering from an incurable and painful disease or in an irreversible coma'. 'Euthanasia' comes from two Greek words, *eu-*, a prefix meaning 'good' or 'well', and *thanatos*, meaning 'death'. Literally speaking, when someone undergoes

euthanasia, his or her death is good. Normally, for death to be good, living would need to be worse than death. We can understand that the two conditions the definition describes – incurable, painful disease and irreversible coma – are two of the most important ways living can be worse than dying. In these cases, we might say life is not worth living. This is why euthanasia is also called ‘mercy killing’.

### Types of euthanasia

We can distinguish six types of euthanasia. In involuntary euthanasia the patient does not want to die. In nonvoluntary euthanasia the patient has not expressed his or her choice. This may happen if the patient is too young to express choices; it has been usual practice to allow some infants with terrible congenital diseases, such as Tay-Sachs, to die. Or the patient might not be able to express choices now – because of being in a coma or mentally impaired through senile dementia – and did not express a choice earlier. In voluntary euthanasia the patient wants to die and has expressed this choice.

Each of these three types can be either active or passive. In active euthanasia the patient is killed, for instance by a lethal injection. In passive euthanasia the patient is allowed to die, for instance by withholding treatment for the disease that then kills her.

Passive euthanasia does not fit the definition given at the outset, because it involves letting the patient die rather than killing him. It also doesn’t fit because the death can sometimes be very painful and prolonged. Active euthanasia, by contrast, is almost always painless, since very high (fatal) doses of painkillers can be given with the injection.

### When, if at all, is euthanasia justified?

People commonly agree that, because it is important for us to be able to make choices about things that are important to us, involuntary euthanasia will almost always turn out to be wrong. But does this also mean we must respect the choice for euthanasia? Is voluntary euthanasia always right?

We need to first distinguish the question of whether voluntary euthanasia can be morally permissible from the question of whether it should be legalised. One of the most common arguments against euthanasia relies on the possible abuses that could happen. Patients might feel pressured into agreeing to euthanasia by families that didn’t want to look after them or by doctors who wanted to use the hospital resources for other patients. Alternatively, patients who felt depressed and unable to see how to live a meaningful life despite their illness may choose euthanasia, when with help they could have become less depressed.



### **Is there a genuine distinction between killing someone and letting her die?**

An act utilitarian may argue not. In both cases, the person dies. All that matters is that she doesn't suffer. However, other theories argue there is. Not killing someone is related to the virtue and duties of justice. Justice requires that we respect people, their choices and rights. Not letting someone die is related to the virtue and duties of charity. Charity requires that we help other people's lives go well.

People all over the world are dying from hunger or disease who could have been prevented from dying. It is difficult to argue that because you did not give more to charity you have done something as bad as if you had actually killed them yourself.

There are some cases in which letting someone die is equivalent to killing him. The clearest case is when you have a duty to provide food or medicine to someone and you do not. For example, a parent who didn't give her child food would be guilty of murder. In such a case, both justice and charity require the same thing, and so there is no practical difference between killing and letting someone die.

Is there a practical difference in the case of euthanasia? Many doctors think that administering lethal injections goes against the idea and duties of practising medicine. However, in addition to the duty to protect the lives of their patients, doctors also have the duty to do what is best for their patients, including relieving pain. One way of trying to respect both duties at once is to allow the patient to die while doing everything possible to ensure her death is painless. Some people argue that the duty to protect life does not involve the duty to prolong life for as long as possible, if the quality of life is very poor. Therefore, doctors are not failing in their duty to protect life by allowing patients to die when they can only expect a very poor quality of life.

Some deontologists argue that we have a duty not to kill human beings, even if the person who dies requests it. This is one interpretation of the idea of the sanctity of life, that we must respect someone's right to life even when he wants to die. Because deontology draws a distinction between killing someone and letting him die, these deontologists may allow passive euthanasia, but not active euthanasia.

These are important points. However, both Switzerland and the Netherlands have legalised euthanasia, and there is no firm evidence of such abuses occurring on a wide scale. But the question of whether euthanasia should be legal is not our question here, and it is important to remember that the argument from abuses is not an argument against the view that voluntary euthanasia is morally permissible.

One argument against voluntary euthanasia is inspired by Kant. He argued that suicide is wrong. He said that there is a contradiction in choosing one's death out of desire for the best for oneself. Our self-love is what keeps us alive, and it would be a contradiction if it also sought to destroy life (1991: 85). But this is a poor argument, because there is no contradiction if our self-love seeks life when life is best and seeks death when death is best (as in euthanasia). This way our self-love always seeks the best for us.

An argument for voluntary euthanasia inspired by Kant claims that rationality is what bestows dignity on human beings, and we must respect people's dignity. Therefore, humans being who may lose their dignity and their rationality through illness and pain may legitimately request euthanasia. We respect and protect their dignity by helping them die in circumstances of their own choosing. This is one of the most powerful arguments for voluntary euthanasia.



## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

What reasons are there to think that active euthanasia is wrong, but passive euthanasia is not wrong? Are they persuasive?

### Related examination questions

(Part a) Briefly distinguish between active and passive euthanasia. (6 marks) (2002)

(Part b) Outline and illustrate *one* deontological argument for preserving life, with reference to *one* of the following moral issues: abortion, animal rights, euthanasia. (15 marks) (2002)

(Part b) Explain how, in any *one* situation, killing might be seen as a virtuous act. (15 marks) (2001)

(The latter two questions are also relevant to a later section and so are repeated there.)

## Abortion

Abortion is the termination of a pregnancy. We usually use the term to refer to the deliberate termination of a pregnancy, but in medicine, a miscarriage is also called a 'spontaneous abortion'. We will be concerned with deliberate abortion.

A woman becomes pregnant when a sperm fertilises one of her eggs ('conception'). The fertilised egg is a 'zygote' until it implants in the wall of her uterus, five to seven days later. It is now called an 'embryo', until eight weeks old, when it is called a 'fetus'. However, I shall use the term 'fetus' for the developing organism at all stages from conception to birth.

### What is the moral status of the fetus?

Many of the arguments for abortion focus on the moral status of the fetus. Most of the current debate is about whether a woman who was not raped and whose life is not threatened by being pregnant can be right to have an abortion. People who oppose abortion usually claim that the fetus has a right to life, because it is a human being and all human beings have a right to life. This is a deontological argument. But why should we think that all human beings have a right to life? Many people don't think that animals have a right to life, since they are happy to eat them; what is special about being human?

One thing that would make us special is that we have a soul, while animals do not. If true, this is a very strong objection to abortion. The traditional point at which we are said to acquire souls is at conception. We are going to stay just with arguments that are not theological, but two facts are worth noting. First, two-thirds of zygotes are spontaneously aborted, i.e. rejected naturally by the uterus. If each is made special by the presence of a soul, that seems a moral tragedy. Second, some types of contraception, such as the IUD (intra-uterine device) and certain types of contraceptive pill, work by changing the lining of the uterus so that fertilised eggs cannot implant in it. These methods of contraception do not stop eggs from being fertilised. If abortion is wrong because a being with a soul is prevented from developing, then these types of contraception are equally wrong.

Once we allow that abortion immediately after conception is permissible, we are faced with the difficulty of trying to find a point to draw the line. The fetus develops a little each day, day on day, until it is born, and after that, the child develops a little, day on day, until it is an adult with reason and rights. So how is it possible to say 'Now the fetus does not have a right to life, now it does'? At any point where we draw the line, the fetus is not very different just before this point and just after this point.

One way to solve this difficulty is to consider why human beings might have a right to life. What is special about being human? The things that come to mind – such as reason, the use of language, the depth of our emotional experience, our self-awareness, our ability to distinguish right and wrong – are not things that a fetus has (yet). But many other human beings, including those with severe mental disabilities and senile dementia, also don't have these characteristics. But we do not normally think it is permissible to kill them.

There is one important characteristic we do all share, and that a fetus acquires at around 20–4 weeks, and that is **sentience**. Sentience is the primitive consciousness of perception, pleasure and pain. If the right to life depends on sentience, then a fetus begins to have a right to life at around 20 weeks, but not before. Of course, as we noted above, we cannot say precisely when. Sentience develops at different speeds in different fetuses. But we should err on the side of caution, and it seems that fetuses do not, in general, develop sentience until 20 weeks old. However, if we choose this quality as the basis for a right to life, it means that many animals have a right to life as well because they are sentient (see next section).

But even sentience does not give the fetus a right to life in the first 20 weeks after conception, and most abortions take place within that period. If the fetus does not have the characteristics that give someone a right to life, we might argue that, unlike animals, it will have them if it is allowed to develop. It has a right to life now because it has the *potential* to become a person with a right to life in the future. But this is a bad argument.

First, the sperm and the egg that combined to form the fetus also had the potential to become a person. If it is potential that matters, then contraception of any form would be as wrong as abortion. An obvious reply to this is that the sperm and egg don't form a natural 'unit' for us to ascribe potential to. However, this reply must give us some reason to think it is only the potential of natural units that matters.

Second, it is not normal to treat potential as though it was already realised. Someone who has only the potential to become a teacher is not yet a teacher, and should not be put in charge of lessons. Someone who has the potential to become a millionaire cannot spend the money yet.

One important stage in the realisation of the potential of the fetus is at *viability*. This occurs when the fetus is sufficiently developed to be capable of surviving outside the uterus. With the advance of technology, viability is becoming earlier and earlier, though it is still considerably later than sentience. After viability the fetus could be delivered, kept alive outside the woman's body, and put up for adoption. This could make it wrong to abort the fetus.



## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Does the fact that a fetus will become a human being give it a right to life? Why or why not? What reasons are there to think that sentience is a morally important property?

On what other grounds, if any, might abortion be permissible?

We have so far only considered deontological arguments. Act utilitarianism asks us to consider the balance of pleasure and pain, or of preferences, in the two situations of abortion and giving birth. Normally we believe it is better to be alive than not alive. So the future life of the fetus must weigh very heavily in its favour, and certainly outweigh the inconvenience to the woman of carrying the pregnancy to term and then putting the baby up for adoption. But there is a question whether the future experience or preferences of the fetus count, because before sentience it is not yet a being with the ability to experience pleasure and pain. Utilitarianism doesn't give us an obvious answer as to what to do about future beings.

Virtue theory takes a very different approach. The discussion so far seems to treat women as containers for a fetus rather than creators of a life out of their own bodies. The *meaning* of pregnancy and abortion are not explored.

Rosalind Hursthouse argues that to think of an abortion as though the fetus does not matter is callous and shows a lack of appreciation for the type of being a fetus is – that it is quite literally one's flesh and blood, developing from oneself (Hursthouse 1992). It shows the wrong attitude to human life, death and parenthood. But this doesn't automatically make all abortions wrong. If a woman wants an abortion because she fears she cannot afford to feed the child or because she has a very demanding job and may neglect it, this is not a callous thought. However, the fact that she prioritises her job above children may indicate that her priorities in life are wrong, that she hasn't understood the value of parenthood. But it depends on the particular case. It may be that the woman leads a very worthwhile, fulfilling life, and cannot fit motherhood into the other activities that make her life as good as it is. For virtue ethics, then, each abortion is an individual case, involving an individual woman in a unique set of circumstances. And so each case must be judged by its own merits.

## Related examination questions

(Part b) Outline and illustrate *one* deontological argument for preserving life, with reference to *one* of the following moral issues: abortion, animal rights, euthanasia. (15 marks) (2002)

(Part b) Explain how, in any *one* situation, killing might be seen as a virtuous act. (15 marks) (2001)

## Animal rights

Most people believe that it is morally permissible to rear and kill animals for food and clothing and to experiment on them, at least for medical if not cosmetic purposes. Is this view defensible?

### Peter Singer: a utilitarian argument

Peter Singer is a utilitarian. In *Animal Liberation* (1975), he argued that the way we commonly treat animals is not morally justifiable. We do not think that it is right to treat women worse than men just because they are women (this is sexism), nor to treat blacks worse than whites (this is racism). Likewise, it is wrong to treat animals differently just because they are not human. This is 'speciesism'.

There is a disanalogy here. With women and men, blacks and whites, there is no difference in those important capacities – reason, the use of language, the depth of our emotional experience, our self-awareness, our ability to distinguish right and wrong – that make a being a person. But there is a difference between human beings and animals regarding all of these.

Singer argues that these differences are not relevant when it comes to the important capacity that human beings and animals share, namely sentience. He quotes Bentham: 'The question is not, Can they reason? nor Can they *talk*? but, *Can they suffer*?' (Bentham 1962: ch. XVIII, sect. 1, note). How can we defend causing suffering to animals when we would think it wrong to cause suffering to people? For a utilitarian, an act (or rule) is wrong if it produces more suffering than an alternative. Who is suffering is irrelevant. When it comes to suffering, animals should be treated as equal to people.

Does this mean that we should become vegetarian, avoid wearing leather, and protest against animal experiments? Not necessarily.

There is first the question of the utilitarian calculation: would stopping animal experiments reduce the amount of (animal) suffering in the world more than it would increase (human) suffering?

Second, the utilitarian position only objects to suffering, not to killing. This leads to the 'container' view of life: an animal's life is only valuable because of the happiness it contains. If you painlessly kill that animal and bring another animal into being (as is done when rearing animals), you haven't reduced the total amount of happiness in the world. Singer's position implies not vegetarianism, but making sure that animals are happy when they are alive and slaughtering them painlessly.

This would make eating meat much more expensive, because animals would have to be kept in much better conditions, but it would not make it morally wrong per se. It is wrong at the moment, because animals are not treated as well as they could be.

But if killing animals is permissible on this theory, what about babies? We don't think that killing babies, using them for food or experiments, is morally permissible, yet babies are no different in their psychological capacities from many animals.

### Deontological arguments

Deontologists will argue that killing human beings is wrong because they have a right to life. Having rights is related to our rationality and choices; rights to life, liberty, and property protect the 'space' that we need in order to make choices and live our lives as rational beings. Animals aren't rational and don't make free choices the way we do, so they don't have rights.

But babies also aren't rational and don't make free choices (yet) and some people with severe mental disabilities never do. If they have a right to life, and do not have different psychological capacities from certain animals, then to deny those animals a right to life would be speciesist. The problem is this: if you pick some special property only human beings have to justify a right to life, some human beings won't have it. If you pick a property all human beings have to justify a right to life, then some animals have it as well.

Tom Regan argues that to have a right to life, a creature only needs to be a 'subject of a life' (Regan 1983: 243). By this he means it has beliefs, desires, emotions, perception, memory, the ability to act (though not necessarily free choice), and a psychological identity over time. If a creature has these abilities, there is a way its life goes for it, and this matters to it. A right to life protects this. Although we can't know exactly which animals meet this criterion, we can be sure that almost all mammals (including humans) over the age of one do so.

Because these animals have a right to life, Regan argues, we cannot kill them for any reason less important than saving life. Because we do not need to eat meat or wear leather to live, we should not use animals for these purposes. Regan also argues that an animal's right to life is equal to a human being's. We do not normally discriminate between 'more valuable' and 'less valuable' human lives, even though some people are capable of much greater things than others. So we should not discriminate between 'more valuable' human lives and 'less valuable' animal lives. The right to life is equal for all subjects of a life. This means we cannot justify medical experiments that involve killing animals by the human lives the experiment may help save. We should be no more willing to use and kill animals than human beings.

For some people, these conclusions indicate that something must have gone wrong in the argument. After all, isn't it 'natural' that we eat animals, and isn't using them for clothing and medical purposes just an extension of this? But when it comes to human beings, it is difficult to know what is 'natural'. It is easier to say that tribal people who hunt animals in the wild for food are doing something 'natural' than that our practices of factory farming, such as keeping 20,000 chickens in a single enclosure, are 'natural'.

We should notice that the views we have discussed may not object to tribal hunting. The animal lives as good a life as its species might normally live, and its flesh brings celebration and pleasure. This is not true for the factory-farmed animals we eat every day. And the lack of alternative to meat for a healthy diet for many tribal people may be considered a legitimate reason to eat animals.



## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

What implications do the utilitarian and deontological arguments against eating animals have for our current practices? Which argument against eating animals is more persuasive, the utilitarian or the deontological? Why?

### An argument from virtue ethics

But is the speciesism argument valid in the first place? Virtue ethics encourages us to think further about human 'nature' and our place in the natural world. It notes that 'speciesism' isn't the only case where we 'naturally' privilege those closest to us. We also privilege our families and friends, and we are loyal to the places we grow up and the companies we work for. None of this seems morally objectionable. Perhaps it is not *just* the capacities of the being that determine how we should treat it, but also our relationship to it. There is a moral importance to bonding, the creation of special ties with



particular others. Our bond to other human beings is special because we share humanity.

The capacities of a being are very important, however. To treat another being that is rational as though it is not rational is to show it disrespect. Not to recognise that it can suffer is to show a lack of compassion. To treat a living creature as a meat-growing machine or experimental object is likewise to display a relationship with it that resembles selfishness, because we reduce it from what it is in itself to something that exists only for our sake.

But what does this mean for whether eating meat and medical experiments on animals are wrong? Virtue ethics has left us without a clear answer, but a sense of the difficulty of the question.

### Related examination question

(Part c) Assess whether utilitarianism can help us decide if it is ever morally right to kill. (24 marks) (2002)

## ● META-ETHICS: COGNITIVISM

Meta-ethics is the study of ethical concepts, such as right and wrong, good and bad, and of sentences that use these concepts. **Cognitivism** is the view that we can have moral knowledge. One main cognitivist theory, **moral realism**, claims that good and bad are properties of situations and people, right and wrong are properties of actions. Just as people can be 1.5 metres tall or good at maths, they can be good or bad. Just as actions can be done in 10 minutes or done from greed, they can right or wrong. These moral properties are a genuine part of the world. This is the type of cognitivism we will discuss.

Utilitarians, virtue ethicists and deontologists can be cognitivists if they believe the claims they make amount to knowledge. If they are cognitivists, many are likely to be moral realists. But Kant is a different type of cognitivist. He does not believe that moral concepts pick out properties in the world. Instead, moral judgements are derived from pure practical reason. His position is that moral knowledge is like mathematical knowledge: we can know mathematical truths, such as  $4 + 2 = 6$ , but many people do not think that numbers exist in the world. These truths are a product of reason, not part of reality.

## Intuitionism

Intuitionism is the realist theory that we come to know about moral properties by 'intuition', rather than by 'pure' reason or by our senses. It is most associated with two British philosophers, G. E. Moore (1873–1958) and W. D. Ross (1877–1940).

### Moore and the naturalistic fallacy

In *Principia Ethica* (1903), Moore argued against ethical **naturalism**. Naturalism is the claim that moral properties are in fact natural properties. For example, a preference utilitarian might say that what is bad about murder *just is* the frustration of the victim's preferences. Goodness is maximising the satisfaction of people's preferences. And whether people's preferences are satisfied is a natural (psychological) fact.

Moore called the attempt to equate goodness to some natural property, such as preference satisfaction, the 'naturalistic fallacy'. Goodness, he claimed, is a simple and unanalysable property. It cannot be defined in terms of anything else. Something similar, he thought, could be said about colours. Blue is a simple property, and no one can explain what blue is, you have to see it for yourself to understand what blue is. But unlike colours, goodness is a non-natural property. It is not part of the natural world of atoms that makes up all we (literally) see. But it is part of reality. (If we have souls, these aren't part of the natural world, but they are part of reality.)

Moore's main argument for believing that it is a **fallacy** – a mistake – to identify goodness with a natural property has been called the 'open question' argument. If goodness just is happiness, then it wouldn't make sense to ask 'Is it good to make people happy?' This would be like asking 'Is making people happy making people happy?' This second question isn't a real question (the answer has to be 'yes'), but 'Is it good to make people happy?' is a real question: the answer can logically be 'yes' or 'no'. And so goodness cannot be happiness. The argument is the same whatever we substitute for happiness. 'Is  $x$  good?' is always a real question while 'Is  $x$   $x$ ?' is not. And so goodness cannot be any other property.

This argument doesn't work. Here is a similar argument. 'The property of being water cannot be any property in the world, such as the property of being  $H_2O$ . If it was then the question 'Is water  $H_2O$ ?' would not make sense – it would be like asking 'Is  $H_2O$   $H_2O$ ?' But it does make sense. So water is a simple, unanalysable property.' This is not right, as water *just is*  $H_2O$ .

The reason the argument doesn't work is that it confuses concepts and properties. As we have just seen, two different concepts – water and  $H_2O$  – can pick out the same property in the world. (You learnt about water long before you

knew it was H<sub>2</sub>O; during this time, you had the concept of water, but not the concept of H<sub>2</sub>O. So they are different concepts, but they both refer to the same thing.) Likewise, the concept 'goodness' is a different concept from 'happiness', but perhaps they are exactly the same property in the world. We may doubt this for other reasons, e.g. because beauty is also good, and beauty is a different property from happiness. The point is that the open question argument does not show that they are different.



## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

What is the 'naturalistic fallacy'? Do Moore's arguments against the naturalistic fallacy succeed? Why or why not?

### 'Intuition'

Even though his argument that goodness is unanalysable is bad, perhaps Moore is right to say that goodness is a non-natural property. After all, for something to be good or right does seem to be quite different from its being heavy or 'over there'. (I discuss this further in the next section.) If values are non-natural properties, how do we know about them? Moore's answer is 'intuition'. Basic judgements about what is good, e.g. pleasure, beauty, etc., are intuitions. They are **self-evident** judgements (see 'Intuitionism and self-evident judgements'). Moore thought it was self-evident that pleasure and the enjoyment of beauty are good and that maximising pleasure is right.

Moore's idea of an 'intuition' seems quite mysterious, especially because Moore claims that moral properties are not natural properties. All our usual ways of knowing things – through our senses or through the operations of reason – are no good here. Some recent philosophers, especially virtue theorists, have argued that it is our *emotions*, together with practical wisdom, that give us this kind of intuitive knowledge. If our emotional responses are virtuous, then they intuit the moral values a situation has. For example, if I am courageous in sport, then I can feel pain or fear – which tells me something bad is happening or may happen – yet I continue to push myself anyway, because I also feel the importance and good of achievement. Virtuous feelings are actually types of cognition – cognitions of values. This theory may claim values are natural properties or agree with Moore that they are non-natural properties.

### Ross and *prima facie* duties

W. D. Ross was a deontologist, and argued that it was self-evident that certain types of actions, which he named **prima facie** duties (1930: 29), were right. He

### Intuitionism and self-evident judgements

A self-evident judgement has no other evidence or proof but its own plausibility. This doesn't necessarily mean that everyone can immediately see that it is true. 'Self-evident' is not the same as 'obvious'. Our ability to make these judgements needs to develop first, and we need to consider the question very carefully. But if we do, we will see that the judgement is true.

The difficulty with 'self-evident' judgements is that people disagree about whether they are true or not. Moore thought it was self-evident that pleasure is good and that maximising the good is right. Ross, on the other hand, thought it was self-evident that there are times when it is wrong to maximise pleasure. He argued that it was self-evident that certain dutiful actions, such as fulfilling a promise, are right. The problem is, because the judgements are supposed to be self-evident, we cannot give any further reasons for believing them.

But this doesn't mean we can reject the idea of self-evidence. Suppose we *could* give reasons for thinking that pleasure is good, for example it's good because it forms part of a flourishing life for human beings. Is it self-evident that being part of a flourishing life makes something good? If not, we need to give a further reason for this judgement. And we can ask the same question of any further reason we give. And so on, forever. It seems that if judgements about what is good are not self-evident, then judgements about what counts as a reason for thinking something is good must be.

Some philosophers suggest an alternative: judgements about what counts as a reason depend upon a particular set of beliefs that are not being questioned at the moment. When we then question those beliefs, we can give reasons for believing any one belief or judgement at once, but must in turn assume others. This way no judgement is self-evident, because it can be supported by others. Why should we believe *any* of the judgements in the set? Because the set as a whole is coherent and makes sense of our experience.

listed seven classes of *prima facie* duties: duties of fidelity (such as keeping a promise), duties of reparation (when we have done something wrong), duties of gratitude, duties of justice, duties of beneficence (helping others), duties of self-improvement, and duties of non-maleficence (not harming others). These duties can sometimes conflict with each other, and one may override the other. That is why Ross called them ‘*prima facie* duties’ – they are duties ‘at first sight’. In cases of conflict, one will give way and no longer be a duty in that situation.

As we have seen, utilitarians (Moore), deontologists (Ross), and virtue ethicists can be intuitionists. What is common to all these positions are the claims that moral values are real and known through intuition. One of the main difficulties with intuitionism is knowing how we can resolve arguments between people whose intuitions disagree. Perhaps intuitions are not knowledge of reality, but just expressions of people’s feelings. We will see that the non-cognitivist theory of emotivism claims just this.

## **Moral realism**

Moral realism is perhaps the ‘default’ or ‘common-sense’ position on ethics for many people. Many people believe that things really are right or wrong; it is not our beliefs that make them right or wrong. People are, of course, also aware of cultural differences in moral beliefs, a fact that can lead some to give up moral realism for **relativism** (see ‘Relativism’ in the next section). But tolerance of cultural differences tends to be quite limited, and many people continue to hold on to a number of moral absolutes. For example, very few people seem to think that because murder of members of other tribes, or female circumcision, or sati (where widows are expected to throw themselves on the funeral pyre of their husbands) is morally permitted in some tribal societies, that makes murder, or female circumcision, or sati right, even in those societies.

The moral realist believes that statements like ‘Euthanasia is not wrong’ are expressions of beliefs, which can be true or false. Whether such statements are true or false depends on the way that the world is, on what properties an action, person, or situation – such as euthanasia – actually has. They must ‘fit the facts’.

## **Facts and values**

What sort of facts? Moore’s argument for the naturalistic fallacy tries to draw a distinction between natural facts, which we know through our senses, and moral values, which we know through intuition. But Moore still believed there were ‘facts’ about these values, i.e. he believed that moral properties existed as part of reality, and that beliefs about moral properties could be true or false. He simply

rejected the idea that facts about moral values could be deduced from any other kind of facts.

The puzzle is how a value can be *any* type of fact. Values are related to evaluations. If no one valued anything, would there be any values? Facts are part of the world. The fact that dinosaurs roamed the earth millions of years ago would be true whether anyone had found out about it or not. But it is more difficult to believe that values ‘exist’ quite independently of us and our talk about values.

This contrast is unfair. There are lots of facts – for example, facts about being in love, or facts about music – that ‘depend’ on human beings and their activities (there would be no love if no one loved anything). But they are still facts, because they are independent of our judgements, and made true by the way the world, in this case the human world, is. You can make mistakes about whether someone is in love or whether a piece of music is baroque or classical.

This response is helpful, but values still seem different from the examples given. When two people disagree over a matter of fact, whether it is about the natural world (dinosaurs) or the human world (love), we normally know how we could prove the matter one way or the other. Facts are things that can be shown to be true. But if two people agree over all the facts about abortion, say, but still disagree about whether it is right, we cannot appeal to any more ‘facts’ in the same way. What we would call ‘the facts’ seem to be *all* agreed, but the dispute about values remains. Value judgements always go beyond the facts. Of course, the realist will say there is one fact that has not been agreed upon, namely whether abortion is right or wrong. But the case brings out the point that disagreeing about values seems to be quite different from disagreeing about facts. So values aren’t facts.

### Moral facts are reasons

Realists respond by pointing out that there is more of a connection between facts and values than this argument suggests. Notice that we always appeal to the facts when we are trying to justify a moral judgement. If there were no connection, this would seem silly. But we can give *reasons* that support our moral claims, for example that eating meat is wrong, because of the suffering it causes to animals. This reason – that our practice of eating meat causes animal suffering – is a factual claim, about a way that the world is. It is either true or false that the practice of eating meat causes suffering to animals. This may be hard to prove, but we know roughly *how* to prove it.

The model is this: “Eating meat causes animal suffering” is a reason to believe “Eating meat is wrong”.

In general terms, “Fact  $x$ ” is a reason to believe “Moral judgement  $y$ ”.

So far, so good. Now the moral realist claims that this relation ‘is a reason to believe’ is true or false. Either fact  $x$  is a reason to believe moral judgement  $y$  or it is not. Compare reasons for other types of belief. If the measurement of radiometric decay indicates that dinosaur bone fossils are 65 million years old, this is a reason to believe that dinosaurs lived on earth 65 million years ago. It is not *proof*, perhaps, but it is a reason. (Reasons can come in different strengths; there can be good reasons, really good reasons, and proof. Bad reasons are not actually reasons at all.) The result of radiometric dating of dinosaur bones is a reason to think dinosaurs lived on earth 65 million years ago, whether you think it is a reason or not. Facts about reasons are objective, just like facts about the natural world. But facts about reasons are another *type* of fact.

What type? Well, it is not a fact that science can discover. There is no scientific investigation into what reasons there are. But this doesn’t mean it is not part of reality. Philosophers would say facts about reasons are **normative** facts. They are facts about justification and reasoning.

Moral realists claim there are facts about the reasons we give for our moral judgements. Like all facts, these facts about reasons are part of the way the world is. How does this help moral realism? Let’s go back to the example of abortion. We said that the two people agree on all the ‘facts’ about abortion, but disagree on whether it is wrong. What we meant, says the realist, is that they agree on all the natural facts, but we forgot about the facts about reasons. For example, is the fact that the fetus will become a human being a (strong) reason for thinking abortion is wrong? The answer to this question, claims realism, is factual, a fact about a reason. So the two people don’t agree on all the facts, because they don’t agree on the normative facts. One of them is making a mistake, because they are not seeing certain natural facts as reasons at all or, at least, not seeing them as strong reasons, when they are reasons or strong reasons. If two people agree on all the natural facts *and* all the normative facts, then they will also agree on the value. So we can understand values as a type of fact.

Moral realism accepts that it can be very difficult to establish whether a natural fact constitutes a reason for believing something is right or wrong, and how strong this reason is. But this is the case in all types of investigation into reality. We must always ‘weigh up the facts’ when making judgements about what to believe. This ‘weighing up’ is an attempt to discover the facts about reasons. Moral judgements – judgements about moral values – are judgements about normative facts.

I said earlier that utilitarians, deontologists and virtue ethicists can all be moral realists. For example, hedonist utilitarians claim that pleasure always gives us a reason to try to create it (it is good), and pain always gives us a reason to try to avoid it. They also claim that there is always more reason to bring about more pleasure than less (this is right). Virtue ethicists, on the other hand, claim that certain facts about being human mean that a certain way of living is the best, most flourishing life. We therefore have reason to develop our characters in ways that allow us to live like this, and meet our and other people's needs.



## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Should we make a distinction between facts and values? What implications does such a distinction have for moral realism?

### Related examination question

(Part b) Explain and illustrate the cognitivist view that we can know moral facts.  
(15 marks) (2003)

### Associated problems

We have already discussed three objections that are often made to moral realism. We shall finish this discussion before looking at three other objections.

#### Three quick objections

The first objection we have discussed is the difference between facts and values, the gap that Moore noted with his open question argument and that non-cognitivists argue for (see 'META-ETHICS: NON-COGNITIVISM' below). The point can be put concisely: no fact can logically entail a moral value. This objection is sometimes also known as the 'is-ought gap'. We have seen the realist's response: whether a natural fact counts as a reason for believing a certain value judgement is itself a matter of objective fact (it is a normative fact). Perhaps it is true that natural facts don't logically *entail* value judgements. This is because 'entailment' is one kind of normative fact, like 'proof'. But there are others, like 'evidence for' and 'reason for'.

A second objection we have already discussed is the claim that moral disputes cannot be resolved by appeals to facts, that judgements of value always go beyond the facts. The realist's reply here is that this is true if you are only



talking about natural facts. But there are other types of fact that people are disagreeing on, namely normative facts. If we resolved the disagreement about both natural facts and normative facts, people would agree on the moral judgement as well. The moral realist can also accept that we cannot resolve disagreements about normative facts just by appealing to natural facts. A modern form of intuitionism might claim that we discover facts about reasons through a kind of intuition.

A third objection is known as the argument from ‘queerness’. Isn’t the idea of values existing in the world like facts a very strange notion? And how we are supposed to come to know these values seems very strange too. But realists will deny that they claim anything queer at all. If all realists thought values existed as Platonic Forms, perhaps the argument from queerness would have some force. But we have seen that values can be understood in terms of normative facts. And it seems we need these even to do science, because the idea of a natural fact (the results of radiometric dating) being a reason to believe another fact (when dinosaurs existed) is needed wherever we have beliefs. So normative facts aren’t strange. As for how we come to know about values, as indicated in the discussion of intuitionism, one possible reply is ‘through emotional cognition’, a combination of emotional sensitivity with right reasoning. It is through virtue and practical wisdom that we come to an understanding of moral reasons.

### Related examination question

(Part c) Assess the view that we can’t get an ‘ought’ from an ‘is’. (24 marks) (2003)

#### Three long objections

The first new objection questions why we should believe that our intuitions (of values directly, or of certain facts being reasons for certain value judgements) are *beliefs* at all. They might actually be expressions of feeling, or a matter of choice. I shall not discuss this now, since the sections in ‘META-ETHICS: NON-COGNITIVISM’ below present these theories.

There are two further objections to look at. One is the question of relativism. The other is the question of the relation between moral values and motivation.

## Relativism

Different cultures have different moral beliefs and practices. If moral realism is correct, then some moral beliefs are true, and others are false. We measure our morality against the way the world is. The realist claims that different cultures are all aiming to get at the *truth* about ethics, just as scientists are trying to find out the truth about the world.

The relativist claims that this makes it difficult to understand why such a variety of cultural practices have existed. Why have different cultures come up with different moral answers? Where they disagree, how can we explain why at least one culture has ‘got it wrong’? Why couldn’t people in that culture see what was right and do that? The realist’s story doesn’t sit well with an understanding of the history of a culture and how its ethical practices developed.

Relativism understands ethical claims to be part of a culture, not part of reality; ethical practices have developed to help people find their way around a social world. But there are many social worlds, many cultures, and they have developed different ways of doing things. And so there is no ethical truth beyond culture. There is no single truth to ethics.

Realists have three responses. First, they can say that different ethical practices reflect the different particular conditions in which different cultures are situated, but not different ethical principles. For example, the Inuit used to abandon their old people on ice flows to die, while we try to keep them alive for as long as possible. But this doesn’t mean killing old people is right for the Inuit and wrong for us. The practice is simply due to the harsh conditions of survival in which the Inuit lived. It would be right for us if we lived in their conditions, and wrong for them if they lived in ours.

Second, realists draw attention to just how many general ethical principles and virtues different cultures share. For example, most cultures have prohibitions on killing, lying, and theft, and encourage care of the weak.

Third, realists draw attention to moral progress. We have become more humane than in the past, and there is greater agreement about moral judgements than before. This is because we are discovering real moral truths.

But are these answers persuasive?

Moral judgements guide our behaviour. If I think pleasure is good, I aim to bring about pleasure. If I think abortion is wrong, I will not commit or encourage others to commit abortion. This motivating aspect of moral judgements seems puzzling if the moral realist is correct. A fact, in and of itself, doesn't lead to action. It seems that I need to *care* about the fact, and then the motivating force comes from the caring. For example, the fact that it is raining doesn't motivate me to pick up my umbrella unless I don't want to get wet. How then does 'Abortion is wrong' motivate me to act unless I care about right and wrong? But surely, claims this objection, statements about right and wrong, good and bad are motivating in their own right.

But are they? questions the moral realist. This objection doesn't work otherwise. There certainly seem to be people – and perhaps all of us at certain times, e.g. when we are depressed – for whom statements about morality are not motivating. They just don't care about morality; they can understand that an action is morally wrong, but this doesn't affect their behaviour. Moral judgements, then, are only motivating to people who care about morality. Since most of us do most of the time, it is easy to think that the judgements are motivating on their own.

### Related examination questions

(Part a) Briefly explain *two* reasons for believing that there are no moral facts. (6 marks) (2002)

(Part b) Describe and illustrate *one* account of how moral language can guide or influence action. (15 marks) (2001)

## ● META-ETHICS: NON-COGNITIVISM

**Non-cognitivism** maintains that there is no ethical knowledge, because ethical judgements are not statements that can be true or false. In this way, non-cognitivists draw a sharp distinction between facts and values.

### Emotivism

The principle of verification and Ayer's theory

In the 1930s, a school of philosophy arose called logical positivism. The cornerstone of its beliefs was the principle of verification. This claims that a statement only has a meaning if it is either (1) **analytic** or (2) empirically

verifiable. An analytic statement is true (or false) just in virtue of the meanings of the words. For instance, 'a bachelor is an unmarried man' is analytically true, while 'a square has three sides' is analytically false. A statement is empirically verifiable if **empirical** evidence would go towards establishing that the statement is true or false. For example, if I say 'the moon is made of green cheese', we can check this by scientific investigation. If I say 'the universe has 600 trillion planets', we can't check this by scientific investigation in practice, but we can do so *in principle*. We know how to show whether it is true or false, so it is 'verifiable' even though we can't actually verify it.

The principle of verification entails that many types of statement, for example, statements about right and wrong, beauty, and God, are *meaningless*. They are neither true nor false, because they do not actually state anything. If I say 'murder is wrong', there is no empirical investigation we can do to show this. We can show that murder causes grief and pain, or that it is often done out of anger. But we cannot demonstrate, in the same way, that it is *wrong*. To say 'murder is wrong' is not, therefore, to say anything that can be true or false.

We can see how this theory relates to Moore's intuitionism (see p. 70). Moore claimed that basic moral judgements are self-evident and that good is a non-natural property. Both claims imply that moral judgements cannot be shown to be true or false by empirical investigation. But Moore believed that moral judgements are nevertheless true or false, because they are about non-natural properties. For the logical positivists, however, if empirical investigation can't settle the truth of moral judgements, they are meaningless.

So if ethical statements don't state truths, and are therefore literally meaningless, what do they do? In his book *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936: ch. 6), the logical positivist A. J. Ayer argued that ethical judgements express feelings: 'If I say to someone, "You acted wrongly in stealing that money" . . . I am simply evincing my moral disapproval of it. It is as if I had said, "You stole that money," in a peculiar tone of horror' (p. 142). Our 'intuitions', as Moore would describe them, are simply our feelings of approval or disapproval. Feelings are not cognitions of value, and value does not exist independently of our feelings.

The main difficulty with logical positivism is that according to the principle of verification, the principle of verification is meaningless. The claim that 'a statement only has meaning if it is analytic or can be verified empirically' is not analytic and cannot be verified empirically. What empirical evidence can we produce to show that it is true? None. But if the principle of verification is meaningless, then what it claims cannot be true. So it does not give us any reason to believe that the claims of ethics are meaningless.

### Stevenson's theory

Fortunately for Ayer, his theory of ethics, known as emotivism, does not depend on the principle of verification. Charles Stevenson did not use the principle of verification nor claim that the only types of meaning are descriptive and analytic meaning. In his book *Ethics and Language* (1944), he discussed the *emotive* meanings of words, which is a different type of meaning again. The sentence 'You stole that money' has a purely descriptive meaning, namely that you took money that did not belong to you without permission from the owner. But it can be used with an emotive meaning ('You *stole* that money!'), a meaning that expresses disapproval. Many moral terms ('steal', 'honesty', 'respect') have both descriptive and emotive meanings. The central ones, though, 'right', 'wrong', 'good' and 'bad' only have emotive meanings.

Stevenson analyses emotive meaning by connecting meaning to *use*. The purpose of moral judgements is not to state facts. 'Good' and 'right' are not names of properties (natural or non-natural). We use moral terms and moral judgements to express our feelings and to influence the feelings and actions of other people. When we use the terms 'good' and 'right', we express our approval.

This claim is the essence of emotivism. And it is a strong claim. Surely the whole point of ethics is to influence how we behave. Words with emotive meaning do just that. The view that 'right' and 'good' are the names of properties (whether natural or non-natural) makes their meanings descriptive, not emotive. But, as we saw above (p. 78), this makes it difficult to see why we should care about moral facts. Why should I care that the act was wrong any more than I should care that it was done at 3.30 p.m.? According to moral realism, they are both just properties of the act. Emotivism, by contrast, connects caring, approving, disapproving, with the very meaning of ethical words.

### Related examination questions

(Part a) Briefly explain what is meant by the claim that moral language is used to express feelings rather than to describe facts. (6 marks) (2001)

(Part b) Describe and illustrate *one* account of how moral language can guide or influence action. (15 marks) (2001)

### Emotivism and moral disagreement

One of the most powerful objections to emotivism is that it seems to entail a very unsatisfactory view of ethical discussion. If I say 'abortion is wrong' and you say 'abortion is right', I am just expressing my disapproval of it and you are expressing your approval. I'm just saying 'Boo! to abortion' and you're saying 'Hurrah! for abortion'. This is just like cheering for our own team; there is no *discussion*, no *reasoning*, going on at all. Even worse, emotivism claims that we are trying to influence other people's feelings and actions. But trying to influence people without reasoning is just a form of manipulation.

Ayer thought this objection partly false, partly true. It is false because emotivists claim that there is a lot more to ethical discussion: the facts. When arguing over animal rights, say, we are constantly drawing facts to each other's attention. I point out how much animals suffer in factory farms. You point out how much more sophisticated human beings are than animals. And so on. In fact, says Ayer, *all* the discussion is about the facts. If we both agree on the facts, but still disagree morally, there is no more discussion that can take place. And this is why the objection is true – but not an objection. When all the facts are in, there is nothing left to discuss. (We saw the realist's response to this on p. 76.)

The disagreement that remains, Stevenson argued, is not a disagreement over any fact. It is a disagreement in attitude. It is a practical disagreement; no one can live both by the attitude that 'eating meat is wrong' and by the attitude that 'eating meat is right'.

### Prescriptivism

R. M. Hare believed that emotivism had identified some important mistakes in moral realism, but he argued that it gave the wrong account of the meaning of moral words. Moral words are not descriptive and emotive in meaning; they are descriptive and *prescriptive* (Hare 1952). This difference meant that he was able, he claimed, to give a more persuasive account of moral discussion that allowed a greater role for reason.

### Prescriptive meaning

Prescriptive meaning works like commands, also known as imperatives. If I say 'Leave the room', I am telling you to do something. Hare argued that if I say 'Eating meat is wrong', I am saying 'Don't eat meat'. In claiming that moral judgements are like imperatives, Hare's theory is like Kant's (see p. 48). The emotivists were right to claim that the purpose of moral judgements is to guide how we act. And commands do exactly that: they tell us how to act.

There is a difference between commanding – or telling – someone how to act, and trying to get them to act that way. We saw that emotivism is open to the objection that it makes ethical discussion a matter of manipulation. Hare's theory sees the 'guiding' aspect of ethics as a matter of prescription, rather than a matter of influencing someone through emotion. This makes ethical discussion more straightforward and rational.

So what is prescriptive meaning? We use the word 'good', says Hare, when we want to *commend* something to someone. We can talk about good chocolate, good teachers, and good people. In each case, we are saying the chocolate, teacher, or person is praiseworthy in some way. In each case, there is a set of standards that we are implicitly relying on. Good chocolate is rich in the taste of cocoa. A good teacher can explain new ideas clearly and create enthusiasm in her students. A good person – well, a good person is someone who is the way we should try to be as people. A virtue theorist would say a good person is someone who has the virtues. Just as there are certain traits a teacher should have to be a good teacher, there are certain traits a person should have to be a good person.

Whenever we use the word 'good', Hare claims, we always use it in relation to a set of standards. After all, if you say 'Martin Luther King was really good', whether you mean 'good as a speaker' or 'good as a father' or 'good as a person' depends on the context. But you must mean 'good as . . .' something. There are different sets of standards for being a good speaker, a good father, and a good person.

When we use 'good' to mean 'morally good', we are appealing to a set of standards that apply to someone as a person. If we say that an action is a good action or a right action, we mean it is an action that complies with the standards for how someone should act to be a good person. There is a slight difference of emphasis between 'good action' and 'right action': 'good action' *commends* the action without necessarily *commanding* it; we are saying it should be praised, but not necessarily that you *have* to do it to be a good person. If we say an action is the 'right action', then we are commanding it; it is a guideline for behaviour that people should follow.

So the prescriptive meaning of ‘good’ relates to the fact that it commends. What about its descriptive meaning? This comes from the set of standards that is being assumed. Its descriptive meaning picks up on the qualities that the something must have to be a good . . . (speaker, father, coffee pot, desk, whatever).



## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

What is the difference between descriptive and prescriptive meaning? What does the word ‘good’ mean?

### How moral language works

Because ‘good’ is always used in relation to a set of standards, it always has a descriptive meaning. And since we usually use ‘good’ to commend, we generally use it with prescriptive meaning as well. But we do not always use it with prescriptive meaning. Take the dog show Crufts. The judges have a set of standards for each type of dog, and will say things like ‘What a wonderful poodle!’ You might agree that, as poodles go, that poodle has it all, but really you prefer your poodles rugged and scruffy. So if you say ‘OK, so it’s a good poodle’, you aren’t commending the poodle, you are just acknowledging that it is fluffy, dainty, and so on. We might capture this by saying ‘So it’s a “good” poodle.’

This can happen with any word that both commends and describes; we can use it just to describe and not commend or disapprove. Take moral words like ‘steal’ or ‘honesty’. We often use the word ‘honest’ to commend someone. But I can say ‘If you weren’t so honest, we could have got away with that!’ This is an expression of annoyance, not praise. I’m using ‘honest’ in a purely descriptive way. This even works with ‘good person’. I can agree that a ‘good person’ is one who is honest, kind, just, etc. But I can still think that good people are not to be commended, because, as Woody Allen said, ‘Good people sleep better than bad people, but bad people enjoy the waking hours more.’

Hare is making a point similar to that of the emotivists: that descriptive meaning and prescriptive meaning are logically distinct. And when we use words with a moral meaning, we use them with a prescriptive meaning. This means that nothing about being honest (e.g. telling the truth: descriptive meaning) can make me commend honesty (think that telling the truth is how to behave: prescriptive). More generally, nothing about the facts – of abortion, euthanasia, animal suffering – can logically entail that abortion is wrong, say, or that euthanasia is right. We are, in this way, *free* in the prescriptions that we make.



However, Hare argues that this freedom is rationally constrained. As we saw, prescriptions relate to a set of standards. And a standard applies to something in virtue of the properties it has; for example chocolate is good if it has a rich taste of cocoa. So if one bar of chocolate is good chocolate because it has a rich taste of cocoa, then another bar of chocolate that has the same taste must also be good chocolate. Whenever we apply a standard, we are logically committed to making the same judgement of two things that match the standard in the same way. If I say this chocolate is good but that chocolate is not, I must think that there is some relevant difference between the two.

When it comes to moral judgements, the same is true. We can choose what standards we live by, but standards always work in a certain way. I think that it is wrong for you to steal from me, because it infringes my rights of ownership. Therefore I must think that it is wrong for me to steal from you, because it infringes your rights of ownership – unless I can say that there is some relevant difference between the two cases. Hare argues that the simple fact that in one case *you* steal from *me* and in the other case *I* steal from *you* is not a relevant difference; both actions infringe rights of ownership. Because this was the reason I gave in the first case, and the same fact is true in the second case, I must accept that the same judgement applies in the second case.

### Prescriptivism and emotivism

How does Hare's theory improve on emotivism? Emotivists thought that the only role for reason in ethical discussion is establishing the facts. Hare has developed two more ways in which reason is part of ethical discourse.

First, we can argue about consistency. For example, in his argument regarding animals, Singer claimed that there was no relevant difference between the suffering of people and the suffering of animals. If we are going to say that causing the suffering of people is wrong, we are committed to saying the suffering of animals is wrong – unless we can find a relevant difference. Establishing whether there are any relevant differences is another role for reason.

Second, we can infer prescriptions from other prescriptions. A famous argument against abortion says 'Taking an innocent human life is wrong. Abortion is the taking of an innocent human life. Therefore abortion is wrong.' This is a valid argument, even if we rephrase it as Hare would understand it: 'Do not take innocent human life. Abortion is the taking of an innocent human life. Therefore, do not commit abortion.' To disagree with the conclusion, we must disagree with at least one premise. And so our prescriptions are logically related to one another. So we can use reason to discuss these relations.

## Related examination questions

(Part a) Identify *one* similarity and *one* difference between emotivism and prescriptivism. (6 marks) (2003)

(Part b) Explain and illustrate the view that moral language is prescriptive. (15 marks) (2002)

## Associated problems

What is the role of reason in ethics?

We have already discussed one objection to non-cognitivism, namely that it cannot account for our use of reasoning in moral discussion. The non-cognitivist response is simply to rebut the objection. Moral disagreements can be, and often are, about facts. When they are not about facts, Hare argues, moral disagreements can also be about the consistency in applying certain standards, and about how one standard can imply another. Stevenson argues a parallel point: that moral disagreements can be about whether one moral attitude excludes another in the sense that no one can live by both at the same time.

We can develop this last point further. People do not have feelings or make choices in isolation. The attitudes we adopt have implications for other attitudes and mental states. If I disapprove of an action, I must also have certain beliefs about it (my reasons for disapproving, such as that it causes pain) and certain desires towards it (such as wanting to prevent it), and as Hare argued, I must have similar feelings about similar actions. Moral disagreement, then, can be about the relations between different feelings that we have. For example, deciding whether abortion is right or wrong is complicated because there are many feelings involved, sympathy towards the mother, sympathy towards the fetus, feelings about human life, death, and parenthood. It is difficult to work out how these feelings can all be acted upon, and that is why people disagree.

## Form and content

Two further, and very important, difficulties that non-cognitivism faces relate to the fact that it doesn't place limits on what we can approve or disapprove of. The first difficulty stems from the fact that non-cognitivism identifies moral judgements with a particular *type* of judgement, rather than a particular *content*. Emotivism equates moral judgement to the expression of moral approval or disapproval (and related emotions). Prescriptivism equates it to an expression of

principle that applies to people as people. But isn't morality about sympathy, loyalty, courage, happiness, and so on?

It must be true to say, as non-cognitivism does, that moral judgements are special or different in some way. This is shown, for instance, in the close relation between making a moral judgement and being motivated to act on it. But is the special nature of moral judgements to be explained just in terms of their *form* (emotional expression or universal prescription), or are they special because of their *content*, i.e. what it is they are about?

This question becomes clearer when we consider the second, related difficulty. Because non-cognitivists understand moral judgements in terms of their form, not their content, they seem to allow that anything could be morally approved or disapproved of or chosen as a principle of action. I could disapprove of people under 1.6 metres tall or choose to live by the principle that we must maximise the number of florists living in Kensington. But the idea of morality is not so unrestricted. It must relate in some way to what is good for people (or more broadly, animals, the environment, God). If we don't at least try to relate our feelings of approval and disapproval or our choice of principles to this, those feelings and choices cannot qualify as 'moral'. Not just any set of expressions of approval or principles can count as 'morality'. Values are not so detached from facts – about human nature, for instance – that we can understand any system of principles or feelings as embodying a system of moral values.

How can the non-cognitivist explain this? According to the non-cognitivist, we explain moral values in terms of feelings or choices. But the objection shows that we have to presuppose certain ideas about moral values in order to understand feelings or choices as relating to morality at all. It is not just a matter of the form of the judgement.

We need to ask whether we can value anything we choose to. Non-cognitivism claims first, that a judgement is a value judgement if it has a particular form; and second, that value judgements 'create' values rather than 'discover' them. For the moral realist, our value judgements are a reflection of values that exist independently. For the non-cognitivist, values are a reflection of our value judgements. It follows that, if values depend entirely on our will, we could value anything we chose to. But this is difficult to make sense of. Outside certain limits, we would consider people mad rather than thinking that they just had a different set of values from ours.

Imagine that someone did believe in maximising the number of florists in Kensington, and all her 'moral' feelings and actions related to this: she is willing

to do anything to pursue her goal (even murder), she tries to stop florists from closing down, she tries to change the law to protect florists in Kensington, she feels no disapproval towards theft, lying, disloyalty, no approval of kindness or courage – unless they relate to florists in Kensington. Such a person would be classed as a psychopath. As I said above, the limits of what we understand as ‘morality’ relate to what we can understand as relating to what is good for human beings (or more broadly, animals, the environment, God).

One way non-cognitivists can respond is by making use of those facts about human beings that limit our idea of morality. It is precisely because human beings have certain needs, have a particular nature, that we do not value things that are not related to human (animal, etc.) welfare. And this is just a natural fact about human beings. ‘Valuing’ is an activity of the will, but the will is guided by its nature. In truth, there is no *logical* restriction on possible ‘moralities’, but there is a considerable *factual* one. We are all set up, by evolution perhaps, to value actions and people in particular, familiar sorts of ways. This is why we call only particular sets of feelings or principles ‘moral’. The objection doesn’t prove that there are facts about morality that our feelings or choices must answer to. It only shows that a common human nature underlies our feelings and choices. But it is still these feelings and choices that create morality.

### Nihilism

A fourth objection to non-cognitivism is that it entails that there are no values, so anything goes. This is known as **nihilism**. If morality is the product of my feelings and choices, then morality has no authority over me. I can do whatever I like, as long as I don’t get caught. ‘Morality’ becomes no more than a matter of taste, and taste cannot be shown to be right or wrong (‘de gustibus non disputandum’: taste cannot be disputed).

Non-cognitivists argue that this is either an unfair simplification of their theories or a straightforward misunderstanding. The adoption of nihilism is itself a choice or expression of feeling, and one that moral people will disapprove of morally. The view that there are no moral values is one particular moral position, and comes into conflict with the moral feelings and choices of other moral positions. The theory that moral values are a reflection of our feelings does not imply that we should stop having moral feelings. Nihilism is not ‘more correct’, but a cynical and immature view of life (note the emotionally expressive evaluative words). And so we should have disapproving moral feelings towards anyone who advocates that morality is just a matter of taste.

## Non-cognitivism and tolerance

Many people think that non-cognitivism implies a certain kind of tolerance. If morality is a reflection of our choices or feelings, and my choices or feelings are different from yours, then who are you to tell me that my morality is wrong? Non-cognitivism implies tolerance, they claim, because no one can correct anyone else.

Tolerance can appear to be a virtue, but it can also be a vice. Should we tolerate every view, including racism, sexism, female circumcision? Doesn't morality require that we 'take a stand' against what is wrong? Can non-cognitivism allow for this?

The objection is based on a mistake, because non-cognitivism does not entail tolerance for two reasons. First, tolerance is itself a moral value. 'You ought to tolerate other people's values, because there are no moral values' is self-contradictory. If there are no moral values, then there is nothing I 'ought' to do. We only ought to be tolerant if tolerance is a good or right thing to be. So, turning the tables, who are you to tell someone else to be tolerant? This is no different from saying that someone ought not to eat meat or ought not to be racist. It is a moral claim. Non-cognitivism doesn't entail that we ought to be tolerant or that we ought not to be tolerant.

Second, if my morality is different from yours, then not only will I disagree with you about whether a particular action is right or wrong, I may also disapprove of people who disagree with me and try to persuade them to change their mind. Or, I might feel that tolerance is a moral value, so I feel I should tolerate their different values. But this tolerance will have its limits. Very few people think that tolerance is a more important value than preventing a racist murder, say.

For these same reasons, non-cognitivism does not imply relativism. To claim that moral judgements can be right for you and wrong for me because we have different cultures is itself a moral claim. If I feel approval towards a particular action, I may disapprove of people who behave as if the action is wrong. How tolerant I am of other cultures depends entirely on whether I think such tolerance is a good thing.

But can I really justify interfering with how other people behave just because their actions don't accord with my feelings or choices? This seems very petty. But this isn't the reason I am interfering, claims the non-cognitivist. It is not because it offends me, but because they are being racist or cruel or cowardly or whatever.

The difference between non-cognitivism and moral realism is this: for the non-cognitivist, that I think racist discrimination is a good reason to prevent an action is an expression of my moral feelings. For the realist, that this is a good reason to interfere is a normative fact. The realist claims to have the backing of reality.

### Moral progress

A final objection to non-cognitivism is that it does not allow for the idea of moral progress. If there is no moral reality, then our moral beliefs or feelings cannot become better or worse. Obviously, they have changed; people used to believe that slavery was morally acceptable and now they do not. But how can non-cognitivism say that this is *progress*? There are two responses non-cognitivists can give.

First, as we noticed when discussing the place of reason in moral debate, non-cognitivists can claim that there can be very real improvements in people's moral views if they become more rational. This can happen in several different ways. First, people may come to know certain facts that they didn't know before. In the case of slavery, people believed many things about slaves that were not true (one popular false belief was that they were stupid). Moral progress here means basing one's moral feelings or principles on the facts, not mistakes. Second, people can become more consistent, more willing to universalise their principles. Some utilitarians, such as Peter Singer, argue that if we were consistent in our feelings about preventing suffering, we would not eat meat. If he is right, then this would be moral progress. Third, people can become more coherent in their moral judgements. Many of us have moral feelings that come into conflict with each other, e.g. over abortion. Moral progress here would be a matter of working out the implications of our views, and changing what needed changing to make them coherent with each other.

Because people are ignorant, do not always think logically, and have not resolved the conflicts between their different feelings, the non-cognitivist can say that there is plenty of room for moral progress. But moral progress just means

becoming more rational in our moral thinking, not becoming more 'correct' in our moral judgements.

A second response that non-cognitivists can make to the objection from moral progress is this: If I disapprove of the moral feelings or principles of societies in the past and approve of the moral feelings and principles of society in the present, then I will also say that we have made moral progress. Society has moved from moral principles that were bad (i.e. principles I disapprove of) to moral principles that are good (i.e. principles I approve of). That is what moral progress is.

This response means that moral progress is only visible from a particular moral point of view. If you disagree with me, you might claim that today's moral principles are much worse than those 200 years ago and so we have not made moral progress. But this is now just the familiar problem of moral disagreement or relativism, and we saw how the non-cognitivist answered these problems above. The problem of moral progress is just another example of these problems.

### Related examination questions

- (Part c) Assess the view that moral beliefs are a matter of personal decisions, preferences and tastes. (24 marks) (2001)
- (Part c) Assess emotivism. (24 marks) (2002)
- (Part c) Assess the view that we can't get an 'ought' from an 'is'. (24 marks) (2003)

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### RECOMMENDED READING

- A lively, engaging, and quick introduction to the main issues of ethics, written in a very clear style, is Simon Blackburn's *Being Good* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). At the opposite end in terms of length is Peter Singer's edited collection of introductory essays *A Companion to Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), an irreplaceable resource. Each essay, written for the beginner, is an excellent survey of a single topic. One of the clearest, mid-length introductions to ethics is James Rachels's *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, 3rd edn (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1999). He considers normative theories in relation to practical issues. With more detail, Piers Benn's *Ethics* (London: UCL Press, 1998) is a careful and accurate introduction across the whole range of normative and meta-ethical issues. And Richard Norman's *The Moral Philosophers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983) is one of the best introductions to the normative and meta-ethical theories of ethics via the great philosophers who held them. It also includes a good discussion of moral realism, defending it against the powerful attack that can be found in the first two chapters of John Mackie's *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977). Bernard Williams's *Morality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976) includes difficult, but excellent, discussions of subjectivism, relativism, the idea of 'good', and utilitarianism. His joint book with John Smart, *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1973) is one of the most informative discussions of utilitarianism: its structure, its motives, and its problems.



Finally, on practical ethics, two classic works, both defending a utilitarian standpoint but discussing a wide range of arguments, are Peter Singer's shorter and clearer *Practical Ethics*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) and Jonathan Glover's more detailed *Causing Death and Saving Lives* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977).

## GLOSSARY

**act utilitarianism** – The normative moral theory that claims (1) happiness is the only good, and (2) an action is only right if it leads to greater happiness than (or at least equal happiness to) any other action possible in that situation, i.e. if it maximises happiness.

**analytic** – An analytic statement is true (or false) in virtue of the meanings of the words. For instance, 'If I'm heavier than you, you are lighter than me' is analytically true, while 'a square has three sides' is analytically false.

**cognitivism** – The meta-ethical theory that we can have moral knowledge. Many cognitivists are also moral realists, although Kant is an exception. He believed moral knowledge could be deduced from pure reason.

**deontology** – The normative moral theory that whether an action is right or wrong is determined by the properties of the action, and not, for example, by its consequences.

**duty** – The idea that an action is morally obligatory or required. It is the central moral concept of deontology.

**empirical** – Relating to or deriving from experience, especially sense experience, but also including experimental scientific investigation, even if it involves special instruments.

**fallacy** – A pattern of poor reasoning. A fallacious argument or theory is one that is mistaken in some way.

**hedonism** – Hedonism can mean either of two different claims: (1) happiness is the only good, or (2) happiness is pleasure and the absence of pain. Utilitarianism, as defended by Bentham, is a hedonic theory in both senses.

**higher pleasure** – If one type of pleasure, e.g. reading literature, is preferred to another type

of pleasure, e.g. drinking alcohol, by almost everyone who has experience of both, then it is the higher pleasure. Mill argued that higher pleasures are more valuable to human beings than lower pleasures, and contribute more to their happiness. He believed that pleasures of thought, feeling, and imagination were higher pleasures while pleasures of the body were lower pleasures.

**intuitionism** – The cognitivist meta-ethical theory that claims we come to know moral truths through 'intuition', rather than pure reason or the senses. It is associated with the view that moral properties are not natural properties we can know about in any other way.

**maxim** – A personal principle that guides our choices, e.g. 'to have as much fun as possible', 'to marry only someone I truly love'. Our choices usually have some maxim or other behind them, which explains our reasons for that particular choice. Kant claimed that only maxims that everyone could live by are morally acceptable.

**meta-ethics** – The study of the meaning and nature of moral concepts, such as 'right' and 'good', and moral statements, such as 'Abortion is wrong'. Among other things, meta-ethics debates whether morality is objective or subjective and whether there can be moral knowledge.

**moral realism** – The cognitivist meta-ethical theory that claims that moral properties are a genuine part of the world, e.g. good and bad are properties of situations and people, right and wrong are properties of actions. Statements about moral properties can be true or false, and so there are moral facts.

**natural law** – The normative moral theory that

claims that a basic set of principles for reasoning about what to do (practical reason) has been laid down by God or can be derived from facts about human nature and the natural world.

**naturalism** – The meta-ethical theory that moral properties are, or are determined by, natural properties. It is a type of moral realism.

**nihilism** – The meta-ethical theory that there are no moral values, that morality is a fiction. It is sometimes thought to be entailed by non-cognitivism.

**non-cognitivism** – The meta-ethical theory that maintains that there is no ethical knowledge, because moral judgements are not statements that can be true or false. Moral judgements are expressions of emotion or attitudes, or prescriptions about what to do. Non-cognitivists draw a sharp distinction between facts and values.

**normative** – Relating to 'norms', rules or reasons for conduct.

**normative ethics** – General theories about what is good and what types of action or codes of action are right. Normative ethical theories can provide guidance in practical cases.

**practical ethics** – The branch of philosophy that discusses whether a particular action or type of action, e.g. abortion, is right or wrong.

**prima facie** – At first sight, correct or accepted until shown otherwise. Ross argued that certain types of action are duties that we ought to perform unless they conflict with something more important. He called these *prima facie* duties.

**relativism** – The meta-ethical theory that morality is created by cultures or societies, and so the rightness or wrongness of moral claims

is 'relative' to particular cultures or societies. There is no truth about morality independent of what cultures and societies actually think.

**rule utilitarianism** – The normative moral theory that claims (1) happiness is the only good, and (2) an action is right if it complies with rules which, if everybody followed them, would lead to the greatest happiness (compared to any other rules).

**self-evident** – A self-evident judgement has no other evidence or proof but its own plausibility. This doesn't necessarily mean that everyone can immediately see that it is true. 'Self-evident' is not the same as 'obvious'. However, the only way we can come to know the judgement is true is by considering it.

**sentience** – Primitive consciousness of perception, pleasure and pain.

**utilitarianism** – The family of normative moral theories that claim the only thing that is good is happiness, and the sole criterion for right and wrong is the maximisation of happiness. See also **act utilitarianism** and **rule utilitarianism**.

**virtue** – Usually, a morally good trait of character. Aristotle argued that virtues dispose us to feel desires and emotions 'well', rather than 'badly'. By 'well', he meant 'at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way' (Aristotle 1980: 38).

**virtue theory** – The normative moral theory that claims that the question 'What is a good person?' is more fundamental than the question 'What should I do?' Virtue theorists therefore develop theories about what it is to be a good person. An action is right, roughly, if it is an action that a virtuous person would do.

# 3

## • philosophy of religion

UNIT 2 Elizabeth Burns

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### Key concepts ►

- personal
  - omnipresent
  - creator and sustainer of the universe
  - transcendent
  - omniscient
  - omnipotent
  - perfectly good
  - analogy
  - verification
  - falsification
  - language-game
  - cosmological argument
  - teleological argument
  - argument from religious experience
  - ontological argument
  - Pascal's wager
  - Reformed epistemology
  - the problem of evil
  - miracles
  - divine command ethics
- 

### ● INTRODUCTION

Philosophy of religion uses the tools of philosophy to try to work out the meaning of religious beliefs and whether they might, in some sense, be true. If

there is a God who requires us to live in a certain way, who helps us in times of trouble or gives us the hope of a life after death, this could make a big difference to our lives. So we need to know whether it's rational to make such claims.

## ● THE MEANING AND JUSTIFICATION OF RELIGIOUS CONCEPTS

### Conceptions of God

We will begin by considering the various ways in which God has been described: his **attributes** or **properties**. These include 'personal', '**omnipresent**' (present at all places and (possibly) at all times), 'creator and sustainer of the universe', '**transcendent**' (outside the universe and (possibly) outside time), '**omniscient**' (all-knowing), '**omnipotent**' (all-powerful), and 'perfectly good'. In each case, we need to ask whether we can give a **coherent** account of what we mean when we say that God has that property – whether we can, for example, spell out what it means to say that God is omnipotent without saying anything that seems to contradict other things we want to say about God or about the world.

#### Personal

What is a person? There is much disagreement about this, but, broadly speaking, a person may be said to be at least some of the following:

- an individual substance: something which exists separately from other persons
- a collection of desires, beliefs, and sensations. This is sometimes called 'the bundle theory'.
- rational: able to acquire knowledge and use it to make decisions
- able to act by free choice
- aware of and able to communicate with other persons
- able to form relationships with other persons
- worthy of dignity and respect.

All of these may be – and have been – applied to God.

However, some scholars make a distinction between saying that God is a person and saying that God is personal. For example, Brian Davies argues that 'God is personal' means that God has knowledge and will (he makes choices), and is active. But this is not the same as saying that God is a person; Davies notes that the phrase 'God is a person' is not found in the Bible or the creeds, and says that

we should not talk about God ‘as if he were the man in the next street’. People are associated with ‘bodies and parents and food and drink and sex and society and death’ but God is ‘bodiless and immortal or eternal’ (in Davies 2000: 560–1).



## QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

Davies says that God has knowledge and will, and is active. But are there other ways in which we could say that God is personal without implying that he is like ‘the man in the next street’?

### Omnipresent

An omnipresent God is present at all places, and, if God is timeless, at all times. But God is not present in the same way as physical objects are present. For Thomas Aquinas (c.1224–74) (1920), God is present in all places and at all times because his power, knowledge and **essence** (nature) extend to all places and all times.

### Creator and sustainer of the universe

The God of the Bible is portrayed as creator of the world and everything in it (Genesis 1–2), but not usually as responsible for its continued existence. However, traditional western theology has held that God both created and sustains the universe, and that these activities are, in effect, the same; God’s creation is continuous. This belief was derived from the view that God is timeless; if time does not pass for God, his act of creation is occurring at every moment of the history of the universe.

Hugh J. McCann (in Quinn and Taliaferro 1999) argues that the natural world cannot sustain itself. Scientific laws describe the characteristics and processes of natural things, but there is no natural process that explains how things continue to exist, and for this we need God. Although scripture sometimes seems to suggest that God is more active at some times than others – in sending Jesus to first-century Palestine, for example – this is simply because some of God’s acts make his concern especially clear to us, and because some of them may involve departures from the natural order of events. It would be contradictory for an unchanging God to intervene in our world only occasionally; since he cannot change, he must be continuously involved. It would also be contradictory for a loving God to intervene only occasionally; his concern for his creation means that he is involved with everything that happens.

### Transcendent

A transcendent God is outside the universe, and may be outside our temporal system (Aquinas held both of these views). If God is timeless, it may be objected that he cannot act within our temporal world. But Nicholas Wolterstorff (in Peterson et al. 2001) suggests that, on Aquinas' view, God's actions affect events in time even though they are not themselves events in time. For example, although God may have enabled the Israelites to escape from Egypt in 1225 BC, God's action did not occur in 1225 BC. Events that are past, present or future from our perspective occur simultaneously from God's perspective.

### Omniscient

To say that God is omniscient is to say that he is all-knowing. The meaning of this depends on whether we say that God is timeless, or that he exists everlastingly within time.

If God is timeless, his omniscience means that he sees, and therefore knows about, all the events of time (which, from our point of view, are past, present and future) simultaneously. Boethius (c.480–525) (in Davies 2000) said that this is like a man standing on a mountain seeing all the events on the road beneath him.

However, if God knows about our future actions before we perform them, this suggests that we cannot be free. If God knows that I will go hang-gliding next Tuesday, then, it would seem, I can't choose to play croquet instead. More importantly, if God knows that I will murder the Prime Minister next Tuesday then I can't do otherwise. I am therefore not responsible for my actions.

One way to respond to problems of this kind is simply to admit that human beings do not have free will. Alternatively, we could say that we do have the freedom to choose our actions, but that this freedom is limited by our natures – the kind of people we are – and our backgrounds – our upbringing, and the situations in which we find ourselves. For example, suppose I choose croquet rather than hang-gliding next Tuesday. I might think that my choice is completely free; I could just as easily have chosen hang-gliding. But someone who knows me well, and knows that I am a very cautious and anxious kind of person with family responsibilities, will not be at all surprised at my choice. This kind of freedom is called **liberty of spontaneity**. On this view, the fact that God timelessly sees what I will do next Tuesday does not matter because my freedom is so limited; what I think of as a free choice could be accurately anticipated by someone – like God – who understands me completely.

Someone who wanted to say that our choices are completely free – that we have **liberty of indifference** – could appeal to Boethius. He suggests that, although

God sees all human decisions and actions in one simultaneous present, this is not the same as saying that his knowledge **determines** our actions. We are therefore responsible for them and will be rewarded or punished, as appropriate. For example, Boethius says, if I know that a man is walking, the fact that I know this does not affect his freedom to do it. In the same way, if God sees all human actions as they occur, this does not affect our freedom to choose what we do.



## QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

If God sees our actions as they happen, do you think that our actions can be genuinely free?

### Two definitions of human freedom

- Liberty of spontaneity: We are free to choose our actions, but our freedom is limited by our natures and our backgrounds.
- Liberty of indifference: We are completely free to choose our actions.

If God exists everlastingly within time, his omniscience means that he knows everything about the past and the present, and everything about the future which his knowledge about the past and present enables him to predict. So, if human beings have only liberty of spontaneity, an everlasting God still knows what we will choose to do in the future. However, if we have liberty of indifference – genuine freedom – some say that an everlasting God cannot know our future choices because the future hasn't happened yet (e.g. Swinburne 1993). Others (e.g. Nelson Pike, in Peterson et al. 2001) think that, somehow, an everlasting God can know our future choices. But Pike seems to suggest that we are not free to make God's knowledge about the future false – which places constraints on human freedom and responsibility once more.

### Omnipotent

To say that God is omnipotent is to say that he is all-powerful. Broadly speaking, there are two views about what this means:

- God is able to bring about anything that is **logically possible** (Aquinas and Swinburne). So he could not bring about the existence of a square circle, for example, because the creation of such a thing is not logically possible.

- As with the first view, God is able to bring about anything logically possible, but, in addition, he could have created a world in which what we take to be contradictions were not contradictions (William of Ockham (c. 1285–1349), and possibly René Descartes (1596–1650), discussed in Hughes 1995). So, although it is not logically possible for there to be a square circle in our world, God could have created a world in which the laws of logic were different, in which there could have been a square circle. Notice that this is not the same as saying that God is able to bring about things that are logically impossible in our world.

Even if we don't have to say that an omnipotent God can bring about things that are logically impossible in our world, it would appear that there are other things he can't do which, as an omnipotent being, we would expect him to be able to do. For example, the famous 'paradox of the stone' asks whether God could create a stone too heavy for him to lift. If he could not do this, there would be something which he could not do, i.e. create the stone. But if he could do this, there would still be something he could not do, i.e. lift the stone. (There are a number of variations on this paradox: for example, could God create a bowl of porridge too big for him to eat?)

Leaving aside the problem that, on most views, God does not have a body with which to lift stones (or consume porridge), various solutions to this problem have been put forward. Some have suggested that God could not make the stone. Although there is no contradiction in saying that a *human being* could create a stone that he or she could not lift, there is a contradiction in saying that *God* could make a stone that he could not lift – because it would be contradictory for an omnipotent being to make a thing too heavy for him to lift (George Mavrodes, in Peterson et al. 2001). Others have suggested that God could make the stone. He could choose not to lift it, thereby choosing not to destroy his own omnipotence (Swinburne 1993). Or we could say that, if God cannot lift the stone, there is no such thing as the power to lift the stone and God therefore cannot be expected to have this power. Or God could make an ordinary stone and promise never to move it. So he would be unable to lift it not because he lacked power but because to lift it would be to break his promise (Thomas V. Morris, in Davies 2000).



## QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

We have looked at four possible solutions to the paradox of the stone. Which of these do you think is the best?



### Perfectly good

Broadly speaking, God may be perfectly good in one, or perhaps both, of two senses. In the **metaphysical** sense of goodness, God's perfect goodness means that he is complete; he has no deficiency of any kind. In the moral sense of goodness, God's perfect goodness entails that he has no moral deficiency; he is perfectly benevolent, just, wise, and so on.

If God's goodness is moral goodness, this raises the question: Does God decide what is morally good, or is God good because he conforms to a standard of goodness that exists independently of himself? Debate about this question has a long history going back to Plato's *Euthyphro* dilemma. We will discuss it further in the final section of this chapter.

### Related examination questions

(Part a) Identify and briefly describe *two* of God's properties. (6 marks) (2001)

(Part a) Briefly explain what is meant by any *two* of the following terms: transcendence, omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, perfect goodness. (6 marks) (2002)

### Combining God's attributes

We have noted a number of difficulties in working out the meaning of some of God's attributes. Additional problems seem to arise when we consider God's attributes in combination. Perhaps the most significant of these is the problem of evil. This states that, if God creates and sustains a world containing evil, and is both omniscient (and therefore knows about the evil) and omnipotent (and therefore has the power to prevent or alleviate it), how can we also say that he is perfectly good?

One possible solution is to deny one or more of God's attributes.



### QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

Consider each of the following attributes in turn: creator/sustainer of the universe, omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good. How might the denial of each attribute help us to solve the problem of evil?

Another possible solution is to modify one or more of God's attributes.



## QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

Considering the same attributes again, how might each be modified to help us solve the problem of evil?

Further solutions to the problem of evil will be considered later in this chapter.

### Related examination question

(Part b) Explain *one* philosophical problem that arises when combining two or more of God's properties. (15 marks) (2001)

## The nature of religious language

### Religious language as analogical

Some of the difficulties in understanding the meaning of God's attributes could, perhaps, be avoided by saying that these attributes must be understood **analogically**.

Aquinas thought that words could not be ascribed to God and his creation **univocally**; i.e. their meaning when applied to God could not be the same as their meaning when applied to his creation. If the word 'good' means the same in 'God is good' as in 'Katherine is good', this implies that God is no better than the things he has created; he is just a sort of 'super-person'.

Aquinas also thought that words could not be ascribed to God and his creation **equivocally**; i.e. their meaning when applied to God could not be completely different from their meaning when applied to his creation. If the meaning of the word 'good' in 'God is good' is completely different from the meaning it has in 'Katherine is good', there seems to be no way to work out what it means to say 'God is good'.

Aquinas therefore argued that God's attributes can be understood analogically. Terms that are used analogically of God are used in a sense related to, but not the same as, the sense in which they are applied to our human world. In the previous section, we saw that God may be said to be personal and present in senses that are similar to but not the same as the senses in which a human being may be

personal or present. For Aquinas, the meaning of terms used analogically could be ‘stretched’ in one of two ways. If, when we say that God is good, we are using an analogy of attribution, we mean that God is the source and cause of the goodness we see in the world. And if, when we say that God is good, we are using an analogy of proportionality, we mean that the way in which God is good is related to the way in which human beings are good. So, ‘God is good in whatever way it is appropriate for God to be good’ (Vardy 1999: 38).

Neither understanding of the use of analogy is without difficulties. In saying ‘God is good’, religious believers usually mean more than ‘God is the cause of goodness’, and, if God is good in whatever way it is appropriate for God to be good, this tells us little about God’s goodness if we don’t know how it is appropriate for God to be good.

## Verification

Since it is difficult to explain the meaning of religious language, by the beginning of the twentieth century some scholars had begun to say that religious language has no meaning at all – that statements about God are meaningless.

In the 1920s, a group of philosophers who became known as the Vienna Circle and later as logical positivists developed a theory of meaning, a method for distinguishing between sense and nonsense, called the **verification principle**.

### *The ‘strong’ verification principle*

In its first formulation, sometimes known as the ‘strong’ version, the verification principle claims that a meaningful statement is either **analytic** or **empirically verifiable**. An analytic statement is made true by the meanings of the words. In the classic example, ‘A bachelor is an unmarried man’, if we analyse the word ‘bachelor’ we find that this means ‘an unmarried man’; so the statement must be true. A statement that is empirically verifiable is one that can be shown by experience to be true (e.g. ‘There are some cars in the car park’), or one which we could, in principle, show by experience to be true even if we cannot do so at the moment. (A. J. Ayer, borrowing from Moritz Schlick, suggested as an example of this, ‘There are mountains on the farther side of the moon’ (1971: 49).)

According to the strong verification principle, any statement that is neither analytic nor empirically verifiable is meaningless. It therefore appears to rule out many of the statements made by religious believers.

However, this version of the verification principle also rules out many other statements that we usually regard as meaningful. For example, we can’t show by

experience that all flamingoes are pink because, no matter how many flamingoes we observe, it is always possible that there is, somewhere, a flamingo that is blue. It was therefore necessary to modify the verification principle.

### *The 'weak' verification principle*

According to the 'weak' verification principle, a meaningful statement is one that is either analytic or shown by experience to be probably true.

This version of the principle allows us to say that the statement 'All flamingoes are pink' is meaningful on the grounds that experience suggests that all flamingoes are pink, even if we can never prove this conclusively. However, for Ayer, 'no statement which refers to a "reality" transcending the limits of all possible sense-experience can possibly have any literal significance' (1971: 46).



## QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

Is the word 'literal' significant here?

### *Responses to the verification principle*

Some scholars have suggested that we should reject the verification principle because, even in its weak version, the principle itself cannot be verified. The verification principle tells us that a meaningful statement is one that experience shows us is probably true; but, so the objection goes, experience cannot tell us this. This is because there are some statements (Davies (1993) suggests those about life after death, for example) that do seem to be meaningful but cannot be shown by experience to be probably true.

Others have argued that religious beliefs *can* be verified by experience. Later in his life, even Ayer seems to have allowed appeals to mystical experience, saying that he did not wish 'to restrict experience to sense experience'. He said that he wouldn't 'mind at all counting what might be called introspectible experiences or feelings; mystical experiences, if you like' (quoted in Charles Taliaferro 1998: 99). And John Hick (1990a) has argued that our beliefs about religion will be verified at the end of our lives. He tells a parable of two people walking along a road, one of whom believes that it leads to the Celestial City, while the other sees the journey as an 'aimless ramble'. When they reach the end of the journey, it will be clear that one of them was right and the other wrong. Similarly, Hick says, at the end of our lives our beliefs about religion will be verified (or not) when we either experience some form of life after death or cease to exist. This is known as eschatological verification.



## QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

To what extent do you consider these to be effective responses to the challenge of the verification principle?

### The ‘strong’ verification principle:

A meaningful statement is either analytic or empirically verifiable.

### The ‘weak’ verification principle:

A meaningful statement is either analytic or can be shown by experience to be probably true.

### Two responses

- We should reject the verification principle because the principle itself cannot be shown by experience to be probably true.
- Religious beliefs *can* be verified by experience.

## Falsification

As we have seen, some scholars have argued that statements about religious belief are nonsense because they cannot be verified. A closely related view is that statements about religious belief are nonsense because they cannot be **falsified**; in other words, believers are unwilling to allow anything to count against them.

The theory asserting that, for a statement to be meaningful, we must be able to say what would make it false, was initially developed by the philosopher of science Karl Popper. It was applied to religious belief by Antony Flew in his contribution to a discussion that became known as the *University* debate.

### *Flew and falsification*

Flew tells a parable, based on a similar story from John Wisdom’s paper ‘Gods’, of two explorers who come across a clearing in the jungle. One says that there is an invisible gardener, but the other denies this. They conduct various tests to try to detect a gardener; they set up an electric fence and patrol with bloodhounds, but no gardener is ever found. But still the first man maintains that there is a gardener: ‘a gardener, invisible, intangible, insensible to electric shocks, a gardener who has no scent and makes no sound, a gardener who comes secretly to look after the garden which he loves’ (Flew, in Hick 1990b: 367). But, the second man

responds, 'Just how does what you call an invisible, intangible, eternally elusive gardener differ from an imaginary gardener or even from no gardener at all?' (p. 367). He objects that the definition of 'gardener' has been qualified to such an extent that it no longer has any meaning. The gardener-hypothesis has been 'killed by inches, the death by a thousand qualifications' (p. 368).

Similarly, Flew claims, religious believers respond to objections to their beliefs by qualifying those beliefs until they no longer have any meaning. For example, a believer might say that 'God loves us as a Father loves his children.' Faced with the objection that God appears to show no concern for a child dying of inoperable throat cancer, the believer might respond that God's love is 'not a merely human love' or that it is 'an inscrutable love'. But, Flew says, what is such love worth? What would have to happen for us to say that God does not love us – or even that he does not exist?

### *Hare's objection to falsification*

R. M. Hare (in Hick 1990b) responds by telling a parable about a madman who thinks that all dons (university lecturers) want to kill him. No amount of evidence to the contrary can dissuade him from this belief; he will not allow anything to count against it. But the difference between his view of dons and our view of dons is simply that the madman has an insane **blik** (a word invented by Hare meaning, broadly speaking, a view held without reasons), and we have a sane one. Hare argues that neither view about dons can be falsified; there is nothing that would conclusively show either view to be mistaken. Therefore, he suggests, our view of dons is simply a matter of personal feeling, or choice.

However, it could be objected that Hare's parable actually supports Flew's falsification theory. The madman's belief is meaningless precisely because it is not falsifiable – because he will not allow anything to count against it. By contrast, our own view about dons is falsifiable. If every don I met aimed a loaded gun at my head, I would have reason to believe that at least some dons wanted to kill me. But since I have never, to my knowledge, met a don with murderous intentions, my belief that dons have no desire to kill me has not been falsified. So, the madman's view of dons is irrational, but ours is not.

### *Mitchell's response*

Basil Mitchell (in Hick 1990b) responds to Flew by suggesting that the **theist** does recognise the fact of pain as counting against the assertion that God loves human beings. But he does not allow it to count decisively. Mitchell tells a parable about a member of the resistance in an occupied country who meets a stranger. The stranger tells him that he is on the side of the resistance and that

he must have faith in him, no matter what happens. The resistance member is deeply impressed by the stranger and decides to trust him. Subsequently, even when the stranger seems to be acting for the enemy, the resistance member believes that he is on his own side. Similarly, the believer who trusts God continues to believe that God loves human beings, despite the many examples of evil in the world. Thus, Mitchell argues, the God-hypothesis cannot be falsified because there are good reasons for accepting it; they counteract any statements that might seem to falsify statements about religious belief.



## QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

Do you think that Christianity would be falsified if it could be proved, beyond reasonable doubt, that Jesus never lived, that he was a habitual liar, that he suffered from delusions, or that he did not rise from the dead?

### Falsification

For a statement to be meaningful, we must be able to say what would make it false.

### Objections

- Hare: some of our beliefs are 'bliks': there are no reasons for them and they cannot be shown to be false.
- Mitchell: some things do count against religious beliefs, but these are not decisive because there are stronger reasons for accepting these beliefs. Therefore, religious beliefs cannot be falsified.

### Language-games

The so-called **language-game** theory was derived from the later philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein, particularly his *Philosophical Investigations*. It has been applied to religious belief by a number of scholars, but perhaps most notably by D. Z. Phillips. Wittgenstein's philosophy is notoriously difficult to interpret; what follows is therefore my attempt to give a clear and systematic account of his view, but some scholars may disagree with my interpretation.

Wittgenstein said that we cannot assume that words refer to objectively-existing things; rather, words acquire meaning from the way in which they are used. The philosopher's task is to describe the way we use language, not to ask questions about whether or not things exist.

According to this theory, there are many different kinds of language, each associated with a different kind of activity. Each kind of language is called a language-game. Games have their own distinctive vocabularies and rules, which are learned by participants, and are neither true nor false. The same is true of languages. One list of language-games includes 'asking, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying' (Wittgenstein 1958: §23). As Beverly Clack and Brian R. Clack (1998) point out, Wittgenstein never describes religion in its entirety as a language-game, but this description has been used by others (e.g. Phillips).

The activity with which a language-game is associated is called a **form of life**. To understand the meaning of a word, we must understand not only the part it plays in its language-game, but also its purpose in the relevant form of life. For example, talk of the love of God must be understood not only in the context of other things that are said about God, but also by looking at what it means in practice. Again, Wittgenstein does not describe religion in its entirety as a form of life, but others (e.g. Keightley 1976) have suggested that this application of Wittgenstein's theory cannot be ruled out.

Since language-games are distinct from each other, the statements of one language-game cannot be criticised on the grounds that they conflict with the statements of another. This would be like a football player criticising a rugby player for handling the ball. So, for example, we might say that the story of Adam and Eve does not conflict with scientific theories about the origin of the world because religion and science are two different language-games (Hick 1990a); they are just two different ways of thinking, speaking and acting.

Although, according to Wittgenstein, the philosopher's task is to describe the way we use language, the language-game theory does not rule out the possibility that religion is concerned with a deity who exists outside of the language-game; the philosopher simply does not ask questions about this. However, Phillips seems to have developed Wittgenstein's view in a **non-realist** way. For Phillips, God is not a personal, active being; rather, God is found in the language people learn when they learn about religion. Knowledge of God is not knowledge of an objectively-existing supreme being, but knowledge of how to use religious concepts. And God does not intervene in the world in response to prayers; instead, believers pray in order to understand their own and others' difficulties, working out how best to deal with them or cope with them (Phillips 1981).

### *Objections to the application of the language-game theory to religious belief*

Objections to the application of the language-game theory to religious belief include the following (but note that these objections may apply more to the



views of those who have developed Wittgenstein's views than to Wittgenstein himself):

- '[T]he Neo-Wittgensteinian theory of religious language is that it is not (as it professes to be) an account of . . . ordinary religious language use but rather is a proposal for a radical new interpretation of religious utterances' (Hick 1990a: 98).
- Religious language and the religious form of life cannot be separated from other languages and forms of life:

When the religious believer says that God created the heavens and the earth, that God raised Jesus from the dead or that God answered his prayers for healing, he implies there are connections between religious language and the language we use to describe nature, history and the daily events of our lives.

(Evans 1982: 153)

- Such an interpretation of religious belief is relativist: each community constructs its own truths, and no view is true or false independently of the community in which it is used (Baggini 2002).



## QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

What might be the possible consequences of relativism about religious beliefs?

### Related examination questions

(Part c) Assess the view that talk about God is unintelligible. (24 marks) (2001)

(Part c) Assess whether religious language is meaningful. (24 marks) (2003)

## ● ARGUMENTS FOR THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

We have considered definitions of some of God's attributes, and how – and indeed whether – the language in which we describe God makes sense. We now examine four arguments which may – or may not – support belief in the God we have attempted to describe.

## The cosmological argument

The **cosmological argument** is based on the assumption that the existence of the world, or some aspect of it, needs to be explained. The activity of God is said to provide this explanation.

### Aquinas' cosmological arguments

The first three of Aquinas' (1920) Five Ways (arguments for the existence of God) are forms of the cosmological argument. (The Fourth Way is a form of the moral argument, and the Fifth is a version of the teleological argument.)

- The First Way argues that there must be a first cause of all change, since nothing changes itself and there cannot be a series of things each of which is changed by another, which is changed by another . . . and so on, without end.
- The Second Way argues that there must be a first cause of everything that exists, which is not itself caused to exist by anything else.
- The Third Way argues that there must be a **necessary** (here meaning not dependent on anything else) cause of all **contingent** things (things that may not have existed). If there had been no necessary cause, there would have been nothing to bring contingent things into existence and there would have been nothing now, and this is clearly not the case.

In each case, Aquinas argues, the cause is what all people call God.

### Objections to the cosmological argument

Various objections to the cosmological argument have been raised. Four of the most important are as follows:

First, why could there not be an infinite series of causes of change, existence and contingent things? Why do we have to say that each series of causes began at some point? This is known as the problem of infinite regress.

Davies (1993) responds that, even if we say that each causal series goes back to infinity, we still need to find a cause of the whole series.

The second objection could be seen as a response to Davies. Although things in the world have causes, why do we need to say that there must be a cause of the universe as a whole? This objection was first raised by David Hume (1711–76) (1980), and illustrated by Bertrand Russell, who said that, although every person has a mother, this does not mean that the human race as a whole has a mother. Russell says, 'I should say that the universe is just there, and that's all' (1967: 139).



## QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

J. L. Mackie asks what reason there might be for making God ‘the one exception to the supposed need for something else to depend on’ (in Peterson et al. 2001: 215). Could this be applied to Russell’s argument about the universe?

Third, it could be argued that no version of the cosmological argument gives us reason to believe in a single first cause; a different God could have been responsible for each planet, for example.

It may be possible to respond to this objection by appealing to **Ockham’s razor**, a rule derived from the writings of Ockham, which states that ‘entities are not to be multiplied without necessity’. In other words, we should accept the simplest explanation. Applied to the cosmological argument, this would mean that if a single first cause is an adequate explanation for the existence of the world, we shouldn’t introduce further first causes unless there is some need to do so.

Finally, even if we accept that there must be a first cause of change, existence and contingent things, the cosmological argument seems to give us no reason to suppose that this cause has the full range of attributes that God is usually said to possess. For example, the argument gives us no reason to believe that the first cause is omniscient. And although the argument does imply that the first cause must be very powerful, this is not to say that it is omnipotent (*all*-powerful).

Nevertheless, it may be possible to find support for God’s other attributes in other arguments for his existence. We therefore turn to the next of these: the teleological argument.

### Related examination question

(Part c) Assess the cosmological argument. (24 marks) (2003)

### The teleological argument

The **teleological argument** claims that the existence of God explains why the world appears to have been designed. (‘Teleological’ comes from the Greek *telos*, which means ‘end’, ‘purpose’, or ‘design’.) Broadly speaking, there are three types of teleological argument: those that argue that particular things in the world seem to have been designed for a purpose, those that argue that the world seems

to have been designed to function in a regular way, and those that argue that the world seems to have been 'fine-tuned' to support life and that, had any one of many things been slightly different, we would not have been here to appreciate it. In this section, we will look at one example of the first type (William Paley (1743–1805)), and one example of the second, which also contains elements of the third (Swinburne 1991).

### Design in the sense of purpose

Paley gives us perhaps the most famous version of the argument in his *Natural Theology, or Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity collected from the Appearance of Nature*. Paley says that if he found a stone on a heath, he would be justified in saying that it might always have been there. But, he says:

suppose I had found a watch upon the ground, and it should be inquired how the watch happened to be in that place: I should hardly think of the answer which I had before given, that . . . the watch might have always have been there.

(in Klemke 1992: 32)

Paley thinks that, in such a situation, we would conclude that it had been put together for a purpose and that it must therefore have had a maker.

Paley claims that we would come to this conclusion even if we had never seen a watch made, if we had never known someone who could make one, if we could not make one ourselves or even understand how it was made, if the watch sometimes went wrong, or if there were some parts of the watch whose purpose we were unable to deduce.

We would not think that it was just one of a number of possible combinations of physical matter, that it contained within itself a principle that organised its various parts, that the mechanism was just a trick to make us think that the watch was designed, or that the design was the result of the laws of nature. We would still think that the watch had been designed, even if we knew nothing at all about how or why this had been done.

Similarly, Paley suggests, the natural world contains many instances of apparent design. For example, a bird's wings are made in such a way that it is able to fly, and the fins of a fish enable it to swim. Paley concludes that there must have been a designer of the world. The designer must have been a person, and that person is God.

### Design in the sense of regularity

Swinburne gives us an example of a 'teleological argument from the temporal order of the world' (1991: 136). He argues that simple laws govern almost everything. For example, the law of gravity ensures that stones will fall, and the law of chemical cohesion ensures that desks hold together. The universe might have been chaotic, but it is not, and this requires an explanation.

Swinburne argues that it cannot be explained by science. Science can explain why particular phenomena behave in the way that they do – for example why an electron exerts the attractive force it does. But it cannot explain why phenomena behave in such a regular way. Therefore, he argues, there must be 'an agent of great power and knowledge' (p. 141) who causes phenomena to behave in this way.

### Hume's objections

The classic critique of the design argument is found in Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, published in 1779, twenty-three years before Paley's statement of the argument.

Swinburne (in Davies 2000) identifies eight objections made by Hume, all of which occur in the *Dialogues*, with the exception of the first, which comes from the earlier *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*:

- 1** We can only ascribe to a cause whatever qualities are needed to produce the effect. So the design argument, if it works, proves only the existence of a design-producing being. We cannot also say that this being has any of the other attributes traditionally ascribed to God.

Davies's (1993) response is that the designer of the universe must be powerful to achieve its effect, incorporeal (without a body) because it lies outside the universe, and purposive because it produces order. He suggests that, even if God is thought to have more attributes than these, we can argue that the design argument provides at least some support for his existence.

- 2** We cannot infer from the fact that examples of order in the universe have human causes that order in the universe as a whole has a cause, because the universe is unique. In other words, the analogy does not work because we have no way of knowing whether order and its explanations within the universe are in any way like order and its explanation in the universe as a whole.

Davies suggests that it is not unreasonable to ask questions about the origin of something unique. Scientists try to account for things – such as the human race – which are unique. And even if there is only one universe, it does share some of its properties with other things; for example, like many of its parts,

it changes, is composed of material elements, and exhibits regularity. (In fact, as we saw earlier, Paley has already used a similar argument. He says that we would assume that a watch was designed even if we had never seen one before. The existence of watches points to the existence of watchmakers because watches exhibit regularity.)

**3** If the world was designed, who designed the designer?

Swinburne suggests that the existence of the designer does not need to be explained because 'scientists have always thought it reasonable to postulate entities merely to explain effects, so long as the postulated entities accounted simply and coherently for the characteristics of the effects' (1991: 282). Thus, Davies argues, there is no reason to suppose that the cause of order exhibits the kind of order which requires an explanation external to itself. Just as human thoughts are causes of order but are ordered in themselves, so the order in the world is caused by thoughts of God which require no external explanation for their orderliness.

**4** The argument makes God too anthropomorphic, i.e. too much like a human being.

Davies argues that, if God is the explanation of the world, he cannot be like the thing his existence explains; he does not have to share all the attributes of human designers. Swinburne says that, in order to control the regularities in the universe, God must be free, rational and very powerful, but that he cannot have a body since this would restrict his influence to a limited part of the universe, and we need him to explain scientific laws which operate in the world as a whole.

**5** Why should there be only one designer? Many people work together to build a house or a ship, etc.

It has already been suggested that God does not have to share all the attributes of human designers (point (4) above). Davies notes that, although order is often produced by groups of human beings, this does not imply that every instance of order must be produced by a group.

As Swinburne points out, Hume is aware of 'the obvious counter-objection to his suggestion', i.e. Ockham's razor, which, as we saw in connection with the cosmological argument, requires that entities are not to be multiplied without necessity. Applied to the teleological argument, it leads to the conclusion that there is no reason to say that there is more than one designer. Hume thinks that this does not apply to his argument, however, because we do not know whether there is a god with enough power to order the whole universe. But Swinburne thinks that it does apply, whether or not we have

such knowledge. Further, he suggests that, if the universe were ordered by several deities, we would expect to see 'the characteristic marks of the handiwork of different deities in different parts of the universe' (1991: 284). For example, there might be an inverse square law of gravity in one place, and a law just short of being an inverse square law in another.

- 6** Why can we not regard the universe as a living organism, which grows and reproduces in a regular manner, rather than as something like a machine or artefact?

Swinburne suggests that this objection does apply to design in the sense of purpose, but that it does not apply to design in the sense of regularity: 'The seed only produces the plant because of the continued operation of the laws of biochemistry' (p. 284).

- 7** The universe could be the result of chance; i.e. there are periods of chaos and order and we are currently living in a period of order.

But, even if the universe is the result of chance, it could be argued that we still need to explain the present order. According to Swinburne, the view that the universe is the result of chance becomes less plausible as time progresses and order remains.

- 8** Swinburne also notes that the *Dialogues* contain a substantial presentation of the argument that the world contains evil and that, if God designed the world, he is either not totally good or not omnipotent. But Swinburne suggests that this does not affect the teleological argument because it does not attempt to show that God is good or omnipotent.

Davies does appear to regard the existence of evil as a problem for the teleological argument but suggests that evil things can also be designed. For Davies, someone who accepts the teleological argument does not have to say that every particular thing works together for the good of other particular things.



## QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

Are you convinced by the responses to these objections? Look again at (3) and (8) in particular.

### Further objections

#### *The argument from purpose*

Since the publication of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* in 1859, some (e.g. Richard Dawkins) have argued that we no

longer need God to explain the way in which the natural world seems to be so well suited to its purposes. According to Darwin, the current state of the universe is merely the result of the struggle for survival; those organisms that were unable to adapt to their environments simply did not survive.

However, arguments from regularity such as Swinburne's are not vulnerable to this objection. Although the theory of evolution explains the apparent design of individual living things, it does not explain why the world works in accordance with laws of nature. One can simply say that evolution is the means by which God enables plants and animals to develop in such a way that they are best suited to their purposes, and that the existence of God is needed to explain the regular workings of laws of nature.

#### *The argument from regularity*

Nevertheless, it can be objected that, if God designs by means of natural selection, he has chosen a method that causes considerable suffering to those creatures who have failed to adapt adequately to their surroundings.

We could also object that the expectation of an intelligent cause does not guarantee that there is one; the presence of order could be just a brute fact. But Davies says that there are many other cases in which we do accept the existence of an intelligent designer as an explanation of order when there is no other explanation. For example, if a sequence of musical notes results in a symphony, we generally conclude that they were ordered by a composer.

Alternatively, we could argue that, if the universe were not regular, we would not be here to observe it. Therefore, the fact that we are here is not particularly surprising and so does not stand in need of any special explanation. In order to refute this objection, Swinburne (1991) constructs the example of a man who will be killed unless a card-shuffling machine draws an ace of hearts from each of ten packs of cards. The machine does draw ten aces of hearts and the victim thinks the machine has been rigged, but his kidnapper says that the outcome is not remarkable since he would not have lived to see it if any other cards had been drawn. But, Swinburne suggests, the victim is right; even though he could not have seen any alternative outcome, a draw of ten aces of hearts is still extraordinary and needs an explanation.



## Related examination questions

(Part a) Briefly explain what is meant when an argument is described as 'teleological'. (6 marks) (2001)

(Part b) Outline and illustrate how the teleological argument for the existence of God uses analogy. (15 marks) (2001)

(Part c) Assess what can be concluded from the teleological argument. (24 marks) (2001)

## The argument from religious experience

So far, we have examined two arguments that infer God's existence from some aspect of the world. In this section, we will consider the claim that it is possible to have more specific experiences of God or his effects, and that such experiences constitute evidence for his existence.

### What is a religious experience?

#### *Types of religious experience*

Swinburne (1991) identifies five kinds of religious experience, two public and three private.

The two types of public experience are:

- those in which God, or God's action, is identified in a public object or scene, such as the night sky
- those that occur as a result of unusual public events, e.g. the appearance of the risen Jesus to his disciples (Luke 24: 36–49).

The three types of private experience are:

- those that an individual can describe using normal language, e.g. Joseph's dream that an angel appeared and spoke to him (Matthew 1: 20–1)
- sensations that cannot be described in normal language, e.g. mystical experiences
- those in which the individual has no sensations, but is directly aware of God (Swinburne does not describe these as mystical experiences, but others, e.g. William P. Alston (in Peterson et al. 2001), do so.)

*The characteristics of mystical experience*

William James suggests that there are four marks that enable us to identify a mystical experience:

- **ineffability**: It cannot be described in words; it can only be felt. It must be experienced to be understood.
- **noetic quality**: Although it is like a state of feeling, it is also a state of knowledge. It communicates a truth or truths that cannot be communicated in any other way.
- **transiency**: It does not last more than an hour or two.
- **passivity**: It sometimes causes a feeling of being controlled by a higher power.

James considers a number of examples of mystical experience, including those of Hindus who have undergone training in yoga: the 'experimental union of the individual with the divine'. Diet, posture, breathing, concentration and moral discipline lead disciples to a state known as *samadhi*, in which they learn that the mind has a higher state, beyond reason and above consciousness and in which there is no sense of self. In this state, they see the Truth and know themselves for what they really are, 'free, immortal, omnipotent, loosed from the finite, and its contrasts of good and evil altogether, and identical with the Atman or Universal Soul' (in Peterson et al. 2001: 13).

Alston argues that, since God is spiritual, mystical experiences that are non-sensory are more likely to present God as he is. Alston says that we cannot adequately describe some of the things in the world that we claim to perceive directly and therefore have to resort to analogy. For example, I might be able to describe my **perception** of someone only by saying 'She looks like Susie'. So, although we cannot describe direct perceptions of God, it is quite legitimate to claim that we have such perceptions.

### Can we use religious experience to prove God's existence?

Swinburne argues that, in judging whether or not a religious experience is a genuine experience of God, we should apply the Principle of Credulity and the Principle of Testimony.

*The Principle of Credulity*

The Principle of Credulity states that, unless there is some special reason for doubt, we should accept that 'How things seem to be is good grounds for a belief about how things are' (Swinburne 1991: 254).

There are four things that might make us doubt that the way things seem to be indicates how things are:

- 1** The conditions or the person have been found in the past to be unreliable. For example, past experience may suggest that it is unwise to trust perceptions made under the influence of LSD, or by a particular person.
- 2** Similar perceptual claims have proved false. For example, if a person claims that he has read ordinary-size print at a great distance but cannot do this on other occasions, it is likely that his original claim was false.
- 3** Background evidence suggests that it is very probable that the thing perceived was not present. For example, a claim to have seen John in the corridor might be doubted if there were others in the corridor looking for John who did not see him.
- 4** Although the perception is genuine, it was not caused by the thing thought to have been perceived. For example, a person may genuinely have seen someone in the corridor who looked like John, but his perception may have been of an actor dressed like John.

Swinburne suggests that these may be applied to religious experiences as follows:

- 1** Claims to have had a religious experience are not usually doubted on these grounds. Most religious experiences are had by those who have not taken drugs and are generally regarded as reliable.
- 2** This challenge would be effective if it could be shown that alleged religious experiences are generally unreliable. This could be done if there were a good proof of God's non-existence – but there is not.

Some suggest that religious experiences are unreliable because they support conflicting beliefs. Swinburne responds that God may be known by different names to people of different cultures. In cases where there is a genuine conflict – a Jew would not accept an experience of Christ, for example – if the opponent can give good reasons for regarding the experience as false, the person who had the experience must either withdraw the claim or 'describe it in a less committed way' (1991: 266); for example, the claim could be to have been aware of some supernatural, but unidentified, being.



## QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

Do you think the suggestion that God may be known by different names to people of different cultures constitutes a reasonable response to the objection

that religious experiences are unreliable because they support conflicting beliefs? Give reasons for your answer.

Another way to suggest that alleged religious experiences are generally unreliable is to say that those who have such experiences have not had the kind of experiences that are needed to make such claims probably true. For example, it might be argued that a claim to have recognised a person is only likely to be correct if you have previously perceived that person in some way and been told who he is, or if you have been given a detailed description of him. But Swinburne suggests that a description of God as an omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly free person may enable us to recognise him, and, even if we find it difficult to recognise power, knowledge or freedom in human persons, we might be able to recognise extreme degrees of them.

- 3 This challenge would be effective if it could be shown that, very probably, God was not there to be perceived, but, as Swinburne has already suggested, this cannot be done.
- 4 This challenge would be effective if it could be shown that alleged experiences of God were caused by something other than God. But, if God is omnipresent and the sustainer of all causal processes, *whatever* brings about an experience of God will, ultimately, be caused by God. It could only be shown that these alleged experiences were not caused by God if it could be shown that God does not exist.

Thus, Swinburne concludes, we should accept alleged experiences of God as genuine unless it is much more probable that God does not exist. And, he claims, the balance of probability may be tipped in favour of the genuineness of religious experiences if there is evidence that others have such experiences.

### *The Principle of Testimony*

According to Swinburne's Principle of Testimony, unless there is some special reason for doubt we should accept that the experiences of others are as they report them. Most of our beliefs about the world are based on the perceptions of others. We might doubt someone's perception if we had evidence that, either generally or in that particular case, they were misremembering, exaggerating, or lying. But, in most cases, none of these applies. In the case of religious experience, we can test whether they do apply by examining the person's life-style after the experience. If they act as if there is a God, it is likely that the experience was genuine. Although believing on the basis of others' experiences is not as good a reason for belief as believing on the basis of one's own experience, many of our

beliefs about the world *are* based on the reports of others and, particularly when many people claim to have had the same experience, it is reasonable for us to accept their testimony.

So, if we accept the testimony of others (the Principle of Testimony) this may make it probable that God exists and show that there is no overriding reason to reject our own experience as genuine (the Principle of Credulity). Someone who has not had an experience of God will have less evidence for God's existence, but he or she will still have the testimony of others on which to base such a belief.

**Swinburne's Principle of Credulity:** Unless there is some special reason for doubt, we should accept that how things seem to be is good grounds for belief about how things are.

**Swinburne's Principle of Testimony:** Unless there is some special reason for doubt, we should accept that the experiences of others are as they report them.

### Responses to the Principle of Credulity

In support of the fourth challenge to the Principle of Credulity, that alleged experiences of God are caused by something other than God. Wayne Proudfoot (in Peterson et al. 2001) argues that such experiences can be explained in historical or cultural terms. He suggests that religious experiences are shaped by the religious traditions within which they occur, and within the particular forms of the tradition that shaped the person and his or her experience.

Michael Martin suggests that religious experiences are caused not by external realities but by the workings of people's minds – the psychological hypothesis. The use of drugs and alcohol, mental illness and sleep deprivation provide experiences that are not trusted because they do not give us a coherent account of an external reality and '[r]eligious experiences are like those induced by drugs, alcohol, mental illness, and sleep deprivation: they tell no uniform or coherent story, and there is no plausible theory to account for discrepancies among them' (in Peterson et al. 2001: 45).



## QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

Do you agree with Martin that there is no plausible way to explain why some religious experiences seem to be incompatible with others? Look again at Swinburne's arguments in response to the second challenge to the Principle of Credulity.

### *The Negative Principle of Credulity*

Martin suggests that, if experiences of God are grounds for belief in the existence of God, experiences of the absence of God are good grounds for belief that God does not exist. So if we accept the Principle of Credulity we also have to accept the Negative Principle of Credulity, according to which 'If it seems . . . to a subject *S* that *x* is absent, then probably *x* is absent' (in Peterson et al. 2001: 52).

Swinburne argues that we cannot experience the absence of God because we do not know under what conditions God would appear if he existed. But Martin suggests that, if we do not know this, this would also mean that we cannot experience the presence of God.

So perhaps a better response to this objection is suggested by Davies (1993: 127), who says that the fact that some claim to have experienced the absence of God does not mean that those who have experienced God are wrong. Two groups of people may hunt for the same animal. The first may see it and the second fail to find it, but this does not mean that the first group was mistaken.

### Responses to the Principle of Testimony

As we saw above, Swinburne argues that we can test whether a person's experience is likely to be genuine by examining their life-style after the experience – whether, in the case of a religious experience, the person acts as if there is a God. However, Martin suggests, '[o]ne could have a vision of God and yet, on account of weakness of will or the overpowering or dreadful nature of the vision, degenerate morally' (in Peterson et al. 2001: 46). In addition, it is quite possible that someone might show moral improvement after an illusory religious experience.



## QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

To what extent do Martin's objections to the Principle of Testimony invalidate claims to have experienced God?

## Related examination questions

(Part b) Outline and illustrate *two* characteristics of a religious experience. (15 marks) (2003)

(Part b) Outline and illustrate *two* criticisms of the argument from religious experience. (15 marks) (2002)

## The ontological argument

We have examined several arguments based on some feature of the world or human experience – arguments that are *a posteriori*: after, or based on, experience. We now turn to an argument that begins with human thought – an argument that is *a priori*: before, or prior to, experience.

Broadly speaking, the **ontological argument** claims that existence is part of the definition of God and that God must therefore exist.

### Anselm's ontological argument(s)

The ontological argument originated with Anselm (1033–1109). In chapter 2 of his *Proslogion*, he defines God as 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived' (thought of) and argues that even the fool mentioned in Psalm 14:1 can have this concept in his mind. However, he continues, if the concept exists only in the mind it cannot be that than which nothing greater can be conceived, because then there would be something greater – the same concept existing in reality. Therefore, that than which nothing greater can be conceived cannot exist only in the mind; it must exist in reality as well.

In chapter 3 of the *Proslogion*, Anselm argues that, although a person can be thought not to exist, the same is not true of God; he exists necessarily. This is because, if God did not exist necessarily, he would not be that than which nothing greater can be conceived.

It is important to realise that Anselm is using 'necessary' in a sense different from the sense in which Aquinas uses the word in his Third Way. As we saw, in the Third Way, God's necessity means that he is not dependent on anything else. For Anselm, however, something exists necessarily if its non-existence would be self-contradictory. Necessity of this kind is often called logical necessity.

Some scholars (e.g. Norman Malcolm) have argued that *Proslogion* chapter 3 gives a different version of the argument from that found in *Proslogion* chapter 2.

However, others (e.g. Davies 1993) have argued that the so-called second form of the argument is simply a further explanation of the first; Anselm is just making it clear that, since the definition of God includes necessary existence, God cannot not exist.

### Gaunilo's objection

Writing 'On behalf of the fool', Gaunilo of Marmoutier raises several objections to Anselm's argument. In the most well-known of these, he tries to show that Anselm's argument is absurd by using it to prove the existence of a perfect island. His argument is as follows:

- Some say that there is a 'lost island', which is superior in every way to islands inhabited by human beings.
- But it would be ridiculous to argue that this island must exist on the grounds that if it exists only in the mind it is not 'more excellent than other lands' (Anselm 1962: 308–9).

In his reply to Gaunilo, Anselm says that 'of God alone it can be said that it is impossible to conceive of his non-existence' (1962: 319). This is because, as Anselm has shown in chapter 3 of his *Proslogion*, only God exists necessarily.

A second response has been made by Alvin Plantinga (in Peterson et al. 2001), who has suggested that the idea of a greatest possible island is incoherent because, no matter how many palm trees (or whatever) the island has, it is always possible for it to have more. The same is not true of God. A being cannot be more powerful than omnipotent, or more knowing than omniscient, so it makes sense to describe an omnipotent, omniscient (etc.) being as perfect, whereas it makes no sense to describe any island as perfect, because any island can be improved still further.

### Descartes's ontological argument

Descartes (in Davies 2000) argues that God is 'a supremely perfect being' and that existence is a perfection: a desirable attribute that it is better to have than to lack. Therefore, existence cannot be separated from God, just as having three angles cannot be separated from the essence of a triangle, and the idea of a mountain cannot be separated from the idea of a valley.

### Kant's objections to Descartes

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) made two famous objections to Descartes's version of the ontological argument. First, he says that '[t]o posit a triangle [i.e.



say that it exists], and yet to reject its three angles, is self-contradictory; but there is no contradiction in rejecting the triangle together with its three angles. The same holds true of the concept of an absolutely necessary being' (in Davies 2000: 338). That is, although it may be contradictory to say that God exists without some of the attributes that he must have in order to be God, it is not contradictory to say that God, with all his attributes, does not exist.

Davies (1993) says that Anselm is not trying to argue that God exists on the grounds that existence must be included in the definition of God; rather, he is arguing that something than which nothing greater can be conceived cannot exist only in the mind. However, it could be argued that the two arguments are equivalent. If the concept of something than which nothing greater can be conceived must include existence and therefore cannot exist only in the mind, this amounts to saying that God exists because existence must be included in the definition of God.



## QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

Do you agree that the two arguments are equivalent?

Kant's second objection is that existence cannot be a perfection because it is not a real **predicate**, an attribute of something that tells us more about it. A hundred existing thalers (a thaler was a unit of German currency) do not contain any more thalers than 100 possible thalers.

However, we could argue that 'exists' is only different from other kinds of predicate in that it describes something not described by other predicates. And this must be true of every predicate. This 'something' differs from that which is described by other predicates in that anything that does not have this particular property also lacks all other properties. But 'exists' is not the only property the absence of which also rules out other properties. For example, something that does not possess the property of being male cannot possess the property of being a father. So, we could suggest, the difference between 'exists' and other properties is simply one of degree. The absence of the property of existence simply rules out a larger number of other properties (i.e. all of them) than the absence of any other property. So perhaps we *can* say that existence is a real predicate – that it does tell us something about an object.

### The ontological argument and non-realism

As we have seen, it is difficult for someone who accepts the ontological argument to show that the concept of God exists objectively. However, if, as some non-

realists suggest, God is simply a concept in the minds of believers, then it may be possible to argue that the ontological argument does, indeed, prove the existence of God.

### Related examination questions

(Part a) Briefly explain *one* difference between the ontological and teleological arguments for the existence of God. (6 marks) (2003)

(Part b) Outline and illustrate *one* criticism of the ontological argument for the existence of God. (15 marks) (2003)

### Arguments for God's existence

*A posteriori* arguments (based on experience)

- cosmological argument: God explains the existence of the world or some aspect of it.
- teleological argument: God explains the purpose or regularity in the universe.
- argument from religious experience: Religious experiences are evidence for God's existence.

*A priori* argument (prior to experience: based on thought)

- ontological argument: Since (necessary) existence is part of the definition of God, God must exist.

## ● FAITH, REASON AND BELIEF

We have examined a range of arguments for the existence of God. However, we saw that none of these arguments provides conclusive proof of the existence of an objectively-existing personal deity. For some scholars, this does not matter, as they think that faith does not depend upon arguments. They hold that there are some things that cannot be known by reason, but that it is nonetheless reasonable to choose to believe them.

## Pascal's wager

In his *Pensées*, Blaise Pascal argues that, if there is a God, he is beyond our comprehension, and we are therefore unable to give rational arguments for belief. However, he suggests that it is reasonable to wager that God exists. We have to choose one way or the other: in favour of God, or against him. And, Pascal says, if you wager that God exists, 'if you win, you win everything; if you lose, you lose nothing. Wager that he exists then, without hesitating!' (in Stump and Murray 1999: 298).

But what of the person who says: 'I am made in such a way that I cannot believe'? Pascal replies that the inability to believe arises from the feelings. Such a person should therefore try to change these feelings by behaving as if he believed; by taking holy waters and having masses said he will eventually come to believe naturally.

Pascal says that no harm will come to a person from following this course of action. He says, 'You will be faithful, honest, humble, grateful, doing good, a sincere and true friend. It is, of course, true; you will not take part in corrupt pleasure, in glory, in the pleasures of high living. But will you not have others?' (in Stump and Murray 1999: 300).



## QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

To what extent does reason feature in Pascal's account of faith?

### Objections to Pascal's wager

There are a number of possible objections to Pascal's wager. These include:

#### 1 Pascal is appealing to self-interest.

George Schlesinger replies that Pascal's wager was only a first step. Once the wager has been made the wagerer is instructed to behave as if he believed, in the hope of attaining genuine belief in God.

Schlesinger admits that we could still object to this on the grounds that, no matter how desirable the end result, it is achieved by appealing to selfish motives; the person who eventually believes may live a good life in the process of attaining that belief, but he does so only because he wants to attain some good for himself.

But Schlesinger replies that almost every act fulfils some wish; even a philanthropist could be satisfying the need to reach the pinnacle of 'other-

directedness'. He suggests that an action is deplorable only when it harms others or oneself by preventing the striving after higher-order pleasures. And the pleasure that Pascal recommends is of the highest order; so, if craving for this pleasure is counted as greed, then it is 'a noble greed that is to be acclaimed' (in Stump and Murray 1999: 303).

- 2** Pascal seems to present us with only two options. But there are many others. 'How is the wagerer to assess the relative benefits associated with betting on Osiris, Baal, Dagon, Zeus, or Blodenwedd?' (p. 304). This is sometimes referred to as the 'many gods' objection.

Schlesinger's responses to the 'many gods' objection include:

- (a) Some choices are more probable than others.

So, he argues, it makes more sense to wager on a God who is faithful, just and right whose attributes 'resonate with our nobler sentiments', than it does to wager on 'an unprincipled, arbitrarily acting, wanton god' (p. 307).

- (b) It is reasonable to prefer the simplest hypothesis.

The theistic hypothesis is the simplest because it is the only one that can be expressed in terms of a single predicate; to describe God, the theist need only say that he is an absolutely perfect being. By contrast,

though there is a large body of ancient Greek literature concerning Zeus, there are still many aspects of Zeus's character that remain unknown to us. We know for instance that he was sometimes asleep, but we have no idea how many hours of sleep he needed and what effect sleeplessness had on him. We also know that he ate and drank, but not how much or whether he occasionally overgorged himself or how long he could go without any food at all.

(in Stump and Murray 1999: 308)



## QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

Do you agree that theism is the simplest hypothesis?

### Related examination question

(Part a) Briefly outline Pascal's wager. (6 marks) (2002)

## Reformed epistemology

In the previous section, we saw that there are some religious beliefs that can be accepted only on the basis of faith, but that it might be rational to accept these beliefs on the basis of faith.

Philosophers known as 'Reformed epistemologists' have argued that there are some religious beliefs that must be accepted on the basis of our experience of God, and that all other religious beliefs are dependent on these beliefs. Such beliefs are known as **properly basic** – they are beliefs on which other beliefs depend, and which can be accepted without proof.

### Plantinga

Plantinga is, perhaps, the best known proponent of Reformed epistemology. Following the theologian Herman Bavinck, he says that theologians in the Reformed tradition reject **natural theology** (arguments for God's existence) because:

- People do not, as a matter of fact, believe in God on the basis of arguments for his existence.
- Belief in God can be rational without arguments for God's existence.
- It is not possible to come to belief on the basis of arguments because the arguments of natural theology do not work.
- Scripture begins with God as the starting point, and the believer should do the same.
- We believe in the existence of the self and the **external world** without arguments, so it is acceptable to believe in God without arguments (in Peterson et al. 2001: 330–1).

Plantinga cites the view of John Calvin (1509–64) that there is 'a sense of deity inscribed in the hearts of all' (quoted in Peterson et al. 2001: 331) and that it is sin that prevents us from being aware of the deity: many of us cannot believe because we are sinful.

Further, God 'not only sowed in men's minds that seed of religion . . . but revealed himself and daily discloses himself in the whole workmanship of the universe. As a consequence men cannot open their eyes without being compelled to see him' (p. 332). Calvin says of the heavens that

[e]ven the common fold and the most untutored, who have been taught only by the aid of the eyes, cannot be unaware of the excellence of divine art, for it reveals itself in this innumerable and yet well-ordered variety of the heavenly host.

(in Peterson et al. 2001: 332)



## QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

Does this imply that Calvin and Plantinga accept a version of the teleological argument?

Plantinga suggests that no argument is implied; in such circumstances, Calvin claimed, the person simply knows that God exists.

Following Calvin again, Plantinga claims that it is not simply the case that the Christian does not need arguments; he ought not to believe on the basis of argument because, if he does, his faith will be unstable.

Thus, according to Plantinga, the Reformers thought that belief in God can be taken as basic: a person is rational to believe in God without arguments, and without basing this belief on any other beliefs.

### The Great Pumpkin objection

Plantinga defends Reformed epistemology against the objection that, if belief in God is properly basic, why cannot any belief be properly basic – such as the belief that the Great Pumpkin returns every Halloween? Or that if I flap my arms hard enough, I will be able to fly around the room?

Plantinga says that Reformed epistemology does not allow us to hold that beliefs such as these are properly basic. Although some propositions seem self-evident when they are not, ‘it would be irrational to take as basic the denial of a proposition that seems self-evident to you’ (in Peterson et al. 2001: 339). For example, Plantinga says that, if it seems to you that you see a tree, it would be irrational to take as basic the proposition that you do not see a tree.

There are, he thinks, no arguments showing us what is and is not properly basic. But we can tell the difference between propositions that are and are not properly basic by collecting examples of statements that are properly basic and those that are not. By examining these statements, we can work out how to decide what makes a belief properly basic.

So, for Plantinga, the Reformed epistemologist can say that belief in the Great Pumpkin is not properly basic, even though he or she holds that belief in God is properly basic. But he or she must say that there is a relevant difference between the two beliefs, and there are plenty of these. For example, the Reformed epistemologist can say, like Calvin, that God has implanted in us a natural tendency to see his work in the world, and that the same cannot be said of the Great Pumpkin – because there is no Great Pumpkin, and there is no natural tendency to accept beliefs about the Great Pumpkin.



## QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

Do you think that this is a good response to the 'Great Pumpkin objection'?

### Objections to Reformed epistemology

For Reformed epistemologists, it is an awareness of God that enables them to say that belief in God is properly basic. But this awareness of God is open to the objections to religious experience that we considered above. For example, Robert Pargetter (in Peterson et al. 2001) considers the possibility that some experiences are brought about by the circumstances in which they occur, or that, in the same situation, some people will experience God while others will not.

Other scholars argue that there are **defeaters** (i.e. things that count against a belief to the extent that we must reject it) for the basic belief that God exists. These include the fact that many people do not believe in God, explanations of religious belief as psychological projections, and the existence of many religions. However, perhaps the most significant potential defeater is the problem of evil. Although Plantinga has argued that no one has yet constructed a successful argument for God's non-existence based on the existence of evil, William Hasker thinks that the problem of evil does constitute a defeater for theistic belief.

Replies to these two objections might consist of detailed responses to the objections raised: trying to explain why a good God might allow evil, for example. In addition, Hasker suggests, we could appeal to various arguments for the existence of God and argue that, taken together, they support the view that the overall evidence is more in favour of God's existence than against it (in Peterson et al. 2001: 353).

### Fideism

**Fideism** may be defined as the view that religious beliefs cannot be assessed by reason. If views that reject natural theology may be called fideistic, the views of Wittgenstein and his followers and the Reformed epistemologists may also be termed fideistic in this sense (Terence Penelhum in Quinn and Taliaferro 1999).

However, a more radical form of fideism, which not only rejects natural theology but stresses the paradoxical nature of faith has been widely associated with Søren Kierkegaard (1813–55). Although recent scholarship has suggested that this may not be an accurate representation of Kierkegaard's own view, he does seem to have put forward such a view when writing under the pseudonym of Johannes Climacus in his book *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*.

Climacus argues that attempting to find God by means of reason can take a great deal of time, and that this time is wasted since a person has no belief while undertaking the search. The person may die tomorrow without finding God, but even if he does not, belief in God is not something to be accepted 'if convenient' but something to be accepted at any price. While objective knowledge

rambles comfortably on by way of the long road of approximation without being impelled by the urge of passion, subjective knowledge counts every delay a deadly peril, and the decision so infinitely important and so instantly pressing that it is as if the opportunity had already passed.

(in Peterson et al. 2001: 96)

For Climacus, the passion with which a person believes is more important than the objective truth of the beliefs. He argues that someone who goes to the house of the true God with a true understanding of God but prays in a false spirit has less truth than the person who prays to the image of an idol with passion: he prays truthfully, even though he worships an idol. Truth is an objective uncertainty held passionately. Climacus suggests that attempting to find God by contemplating nature may lead him to see omnipotence and wisdom, but will also show him much else that will lead to objective uncertainty. But, he says, faith embraces uncertainty with a passion. Such faith is a risk – but without risk there can be no faith. To preserve his faith, Climacus says that he must hold fast the objective uncertainty, 'so as to remain out upon the deep, over seventy fathoms of water, still preserving my faith' (p. 98).

### Objections to fideism

Of the various possible objections to fideism, two, perhaps, are particularly significant. First, if faith requires us to commit ourselves to our beliefs without using reason, how do we decide which beliefs to commit ourselves to? There are many different belief-systems from which to choose. Secondly, belief that is not subjected to critical analysis can sometimes have terrible consequences. For example, in 1977, the Reverend Jim Jones claimed to be a living God with a divine message and convinced his community, Jonestown, to commit mass suicide in the hope of attaining a better life after death.

Peterson et al. suggest that faith can be tested by reason without losing the faith itself. Although Luther thought that Copernican astronomy (which showed that it is the earth which moves and not the sun, as is assumed in the Bible, e.g. Joshua 10: 12–14) was a threat to faith, few people now think that astronomy damages faith. Indeed, many come to believe that some of their views about God are logically contradictory without losing their faith. Further, for a religious belief-system to be taken seriously by a reasonable person, it must be possible to test



it for logical consistency and truth. Evans suggests that there is no reason to believe that God wishes us to suppress our critical faculties; our ability to think is a gift from God and it is therefore reasonable to assume that he intended us to use it (1982: 21).

### Related examination questions

(Part a) Briefly explain the view that faith is opposed to reason. (6 marks) (2003)

(Part c) Assess the role of faith in supporting religious belief. (24 marks) (2002)

## ● THE IMPLICATIONS OF GOD'S EXISTENCE

### The problem of evil

The so-called problem of evil represents, for many people, either the biggest challenge to their religious faith, or the clearest reason for rejecting belief in God. Broadly speaking, the problem is as follows:

The world contains two kinds of evil:

- moral evil: evil brought about by the actions of human beings – torture, for example, and
- natural evil: all that is evil in the physical universe, such as earthquakes and diseases.

But if God is omniscient, omnipotent and good, why does evil exist? If God knows about the suffering caused by evil, has the power to prevent it, and does not wish human beings to suffer, why does the world contain evil?

It seems that the two statements:

- There is evil in the world, and
- God exists

are contradictory.

In general terms, there are two ways in which people have attempted to solve the problem:

- by denying or modifying one of the attributes in question
- by constructing a defence or **theodicy** (derived from the Greek *theos*, 'God', and *dikē*, 'righteous'), a technical term for attempts to solve the problem of evil.

### The Free Will Defence

The Free Will Defence (FWD) is an attempt to explain the existence of moral evil (although some versions also use a form of the defence to explain natural evil).

Perhaps one of the best-known versions is put forward by Plantinga. He admits that there is a contradiction between God's attributes of omniscience, omnipotence and goodness if it is held that there are no limits to what an omnipotent being can do, and that a good being always eliminates evil as far as it can. But Plantinga observes that few would argue that God can bring about logically impossible states of affairs or cause necessarily false propositions to be true. He therefore considers the following modifications:

- There are no nonlogical limits to what an omnipotent being can do.
- An omniscient and omnipotent good being eliminates every evil that it can properly eliminate.

He argues that there are some evils that cannot be eliminated without eliminating goods that outweigh them. For example, suffering and adversity may lead to 'a heroism that inspires others and creates a good situation out of a bad one' (in Peterson et al. 2001: 282–3).

Thus, Plantinga concludes, there is no explicit contradiction between statements asserting God's omniscience, omnipotence and goodness. So those who say that there is a contradiction between these statements must mean that a contradiction is *implied*.

Plantinga says that we could argue that this is not the case because there is a good reason why an omniscient, omnipotent, good God does not eliminate evil. He cites Augustine's view that 'the creature is more excellent which sins by free will than that which does not sin only because it has no free will' (quoted by Plantinga, in Peterson et al. 2001: 285). For Augustine, 'God can create a more perfect universe by permitting evil' (p. 286). Plantinga accepts a version of this view, although he distinguishes between his own Free Will Defence, which says what God's reason for permitting evil might possibly be, and a Free Will Theodicy, which attempts to say what God's reason for permitting evil is.

The FWD, according to Plantinga, tries to show that there may be goodness that God cannot bring about without permitting evil. Plantinga argues that a world containing free creatures who perform more good than evil actions is more valuable than a world that contains no free creatures. God can create free creatures, but he cannot cause or determine them to do only what is right. In

exercising their freedom, some of these creatures go wrong, and this is the source of moral evil. However, Plantinga says, '[t]he fact that free creatures sometimes go wrong . . . counts neither against God's omnipotence nor against his goodness; for he could have forestalled the occurrence of moral evil only by removing the possibility of moral good' (pp. 287–8).

Plantinga considers the following objections to his view:

- 1 Freedom and determinism are compatible (sometimes called the **compatibilist** position and most notably argued by Flew (in Flew and Macintyre 1955)). In other words, God could have created creatures who were free, but also determined by God to do only what is right. (Note that, for Flew, a free creature is one who has liberty of spontaneity; see p. 97.)

Plantinga says that this objection seems quite implausible; we might just as well say that being in jail doesn't limit our freedom because if we were not in jail we would be free to come and go as we pleased.



## QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

Do you think that this is a good response to the objection?

- 2 An omnipotent God could create a world in which creatures are genuinely free to do wrong but never in fact do so (this is Mackie's view (in Peterson et al. 2001)). A good God would create the best of all possible worlds. Since it would have been possible to create a world in which creatures freely choose to do good and this world is not such a world, there cannot be a good God.

In response, Plantinga argues that it would not have been possible for God to create a world in which Curley Smith, a corrupt mayor of Boston, produces moral order but no moral evil. 'Every world God can actualise is such that if Curley is significantly free in it, he takes at least one wrong action' (in Peterson et al. 2001: 299). In other words, Plantinga says, Curley suffers from **transworld depravity**; and, if a person suffers from it, 'then it wasn't in God's power to actualise any world in which that person is significantly free but does no wrong' (p. 300).

Plantinga argues that everybody suffers from transworld depravity. Therefore, it would not have been possible for even an omnipotent being to create a world in which creatures never chose to perform morally wrong actions. So, 'the price for creating a world in which they produce moral good is creating one in which they also produce moral evil' (p. 300).

### Responses to the Free Will Defence

We can only accept the FWD if we agree that a world of genuinely free agents (i.e. those with liberty of indifference, as opposed to liberty of spontaneity) is better than one of automata (beings or things which act/move in accordance with a 'programme'; they cannot think for themselves), even at the price of much suffering. Davies (1993) suggests that most people do accept this, and that we normally think well of those who allow others freedom.

Vardy (1992) suggests that whether or not we think that God could have created human beings who make genuinely free choices in favour of the good on every occasion hinges on our view of God's omnipotence; if God is able to do things that are logically impossible, then he may be able to create beings who always freely choose to do what is good.

However, even if we accept the assumption of the FWD that a free act cannot be caused by God, Flew (quoted in Davies 1993) points out that, according to classical theism, God is the first cause lying behind all causal processes, both past and present. And this means that God must ultimately be responsible for the evil caused by human beings.

Davies responds that, although God brings into existence and sustains the things determining human behaviour, he is not, himself, the cause of that behaviour. God makes free human actions possible, but he is not the cause of those actions.

### Hick's Irenaean theodicy

As we noted above, although the FWD focuses on the existence of moral evil, some versions also use a form of the defence to explain natural evil. For example, for Augustine, natural evil is the consequence either of **the fall** of human beings or of the fall of angelic beings who exert an evil influence on the earth. Hick's view encompasses moral evil, but, he claims, it also provides a better explanation for the existence of natural evil.

Hick rejects the view of Plantinga and others on the grounds that, even if their argument is sound (and he later suggests that it is not), it is based on an Augustinian theodicy. Hick argues that most people now regard the story of Adam and Eve and the fall as myth rather than history, accepting instead that humanity evolved from lower forms of life and emerged in a morally, spiritually and culturally primitive state. They also reject the idea that natural evil is the consequence of a human or angelic fall.



## QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

Do you think that these are good reasons for rejecting the FWD?

Instead, on the basis of the thought of Irenaeus, Hick constructs a theodicy based on a two-stage conception of the creation of humankind. At the first stage, human beings are created in the 'image' of God: they are 'intelligent, ethical and religious animals' (in Peterson et al. 2001: 304) with the potential for knowledge of and relationship with God. The second stage is a process of 'soul-making': a gradual process of further growth and development, in which humans are brought, through their own free responses, into what Irenaeus called the divine 'likeness'; the human animal gradually becomes a child of God.

Hick says that we were created in this way; firstly to preserve our freedom. God has created the world and human beings in such a way that his existence is not 'overwhelmingly evident' to us. There is an **epistemic distance** between human beings and God, a distance between the little we know about God and the state of having complete knowledge of God. The world is 'religiously ambiguous' so that there is 'freedom to open or close oneself to the dawning awareness of God which is experienced naturally by the religious animal' (in Peterson et al. 2001: 305). We are free 'to acknowledge and worship God' or 'to doubt the reality of God' (p. 305), so that we have the possibility of coming freely to know and love our Maker.

Secondly, Hick argues that freely chosen goodness is more valuable than ready-made virtues. He thinks that Flew and Mackie were correct to argue that God could have created free beings who always choose the good, and suggests that he did so in the case of Jesus Christ. But Hick argues that

virtues which have been formed within the agent as a hard-won deposit of her own right decisions in situations of challenge and temptation, are intrinsically more valuable than virtues created within her ready made and without any effort on her own part.

(in Peterson et al. 2001: 306)

God therefore created imperfect creatures who would attain the more valuable kind of goodness through their own free choices.

Hick argues that the many examples of human sin support the view that human beings are self-regarding animals. But the many examples of human goodness support the view that God is gradually creating children of God. A world in which people can suffer is an appropriate environment for the second stage of creation. In a world in which no one could suffer – in which, for example,

someone who fell off a high building floated unharmed to the ground, or bullets became insubstantial when fired at a human being – no action could be morally wrong and there could therefore be no moral choices. But, in the world as it is, we can develop courage and determination, and in our relationships we can develop the values of ‘mutual love and care, of self-sacrifice for others, and of commitment to a common good’ (in Peterson et al. 2001: 310).

Hick acknowledges that the main threat to this view comes from the amount and intensity of moral and natural evil. However, he says that our judgements about the intensity of natural evil are relative. If an agonising death from cancer were thought to be the worst thing there is, in a world without cancer something else would then rank as the worst form of natural evil. This would be removed, and so on, until no natural evil remained. But then we would have an environment that could not lead to moral growth. Likewise, if we experienced misfortune in proportion to our wrongdoings, right actions would be done only to bring health and prosperity, and not purely because they are right. So, ‘God’s good purpose enfolds the entire process of this world . . . and . . . even amidst tragic calamity and suffering we are still within the sphere of God’s love and moving towards God’s kingdom’ (in Peterson et al. 2001: 313).

Hick acknowledges that the person-making process is not completed on earth and that his theodicy must therefore presuppose survival of death and a period of further living and growing towards the end state. He also argues that it is only if the whole human race is saved that the sins and sufferings of ‘the entire human race throughout all history’ (p. 314) can be justified.

### Responses to Hick

We have seen that Hick argues that the consequences justify God’s actions. However, Peterson et al. (1998) consider the following objections to his view:

- The epistemic distance between human beings and God could have been maintained at less cost. Even if we agree that the epistemic distance is a good thing and that suffering contributes to this by making God’s existence less obvious, is it necessary that there should be *so much* suffering in order to achieve this?
- There is insufficient evidence to support the view that there is a soul-making process.
- If the soul-making process does exist, does the goal justify the means used to achieve it? This doubt is also the conclusion reached by Ivan Karamazov in his famous speech to Alyosha in Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*. He says: ‘if the sufferings of children go to make up the sum of sufferings which is

necessary for the purchase of truth, then I say beforehand that the entire truth is not worth such a price' (1958: 287).

A further objection is considered by Clack and Clack (1998):

- If evil will be righted in the future, why fight against present evils?



## QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

How might Hick respond to these objections? Do you find such responses convincing?

### The 'reasonableness of the existence of God' defence

In this section we have examined two attempts to explain how an omniscient, omnipotent and good God could allow the existence of evil. However, Davies suggests that, even if we cannot understand the reasons why evil exists, we might still have good reasons for thinking that God exists. We would therefore have to conclude that both evil and God exist and that the existence of evil does not make the existence of God impossible. Indeed, Davies suggests, it might be argued that we should not expect to be able to understand the reason for suffering: 'For what falls within the plan of an omnipotent, omniscient God will be something understood only by what is omnipotent and omniscient' (1993: 40).



## QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

Do you agree with Davies that there might be reasons to believe in God's existence that are stronger than the argument for God's non-existence based on suffering?

**Related examination question**

(Part c) Assess whether the existence of moral evil casts doubt on the existence of God. (24 marks) (2002).

## Miracles

There are various definitions of 'miracle'. These include:

- a violation of the laws of nature (Hume 1975). Examples of this might be Jesus' turning water into wine, walking on water, and resurrection.
- an event that does not violate the laws of nature, but that is directly brought about by a god, sometimes referred to as a coincidence miracle. To illustrate this, R. F. Holland (1965) tells the story of a child playing on a railway line as a train approaches. The train driver faints, the brake is applied automatically, and the train stops a few feet from the child. The child's mother thanks God for a miracle.
- an inexplicable event that believers consider to have religious significance. As an example of this, Gareth Moore (1988) asks us to imagine an injured child at the foot of a mountain. There is a landslide and a large boulder begins to roll down the mountain. However, just before it reaches the child, it stops in mid-air and hovers 15 cm above him. Many tests are carried out, but no cause is ever found. Although the event is regarded as a miracle, and God is said to have saved the boy's life, this does not mean that somebody or something held the boulder up, preventing it from crushing the boy. It was a miracle because there was no cause for the boulder not to fall on the boy.

### Objections to belief in miracles defined as coincidences or inexplicable events

In the case of coincidence miracles, Mackie has objected that 'the interpretation of the event as a miracle is much weaker than the rival natural explanation' (in Peterson et al. 2001: 443). So, although it may have been extraordinary good luck that the train driver fainted and thereby involuntarily applied the brakes just in time to save the child, it was just that – good luck. No doubt you can think of many examples of accidents in which those involved were not so lucky.

For miracles of both kinds, it might be objected that these are not usually what is understood by a miracle. In the first case, no natural laws are violated, and, in the second, the event is not caused by God. In the case of miracles as inexplicable events, it is difficult to understand the sense in which such miracles may be regarded as having religious significance. What does it add to our understanding of an event apparently without a cause to say that it was brought about (although not in a causal sense) by God?





## QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

How could someone respond to these objections?

**Hume's objections to belief in miracles defined as violations of laws of nature**

Hume (1975) argues that belief in miracles is not rational; we should proportion our belief to the available evidence. However, the available testimony regarding miracles is poor. He argues that, in the whole of history, there has never been a miracle that has been attested by a sufficiently large number of witnesses of good sense, education and learning, with a reputation to lose if they should be found to be telling lies.

Secondly, he suggests, human nature loves the fantastic. People enjoy the miraculous accounts of travellers, with descriptions of sea and land monsters. Similarly, religious people, in their enthusiasm to promote a holy cause, may imagine that they see things that are not real. There have been many examples of forged miracles, prophecies and supernatural events, detected either by contrary evidence or by their absurdity.

Thirdly, Hume claims that miracles occur chiefly among 'ignorant and barbarous nations'; if they do occur amongst civilised people, they have been received from 'ignorant and barbarous ancestors'. Such people tend to assume that there is a supernatural cause of battles, revolutions, diseases, famine and death, but, in our more enlightened times, we know that there is nothing mysterious or supernatural involved.

Finally, Hume notes that different religions report different miracles. Therefore, he says, none of them is true. He says that it is impossible that the religions of ancient Rome, Turkey, Siam, and China should all be true. Therefore, any miracle from any of these religions discredits the other religions and the miracles that allegedly occur within them.

### Comments on Hume's definition of miracle

Some scholars have questioned whether we need to say that a miracle violates a natural law. According to William Lane Craig, there are three main views of natural law:

- The regularity theory – laws of nature are not really laws but just 'generalised descriptions of the way things happen in the world' (in Davies 1998: 153). A natural law simply describes whatever happens in nature. So, if unexpected

events occur, these are simply incorporated into the description.

- The nomic necessity theory – laws are not only descriptive, they also tell us what can and cannot happen. But they must take into account everything that does happen, and so must be revised if an unexpected event occurs. However, if a law is inaccurate because God is acting, ‘the law is neither violated nor revised’ (p. 153). On this view, miracles are defined as ‘naturally impossible events . . . events which cannot be produced by the natural causes operative at a certain time and place’ (p. 154).
- The causal dispositions theory – natural laws tell us about the way in which various kinds of things affect other kinds of things; e.g. ‘salt has a disposition to dissolve in water’ (p. 154). If God acted to prevent salt from dissolving in water, the law would not be violated because salt would still have a disposition to dissolve in water. So a miracle is not a violation of a law of nature but ‘an event which results from causal interference with a natural propensity which is so strong that only a supernatural agent could impede it’ (p. 154).

Craig argues that none of these views supports the view that a miracle is a violation of a law of nature. Rather, miracles are ‘naturally (or physically) impossible events, events which at certain times and places cannot be produced by the relevant natural causes’ (p. 154).



## QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

To what extent would Craig’s view, if correct, support belief in miracles?

### Replies to Hume’s objections

#### *The possibility of miracles*

Craig suggests that it would only be rational to deny the possibility of miracles if one had good grounds for believing in atheism. He argues that Hume ‘incorrectly assumes that miracles are highly improbable’ (in Davies 1998: 155) and suggests that the resurrection of Jesus is not improbable in the light of evidence such as the post-mortem appearances, the empty tomb, and the disciples’ belief that Jesus had risen from the dead.

#### *The reliability of testimony*

In response to Hume’s first objection, Davies (1993) asks how many witnesses constitute ‘a sufficient number’. And what counts as good sense, education and learning? In addition, Hume does not show that people are always swayed by their love of the fantastic. There may be some instances in which this is so, but

it seems implausible to suggest that every person who claims to have seen a miracle has been swayed by love of the wonderful. Thirdly, it may sometimes be reasonable to accept testimony that conflicts with what seems to us to be probable or possible. For example, Thomas Sherlock says that it would be unreasonable for a man who lived in a hot climate to reject our testimony that rivers can sometimes be solid (quoted in Davies 1993: 206).

Vardy (1999) points out that Hume only deals with others' reports of miracles; he might have believed in miracles if he had experienced one himself. However, Mackie (in Peterson et al. 2001) argues that even if one has observed a miracle oneself, one could have misobserved it, or may be misremembering or deceiving oneself. Vardy also suggests that, when Hume was writing, miracles were supported only by word-of-mouth reports whereas, today, miracles are sometimes supported by scientific evidence. But even these could be simply extraordinary events (Vardy admits they could be just evidence of the power of the human mind) with no religious significance. For us to be certain of their religious significance, they would need to be clearly connected with a religious cause, such as prayer.

Davies acknowledges that, even if we agree that, until now, our experience has not supported belief in miracles, it is still not impossible that miracles could happen at some time in the future. However, it is possible that we are mistaken in thinking that natural laws have never been violated (or that naturally or physically impossible events have never occurred), just as we would be mistaken in thinking, on the basis of inadequate investigation, that whales are not mammals (Plantinga, quoted in Davies 1993: 207).

### *Conflicting accounts*

Davies suggests that it is not impossible that the miracles of two religious traditions could both be true. However, if the miracles of two religions supported contradictory truth-claims, this would count against the truth of at least one of those miracles.

### **A further objection**

A further objection to belief in miracles is that, if God intervenes in the world, it could be argued that he is guilty of arbitrariness. He seems to help individuals with (sometimes) trivial problems, but to ignore major disasters – such as the murder of 6 million Jews (Maurice Wiles, quoted in Vardy 1999: 208–9). Davies points out that, for Aquinas, a miracle is not an *intervention* by God because God is always present. Nevertheless, the question of why God brings about miracles only on some occasions remains.



## QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

If it cannot be *demonstrated* that miracles, defined as violations of laws of nature, occur, do you think it is reasonable to believe that they do?

### Related examination question

(Part b) Outline and illustrate *one* reason for doubting that miracles occur. (15 marks) (2002)

### Religion and morality: divine command ethics

In our discussion of God's perfect goodness, we noted the question: Does God determine what is morally good, or is God good because he conforms to a standard of goodness that exists independently of himself?

The view that whatever God commands is morally good is known as divine command ethics (DCE). Janine Marie Idziak (in Quinn and Taliaferro 1999) cites the following arguments in support of it:

- The Bible contains various examples of an immoral act being made right by a divine command; for example, God commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son.
- Conformity to the divine will is an important theme of Christian spiritual life; for example, in his late medieval work *The Imitation of Christ* Thomas à Kempis describes Christ telling a disciple to accept his will without argument or complaint.
- John Locke (1632–1704) argued that, since God created us, we must live in accordance with his will.

An objection to this argument is that the fact that *A* made *B* is not a good reason for *B* to obey *A*, as B. L. Haines's hypothetical case of a couple who have children in order to use them as child prostitutes and live off their earnings illustrates. A reply might be that we should obey God not just because he has made us but because, as Karl Barth suggests, he has given himself to us, he chooses to be with us, and he has taken our place and taken up our cause.

- We should obey God's commands because he has the power to enforce them.

However, 'might' does not 'make right'; a tyrant may have great power, but this does not mean that it is right for us to obey him. Others have therefore modified this argument, saying instead that to reject DCE compromises and limits God's power because this makes God subject to something not in his power. But some theists accept that divine power *can* be limited in this way; it is not necessarily an imperfection to be bound to what is independently good.

- If God is the first cause of everything, he is also the cause of goodness.

### Objections to divine command ethics

Idziak lists the following objections to DCE:

- Theists may disagree about the content of divine law, e.g. whether capital punishment is required, whether birth control, abortion and homosexuality are permissible. So how do we decide what God commands? Some theists say that the Bible is the source of knowledge of divine commands, while others look to official Church teachings, or revelation. But some are sceptical about these sources of knowledge. Another suggestion, made by Patterson Brown (quoted by Idziak), is that we can infer through reason what God would command.
- If being good is doing what God wills, 'God is good' means 'God does what God wills'. So how do we describe what it is for God to be good? R. M. Adams (quoted by Idziak) suggests that to call God good is to express a favourable emotional attitude towards him and to ascribe to him qualities regarded as virtuous.



## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

On what grounds would someone express a favourable emotional attitude towards God? And how would someone recognise which qualities to ascribe to him?

- DCE have counterintuitive consequences. If God commanded theft, adultery, rape, cruelty for its own sake, the torturing of children, or the hatred of God, these would become right.

The most plausible response to this, according to Idziak, is that God's commands are in keeping with his nature and character. Therefore, he will not command such things.



## QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

If God exists, in the light of the arguments given above, do you think it is more plausible to say that God determines what is morally good, or that God is good because he conforms to a standard of goodness that exists independently of himself?

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The following dictionary is also recommended:

- Evans, C. Stephen (2002) *Pocket Dictionary of Apologetics and Philosophy of Religion*, Leicester: InterVarsity Press.

## GLOSSARY

This glossary provides brief definitions of some of the key terms used in this chapter. Note that, for some terms, the precise definition is a matter of dispute.

**analogical** – Having a meaning which is similar to but not the same as.

**analytic** – A statement made true by the meanings of the words; in the classic example, ‘A bachelor is an unmarried man’, if we analyse the word ‘bachelor’ we find that this means ‘an unmarried man’; so the statement must be true.

**a posteriori** – After, or based on, experience.

**a priori** – Before, or prior to, experience.

**attributes of God** – Descriptions or properties such as ‘omniscient’, ‘omnipotent’, etc.

**blik** – A view held without reasons (a term invented by R. M. Hare).

**coherent** – In a coherent description the parts of it fit together (and perhaps support each other) without contradictions.

**compatibilism** – The view that freedom and determinism are compatible.

**contingent** – Describes something that is dependent on something else and therefore may not have existed.

**cosmological argument** – Argues that the existence of the world or some aspect of it is explained by the existence of God.

**defeater** – Something that counts against a belief, to the extent that we must reject the belief.

**determinism** – The view that all events are ‘fixed’, either because they are the unavoidable outcome of past events, or because they have been created in this way by God.

**empirically verifiable** – Describes a statement that can be shown by experience to be true.

**epistemic distance** – The distance between the little we know about God and the state of having complete knowledge of God.

**equivocal** – Having different meanings in different contexts. For example, ‘bank’ can refer to a river bank, or to the place where I keep my money.

**essence** – God’s essence or nature consists of all the attributes or properties essential to him, which he must have in order to be God.

**external world** – The world existing independently of human experience.

**fall, the** – The fall from perfection of the human race following the sin of Adam and Eve.

**falsification** – The theory that a statement has meaning only if we are able to say what would show it to be false.

**fideism** – The view that religious belief need not or must not be analysed by reason.

**form of life** – An activity or set of practices.



**immanent** – Involved within the world.

**ineffable** – Cannot be described.

**language-game** – A system of language associated with an activity, with its own distinctive vocabulary and rules.

**liberty of indifference** – Genuine freedom of action.

**liberty of spontaneity** – Apparent freedom of action; our actions are chosen, but our choices are constrained by our backgrounds and our natures, and are therefore predictable.

**logically possible** – Not involving a contradiction.

**metaphysics** – The branch of philosophy concerned with the nature of reality; literally, that which is beyond physics.

**natural theology** – Arguments for God's existence.

**necessary** – Not dependent on anything else. Something is logically necessary if its non-existence would be self-contradictory.

**noetic** – Concerned with knowledge.

**non-realist** – Not committed to something existing independently of individuals or communities. Applied to religion, this usually means that God exists only within the language believers use to talk about him; he is a useful concept, but has no objective reality.

**Ockham's razor** – A rule stating that entities are not to be multiplied needlessly; in other words, the simplest explanation is the best.

**omnipotent** – All-powerful.

**omnipresent** – Present at all places and, perhaps, at all times.

**omniscient** – All-knowing.

**ontological argument** – Argues that (necessary) existence is part of the definition of God and that God must therefore exist.

**pantheism** – The belief that God and the world are the same.

**perception** – An impression of the world gained through one or more of the senses.

**predicate** – An attribute of something that tells us more about it.

**properly basic** – Describes beliefs on which other beliefs depend, and which can be accepted without proof.

**properties of God** – See **attributes of God**.

**substance** – Something that exists objectively, in its own right.

**teleological argument** – Argues that the apparent design of the world is explained by the existence of God.

**theist** – Someone who believes in God.

**theodicy** – An attempt to explain why God permits evil.

**transcendent** – Outside or beyond our world or experience.

**transworld depravity** – The tendency to perform at least one wrong action in any possible world.

**univocal** – Having the same meaning in two different contexts. For example, if 'good' is being used univocally, 'God is good' and 'Katherine is good' means that God and Katherine are both good in the same sense.

**verification principle** – Says that a meaningful statement is either analytic or empirically verifiable ('strong' version), or that a meaningful statement is either analytic or can be shown by experience to be probably true ('weak' version).

# 4

## • philosophy of mind

UNIT 4 Janice Thomas

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### KEY CONCEPTS ➤

- substance dualism
  - materialism
  - privacy and privileged access
  - subjectivity
  - qualia ('what it's like-ness')
  - intentionality ('aboutness')
  - anomalous monism
  - phenomenology
  - logical behaviourism
  - numerical and qualitative identity
  - eliminative materialism
  - functionalism
  - multiple realisability
  - inverted spectrum hypothesis
  - reductionism
  - occasionalism
  - epiphenomenalism
  - parallelism
  - interactionism
  - mental causation
  - solipsism
  - Turing Test
  - thought experiment
  - argument from analogy
  - inference to the best explanation
  - criteria of identity
  - bodily continuity
  - psychological continuity
-

## ● INTRODUCTION

If you are reading this book and thinking about its contents you have both a body (furnished with eyes) and a mind. There may seem to be no great philosophical mystery about what eyes or a human body are. But what is a mind? And what is the relationship between mind and body? There are many metaphysical theories about the nature of mind and body. For example, substance dualism maintains that mind and body are two, utterly metaphysically distinct, kinds of substance. Materialism maintains that only material substance exists. Both of these views cannot be right, but how can we decide between them?

Attempts to answer the most central metaphysical questions about the nature of mind – like the ones just mentioned – always seem to bring in their train related epistemological questions and puzzles. How, if at all, can we have knowledge of minds, our own or those of others? What is the nature of persons and their identity over time and how is personal identity to be known? Philosophy of Mind aims to help us reach defensible views about ourselves and our fundamental nature by tackling these questions and trying to answer them in as clear and rational a way as possible.

## ● APPROACHES TO MENTALITY AND THE NATURE OF MIND

### Distinguishing the mental from the physical

Asked to list a good number of your physical states and properties and then to do the same with your mental states and properties, you would be unlikely to find it difficult. It is surprisingly easy to give examples of both your physical and your mental states, identifying them correctly as one or the other. The physical list would contain ‘passport properties’ like your eye and hair colour, height, weight, scars, birthmarks and so on. On the mental list would be feelings, perceptions, sensations, present thoughts, memories, plans, etc.

Defining a term by giving a list of items to which that term applies is called ‘defining by enumeration’. Can we do better than mere enumeration in defining the mental and distinguishing it from the physical? Can we make a principled distinction based on **criteria** that are adequate to the task?

The following are all criteria that have been proposed as distinctive marks of the mental:

- lack of spatial features
- immediacy, privileged and infallible access (privacy, certainty)

- subjectivity, qualia, feelings, sensations ('what it's like-ness')
- intentionality ('aboutness')
- anomalousness.

I will look at each of these in turn.

### Lack of spatial features

Physical events, processes and things are all located in space. They all happen *somewhere*. If you are in the audience at a live concert, the musicians are physically nearby. Sensory and neural processes are happening in your eardrums and brain. But is your *experience* of the music happening anywhere? Could a neurosurgeon find it inside your skull? How wide or tall might it be? How much would it weigh?

These questions might well strike you as ones it would be silly to try to answer. You might reasonably wonder whether it even makes sense to talk about mental states and events having spatial properties.

### Privileged access

But other features are also distinctive of the mental. With a little thought you will quickly realise that you have privileged and immediate access to your own mental states. Others have to watch your facial expression or behaviour to guess what you are thinking and feeling. They may have to move to your location to see and hear what you are sensing. Even then, they can only infer that you sensed what they now sense.

But you know immediately, without having to check any evidence, what is going on in your mind. Your thoughts and sensations are private to you. And this means that you have unique authority (**first person authority**) about them. You are infallible with respect to your mental states.

In contrast, anyone can know things about your body every bit as readily as you do. Indeed, a doctor might well know what you can only guess, e.g. that your ankle is not just sprained but broken.

### Subjectivity

Someone else might have the same **type** of headache as you are now experiencing or you might have a headache of the same type on a different occasion. But the **token** sensations and feelings that you alone have at the moment or on any particular occasion are unique to that occasion and to you. They are also endowed with what is known as **phenomenology**. This is a fancy

term for the subjective or felt qualities that your sensations and feelings seem to you to have. There is something each of them is like for you. There is a way (or several ways) each of your feelings feels. You are aware of the tartness of the taste of the marmalade as you take a mouthful of toast, the brightness of the blue as you look out the window at the sky, the dull throbbing of a particular pain.

These subjective 'feels' or **qualia** as they are sometimes called, these ways that your sensations feel to you, are their phenomenology. Purely physical things do not experience phenomenology; they do not have the wherewithal with which to have feeling. Since a rock or a piece of furniture has no feelings or sensations there is nothing it feels like to be a rock or a piece of furniture. To some it has seemed that only minds can have subjective experience, that phenomenology or 'what it's like-ness' is the criterion of the mental.

### Intentionality

Mental states, or at any rate some of them, have another striking feature not mentioned so far. Thoughts, beliefs, hopes, fears, wishes, desires and so forth are all directed at something. They are all *about* their subject matter. This 'aboutness' is sometimes called 'representational character' and sometimes **intentionality**.

Intentionality in this sense is nothing to do with actions being done intentionally or on purpose. The intentionality that is sometimes said to be distinctive of the mental is the directedness or intentness of the mind on its object. If I have a thought about my grandmother that thought is directed upon or about my grandmother. If I think of dragons my thought is directed (intent) upon dragons. A thought can be about an object whether or not that thing exists now or has ever existed.

### Anomalousness

A fourth suggestion about what is distinctive of the mental is Donald Davidson's view that the realm of the mental is, in a way, lawless. He argues that there are no scientific laws relating mental events to one another or to physical events.

It seems true that anything that happens in the physical realm is related by scientific laws to whatever caused it and whatever it, in turn, causes. So, if a stone of a certain weight is dropped a certain distance the force with which it hits the ground can be predicted, calculated and exactly explained because the whole physical event is governed by precise physical laws.

But minds behave differently. You may fly off the handle when someone insults you on one occasion and, on another, even though you are insulted in exactly the same way, you may remain calm and ignore the insult. We can even imagine that

you might be in exactly the same overall brain state on both occasions and yet both your feelings and your actions might be different. There are no laws by which mental events, as such, can be predicted or explained.

On Davidson's view the mental is **anomalous**. There are no laws connecting mental events with each other and with physical events. Psychological events, considered as such, escape the net of scientific law. And this is what marks the mental off from the rest of physical reality.



## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Which of the five criteria of the mental outlined so far seems to you the best candidate to be the distinctive mark of mentality? What criticisms could be addressed to each suggested criterion?

The claim of each of these five criteria to be the mark of the mental has been disputed. No one holds that these features are not important. Nor is it denied that at least the first four characterise many mental states and events. But critics remain unconvinced that they are features *exclusive to* or *distinctive of* mentality:

- Many items that are not mental events or states cannot rightly be said to have spatial location or features. Think of, for example, geometrical theorems or television series.
- There are mental states that seem more accessible to others than to oneself. (E.g. Is it love or just infatuation you are feeling?)
- Some philosophers argue vigorously against the existence of subjective phenomenological feels, or 'qualia', as they are sometimes called. They do not, however, wish to deny the reality of conscious mentality.
- Maps, pictures and stories have intentionality in that they are obviously about what they represent but they are evidently not mental states.
- And the theory that mental events are anomalous is a much disputed and perhaps an empirical one, which awaits further research.

### Related examination question

(Part a) Describe and illustrate two ways in which mental states allegedly differ from brain states. (18 marks) (2002)

## Theories concerning the nature of mind

The two main metaphysical theories of the nature of mind to be considered here are dualism and materialism. The two sorts of dualism to be discussed are substance dualism and property dualism. We will then look at the following materialist theories: behaviourism, identity theory, and functionalism.

### Dualism

#### *Substance dualism*

Plato and Descartes were both substance dualists. They both believed that there are two kinds of substance, which are fundamentally different in their essence. The two substances are, of course, body and mind (or soul). The two great philosophers shared at least one argument for the view that the physical and the mental are essentially different.

Both saw mind as simple and indivisible but body as composite and divisible. Since things with opposed properties cannot be identical (one and the same thing) Plato and Descartes both concluded on this argument alone that mind and body must be distinct.

They also each had a number of further arguments for dualism. We cannot look at all of them here but should at least mention the main one usually attributed to Descartes. This is the argument from dubitability:

- I can doubt whether I have a body or indeed whether any material bodies exist.
- For all I know I may be nothing but an immaterial mind or spirit being fooled into thinking that there are physical bodies (one of which is mine) and that I have sense organs to supply me with the sensations (sights, sounds, etc.) I am experiencing.
- Famously, however, I cannot doubt the existence of the experiencing subject or mind having those sensations.
- So my body has a property my mind does not have. Its existence can be doubted by me though I cannot doubt that my mind (the subject of all my thoughts) exists.
- A single substance cannot at the same time be dubitable by me and fail to be so. So my indubitable mind and dubitable body must be distinct substances.

### Out-of-body experiences as evidence for substance dualism

Sometimes people who have been near death (in an accident or serious surgical operation) report having had an amazing experience while apparently unconscious. The experience is one of leaving the body and floating above it. Then the person may report having travelled down a long tunnel towards a white light and perhaps heard the voice of a long-dead relative before 'returning to this world' and waking up in the old familiar body.

If a subject can move to a location in space distinct from that of his or her body then that body and subject must be distinct substances. They must be two substances not one.

So 'out-of-body experiences', as they are called, would be good evidence for substance dualism *if* there were good evidence for out-of-body experiences. The question, of course, is whether feeling exactly as if you have left your body and viewed it from a distance can be shown to be a veridical feeling as opposed to a very persuasive hallucination.

There are numerous arguments for dualism but as yet none that is invulnerable to criticism. That I can doubt the existence of my body but not my mind, for example, is a seriously flawed argument.

An argument of *exactly the same form* would take us from true premises to what is certainly a false conclusion. Here is an example: Superman's strength is indubitable. But everyone doubts Clark Kent is strong. Since Superman has indubitable strength and Clark Kent's strength is dubitable, Superman is not Clark Kent. This conclusion we know is false. But the premises are true. So the argument that seems to go from those premises to that conclusion cannot be valid. The form of this argument is not a valid one. So the argument from dubitability, being of exactly the same form, fails to prove substance dualism.

### Related examination question

(Part a) Describe and illustrate *two* criticisms of dualism. (18 marks) (2003)



### *Property dualism*

This, as the name suggests, is the view that mental and physical properties are fundamentally distinct. There is only one sort of substance but it has two basic sorts of properties. Mental properties cannot be reduced to physical ones or vice versa.

On such a view, minds are not substances of a different metaphysical type from physical bodies. So property dualism can and does often combine with a materialist view of mind.

But having a particular mental property is not simply equivalent to being in a particular physical state, for example a particular brain state. For the property dualist, mental properties (sometimes described as 'higher-level properties') constitute an autonomous domain, which resists reduction to the physical domain.

## Materialism

### *Behaviourism*

If the arguments for substance dualism seem flawed and unpersuasive, the natural next place to look for a defensible philosophical account of mind may be some form of materialism. In the mid-twentieth century many philosophers of mind, influenced by behaviourism in psychology, turned to philosophical or logical behaviourism.

Behaviourism in psychology is the view that psychology's proper business is the scientific explanation, prediction and control of behaviour. 'Scientific' in this context means 'concentrating on what can be publicly observed and studied, i.e. behaviour and reactions to stimuli'. What cannot be observed can only be the subject of speculation. Appealing to inner states (let alone immaterial substances) is explanatorily pointless and unscientific.

Behaviourism in philosophy rejects the existence of mysterious inner states that are unverifiable because they are in principle inaccessible to empirical research. It says instead that words for states of mind signify nothing but the behaviour that common sense usually regards as associated with those states. So, in its earliest formulation, the behaviourist account of pain, for example, is that it just consists in wincing, crying out ('that hurts') and pulling away from the source of injury. There is no role for an inner state of 'being in pain'.

Early critics pointed out that this view, as sketched so far, is flawed in the following way. If pain is *defined* as pain behaviour the injured stoic (who does not wince, cry, etc.) is not in pain at all and the actor who pretends pain by

behaving appropriately actually *is* in pain. The behaviourist's definition cannot be correct.

Behaviourists responded to this stoicism/pretence objection by adding an important qualification. The stoic *is* in pain, despite the lack of appropriate behaviour, because he *has a disposition* to wince, etc. He is simply not choosing to act as he is disposed to do. The actor lacks that disposition, and so is not in pain, whatever pain behaviour he imitates.

But even this logical behaviourism, with its resort to talk of the subject's dispositions, has failed to make many converts. There are three main reasons. First, there is our intuitive conviction that we do have inner states. Most people feel that introspection gives us good evidence of actual, occurrent mental states that do not simply boil down to impulses towards characteristic behaviour. These states, we feel, cannot be equivalent to our behaviour, because they *cause* our behaviour.

Second, there is the belief most people also share, that two people could be dispositionally and behaviourally identical and yet could have different subjective states. Perhaps when you and I both look at a Christmas tree and say 'That is green' the experience of colour you are having is qualitatively the same as the experience I have when I see ripe tomatoes. If our psychological states can differ although we share dispositions and behaviour there must be more to psychological states than the behaviourist concedes.

The third problem for the logical behaviourist is the impossibility of defining mental states in exclusively physical terms. Behaviour is all capable of purely physical description. But things like 'being frightened' and 'being in pain' are not. Consider the following example. If I meet a bear in the forest my being frightened might take the form of standing stock still. But what I do might not be fear behaviour at all. Not moving could as easily be courage or recklessness. Reference to my other mental states (for example, my desire to block the bear's route to the children or ignorance of how dangerous bears are) is needed. Mental states cannot be accurately read off from behaviour alone. Nor can they be defined without reference to other beliefs and sensations.



## QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

What is logical behaviourism? Give at least three reasons why it might be held to be an inadequate theory of the nature of mind.

## Related examination question

(Part b) Assess the view that talk about mental states is talk about actual or potential behaviour. (32 marks) (2002)

### *Identity theory*

The identity theory of mind (sometimes called ‘central state materialism’) arose partly out of dissatisfaction with logical behaviourism. It seemed to go against common sense to say that my being in pain or afraid is nothing but my being disposed to wince or flee.

Surely if a substance is disposed to behave a certain way we think this is because some of its properties make it prone to behave so. For example, ‘Glass is fragile’ means ‘Glass is disposed to shatter easily’. But we assume that this disposition is a result of some internal or molecular-level properties of the glass.

Similarly, identity theorists hold that dispositions to pain behaviour are explicable in terms of actual occurrent inner states or properties of the subject. The label ‘central state materialists’ refers to their view about which occurrent inner states or properties should be regarded as mental states and properties. Their answer, of course, is that states of the brain and central nervous system (central material states) cause or dispose us to certain characteristic behaviours. Mental states *just are* brain states.

The previous sentence also explains the label ‘identity theorists’. The identity in question is the kind of strict, **numerical identity** that links, say, George Eliot and Marianne Evans (the nineteenth-century author). Numerical identity is ‘countability as one’. George Eliot just *is* Marianne Evans. There are not two authors but one author with two names.

Similarly, the identity theory of mind says that there are not two things when I burn my finger: first, a brain state triggered by activity in nerves running from my finger to my brain and second, a sensation of pain. Rather, there is just one state, which is both a state of my brain and a mental state or sensation.

The identity theory has at least four features to recommend it:

- It is economical: it posits no extra, mysterious immaterial substances or states.
- It improves on behaviourism in the ways already described. Instead of positing unexplained general dispositions it identifies psychological states with brain states in a way designed to improve our understanding of both.

- It aims for an account that is like scientific accounts of phenomena. For example, identifying mental states with brain states is, superficially at least, very like the chemist's identification of water with H<sub>2</sub>O or the physicist's identification of heat with molecular motion. This analogy with scientific reductions suggests that we will understand mental states better for seeing that fundamentally they are nothing but states of the brain.
- It solves the problem of mind/body interaction. This will be discussed in the next section of this chapter.

There are at least two main criticisms of the identity theory. The first is called 'the chauvinism objection'. Recall that the identity theory – at least in the early version we have been considering – identifies mental states like pain, fear, sensory states, etc. with brain states. But which brain states? The states in question must be the brain states of the subjects whose mental states we know about through their reports and our own experience. So, for this view, pain, fear, etc. are nothing but *human* brain states.

But most of us would want at least to leave open for debate the possibility that non-human animals can sometimes be in states like pain, fear, joy, seeing something round or tasting something sweet. However, if there is nothing more to fear, for example, than being in a particular type of human brain state then this means only humans can experience fear. Likewise for all other types of mental states, if they are defined exclusively in terms of the types of brain states that are thought to realise those mental states for humans.

If fear is nothing but a particular type of human brain state, computers, robots, god, angels, Martians and any other non-human subjects you might be able to think of cannot feel fear. They have the wrong types of brain states – or perhaps no brains at all. The identity theory is chauvinist. It says that psychological states can only occur in humans.

I said that there were two main objections to the identity theory. The second objection follows on from what has just been said. So far the only version of the identity theory to have been discussed is the one that identifies *types* of mental state with *types* of brain state. But it is an empirical matter whether even two humans who take themselves to be experiencing the same mental state are in the same type of brain state or not.

And the evidence from neurological research seems to be that, surprisingly, brain state types do not correlate highly with mental state types. You and I may be experiencing the same fear but be in very different types of neural states. You might experience the same fear today and a year from now and your neurological state could be very different on the two occasions.

## Related examination question

(Part b) Assess the view that the mind is the brain. (32 marks) (2003)

Type–type identity theory, as it is called, is chauvinistic and seems to lack empirical support. However, there is a second sort of identity theory, which identifies token brain states with token mental states. This means that individual instances of brain state types are identified with individual instances of mental state types. On this view, for example, your very particular token brain state at the moment is all there is to the particular token mental state you are presently experiencing. This token–token identity theory seems to preserve the advantages of identity theory but avoid the second objection.



## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

What is the difference in meaning between the phrases ‘type of brain state’ and ‘token brain state’? What is the difference between the type–type identity theory and the token–token identity theory?

### *Functionalism*

But is there a way to avoid the chauvinism objection? ‘Functionalism’ or ‘causal role identity theory’ claims as one of its virtues to be able to overcome the chauvinism objection. It does this by deploying the notion of **multiple realisability**.

This notion is easy to explain in terms of a humble object like a mousetrap. Some mousetraps are made of wood and metal and work with a spring, often killing the mouse. Others are made of plastic and simply lure the mouse harmlessly into captivity. They are equally mousetraps. Each uses materials strong enough to catch a mouse and a successful design for the job. ‘Being a mousetrap’ is a functional property. It can be realised in many different ways.

Again, anything toxic to living organisms can be a poison. Different poisons do their unpleasant work by different means, attacking and disabling the organism in many different ways. ‘Being a poison’ is a functional property.

Mousetraps and poisons can each be realised in many different structures and substances. Functionalism in the philosophy of mind says that mental states, too, are functional properties. They can be realised in a wide variety of physical materials and structures. Human pain, for example, is realised in certain human

brain states. Dogs, cats, even goldfish have very different brains so their pain is realised, if at all, in very different physical properties from ours. Perhaps Martian pain, as David Lewis suggests, is realised in hydraulic mechanisms in the Martians' feet (Lewis 1983: 123).

Multiple realisability solves the chauvinism problem. We and our pets and the Martians share the same psychological properties (which are functional properties) and yet differ very much physically. This is because psychological features are defined not in terms of what they are identical with physically but in terms of what they *do*, the causal role they occupy.

Take the example of pain. When I burn my finger this injury sets up a chain of physical events, which are causally related each to the next. First my nerves transfer impulses to my brain. Then whatever state my brain is in is causally responsible for initiating muscular activity which, in this case, means that my finger is pulled back from the flame. The functionalist says that the brain state that is caused by the injury and in turn causes withdrawal from the flame is occupying the causal role of pain; it is (identical with) my pain in this case.

In another species of subject a different sort of physical state (brain or otherwise) would be caused by bodily injury and be responsible for producing avoidance of the injurious circumstance. That state would be pain for that species.

Functionalism solves the problem of chauvinism. Has it any view about the difference of opinion between type and token identity theories? Empirical research will eventually establish the truth or otherwise of claims that this or that type of mental state correlates with a specific type of human brain state. Whatever the results of that research, functionalism will be content. Functional properties could be realised by types as well as their tokens.



## QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

How does functionalism solve the chauvinism objection to the identity theory of mind?

But functionalism is not invulnerable to criticism. Earlier I mentioned a possibility which, if it is genuine, can be used to pose a threat to functionalist materialist views. This possibility involves what is called the **inverted spectrum hypothesis**.

You and I both look at a Christmas tree and say 'That is green.' But, so the hypothesis goes, it is genuinely possible that the phenomenological feel of our two experiences is different. No one will ever know, but our psychological states

differ. Perhaps something similar differentiates your colour experiences from mine round the whole spectrum. (Hence the name ‘inverted spectrum hypothesis’.)

But functionalism defines mental states in terms of functional role. All there is to seeing green on this view is looking at things agreed to be green and identifying them as green. ‘Seeing green’ in both of us is a state caused by looking at a green thing, which in turn causes utterances of ‘That is green.’ Filling that causal role is all there is to being that sensation. So functionalism has to say that the inverted spectrum hypothesis does not name a genuine possibility.

If a theory implies that something is impossible when in fact that thing is genuinely possible the theory is false. If the ‘inverted spectrum hypothesis’ names a genuine possibility, functionalism is false.



## QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

What is the inverted spectrum hypothesis and what threat does it pose to functionalism?

### *Other theories*

Believe it or not there are many more arguments for and against each of the materialist theories given so far. There are also further materialist theories of mind, which have not yet been described. There are views that argue that mental states, properties and events supervene on, without being reducible to, physical states, properties and events. There are also reductionist views.

One of these is **eliminative materialism** which, as the name implies, says that reference to mental states like sensations and beliefs is literally false since no such items really exist. Reference to them could and would be eliminated from a mature scientific vocabulary for describing and explaining human life. Talk of such mental or intentional items survives as part of a rough and ready theory (**folk psychology**), which explains people’s actions and enables us to make predictions about them in an everyday way. Such talk could, however, never be refined into a scientific and acceptable theory.

‘Folk psychological’ talk of beliefs, desires, sensations and emotions will eventually have to give way to descriptions of what is really going on in people’s heads, namely neuronal firings of different patterns and intensities. Any supposed mental states that cannot be re-described in terms of the sorts of physical states and events just mentioned are misleading fictions and they should be eliminated from our talk about the mind.

Another materialist theory, which has so far only been mentioned indirectly, is Davidson's anomalous monism. It is called a 'monism', as you would guess, because it recognises only one kind of substance, namely matter. It is non-reductionist because it regards mental and psychological states and events as real states and occurrences that cannot be re-described in purely physical terms without losing something important.

Davidson's theory is called 'anomalous' monism because, as mentioned above, it argues that the mental cannot be captured in the net of scientific law. There are no psycho-physical laws. Nor are there laws relating the psychological to the psychological. The arguments Davidson gives for these claims are perhaps too complex for a brief introduction. Below, when talking about Davidson's views on mental causation, I will try to explain more of his position in terms of examples.

Finally, it is appropriate to mention that some philosophers of mind think mentality (consciousness, subjectivity) is just another, very special, biological property like digestion or respiration. In this they share a lot of ground with the eliminativists. Others think conscious states lie forever shrouded in mystery: perhaps a species of physical states but one we are somehow doomed, by the very nature of human cognition, never to understand.

## ● THE MIND/BODY PROBLEM

### **The relationship between mentality and physicality**

Different theories of the nature of mind generate different views of the relationship between mentality and physicality. You might at first think that, if substance dualism is correct, the relationship should be something like that between two mutually independent physical objects. Each has its own nature and characteristics which determine the nature of the relationship between them – including whether they can interact causally at all and, if so, in what ways. Dualism sees mind as a distinct, autonomous substance capable of existing even in the absence of all material substances but capable of entering into relations with bodies on an equal footing.

However, immaterial substance is exactly what the name implies. It is something wholly lacking in spatial location, dimensions, mass and motion. So it has no qualities by which it could move, impress or otherwise affect anything physical. Nor can it be physically affected. Although most dualists believe that minds affect and are affected by bodies they have no explanation to offer of how this could be accomplished. Immaterial substances lie outside the realm and the reach



of physical forces. Even Descartes admitted he had failed to give an adequate account of mind/body interaction.

The assorted varieties of materialism might be thought to have the advantage here. If there is only the physical realm then anything real is physical (including the mental). If the mental is really just one part or aspect of the physical then it should be able to act upon other physical things and be acted upon by them in turn.

This could be true even if the mental depends for its existence on the existence and nature of certain physical things. There is nothing in the notion of existential dependence itself that precludes the dependent thing from having an effect on what it depends on. (Think of our dependence on the air we breathe and the food we eat. We can and do affect them both in numerous ways.)

But some materialist views do not recognise minds or mental states as things or entities at all. Rather, they see the mental as merely an aspect of the physical, something capable of being affected by the physical but not of exerting any sort of influence in return.

## **The appearance of mind/body interaction**

Substance dualism regards mind and body as utterly metaphysically different. So the awkward problem of trying to explain at least the appearance of mind/body interaction might seem to be particularly acute for dualism.

### **Occasionalism**

One explanation offered by dualists in the past is occasionalism. This is the view that when my body seems to be affecting my mind or vice versa this is really just a special kind of coincidence. For example, in sense perception, when I see a tree this is not a case of a physical object inexplicably having an effect on my immaterial mind. Rather, what happens is that God produces in my mind a sensation that corresponds to the object reflecting light into my eye at the moment. Similarly, going the other way, on the occasion of my wanting a drink God makes my hand reach to pick up my glass.

Occasionalism seems a desperate expedient. It begins by accepting that mind and body do not interact at all which, of course, goes right against common sense. And defending occasionalism would require independent support for the claim that a quite specific kind of god exists. That is, a god capable of producing innumerable seeming causes and effects yet unwilling or unable to endow our minds with the capacity to be affected by or to affect physical things.

### Epiphenomenalism

Another dualist response to the demand for an explanation of the appearance of mind/body interaction is to say that the mental is **epiphenomenal**. This means that it is real and is caused by the physical. However, it is not a part of the world we all see, feel and interact with. It can have no real effect on that world although it may appear to. It is just an impotent by-product.

For the epiphenomenalist it is right to say, for example, that sense perception (a physical process) gives us sensations and ideas (conscious states). Other physical processes cause feelings and desires. Dehydration and lack of food, for example, cause thirst and hunger. But none of my sensations and ideas, feelings and desires can have any effect on the physical world which includes my body.

If it seems to me that the feeling of thirst makes me pick up my glass, that is just a mistake. It is events in my nervous system that are the whole cause of the muscle movements involved. Physical events are part of a closed system consisting exclusively of physical causes and effects. We will return to this view when discussing mental causation below.

### Parallelism

Another account that dualists sometimes give of the relationship between mind and body is parallelism. Like occasionalism, this view denies that mind and body actually interact but focuses on the fact that mental states and events are very highly and systematically correlated with physical ones.

What explains this systematic correlation? Since it is not interaction between minds and bodies it must be a cause common to them both, namely the will of God. Just as the chiming of my clock is not the cause of the arrival of my punctual student so the blue physical object in front of me is not the cause of my sensation of blue. The chiming and its correlated arrival are both caused by the fact that it is four o'clock. The fact that there is a blue object located just there is caused, like the fact that I have a sensation of blue just now, by the immensely complex pre-programming of God at creation.

### Interactionism

Many would describe parallelism as every bit as desperate a view as the occasionalist's. In fact neither of these views seems to give an adequate explanation of apparent interaction which would satisfy common sense. Nor does epiphenomenalism, despite its belief in the reality and distinctness of the mental.

We all feel that we have immediate experience of our thoughts affecting our bodies (in deliberate action) and of our bodies and the physical affecting our minds (in sense perception). The sort of interactionism that Descartes is usually held to subscribe to, though he feels (rightly) that he has not explained it adequately, seems the most defensible as well as the simplest view. Surely minds and bodies do, really, interact.

But how is this possible if mind and body are so unlike? They have nothing in common that could give one leverage on the other. Moreover, it seems to defy another part of common sense to suggest that something immaterial could inject any impetus into the closed system of physical causes. Nor is it possible to see how physical energy could leave the system to affect the immaterial mind.



## QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

What makes it so difficult to give a philosophical account of mind/body interaction?

### **Mental causation**

#### **Behaviourism again**

It seems that dualism cannot explain how body and mind affect one another. All right, it might be said, so much the worse for dualism. Many have responded to dualism's apparent inability to explain mind/body interaction – or even the appearance of it – by rejecting dualism on that ground alone and turning to materialism.

But the mind/body problem is in fact no easier for materialists to deal with than it is for Cartesians. Take, for example, the behaviourist way of dealing with it. Logical behaviourists, remember, claim that mental states are all defined in terms of types of behaviour and dispositions to behave in specific ways. They are inclined to deny that mental states are anything other than patterns of behaviour.

Certainly they would deny that an individual mind like that of Shakespeare, for example, was a thing he possessed. The phrase 'Shakespeare's mind', for a behaviourist, does not denote a thing with which Shakespeare's body could have an interactive relationship. It refers to his extraordinary command of language, his creative imagination, his understanding of human psychology, his dramatic genius, etc.

Behaviourism views the problem of mind/body interaction not as a real problem, which can be solved, but as a pseudo-problem, which needs to be exposed and dissolved. But this way of dealing with the mind/body problem is not very convincing. My mind may not be an entity with causal powers distinct from those of my body but many of my individual thoughts, sensations and feelings certainly seem to me to be causally responsible for bodily movements I make.

For example, surely it is the pain I feel on burning my finger that makes me pull my hand away from the flame and it is my headache that causes me to reach for the aspirin. Again, my decision to go for a walk causes me to get to my feet and the sight of the dog looking eager makes me fetch his collar and lead. The behaviourist owes us an account of the introspective certainty at least some people have that their mental states are causally efficacious.

### Identity theories and functionalism again

Behaviourism denies that there are minds or mental states over and above the subject's physical body. So too, in a way, do identity theories and functionalism. But these theories do not, like behaviourism, deny that mental states are distinct from behaviour and dispositions to behave. If my pain, headache, decision and sensation of sight (mentioned in the last paragraph) are each identical with or realised by some state of my brain or central nervous system, surely that gives an answer to the problem of mind/body interaction.

Those mental states, being at the same time physical states, are not causally impotent as immaterial Cartesian mental states cannot help being. They are able to interact with my body as any other physical states interact with my body. They interact with it physically.

This answer faces a difficulty that is referred to in some writings on philosophy of mind as 'the problem of mental causation'. This problem goes as follows. Every physical event has a complete physical cause. Consider my picking up the dog's lead as I get ready to take him for a walk. The movements of my hand and arm as I reach for and grasp the lead are all caused by different nerve impulses initiating different muscle movements. These nerve impulses in turn have complete physical causes in the sense that those causes are obviously adequate to produce the results they do. And these causes have in their turn complete causes (perhaps other neural activity) and so on.

But this means that, in the present case, there is no room for my decision to take the dog for a walk to be even part of the cause of my picking up the lead. That action had, remember, a *complete physical* cause.

Could my mental state – my decision – perhaps have had a causal role further down the causal chain leading back from the physical causes of my picking up the lead? But this suggestion cannot really help. For how could a mental state intervene and act as a cause at *any* point on that chain? Would a mental state acting on a muscle or a nerve or a collection of brain cells not all equally be telekinesis (the immediate action of the mental on the physical)? Telekinesis is rightly regarded by most people with as much scepticism as telepathy, extrasensory perception and other supposed psychic phenomena.

Materialists respond to this point in a number of different ways. The eliminativist will simply regard his case as proven. No dualist or non-reductionist position can successfully account for mental causation. This is because there are no mental causes, only physical ones.

Perhaps surprisingly, various epiphenomenalists agree with the eliminativists in this. So, some who believe in the reality of qualia or conscious subjective states over and above material states and events agree that these mental states (regarded by them simply as by-products of certain physical events) can have no effect on our actions.

Identity theorists of various kinds, including functionalists and Davidsonian anomalous monists, reply by insisting that mental events can and do cause actions. For, surely, we are aware very frequently of acting on reasons and, equally surely, reasons are mental states. To act on reasons is for some of one's mental states to cause just those reasonable actions.

How is this accomplished? The identity theorists point to the fact (as they see it) that every mental event is also a physical event in the brain. It is *as* physical states or events that mental events exercise causal power. Davidson particularly has urged this straightforward response to the mental causation problem.

Davidson's critics have complained that his answer still leaves the mental state causally impotent. A brain state, which also happens to be (psychologically speaking) a decision or a reason, may cause muscle movements. But it does so only in virtue of its being a physical state, not in virtue of being a mental state. Its physical properties do all the work. Its mental properties are idle.

### The soprano analogy

The supposed causal impotence of the mental can be understood in terms of the following analogy invented by Fred Dretske (Dretske 1989: 1–2). Imagine an opera singer whose top notes can shatter glass. She might be persuaded to sing an aria and substitute the words ‘Shatter, oh shatter!’ so that this is what she is singing when she hits her highest notes. Suppose that a glass placed for the occasion shatters when she sings this phrase. It is not the meaning of her words that breaks the glass. It would have shattered even had she been singing ‘Oh, do not shatter!’ It is the physical properties of what she sings that break the glass, not the meaning of her words. Similarly, it is the physical properties of my brain state, not the (meaning of the) decision it embodies, that cause my body to move.

Even for the monistic materialist, the mind/body interaction problem (or problem of mental causation) remains as intractable as ever.

### Related examination question

(Part b) Assess whether theories of the relationship between mind and body have successfully accounted for mental causation. (32 marks) (2002)

## ● KNOWLEDGE OF SELF AND SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS

### Privacy and the meaning of psychological terms

In listing criteria of the mental (above, pp. 150–1) I mentioned the view that mental states are distinguished from physical states by being immediately, infallibly known, and private. Even if this does not seem to you what is most distinctive of the mental you are likely to think that introspection nonetheless does in fact give us immediate knowledge of our mental states.

Our subjective states (beliefs, hopes, fears, etc., as well as feelings and sensations such as pains) constitute our inner lives. We ordinarily think that we have private access to them and, indeed, that they are private in a strong and inescapable way.

No one else can feel my pains or have my sensations. No one can see what green looks like to me. Also, I am authoritative about my inner states. No one can correct my judgements about them.

The converse seems true as well. I cannot feel my neighbour's pain or experience what green looks like to him or her. I am able to sympathise with a friend's pain when I see the cut on his arm but that is because I have had cuts myself and I know what my cuts have felt like. I do not really know what he is feeling.

But if all this is so, a philosophical difficulty of some size seems to follow. We have words in our public language for most, if not all, of the concepts with which we classify our inner states. If the previous two paragraphs are correct, 'pain', 'fear', 'hope', 'feeling of relief', 'sensation of green' – all these and innumerable others – would seem to be words and phrases for private objects. That is to say they denote and get their sense from objects that only one person can experience.

How can I be sure that the word 'pain' means in your mouth what it does in mine? We might have thought that each person's position with respect to our shared language of mental contents was impeccable. Each of us has immediate and infallible experience of his or her own mental exemplars which give meaning to the psychological vocabulary.

But I have no way of knowing whether I have got hold of the right mental exemplar (from my private store) which corresponds to the one which any fellow speaker may be using to give meaning to the word he happens to be using. The strong suggestion is that this cannot possibly be how the words for mental concepts get their meaning. The language of mental states must work differently.

The answer seems to be that we rely on public actions and behaviour, at least partly as the behaviourist claims, in order to generate a language adequate to describing and referring to events in our inner lives. (And remember that we are talking about such mundane 'inner events' as 'seeing a green tree' and 'feeling the pain of a cut'. This is not particularly a worry about 'inner events or states' of a mystical, arcane or mysterious kind.)

We learn the meaning of words and phrases like 'hurts' and 'looks green' not by looking in on a private experience and trying to hang a label on it. Rather, children are taught, when enduring a new scrape or cut, that the word for what is making them cry and wince is 'hurt' or 'sting'. Again, we are taught what 'sensation of green' means by being helped to memorise colour words and then told which things look green, which look red, etc., when colour is the obvious variable between one observed thing and the next.

However, the behaviourist has not, after all, been vindicated. This view of how public words for psychological states get their meaning does not say that psychological terms refer to behaviour or that inner states are nothing but dispositions to behave in certain ways. It does not say that there are no inner states.

Rather, what is being said is that terms for (private) mental states are defined in terms of the behaviour to which those states give rise. This, of course, includes verbal behaviour. So 'sensation of green' means 'whatever experience disposes its subject to describe the object seen as green in colour'. It does not mean 'whatever experience feels sufficiently like *this*' – said of some private sensory state being introspected.



## QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

How do the terms for mental states that occur in ordinary natural languages get their meaning?

### Self-knowledge and self-consciousness

The previous subsection questioned the traditional British Empiricist view that my infallibly known private mental states (in their terms, my 'ideas') have the role of standing as meanings for psychological words. It seems right to conclude that I do not know the senses of mental terms by introspection.

It may, however, still be the case that introspection does give me knowledge of the states or events themselves that are denoted by these terms.

### The difference between sense and reference: two meanings of 'meaning'

Gottlob Frege (1848–1925) famously pointed out that there is a difference between the **sense** of a term and its **reference** or denotation (Frege 1970: 56–78). The sense gives us directions, a 'recipe' for finding things to which that term applies. The reference of a term is the group or class of all those things the recipe could be used to pick out.

So, for example, the sense of the term 'pencil' is something like 'writing implement that makes marks with lead'. Find all the things in the room that match that description and you will have used the sense of the word to gather together its (local) reference or denotation: the collection of pencils in the room.



Do I know anything else through introspection besides the contents of my mind, e.g. the feeling of what is denoted by the phrase 'my pain' or the nature of 'my sensation of green'? To Locke and many others it has seemed that one very important thing I can know introspectively besides the subjective, conscious states I experience is the subject, consciousness or self that is experiencing them. After all, isn't it my *self* that I am immediately aware of in *self*-consciousness?

To this last question Hume gave the emphatic answer 'no!' He said 'For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call *myself*, I always stumble on some perception or other . . . I never catch *myself* at anytime without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception' (Hume 1978: 252). In episodes of introspection, Hume thought, we only experience one or another of our thoughts, feelings, sensations, emotions, etc. There is no entity, over and above those conscious states, no possessor of those states, which I can know by looking inward.

For Hume the only thing worthy of the name of 'self' or 'subject of experiences' was the whole bundle or collection of mental contents or experiences themselves which make up my experiential history. Today philosophers still debate whether Locke's confident assertion (of his ability to know himself in introspection) or Hume's denial (of the existence of a self to be known) comes closer to capturing the truth. Is self-consciousness best regarded as awareness of a subject, together with the ideas it is having, grasped in one single mental view? Or is it better thought of as simply a special sort of attention to the mind's ideas and activities? Or is it something different from either of these?

I do appear to have unchallengeable knowledge of who is doing or thinking or feeling whatever it is *I* am doing, thinking, feeling at the moment. I cannot misidentify the subject of my own psychological states. For example, I cannot wonder whether the headache I am feeling right now is mine or not.

But certainty about ownership does not guarantee accuracy about every aspect of the psychological state I know to be mine. So, in an example already used above, someone else may be better able to tell than you are whether you are in love or just infatuated. Or think of the difference a journalist might fail to detect on some occasion between her sense of her duty to tell the public the truth and her desire to embarrass a particular celebrity.

Introspection tells us some truths about ourselves. It gives us infallible knowledge of some aspects of our experiences and conscious states (especially whose they are). But introspection does not tell us the whole truth about our inner life.



## QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

What knowledge can introspection give you about your inner life?

### ● KNOWLEDGE OF OTHERS

#### The problem of other minds

**Solipsism** is the sceptical view that nothing outside your own mind exists. You may reject such extreme scepticism where the external world in general is concerned. But you may feel nonetheless that there is room for doubt whether there are any minds other than your own. This weaker version of solipsism is referred to as ‘the problem of other minds’ and that is the subject of this subsection.

Once again we begin from the privacy of the mental. Mental privacy, in addition to the other effects we have attributed to it, is the source of the problem of other minds. To say that you have special, private access to your mental states is simply to say that no one other than you can know immediately of the existence and contents of your mind. And that goes for everyone. Each person’s inner life is hidden from everyone else. That being the case, however, how can I know that anyone else has a mind?

But can the leap from certainty about oneself to confidence about the existence and contents of other minds really be such a big one? Most people don’t doubt that their parents, siblings and friends (i.e. other humans at least) are thinkers and perceiving subjects just like themselves. Is it naive to think this? Should we insist on more evidence? And what sort of evidence could there be?

We might think first of the evidence we use constantly in everyday contexts to ascribe mental states to others. Their wincing and groans tell us other people are in pain. Facial expressions, from joyous smiles to grimaces to terrified glances, give us grounds for ascribing happiness, misery and fear.

And, most of all, we talk to them and are answered. Verbal behaviour – otherwise known as ‘what people say’! – is often our best guide to what they think, believe, feel, desire and so on. Even if we sometimes make errors, so that we get some of their thoughts and feelings wrong, surely we know from their speaking at all that they do think and feel something.

Or so it seems. But the serious sceptic about other minds would indeed condemn anyone who relies on such evidence as naive. For everyone is aware that cunning fakery is all too easy to contrive. It is not too fanciful to imagine robotic

constructions that ape human facial expressions and human behaviour of all sorts, including speech.

And everyone has at times been tempted to attribute mental states to computers and other sophisticated machines (even though these are clearly not human) on the evidence of their output of language. Similarly, many people feel inclined on occasion to attribute psychological states like sensations and beliefs to non-human animals, whether pets or cunning creatures seen in the wild. Yet careful thinkers are unlikely to take behavioural evidence of the sort mentioned as conclusive justification for attributing minds to non-humans, whether beasts or machines.

And if not to beasts and machines then why to other humans? So it doesn't look as if scepticism about other minds is as easy to vanquish as we could wish.

### Related examination question

(Part a) Describe and illustrate how solipsism is possible. (18 marks) (2003)

#### Flexibility and language use

The two criteria of mindedness that Descartes offered in the *Discourse on Method* (Descartes 1985: 141) were

- capacity to act in a highly flexible and adaptable way
- use of language.

Many creatures and machines, on Descartes's view, have remarkable abilities. Clocks can tell the time better than we can 'with all our wisdom'. Automaton can be made to produce words in differing contexts. Creatures of different species use complex ruses to capture prey. Birds fly in formation. Many animals can be trained to perform complicated tasks, even to utter words.

But it is not so much what animals and machines can do as what they cannot do that is important. Although Descartes was well aware that many animals use signs of different kinds, he distinguished such animal signal- and sign-making from genuine language (even 'sign-language'). He held that animals never use their signs to express anything other than one of their own 'passions'. (This term means for Descartes 'sensations, drives and feelings' such as hunger, thirst, lust, fear, pain, pleasure and so on.)

A creature with a mind (only humans on Descartes's view) can express much more than just his or her passions. Thoughts and feelings about absent things and people, the past, the future, sport, art, religion, morality, etc. can all form the subject matter of genuine language. But no animal, Descartes thinks, has ever put thoughts about these things into any of its signs.

Equally, he thinks no machine has been or could be made which would be capable of genuine language use including answering questions and conversing appropriately. In our time, many researchers in the field of artificial intelligence have thought this opinion of Descartes's incorrect. Next we will look at a test devised to see who is right.



## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

What are Descartes's two tests for mindedness? How effective are they?

### The Turing Test

Alan Turing was a mathematical logician whose work was pivotal in the development of the theory of computation and so of artificial intelligence. He invented what he called the 'imitation game'. Philosophers of mind have adapted the game (including its name, which is now 'the Turing Test') to produce a test of genuine mindedness for computers.

An up-to-date version of the test could work as follows. Imagine that you are chatting on the internet with two respondents whom you have never met. These are separate conversations. You are told that one of the respondents is another person but that the other is a computer which has been programmed to try to trick you into thinking it is a person.

The human respondent answers with whatever answers come to mind. He or she tries to help you. The computer is programmed to give answers like those a human might give. If eventually you give up, unable to identify which of the respondents is which, then this shows that the computer has a mind.

No computer-plus-program yet tested has passed and proved itself minded. To do so the performance of the computer running its program would have to meet both of Descartes's criteria. It would have to be flexible and adaptable. It would have to be able to give genuine-seeming answers (whether true or not) appropriate to a range of questions across a broad selection of very different subject matters. Otherwise you would easily guess that it was just a machine.

## Related examination question

(Part a) Describe and illustrate *one* way of deciding whether some machines (e.g. robots, computers, etc.) have minds. (18 marks) (2002)

### The Chinese room

There are numerous different criticisms of the Turing Test. Here is one oft-voiced one. Many critics have been convinced that no computer could ever qualify as a mind simply in virtue of running a program, however sophisticated. Perhaps a computer could *simulate* a mind in the sense that it could act *as if* it had beliefs, sensations, etc. but it would not really have these things.

This criticism says that, because the Turing Test is a behavioural test for mindedness, it is always possible that a machine could meet the test although it had no mind. Its behaviour could be good enough to fool the tester and yet there would be no mind behind the behaviour.

John Searle is one critic whose version of this criticism has found many friends. His criticism takes the form of a **thought experiment** (Searle 1981: 282–306). Imagine that you are locked in a room and given an instruction manual. The manual gives you instructions that are all a bit like the following: ‘When you receive a symbol shaped like this and one shaped like that, find symbols shaped thus and so and pass them on.’

The symbols you receive come through one slot in the wall and you are to post out through a second slot the symbols your instructions tell you to pass on. The symbols (of which you have a huge supply of many different shapes) are all characters of written Chinese. But you know no Chinese whether written or spoken. Your task is just to receive batches of symbols through one slot and select batches of other symbols on the basis of their shape alone, which you then pass on through the other slot.

Unknown to you, Chinese speakers outside the room regard the batches of symbols they pass in as questions. The batches of symbols you pass out seem to them to be answers. You are just moving symbols around according to English rules about the shapes of the symbols. Searle’s claim, with which many agree, is that no one performing the tasks required of the occupant of the Chinese room would have or ever achieve any understanding of Chinese.

Searle’s main point is that the Chinese room and its occupant function as a computer running a program. Outsiders may be fooled into thinking this

computer is a mind that understands Chinese. If you are the occupant, however, you will know that there is no understanding of Chinese in the Chinese room. You will know this because you will be aware that you do not understand Chinese, do not know what the supposed questions are about and do not understand the answers.

Not everyone is convinced by Searle's thought experiment. Some have suggested that the room, symbols and occupant together form a system that *does* understand Chinese. Although one part of that system does not have the relevant understanding, this does not establish Searle's case against the view of mind or understanding as the running of a program by a computer.



## QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

Is there anything more to genuine understanding than running a program?

### Defeating the other minds sceptic

The argument from analogy

The counter-argument to Searle just sketched seems very implausible. This may be because the system consisting of you, the batches of symbols and the room does not seem like the kind of thing that could be conscious or have understanding and beliefs.

The intuition behind this criticism of the counter-argument is that there is a way which things with minds look. And there is a kind of thing that has a mind, beliefs and understanding and we expect successful candidates for the title 'mind' to be of that kind. The relevant kind of thing, of course, is a human being.

Not that all minded things need be human. But you may find yourself beginning to be worn down by the sceptic's constant harping on the possibility that whatever apparently minded behaviour you observe, you might be being tricked. You may feel that the way to resist this assault on your ordinary beliefs is to find at least some minimum certainty – at least one 'other mind' you can know to exist – and work up from there.

And there is one thing you *know* has a mind. The so-called 'argument from analogy for other minds' starts from this fact: you know that *you* have a mind. You also know what you look like and how you usually act when you are experiencing various psychological states. You know too that there are other beings around you who bear considerable similarity to you in many respects. These similarities include having a body of a certain type, numerous facial

expressions and gestures, actions, speech, etc., in types of situations you are familiar with from your own case. The argument, then, consists in drawing an analogy between your case and that of a fellow human. Since you resemble each other in all the respects listed and many more, surely you also resemble each other in each having a mind.

If this argument works, it establishes the existence of vast numbers of minds since apparently any human being could be taken as your analogue. And it can seem initially a very persuasive argument. However, many philosophers find it less than satisfactory.

One reason for this dissatisfaction is the kind of argument it is. An argument from analogy can never **entail** its conclusion. It invites its hearer to notice similarities and infer unseen ones but the hearer may judge differently and decline the invitation. Again, wherever there are analogies there are also always disanalogies, which may seem more significant to some thinkers than to others.

A second reason for dissatisfaction follows on from the first. In order to be powerful and difficult to resist, an analogy needs to be based on as broad a base as possible. The argument from analogy for other minds, however, rests on only one case – your own. You are taking your own case to be typical. But what is your warrant for that? Using an example of George Graham's, isn't this a bit like supposing all bears are white on the basis of observing a single bear (a polar bear)? (Graham 1998: 53).

Third, and finally, there is the worry that the argument from analogy relies too heavily on superficial similarities and resemblance. Behaviours and bodily features vary extremely widely from one race or culture to the next. It could be that this test for mindedness would fail to pick out, not just the machines and non-human animals (if any) that have minds, but many of the minded humans as well. It would fail to pick out the humans who didn't happen to look very much like you.



## QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

What is the argument from analogy for other minds and what are its weaknesses?

### Inference to the best explanation

It was dissatisfaction with what he called 'mere argument from analogy' that led John Stuart Mill (1806–73) to devise a related, and much better, argument for other minds. Mill's argument is of a type which, a century later, would come to be known as 'an argument or **inference to the best explanation**'.

### **Inference to the best explanation**

As the name suggests, an inference to the best explanation takes the phenomenon to be explained and tries to devise the best possible theory to account for that phenomenon. Success consists in finding an account that covers every puzzling aspect of the phenomenon, uses the simplest set of hypotheses and makes the fewest assumptions, including assumptions about what kinds of things exist.

Success also involves coming up with an account that is satisfying in another way. No matter how mechanically and methodically it accounts for each feature of the phenomenon to be explained, if a purported explanation is intuitively implausible or too contrived it will not deserve to defeat its rivals. 'A wizard did it using magic' would be a beautifully simple and completely adequate explanation of many things. But it does not satisfy because it stretches credulity too far. To appeal to magic is not to explain. It is to abandon the search for an explanation.

What is important about this notion for our present purposes is this. Once you have found the best possible explanation of something, that is enough to establish the reality of any entities whose existence has to be assumed in order for that explanation to be true.

Mill noticed that there were two chains of events, one involving himself and one involving other humans, which seemed strikingly and significantly the same. One was the causal chain whose first link was his body being affected by certain sorts of things. This led to his having certain feelings and thoughts (the second link). This in turn caused him to act in certain ways (the third link).

The other chain was the same sorts of circumstances affecting the body of another person followed by the other person acting in the same ways Mill would act in such circumstances.

An example of the sort of thing Mill was thinking of might be you dropping a brick on your foot. The brick affects your body which gives rise to feelings of pain which in turn makes you rub your foot. (You are aware of all three.) Then you see your friend drop a brick on his foot and start rubbing his foot just as you did. (You are aware of two events with a gap.)



The best explanation of the two causal sequences you observe being so similar is that your friend's chain has a second link just like yours, which you can't observe. The best explanation of your friend's rubbing his foot in that way is that he, like you, has a mind with feelings that can be caused by injury and can cause behaviour designed to cure the pain. He too has feelings, caused by the injury, that prompt the rubbing. So he too has a mind in which there can be feelings.

Mill's argument is similar to the argument from analogy but it improves on it. He does not just base his belief in other minds on the fact that he himself has a mind and that other people resemble him. He bases it on a lifetime of scientific observation of causal chains. He draws an inductive inference from many past cases of resemblance between, on the one hand, causal chains all of whose links were observed and, on the other, similar chains with a missing link. Such past resemblances have been best explained by assuming that the missing cause, despite not being observed, did occur.

Mill also makes the highly plausible methodological assumption that members of the same species will share large numbers of features. So he is not arguing from features of himself that could, for all he knows, be untypical, like facial expressions or superficial appearance.

Many present-day philosophers of mind accept the inference to the best explanation argument for other minds. Like Mill they are aware that it is logically possible that something else, other than the presence of a mind, could be responsible for actions like your friend's rubbing his foot when injured. But they also agree with Mill that there is no obligation to canvas all the logically possible explanations that ingenuity could contrive. In fact, when a perfectly credible and adequate explanation that covers all the data is readily available we should not look further. The credible explanation is the most rational alternative to accept.

## Related examination question

(Part b) Assess solutions to the problem of other minds. (32 marks) (2003)

## ● PERSONS

In the first part of this section we will look at some of the suggestions that philosophers have made about what conditions must be met by anything aspiring to be called a person. Then we will turn to the question: What are the **necessary and sufficient conditions** for remaining the same person over a period of time?

## What is a person?

It might seem that the answer to the question in the title is all too simple. Someone might say 'Persons are human beings. The two expressions are just synonyms.'

But remembering Frege's distinction between sense and reference (see above, p. 171 and Glossary) we might want to change this simple answer for a more precise one. 'Person' and 'human being' clearly have different senses. The second expression is the name of a particular species of animal. It is an open question whether the first expression is restricted in application to the members of a particular species or not.

Perhaps 'person' and 'human being' are like 'creature with a heart' and 'creature with kidneys'. These last two expressions have the same reference: they pick out exactly the same things. But they clearly do not have the same sense. This is an example of Quine's (Quine 1961: 21).

So what is the sense of the term 'person'? Some would say that a person is any being with a mind of a certain degree of sophistication. This leaves the door open to such possible beings as aliens, angels and God. If a being in any of these three categories existed we might feel that we wished to recognise that being as a person.

Certainly we sometimes attribute *personality* to non-human animals but it may be that no one intends by such attributions anything like what would be intended by attribution of the term 'person'. Though most people believe many non-human animals have sufficient mental capacities to feel pain and a number of other conscious states there seems also to be general agreement that it requires more mental sophistication than this to qualify as a person.

If we found any machine that could pass the Turing Test and seemed able to meet Descartes's two criteria for mindedness we might at least consider calling such a machine a person.

The tentative tone of the points made so far ('perhaps', 'may seem', etc.) shows that it is by no means obvious which beings are persons. There is also a question of who is to decide what counts as a person. Who or what would have authority to give *the* definition of 'person'? Is this a question about English usage, which could be solved by looking in the dictionary or perhaps taking a survey of how people believe they use the term?

The dictionary and such a survey *might* help with answering our present question. But it is possible to take the view that the concept of a person is less an artefact of convention or agreement and more like the concept of a triangle.

Triangles have intrinsic features that exist to be discovered whether anyone discovers them or not. People might never have thought about triangles or hit on the notion of such a thing. It would still have been timelessly true that the sum of the interior angles of a triangle is equivalent to two right angles. From now on I will adopt the view that the concept of a person, likewise, contains features that are not invented by anyone but are there to be discovered by analysis of an appropriate kind.

To the general idea of mental sophistication or intelligence noted above we can add

- capacity for a certain range of emotions and feelings
- ability to remember past events and to anticipate and plan as well as to think about what is not available in present sense perception
- capacity to make evaluative (moral, aesthetic, religious) responses and judgements
- capacity for abstract thought
- capacity to use language
- self-consciousness and subjectivity.

You may feel that this list misses out some important features. For example, the capacity to enter into certain sorts of relationship with other persons is sometimes suggested as a feature that should be mentioned.

This list contains numerous capacities and potentials. And this is unsurprising since no one is exercising all his or her 'person features' at once or throughout his or her life. Human persons all begin life with many of these capacities not yet developed to even the most rudimentary degree. Also, alas, many of these capacities fall away to some extent in later life, sometimes disastrously so.

So far we have been looking for features *sufficient* for being a person. Are the properties or capacities already mentioned also *necessary* so that we would not allow that a being who lacked them was a person? The thought that this would be unduly restrictive makes writers such as David Wiggins (1980: 171) define persons as members of a class, *typical members of which* have these and related capacities. We would not want to say that a sufferer from Alzheimer's disease was no longer a person even after many of these capacities had deteriorated beyond recovery.

Similarly, it seems to me, the newborn and the severely mentally disabled should be counted among the persons. This is so even though their potential to develop 'person features' and 'person capacities' has not yet been realised or will, unfortunately, never be so.

Wiggins believes that the only persons are living organisms but does not believe that the human species necessarily is (or will always be) the only one whose members are persons. Other thinkers believe that there could be machine persons if robotics and computer science advance as we can imagine they might. Still others think we might find further types of persons on other planets or in heaven.

If you are a substance dualist you will say that the necessary and sufficient condition for being a person is being an immaterial substance. There is clearly room for debate, not just about what features are necessary to being a person, but – even when that is agreed – about which are the actual and possible persons.



## QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

What features are necessary and sufficient for being a person?

### The problem of personal identity over time

The philosophers' problem of personal identity over time is sometimes described as the search for criteria of identity for persons. This can be a helpful description provided two things are kept in mind. The first is the meaning of 'criteria' in this context. The second is the meaning of 'personal identity'.

#### Two meanings of 'criterion'

The term 'criteria' ('criterion' is the singular) can mean either of two things. It can mean 'tests for the presence of some sort of thing'. Or it can mean 'the essential features constituting the nature of something'. For example, one criterion (in the sense of 'test') of who is the guilty party may be having the same fingerprints as the person who did the deed. And one criterion of some substance's being an acid is that it turns blue litmus paper red.

The criterion of being a criminal (what makes it true that the criminal is a criminal) is being the one who committed the crime – whether or not anyone ever finds out. What makes an acid an acid is something about the substance's chemical constitution. An acid will have this nature (will meet this criterion) whether anyone ever discovers its nature or not.

When philosophers talk about criteria of personal identity they are talking about what makes a person encountered on one occasion the very same person as a person encountered on another occasion. It is the *nature* of personal identity that is in question. It is the criterion of personal identity in the sense of 'the necessary and sufficient conditions of personal identity' that philosophers are seeking.



## QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

What are the two senses of 'criterion'? What examples can you think of to illustrate each sense?

### Two kinds of identity

The sort of identity in question is what is called strict or numerical identity. This means 'countability as one'. So identical twins, since there are two of them, are not numerically identical. If twins are very similar they could rightly be described as **qualitatively identical**. They share very many properties but they are not numerically identical. Numerical identity is a relationship that a thing can have only with itself.

When philosophers look for criteria of personal identity, then, they are looking for whatever a person must retain to remain one single individual over time. The problem of personal identity is best viewed as a puzzle in philosophical logic. It is a completely general question about the logic of numerical identity where a complex kind of entity is concerned. It is not about your own personality or 'finding your inner self'.

### Bodily continuity

The philosophical problem of identity over time for any sort of thing arises because things do not stay the same as time passes. Things alter – sometimes very greatly. And, of course, sometimes things change in such a way that we say they have gone out of existence. The question is, how much change and what kind of change constitute existence change?

Some things undergo numerous alterations during a long lifetime and then go out of existence by dying. Others go out of existence if only very slight change occurs. For example, a rise in temperature of only a few degrees will make an ice cube go out of existence.

When looking for the criteria of identity over time of any kind of thing, common sense suggests that you think about what it took to be a thing of that kind in the first place. This is because, intuitively, it seems that all the thing need do to stay numerically one and the same over time is to retain those essential features. So, for example, an apple goes on being the same apple as long as it retains those features it had to have to be an apple in the first place. In the case of the apple we might say, very crudely, that it had to be a fruit that was picked from an apple tree.

Now is the time to recall the difficulties we had (and the degree of success too) in saying what being a person involves. Earlier we saw that some thinkers regard

being an animal of a particular species as both necessary and sufficient for being a person. Others feel that having some or all of a certain list of capacities and potentials is essential for personhood – although there is plenty of debate about which exact capacities and features belong on the list. And there are, as well, thinkers who maintain that only being (or having) an immaterial soul/mind entitles its possessor to be called a person.

So one of the most resilient philosophical theories of personal identity maintains that all you need do in order to remain numerically the same person as you are now is to remain the same living human being. Whatever changes occur to your living body, and however severe they may be, you will still be you.

You may suffer the ravages of degenerative disease or a terrible physical accident. You may go through profound psychological changes such as amnesia or mental illness, conquering an addiction or undergoing a religious conversion. As long as you remain the same living human being – whether you remember who you are or not – that fact alone guarantees that you remain the same person.

The theory just introduced says that keeping the same living body – bodily continuity – is *sufficient* for personal identity. Is it also *necessary*? Could some future person who didn't have your body be you?

It is sometimes held that what we value in personal persistence (our own or that of others) is not the persistence of the body per se. Rather we think that our 'person features' depend on the body (or, at least, need *a* body) to survive. In particular we care about the capacities referred to in the list above and we believe that they would not be retained if the living brain were lost. This makes us prize the living body – in particular the brain – as the 'vehicle' of personal identity.

However, if another vehicle existed that might be good enough. Someone who thinks this way would say that bodily continuity is sufficient for personal identity but not necessary. Something else could do the same job of keeping you you.

### Psychological continuity

Several thoughts – and numerous questions – follow naturally from the points made in the previous paragraph. One is that we seem to have shifted from one of the possible views about what a person is to another. Instead of looking for criteria of numerical identity for human beings we are now concerned with criteria of identity for conscious subjects, i.e. the things that can have the capacities on our list of 'person features'. You should ask yourself whether this seems a good change of focus or a mistaken one.

As was noted above, conscious subjects are, in principle, not restricted to human or even any sort of animal beings. Aliens, angels, androids – we can at least imagine conscious subjects of all these types. And perhaps we should recall the immaterial substances many people believe in. Those who think immaterial substances not just genuinely possible but real regard them as very numerous since, according to believers, every one of us has one.

The person you are (meaning the conscious subject you are) may as a matter of present fact depend for its persistence on your actual living body and in particular your brain. This, however, does not mean that it could not survive the death of that body or the loss of that brain if another vehicle could be found to sustain it. Perhaps a replacement brain (or whole body), in this life or the next, could perform the task of sustaining the person you are.

Locke was one of the earliest philosophers to articulate a theory of personal identity using such a psychological criterion. His idea was that the persistent person was not any sort of substance, either material or immaterial. Rather it was a conscious self. For Locke, as far as you can cast back the net of conscious memory and self-awareness, so far stretches the person you are.

This notion is sometimes abbreviated to the title ‘the memory criterion’ of personal identity. However, Locke was not just interested in memories. His idea of what makes a persisting person comes much closer to what modern writers call ‘psychological continuity’. This includes not just memories but the awareness we have, in recalling past actions and events, of ourselves being active and involved in those occurrences.

For someone who adopts Locke’s view of the person, keeping the same living body is neither sufficient nor necessary for personal identity. What matters is keeping the same consciousness. What is both necessary and sufficient for staying you is that you continue to be able to be aware of the events and feelings of your past with that same self-consciousness that you had when they occurred.

With such a criterion of personal identity a thinker can accommodate such notions as that of reincarnation, swapping bodies with another person, survival of death, resurrection and possession of one person’s body by another. The same living body could host successive persons. It could house one person by day and a different one by night. If the same human body is neither necessary nor sufficient for being the same person it becomes irrelevant to personal identity.

What matters instead, however, is psychological continuity. A Lockean view has to admit that the person is lost or broken if the right consciousness and memories are lost or that continuity is otherwise crucially interrupted. An amnesiac becomes a second, different person, not just one unfortunate person who has

forgotten who he is. Someone with false memory syndrome becomes the person whose experiences he thinks he remembers.



## Question for discussion

Does psychological continuity provide the best criterion of personal identity?

Even if a modified Lockean psychological continuity view of persons could somehow escape these last two objections there would be a further major difficulty for such a view to face. If it is logically possible that one substitute or replacement vehicle of personal identity could be created or found to carry all your memories, personality, self-consciousness, etc., then it is logically possible that *more than one* could be found. For ask yourself what would be the obvious way to come up with the needed replacement.

Surely the obvious way would be to copy, down to the minutest detail, the brain that is at the moment the vehicle of your identity. Doubtless, the difficulties of making such a copy are innumerable and insuperable. But the logical possibility seems real enough. The trouble is that an agency capable of making one such copy could presumably make two. And the problem with this suggestion is that both copies would have an equal claim to be the earlier person whose brain was copied.

But the two copies could not both be you surviving in a copy. If there were two of them they could not both be numerically identical with the earlier you. And what if earlier you was still in existence? Copies – even divine, post-mortem copies – cannot be quite the correct answer to the puzzle of personal identity.

## Conclusion

This has been a whistlestop tour of logical puzzles raised by the idea of personal identity. It has left numerous questions unanswered and should only be regarded as an introduction to the subject. It will have been successful if you have begun seriously to question what it is that is crucial to being the person you are.

Remember that this is not a question about your individual personality, character and psychology. Rather it is the question about what makes you *or any person whatsoever* a person and not another type of thing, however similar.

The only uncontroversial examples of persons we have at our disposal in this discussion also happen to be human beings. But we have seen that a single individual can exemplify many different sorts or kinds of thing (simultaneously and for different periods of its existence). We must know what kind of thing it



is whose identity we are trying to trace before we can decide which are the correct criteria of identity for a thing of that kind.

Perhaps you will conclude that only humans are and can be persons. Perhaps not. Perhaps you will adopt the bodily criterion, perhaps the criterion of psychological continuity. Whichever view you decide to support, remember that emphatic declarations of your preferred opinion are not what is needed to establish a philosophical view. You need to support your position with argument.

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## RECOMMENDED READING

- George Graham's book mentioned above is a very approachable and engaging introduction to many of the topics dealt with in this chapter.
- Crane, T. (1995) *The Mechanical Mind* (Harmondsworth: Penguin) is another excellent introduction to topics on the border between Philosophy of Mind and Philosophy of Cognitive Science.

- Guttenplan, S. (1994) *A Companion to the Philosophy of Mind* (Oxford: Blackwell). This is an indispensable reference work with entries on many of the concepts and topics covered in the Mind syllabus.
- Heil, J. (1998) *Philosophy of Mind: A Contemporary Introduction*, London: Routledge.
- Kim, J. (1996) *Philosophy of Mind*, Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press.
- Smith, P. and Jones, O. R. (1986) *The Philosophy of Mind: An Introduction*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

The above three are solid, introductory textbooks written in a clear and well organised way with the beginner in mind.

## GLOSSARY

**anomalous** – The word (meaning ‘lawless’) refers to Donald Davidson’s view that there are no strict laws relating mental states to physical states or to other psychological states. Anomalous monism (Davidson’s term) is a view in philosophy of mind that opposes substance dualism and maintains that there is only one sort of substance, namely matter.

**criterion** (s.), **criteria** (pl.) – This term has two distinct uses in philosophical writing. Sometimes a criterion is a test. So, for example, the criterion of being an acid is that it turns blue litmus paper red. The criterion used for identifying person x may be that she has the right (x’s!) fingerprints. But ‘criterion’ can also mean ‘necessary and sufficient condition(s) for’. So the criterion of being an acid is ‘being a substance that can transfer a proton to another substance’ (anything with that nature is an acid). Similarly, the criterion of personal identity (what defines the nature of personal identity) may be thought to be ‘keeping the same living body’.

**eliminative materialism** – The theory that reference to mental states like sensations and beliefs is literally false since no such items really exist. Eliminativists think that it would be better not to use terms that purportedly denote mental states. Rather, these terms should be eliminated from our vocabulary wherever possible.

**entail** – A conclusion is entailed by its premises when it is deduced from them by a valid argument. The premises *make* the conclusion true (because they are true themselves and the argument is valid).

**epiphenomenalism** – The view that mental states, though real and often caused by bodily occurrences and states, can have no effects.

**first person authority** – Our ability to know our own subjective states, feelings, etc. immediately, with greater certainty than we possess about the physical world and (arguably) with greater certainty than anyone else has about them.

**folk psychology** – The conceptual scheme or theory that we all use to interpret, understand and predict each others’ behaviour by reference to others’ beliefs and desires, without recourse to ‘scientific psychology’.

**inference to the best explanation** – A form of argument, as its name suggests, where the conclusion is accepted because it seems to offer the best explanation of the phenomenon or happening being examined. It may make reference to items that are unobserved or unobservable and, if so, this can be taken to provide a good case for the existence of those items despite their not being observed or observable.

**intentionality** – The ‘aboutness’ or ‘representational character’ of thoughts and other psychological states. The way in which a mental state, ‘in someone’s head’ as we say, can refer to, represent or stand for something in the world.

**inverted spectrum hypothesis** – The suggestion that it is possible that your experience when you look at something red is qualitatively exactly like mine when I look at something green – and so on round the spectrum.

**multiple realisability** – The ability of some individuals or types of individuals to be ‘realised’ or rendered by things of different types. The standard examples are a mousetrap or a poison. Mousetraps can be made to any of numerous designs in a range of different materials. A poison can be any one of numerous substances that are toxic to living creatures in numerous ways. Functionalists believe mental states, similarly, can be realised many different ways in numerous different physical or other materials.

**necessary and sufficient conditions** – Necessary conditions of *p* are ones without which *p* would not occur. Sufficient conditions of *p* are ones that are enough to produce *p*. All of a thing’s necessary conditions must obtain if it is to exist but a *single* sufficient condition guarantees that what it is sufficient for obtains.

**numerical and qualitative identity** – Two things that resemble each other in all their qualities are still two not one. Qualitative identity is the sort enjoyed by so-called identical twins, assembly-line light-bulbs, pairs of pins, etc. Numerical identity (sometimes called ‘strict identity’) is the identity a thing has with itself. It is countability as one thing.

**phenomenology** – The term used by philosophers to refer to the experiential qualities, the subjective or felt qualities that feelings and sensations are perceived to have.

There is something each token sensation is like for its subject. This is its phenomenology or ‘phenomenological feel’.

**qualia** (pl.), **quale** (s.) – The experiential qualities or subjective phenomenological feels of subjective (mental) states. For example, the sharpness of the taste of lemon or the throbbing quality of a particular pain.

**sense and reference** (or denotation) – The sense of a term gives us some sort of direction, a ‘recipe’, for finding things to which that term applies. This may be done by listing properties of that kind of thing or by naming necessary and sufficient conditions. The reference of a term is the group or class of all those things the recipe could be used to pick out.

**solipsism, problem of other minds** – Solipsism is the belief that nothing whatever exists outside your own mind. Even if you are satisfied that there is a world of material objects you may still feel the need of a solution to the problem of other minds. That is, you may still want a convincing argument to establish the existence of *minds* other than your own.

**thought experiment** – An imaginative thought experiment is a tool used frequently in philosophy to try to find the limits or elasticity of certain concepts. For example, imagine a perfect molecule-for-molecule living copy of someone on earth being made on the other side of the universe. Is the copy the same person as the original (now newly arrived from earth)? Or is the copy a new person? This thought experiment has been thought by some to help us to understand the limits of our concept of a person.

**type and token** – There are two tokens of the word ‘and’ in this entry – the one in quotation marks is in ordinary print, the other is in bold. There is only one word type of which the two tokens are instances.

# 5

## • political philosophy

UNIT 4 Patrick Riordan

### KEY CONCEPTS ◉

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- |              |                                      |
|--------------|--------------------------------------|
| ◉ the state  | ◉ legitimacy                         |
| ◉ politics   | ◉ obligation                         |
| ◉ conflict   | ◉ law                                |
| ◉ persuasion | ◉ directive and coercive force       |
| ◉ coercion   | ◉ constitutive and regulative rules  |
| ◉ power      | ◉ positive and negative freedom      |
| ◉ authority  | ◉ rights: liberties and claim-rights |
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### ● INTRODUCTION

Political issues have always been important for philosophy. Questions such as ‘What sort of social order is necessary to enable people to achieve a good life?’ link **politics** to other areas of philosophy. Questions like this require clarification of basic issues such as: What is the best life possible for human beings? (ethics), What kind of being is the human such that it must explore questions about its

good? (**philosophical anthropology**, philosophy of mind), Is there a common human nature and how is it known? (**ontology**, **epistemology**). The purely political questions cannot be divorced from questions in other disciplines of philosophy. The Dialogues of Plato (427–347 BC), especially *The Republic*, illustrate this fact. The broad range of philosophical questions from ontology to ethics contributes to the common search for a life that is worth living.

This search is carried on wherever humans become aware of their responsibility for the situation in which they live. The question about the best life possible and how it might be achieved in social cooperation is always asked within a particular context. The values, concepts and criteria available for dealing with the question are not always the same, however. The abstract terminology of political philosophy can give the impression that philosophers in different times and places are talking about the same reality, but that could be misleading.

For instance, terms such as ‘community’, ‘society’, **state**, are frequently used, as are terms such as **authority**, **law**, and **obligation**. That these terms can be used in abstraction from any concrete and specific set of institutions and relationships at some point in their history can lead one to think that there is some reality termed ‘state’, which can be investigated and known, and that there is some other reality termed ‘society’, equally knowable apart altogether from any specific society.

When we pursue such questions, we are caught in a tension between two poles. On the one hand, we want to avoid any uncritical acceptance of the status quo, which assumes:

- that the way things are is the way they have to be; and
- that the way people traditionally describe and explain the way things are is correct.

On the other hand, because some abstraction is necessary, we need to be careful not to distance ourselves too much from our actual social reality. If our investigations are to contribute to finding a life that is worth living, we have to remain rooted in our concrete historical situation.

The dangers of failing to manage this tension between distance and involvement are the alternatives of **utopianism** on the one hand, or **idealisation** on the other. Utopianism is the glorification of an ideal but unrealisable social order in which problems are solved; this need not be as naive as it sounds, since it can take the form of a highly sophisticated intellectual account of a well-functioning system – one, however, that will never exist. The other danger is the glorification of a particular historical social order as the realisation of the human aspirations for

a life worth living. The idealisation of the particular has taken many forms in history, including Germany's Third Reich, and the Stalinist Soviet Union. Imperialism and nationalism provide other examples.

**Important distinction: possible dangers in political philosophy**

**Utopianism:** the glorification of a non-existent, non-achievable regime

**Idealisation:** the glorification of an actual, historical regime

The question about the kind of social order that will enable us to achieve a good life is usually provoked by some problem. It might be the experience of **conflict** between competing interest groups, or different political parties. The existence of different practical objectives (join the euro, or remain with sterling?) as well as different ways of evaluating the same evidence (was the war against Saddam Hussein warranted?) can challenge us. We have to clarify how we describe and evaluate situations, and then how we can deal with the fact that there are people who disagree with our descriptions and evaluations, and oppose our plans. Clearly, it is not just a matter of disagreement, as if a good discussion might lead us to agree to differ. There is conflict in that people's chances of achieving their objectives and realising their own vision of the good life are restricted by what others do in the pursuit of theirs.

Conflict occurs when the goals pursued by individuals or groups are mutually incompatible or mutually frustrating. For instance, traditionally, the Unionists of Northern Ireland want to remain in the United Kingdom, while the Nationalists of Northern Ireland want to be part of a united Ireland. These goals are not compatible. Similarly, the public ownership of the railway is incompatible with the privatisation of the railway. Adopting the euro is incompatible with maintaining the pound. It is not merely that people disagree on these issues; they are also actively involved in trying to bring about their preferred state of affairs, and so they mutually impede one another.

**Important distinction**

**Disagreement:** opinions are contradictory.

**Conflict:** goals are mutually incompatible or frustrating.

What contribution can political philosophy make to such situations? Philosophy can clarify the concepts that are used, the values that are operative in people's commitments, and the arguments that they present in promoting their case. This work should have some influence on the quality of political activity and debate. However, philosophers are also citizens of their states and members of their own societies. Sometimes they will go beyond this work of clarification, and take sides in particular debates. Where the line is to be drawn, if at all, between professional analysis and practical commitment, is a matter of dispute between philosophers, and a personal challenge for each one.

## Descriptive and normative philosophy

We can distinguish between the **descriptive** and the **normative** modes of speaking. The descriptive is saying what is the case, the normative is saying what ought to be the case, or what is good or bad about what is the case. Take the example of speaking about a state. In a descriptive mode, philosophy can report that in a certain state, perhaps Sweden, the state's main function is the promotion of social justice. Analysis of the relevant conception of justice will follow whatever people in Sweden think that justice is. A normative position might assert that the state's main function ought to be the provision and achievement of social justice. When we speak normatively, we appeal to standards that allow us to assess the performance of states as more or less adequate in relation to those standards.

The normative approach can be further distinguished in a minimalist and a maximalist stance. In the minimalist approach, minimum standards are formulated below which no state ought to fall, for instance, in the respect for human rights. In the maximalist approach, ideal standards might be formulated that no state would ever comprehensively achieve, but that it might meaningfully aspire to, for instance, securing a decent quality of life for all its citizens. This is hardly exhaustible, since the standards of what constitutes a decent quality of life change over time, as expectations are expanded under pressure from achievement.

### Important distinction

**Descriptive:** empirical account of what is the case

**Normative:** **prescriptive** account of what ought to be the case

Normative distinguished further:

**Minimalist:** standards below which one should not fall

**Maximalist:** ideal as the standard, although not achievable



## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

What examples of conflict are you familiar with? What is the problem with being utopian in politics? If our political system is a good one, what could be wrong with idealising it? Should political philosophers be politically active? Can we avoid being normative in talking about politics? Is it possible to be purely descriptive in politics without any normative aspect?

## ● IDEOLOGIES

The word **ideology** is used in different senses which reflect the tension between the descriptive and the normative. In one sense it identifies a body of thought held by a group of people, which they rely on to guide their action. Ideology is distinguished both from science, which might also have application in technology, and from common sense. Both technology and common sense guide action also, but ideology is relevant to political action. Any group of people who share a common view of their situation and act in the political forum to preserve it or change it in accord with their values can be said to have an ideology in this sense. In this usage, there is no automatic claim that the ideas expressed in ideologies are valid or true.

In contrast, the notion of ideology as used by Karl Marx (1818–83) is evaluative. For Marx, ideologies are bodies of ideas, which, although false, give the impression of mediating reality. They protect the interests of the dominant class, and function in its exercise of **power**. A typical Marxist example of ideology is the notion of natural rights, linked to the idea of the individual human being. Those who assert a natural right to private property, for instance, are deluded. There is no such reality, according to Marx, but this false way of thinking succeeds in persuading people because of its apparent universality, claiming a right for every human being. Those who accept the idea effectively support the interests of property owners, who, on Marx's view, comprise the dominant class in society.

**Important distinction: two meanings of 'ideology'**

**Descriptive:** presenting others' ideas without comment

**Normative:** with a negative evaluation of others' ideas



If we use the notion of ideology in a purely descriptive sense, we can identify different practical programmes whereby different groups attempt to shape social order according to their convictions and values. **Liberalism**, **socialism**, **communism**, **conservatism**, **nationalism** and **anarchism**, are examples. One could add **republicanism**, feminism, religious fundamentalism, environmentalism, democracy and theocracy.



## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Where is the limit to be drawn in listing ideologies? Is vegetarianism to be counted as an ideology? What about anti-globalisation? Does there have to be a sufficiently organised political movement with a distinctive set of ideas to constitute an ideology?

### Ideologies, practical and theoretical

As well as the practical programmes to which political parties and other groups are committed, there are theoretical attempts to articulate in a coherent and grounded manner the essential ideas of the various 'isms'. It is important to remember that the theoretical presentation of ideas does not mean that those who use the relevant label actually share the views formulated by the political theorist. For instance, those who consider themselves conservatives and perhaps subscribe to the policies of the Conservative Party do not necessarily hold conservative ideas as formulated by some thinker such as Edmund Burke (1729–97) or Michael Oakeshott.

#### Important distinctions

Ideology as a political movement: e.g. conservatism

Ideology as a theoretical presentation: e.g. Oakeshott's account of conservatism

The clarification and assessment of the ideas used by ideologies is an important task of political philosophy. Not only are the concepts such as law and freedom used in different ways by the ideological theorists but they lead to polar opposition on some important issues. When discussing these issues, the political philosopher must also be aware that the terminology and language she uses may well be linked to a specific ideology. Special attention is required to ensure that the critical distance of philosophy is maintained and that it does not lose its independence to some particular ideology.

### Ideologies: individualist or communal

Ideologies can be compared with one another in different ways. Do they give priority of emphasis to the individual or to the communal, to liberty or to authority, to liberty or to equality, to the maintenance of established order or to its radical change, to the control of the economy or to the freedom of the market?

A major division in the forms of political ideology is to be found between those that emphasise the individual, and those that give preference to the social. This is reflected in the history of modern political thought. The English philosophers Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) and John Locke (1632–1704) exemplify **individualism** in their accounts of the origins and nature of political order. They each begin with a description of the human individual existing outside of society. They then consider the steps that would have to be taken for such an individual to enter into social arrangements with others of his kind. Hobbes thinks that it is the need for security, given the threat that each poses to the other, that drives people to agree with one another to accept limitations on their freedom, to be supervised by an all-powerful sovereign. Locke argues that people would take steps to ensure the protection of their rights, since the absence of a settled, known law, an impartial judge, and an effective executive power, mean that protection and securing of rights is haphazard and arbitrary. So he considers that individuals as he describes them would agree to the creation of limited government with powers to make law, adjudicate disputes and enforce the law.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78) in France and Karl Marx in Germany (from 1850 in London) criticised this individualistic emphasis. Common to Rousseau and Marx is the view that the individual of liberal political thought is a social product. Another similarity in their thought is the search for a social and political order in which the communal nature of the human is fundamental.

Rousseau lamented the element of cold, calculating reason that was supposed to be the basis of involvement in society, and pointed instead to the bonds of affection and belonging that linked people to one another and to their communities. He reinterpreted the solutions offered by Hobbes and Locke in terms of factors such as envy, greed, resentment, hatred, shame and the desire to dominate, rather than rational self-interest. In his own proposed solution he imagined a form of social order in which people would not be subject to domination by others but would remain free, in control of their own lives. His thought survives in forms of **civic republicanism**, which aspires to an absence of all forms of domination, so that citizens participate in self-government on a basis of equality.

Marx saw the emphasis on the isolated individual as the result of a process of **alienation**. Humans, who share the same physical neediness and capacities for working to meet those needs, instead of being united by their common fate and seeing one another as fellows, became divided and learned to see each other as competitor and threat. The basic dynamic of this alienation was driven by the division of human productive energies along the fault line of property: those who controlled productive property, the owners of capital, and those who had nothing to trade except their labour power, the class of workers, the **proletariat**.

## Liberalism

Liberal political ideologies give priority to individual freedom. A fundamental conviction of liberalism is that a rational account of the sources and nature of political authority can be given, on the basis of an analysis of the rights, or the interests, or the aspiration for justice, or the practical rationality of the individual. Once successfully developed, this account will provide a rational grounding of obligation to obey the law, on the one hand, and of the **legitimacy** of state power on the other. Liberal political philosophers offer many such attempts, but none has yet achieved universal acceptance. John Rawls, Robert Nozick, Ronald Dworkin and Joseph Raz are examples.

Liberalism in politics is sometimes linked to economic liberalism, in which the individual's freedom of economic activity as entrepreneur, investor, or worker is respected. Liberal ideologies favour facilitation of economic freedom on the assumption that people will only want to enter into contracts with one another (to buy and sell goods and services, and to sell and buy labour) if they expect to benefit in some way. No one should be prevented by state interference from improving his position by his own free activity, according to the economic liberal. As to the question of whether the free market will provide for the basic needs of all, the liberal usually replies that if someone wants something, they will be prepared to pay for it, and where there is a willingness to buy, sellers will soon take advantage of it. Reliance on the free market is also claimed to be much more efficient than direct control of production and distribution. This polarisation of ideologies has a contemporary application in the debates about the privatisation of government services, from the railways to the National Health Service.

Liberalism holds that people fare best when they are left free to pursue their own interests without interference from the state. A regime based on freedom will foster toleration so that the widest possible expression of opinion will lead to the development of knowledge and the elimination of error, myth and superstition. Eventually, political communities will be able to regulate their lives on rational

and defensible foundations. Liberal theorists attempt to establish such foundations in terms of rights, or justice, or equality, or welfare.

In the absence of success in generating universal agreement on rational foundations for the state, liberalism contents itself with the management of conflict so that no one's ideas of the good are imposed on others.

## **Socialism**

Marx's thought inspired many socialist and labour movements, with a variety of political ideologies. The most successful of these in terms of winning political control were the Marxist Leninists of the Soviet Union, and the Maoist Marxists of China. Other varieties of socialism included the social democratic parties of Western Europe, as well as some anti-statist groups, who were also linked to anarchist movements.

Just as liberalism emphasises the freedoms of economic agents in the market as the key to achieving material well-being, so socialist ideologies give priority to the communal interest and advocate the social control of economic activity so as to ensure achievement of communal goals, such as full employment and provision of basic needs for all: food, housing, health care, and education.

Socialism considers the human as essentially social, and so aspires to forms of political organisation that directly reflect this social reality. The details of the socialist vision reflect the features that need to be overcome in order to realise the dream. For Marxist socialists, it requires the abolition of private property, labour for wages, and the division of labour, those forms of the organisation of production that most divide people from one another and alienate them from their social nature. For other socialists the main feature to be overcome is hierarchy, so that the allocations of power that allow some to dominate others will be replaced by an equality in which all will rule together.

## **Communitarianism**

**Communitarian** positions are based on the view that the human person is always situated in some social context, and that it is impossible to conceive of an individual capable of forming plans and of acting rationally who has not learned to do so within a web of social relationships. They reject the idea of the unencumbered individual as found in liberal thought, i.e. a person without ties and commitments to others.

Some develop this criticism of liberal philosophy into a political ideology, aiming at a situation where a society with shared values and practices would be able to realise these through the application of political power. However, the problem

with such an ideology is that it is almost impossible to find homogeneous societies with shared values that can take on the task of ruling themselves.

## **Nationalism**

Nationalism could also be included under the listing of ideologies on the social end of the spectrum, because of the emphasis on the nation. However, nationalisms have taken different political forms, some embracing liberalism, some republicanism and others some form of socialism and even totalitarianism.

Nationalism assumes that humankind is essentially divided into nations, and each nation has a right of self-determination. Criteria for identifying a nation are: a common language, genetic relatedness, shared history and culture, occupation of a distinct and shared territory, and the willingness to identify oneself as a member of the nation.

But these criteria do not provide clarity in deciding who is included and who is excluded from the nation. Are the French speakers of Belgium to be included in the nation of France? Are the immigrants from former African colonies like Algeria and Senegal to be excluded from the nation? What about the children of these immigrants, born and reared in France? Clear lines of division cannot be drawn, and the attempt to do so has sometimes led to racist discrimination and even genocide.

## **Anarchism**

Not all ideologies accept the state as necessary for achieving their values. Some socialist positions anticipate a 'withering away' of the state, as the functions of planning and control are increasingly done by people at grass-roots level. At the other pole, anarchists deny the need for any state, considering that any exercise of political power is an infringement of human freedom. The anarchist position is an extreme form of the liberal individualist position. Some libertarian thinkers, for instance Nozick, rely on a statement of anarchy as a default position, relative to which they build up their defence of the state.

Anarchism typically presents itself as a critique of state power, and can usually rely on a description of abuses to establish its own credentials. But it cannot point to any society that has managed without the institutions of rule. In a world in which anarchy prevailed, there would be no political theory of anarchism. In the absence of established states there would be no need to formulate this critique of the state. The aspiration to achieve a form of social existence without domination of any kind is attractive, but the inevitability of political power sets a limit to what might be practicable. The anarchist idea keeps alive the question of whether political power can be exercised without domination.

Anarchists view the state as evil, since the coercive power involved in the politics of the state both infringes people's liberties, and corrupts those who hold it. Both those who are subject to power and those who exercise it are harmed by it. Anarchists therefore reject the ordinary political processes for achieving power. Their ideology remains utopian.

All of these ideologies have a view on the nature of the state and its relation to society, the sources and nature of political power, and the purposes for which it might be used. Related ideas such as authority, legitimacy, obligation, are also treated differently by the various ideologies. Since ideologies differ from one another, depending on whether they give priority to the individual or to the social, they will consequently have different understandings of human freedom, rights, law, justice, welfare and the common good. The self-presentation by any ideology can appear plausible, and even convincing, but the study of political philosophy should help to put any claim in perspective, and to show how the plausibility of its ideas depends on the basic assumptions of the ideology.



## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Which ideologies are most realistic? Is success in achieving political power the best indicator of an ideology's worth? Which ideologies are most in danger of utopianism? Which are most likely to idealise some existing regime? Do we have any choice about the ideology we espouse, or is our ideology a product of the way in which we are brought up and taught to think? Which ideologies are incompatible and which are capable of being combined with one another?

### ● FREEDOM

#### Negative and positive freedom

**Negative and positive freedoms** are sometimes distinguished as 'freedom from' and 'freedom to'. A cyclist spins the oiled wheel on its axle to check that there is no friction or interference with the movement. The spinning wheel is a good image to clarify the negative and positive senses of freedom.

Negative freedom is the absence of interference or restraint whereby the wheel is free to revolve on its axle. The application of the brakes is the corresponding image for the restraints that limit freedom. This sense of freedom is also called liberty, typically by Thomas Hobbes, who defined it as the absence of restraint.

The bicycle wheel also illustrates the notion of positive freedom. The wheel is

designed to revolve on its axle and so carry the rider forward. Mostly we take the design for granted and check to see that it works as it should. But that it should work in a certain way, and that it has the capacity for certain functions – these are the elements of positive freedom. A bicycle is not designed to float, or to fly; its functions, specified by its design, determine what it is free to do.

When applied to human freedoms this distinction is matched with corresponding notions of law. Thomas Hobbes gave priority to the notion of negative freedom, called it liberty, and defined law as the form of constraint that would put a brake on a person's freedom of movement. Law from this perspective always has a negative connotation, since it always functions to limit anyone's sphere of action (e.g. you may not drive on the right hand side of the road in the UK). Law might be necessary, in order to allow people to live together in peace – without law, the unlimited freedoms of people would pose too great a mutual threat, Hobbes thought – but law seems to be a necessary evil.

Law is seen as a source of freedom by those who emphasise the positive notion. If freedom is a capacity to function in an appropriate way, then our freedoms are specified in a social and political context by the functions we may exercise, and these are expressed and secured in law. This is law in a much wider sense than purely criminal law, with its prohibitions (forbidding murder, theft, perjury, rape, etc.). It includes constitutional law and social norms.

Some ideologies regard law, not as a source of positive freedoms, but as an instrument to be used to effect human fulfilment. They argue that if the capacity of humans to rule themselves and to direct their own lives free from the distorting influences of irrational elements like emotion, passion, or addiction is a key to their fulfilment, then the law could and should be used to direct people to this form of fulfilment. This is the ideal of autonomy as human fulfilment. While there is an important point in the understanding of freedom as mastery of oneself, there is a real danger in the ideologies that consider it an appropriate function of state law to make people autonomous in this sense. Isaiah Berlin and other critics have attacked this understanding of positive freedom when it is linked to state interventionist power.

## Constitutive and regulative rules

There is a useful distinction between **constitutive** and **regulative rules**. Some rules are constitutive, e.g. they make football the game that it is; they define the purposes, such as scoring goals, and delimit the conditions within which the purposes are to be pursued, as, for instance, in the description of the field of play. Other rules are regulative, defining infringements and assigning appropriate penalties. The constitutive rules of the game correspond to the positive view of law and freedom: they create the possibility of functioning. The regulative rules

correspond to the negative view of law and freedom: they restrict what any player in the game is free to do. Other social activities can provide examples, such as the financial markets. There are constitutive rules that establish the conventions, defining what money, credit, interest, lending rates, derivatives, etc. are. These rules make a market in money possible. Regulatory provisions specify what would count as an infringement, such as fraud, or defaulting on a loan.

**Important distinction concerning freedom and law**

Constitutive rules make the social activity possible, e.g. dealing in money. Law in this sense enables positive freedom.

Regulative rules restrict what one may do, e.g. fraud in the market. Law in this sense restricts negative freedom.

While some ideologies give exclusive attention to either positive or negative freedom, the example from football shows that both are important. Sometimes the emphasis must be on negative freedom. There are some social contexts in which it is appropriate to consider the law simply as a restriction of people's freedoms, especially where there are reasons to be suspicious of the state's use of its power. Debates about anti-terrorism legislation provide recent examples. Sometimes the emphasis must be on positive freedom. There are occasions when it is possible to consider the functioning of the law as a whole and to evaluate the adequacy of legal arrangements in facilitating the achievement of common purposes. An example is the debate in the Constitutional Convention in the Philippines, prior to the adoption of the new constitution in 1987, as to whether the country would be best served by a presidential or a parliamentary system. South Africa, after the end of apartheid, provides another example.

Familiar freedoms such as the freedom of speech, or the freedom of religion, as well as being freedoms from interference (negative), can also be understood as positive freedoms, assuring people that they can pursue their fundamental desires to find out the truth about matters and to pursue their ideals.

Given a history in which many states have abused their power, it is understandable that liberal ideologies sometimes emphasise the importance of protecting liberty against state power. At the other pole there are conservative movements that are inclined to see an excess of liberty as a risk, and who stress instead the importance of a supportive social context in which people can realise their potential. The challenge is to find ways of empowering people without taking from them their responsibility to identify and pursue their own good.



Rousseau recognised the danger that the exercise of freedom might lead a person to a loss of real freedom through being subject to another. An analogy is the process whereby a person becomes addicted to nicotine, alcohol or drugs. The first decision to use the substance might be freely made but the choices lead to a loss of freedom in compulsive consumption. An example from democratic politics might be a voter's decision to accept the temptation offered by a politician who attempts to buy her vote with promises such as reduced taxation or preferential treatment. Collusion with the temptation might be freely made but it may have the effect of giving power to a corrupt party which will continue to work with the same methods, resulting in a loss of political freedom for the citizens. Rousseau considered that citizens, once made aware of this danger of losing their freedom, would be prepared to accept **coercion** to prevent its occurrence; in his words, they would choose 'to be forced to be free'. The freedom Rousseau's citizens value is not the freedom to choose this or that, but the freedom to rule themselves.

Freedom involves the capacity to effect choices, choices that are put into effect, as distinct from a listing of preferences. Advocates of positive freedom warn against allowing images of consumer choice to dominate our understanding of this central human capacity. The choices whereby we shape our own lives and our characters are not like the choice of soap brands or beers in a supermarket. What is similar is the existence of options – choose this or that, take it or leave it. But what is distinctive of life-forming choices are:

- that they require commitment to be put into effect, and
- they inevitably change us in ways that consumer choices cannot.

Decisions such as whether to choose a particular career, take a particular job or marry a chosen partner require commitment, and they shape us and our lives. They become part of our personal history, as the opening up of pathways leading to further choices. If I choose to study a particular set of subjects at a particular university, then that opens the way to further choices that I will have to make, and inevitably excludes some other choices.

Similarly, our political context structures our lives by conditioning our positive freedoms. So it is conceivable that a political regime might protect negative freedoms, with minimal restrictions on people's freedom of action, while at the same time the options for action might be severely restricted. This might happen where economic liberalism ensures that state interference in the market is kept to a minimum, but commercial interests effectively determine for people what their options are for consumption or entertainment. People are free to choose, but only from the limited options that vested interests make available to them.



## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

What are the constitutive rules for politics? What regulative rules operate? Is there a difference between these rules, and the constitutive and regulative rules for society? Is it sufficient to protect negative liberty in the confidence that success in doing so will automatically guarantee freedom in the positive sense?

### Related examination questions

(Part a) Describe and illustrate *two* differences between negative freedom and positive freedom. (18 marks) (2003)

(Part b) Assess whether laws should attempt to uphold the moral standards of society. (32 marks) (2003)

### Rights

In 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights articulated minimum standards of achievement to be subscribed to by the international community of states. Given the well-attested violations of human rights in our world (e.g. as reported by organisations such as Amnesty International, Rights Watch, and others), along with the inflation of rights language such that every possible demand is now expressed as a right, what does it mean to have a right, and what rights do people have?

Philosophy draws our attention to the problems associated with the way in which we formulate these questions. We spontaneously use the language of possession when talking about rights – rights are things one has. This tendency even led Locke to use the word ‘property’ when speaking about the set of rights to life, liberty and estates, for the securing of which people were willing to make compacts with one another to form societies under government: ‘the reason men enter society is the protection of their property’ according to Locke. Resisting this tendency to think in terms of things owned, some philosophers regard rights as the capacities to function in social and political contexts.

A classification of rights originally made by Wesley Hohfeld (1879–1918) lists four types:

- I have a *liberty* to do something, if I am not prevented by some duty from doing it.

- I have a *claim-right* to something, if there is another person who has a duty to provide or protect that something for me.
- I have a *power*, if the law designates me as an officer with responsibility to perform some function.
- I have an *immunity*, if the law frees me from the obligation to submit to the legally assigned power of another.

Rights can be distinguished as liberties and claim-rights, but these are not necessarily separate. Legal systems that recognise liberties also create duties obliging some others, including the state, to respect liberties through non-interference or other forms of protection. Accordingly, the recognised liberties are protected through claim-rights.

The notion of right in each case is dependent on the existence of law. Law is the source of duty or obligation that might restrict a liberty in the first instance, or that might specify a duty allowing others a claim-right in the second instance. The simplest cases for understanding rights are the rights created by human-made law in the civil laws of states. Legal systems having the backing of the coercive power of a state provide remedies for violations of rights. Those whose rights are infringed have some means available to them to have their case heard. Many thinkers maintain that the talk of rights is only meaningful where they are actionable, i.e. where people have recourse to courts to have the wrong redressed.

As well as positive rights created by state law, we also speak of natural or human rights. These appeal to moral or natural law. This appeal is controversial, since, first, not all agree that there is such a thing as moral or natural law, and second, those willing to speak of a natural or moral law do not necessarily agree on its contents. Even where people can agree on the meaning of a human or natural right, there remains the difficulty that such rights are not actionable until codified in some form of positive law. This difficulty played a large role in the debates prior to the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.



## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Which natural rights do we have? What rights does the Universal Declaration assert on our behalf? Are they liberties or claim-rights? For instance, is the right to work a liberty, or is it a claim-right? If a claim-right, who has the duty to employ us?

### **Balancing individuals' interests and the common good**

The rhetoric of moral or human or natural rights is often used to argue that certain liberties and claims ought to be recognised in positive law and made enforceable. Hence, campaigns on behalf of special interest groups frequently present their case in terms of rights. Is there a natural or moral right to assistance in committing suicide? Those who wish to have it legalised are campaigning for the creation of relevant legal rights. Similarly, campaigns to have the law changed so that the partnerships of homosexuals might be considered as legal marriages, or that homosexual couples might be entitled to adopt children, are aimed at the creation of legal rights. Not infrequently the argument will be made in terms of an assumed moral right.

When are the assertions of previously unrecognised moral rights warranted? When are society and the state obliged to respect the asserted right and to make the provisions required, including changes in the law? These questions cannot be definitively answered. Consider discussions about whether the NHS should have to provide infertility treatment for couples who are unable to have children, and similar controversial cases such as the provision of Viagra, the opportunity to select the sex of a child, or the provision of cosmetic surgery. Before the law can incorporate a standardised way of handling such cases there has to be a political discussion, since the conflict involved reveals that the interests of all concerned cannot all equally be satisfied.

In the process of trying to establish what legal rights ought to be instituted, the rights that people claim to have are sometimes invoked as if they were trumps overriding all other considerations. But other factors such as those of cost, proportion to other needs, fairness in the distribution of benefits and costs, impact on other aspects of the social fabric, consequences from allowing precedent, are also politically significant. These other concerns are often grouped together under a heading such as the common good, or as utilitarians will typically do it, under the umbrella notion of social utility or the general welfare.

The proposal to introduce identity cards is a relevant issue. Many of the arguments in favour of the proposal point to features of public utility: the need to manage efficiently the issue of refugees and asylum seekers, to control abuse of social welfare, to facilitate the detection of crime. On the other hand, the arguments against the proposal stress the greater power that would be put in the hands of the state, which would pose a threat to individual liberty.

### Mill's harm principle

John Stuart Mill's (1806–73) principle that the prevention of harm to others is the only legitimate basis for the restriction of liberty is helpful in this discussion. The possibility that my activity might harm others, or indeed might harm society as a whole, would warrant interference by the state. That I might be in danger of harming myself would not be sufficient reason to restrict my liberty, according to Mill. This is a useful principle and provides a clear test for when constraints might be imposed on negative liberty. However, the principle itself does not resolve the dilemmas that arise from the difficulty of deciding what harms should be prevented and how much harm. My interests are harmed when the construction of an airport (extra runways at Heathrow, Stansted, Gatwick) reduces the value of my property, but do such harms constitute sufficient reason to prevent the construction? Am I harmed when my interests are damaged? My hearing may suffer from exposure to loud noise – deafness is certainly a harm – but is the drop in value of my property a harm in the same sense?

### Related examination questions

(Part a) Describe and illustrate *two* circumstances in which the notion of social utility might conflict with the possession of a natural right. (18 marks) (2002)

(Part b) Assess explanations of the relationship between law and rights. (32 marks) (2002)

## ● LAW

Philosophers disagree on what are the essential elements of law. Their views can be located along a spectrum from minimalist to maximalist theories, and these can be contrasted in terms of six fundamental tenets.

### Minimalist theories of law

- A1** The central case of law is the law of a state.
- A2** The law of a state is independent of morality and can be understood without reference to morality.
- A3** Law is essentially a set of commands expressing the lawmaker's will.
- A4** The state claims a monopoly on the use of force within a territory. With the backing of force, state law guarantees a minimum of peace and security for its citizens.
- A5** The force of law depends on the lawgiver's ability to enforce the law.

- A6** The basis of obligation is coercion, the assurance that one will be punished for failure to comply with the law's requirements.

At the other end of the spectrum are theories of law based on the following more inclusive principles.

### Maximalist theories of law

- B1** There are many types of law in human experience, and the law of a state should be understood in the context of other types, such as moral law, natural law, divine law, customary law, and international law.
- B2** The law of a state is related to morality in a complex manner, so that it cannot be understood fully without reference to morality.
- B3** Law is a product of reason, not will. Its function is to achieve order in a social complex, such that the good of the social whole is achieved.
- B4** The state has the responsibility of guiding social interaction through legislation, such that the common good is achieved, or at least not damaged. A minimum of peace and security is a precondition for the achievement of the common good.
- B5** The force of law is twofold, directive and coercive. The **directive force** of law is the power to persuade, flowing from the good sense of the arrangements that the law directs. The **coercive force** of law is linked to the threat of sanction.
- B6** Insofar as the law's requirements are reasonable in relation to the common good of the relevant community, they lay obligations on the citizens who are capable of understanding the purpose of the law, and who acknowledge their own responsibility in relation to that purpose.

These two positions are different, but more like narrower and broader concentric circles than polar opposites. The maximalist position can incorporate the elements of the minimalist position, while rejecting the exclusions it entails. The theory that acknowledges law's relation to morality can accept the fact that large areas of the law function independently of morality, just as it can accept the fact that for many people the only force exercised by the law is that of coercion. Typically, the minimalist position is helpful in finding agreement, even among people who otherwise disagree with one another about questions of the good and the common good.

The emphasis on the directive force of law linked to its function in relation to the common good ties in with an understanding of positive freedom. Law in this sense facilitates the achievement by citizens of their good, which they pursue in collaboration with one another in society. On the other hand, the

acknowledgement of the coercive force of the law and its function in guaranteeing a minimum of peace and security is consistent with an emphasis on negative freedom. The threat that law is understood to pose to the liberties of citizens is considered warranted to the extent that the law is a necessary means to secure the space in civil society in which liberty will have scope for action.

## Unjust law

There is the possibility that the law might be unjust, and therefore that it could no longer succeed in persuading citizens to accept its directive force. Law might be unjust if it is defective in one of the following areas:

- If the law serves, not the **common good**, but the sectional good of the lawmaker, or the ruling class, it is unjust. If the law discriminates between people such that the liberties of some are subordinated to the liberties of others, then it is evidently unjust.
- If the law comes from some source other than from the legitimate lawmakers, then it cannot command the obedience of citizens. Lack of legitimacy can render a law unjust.
- If **equity** is violated, the law is unjust. This concerns not so much a structural imbalance in the law, as the unfair application of the law. The law is applied unfairly if cases similar to one another in relevant respects are not treated similarly.

The first reason is intelligible only to someone who holds a more than minimalist theory of law. Theorists who reject the connection between law and morality on the one hand, and law and the common good on the other, ridicule the discussion of unjust law. If the lawmaker has made her will known, and if she is powerful enough to enforce the law, then the law is binding, because its coercive force is effective.

This criticism misses the point. The maximalist position does not deny that the coercive force of the law remains effective even if the directive force evaporates owing to some significant defect. That a citizen may have no choice but to submit to tyrannical force is undeniable. The question, however, is whether the citizen should consider herself obligated by regulations that have the appearance of law but are seriously defective in some relevant respect.

## Civil disobedience

There is no easy argument from the establishment of significant injustice in the law to a conclusion warranting civil disobedience, or even revolution. For the

maximalist theorist, the resort to civil disobedience or other forms of protest or rejection would have to be argued for in terms of several considerations, only one of which is the injustice of the law. The probability of success, the likelihood of creating greater harm than the harm already caused, and the impact of one's actions on others are also relevant considerations.

In industrial relations unions can threaten to strike, to signal to the employers the seriousness of the issues requiring negotiation and settlement. Strikes are forms of agitation that inevitably involve harm, but fall short of violence in the strict sense. Although the right to strike is recognised as providing workers with some recourse against unfair conditions, strikes have become subject to legislation so as to ensure that unions do not abuse their power and effect greater harm on parties not directly involved in the dispute. Since government is one of the biggest employers in modern states, of police and security forces as well as civil and public servants, the right to strike is denied in some situations to those groups who provide essential services, and whose power if uncontrolled might pose a threat to public safety. Alternatives to strike action have to be sought to allow such groups as fire brigades and members of the military and the police to express grievances. The willingness of citizens in these functions to accept the restrictions on their civil liberties depends on the good functioning of the alternative systems for managing conflict.



## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Is the right to strike a natural right? Is the state warranted in denying the right to strike to some of its employees? Does social utility or the common good justify overriding the rights of some workers in this context? What are the limits to civil disobedience? For instance, in issues such as environmental protection, or the protection of animals, are protestors justified in disrupting society in order to make their point? When are the limits of justification reached?

### Conflict and protest

Liberal democratic regimes accept the inevitability of conflict, rooted in divergence of interests and of world-views. The conflict is carried out in peaceful ways, which resemble the use of argument rather than the use of force. The competition for power is carried on in elections and in parliamentary debates.

In addition to the standard forms of participation in political action, democratic systems also allow for forms of public protest including marches and



demonstrations. The exercise of the recognised rights to public assembly and to protest can be abused, and can lead to rioting, violence and random destruction of property. Neo-Nazis or extreme nationalists have provoked racial violence. On occasion, football supporters can unwittingly give cover to organised groups intending to provoke rioting and violence between opposing fans. The mobilisation of large numbers to protest against elements of globalisation in the context of G-8 meetings has sometimes resulted in street fighting and destruction of property. The extent to which the style of policing has provoked the excess in all these cases is debated. The difficult line to draw is where the civil right to peaceful assembly, absolutely essential to protect democracy itself, is exercised in such a way that it leads to violence and destruction. Where the exercise of freedom of speech infringes on the rights of others to their reputation, to be protected from libel, to be free from incitement to hatred, it is evident that limits must be drawn. There is no blueprint available for such eventualities, but prudential judgement and discretion on the part of responsible people is required.

## Punishment

The coercive force of the law depends on the threat of punishment. **Punishment** is the final stage in a process of response to crime. Those who break the law have to be caught, tried, and convicted, before they can be punished. It is important to remember this process as the context in which punishment is administered.

Punishment is something deliberately done by a disinterested person acting in a representative capacity, for instance, a prison officer implementing the sentence imposed by a court. The two elements of disinterest and representation distinguish punishment from revenge. The traffic warden who fines me for parking in the wrong place is not acting out of some personal animosity (or at least should not be doing so), but is implementing the traffic regulations on behalf of the local council. By contrast, revenge is the reaction of a victim or of someone personally involved with a victim of a crime, and so is motivated by strong emotion, directed against the supposed perpetrator.

In being punished, those convicted of breaking the law are usually deprived of some good, e.g. money, freedom of movement, the company of others, respect, self-respect, reputation, and in the extreme cases, physical well-being and ultimately life.

If punishment consists in the deliberate harming of the interests of another, if it involves deliberately taking good things away from people against their will, how can it be justified? If society harms people's interests in punishing them, is it not repeating the same kind of wrongdoing as was present in the crime?

Different answers are given to these questions. The justification of punishment depends on how the point of punishment is understood. We can imagine typical remarks which reflect the various theories of punishment:

### Internal deterrence

‘That will teach him! He needs to be taught a lesson.’

The lesson that the person punished is supposed to learn is that it does not pay to break the law, and so in the future when he is tempted to repeat the crime he will have reason not to do so. When punishment is spoken of as correction, it relies on a similar theory, rooted in the context of education and training in which children are corrected, so that they learn not to repeat their misbehaviour or their mistakes.

### External deterrence

‘I’m going to make an example of you.’

An exemplary sentence is imposed as a warning to others that crime does not pay. The convicted criminal is punished in order to deter others. It is a matter of debate whether punishment in fact deters. In such discussions it is important to remember that punishment follows on detection and apprehension. It is worth asking if the likelihood of detection is more of a **deterrent** than the severity of the punishment.

### Social protection

‘She ought to be locked up! Society needs to be protected from the likes of her. We’re not safe while she’s around!’

The point of punishment on this view is social defence, the protection of society and of victims of further possible crimes. This rationale for punishment is sometimes labelled incapacitation, removing from the convict the capacity to harm others, as for instance someone convicted of driving under the influence of alcohol might have to forfeit her driver’s licence.

### Reform, rehabilitation

‘They need help. When you know their background, you can understand what they do.’

Crime is understood in this approach as anti-social behaviour, and punishment as a reaction by society is acceptable on this view only if it rehabilitates the criminal, reforming him so that he can return to society and play a normal, law-abiding role.

### Retribution, restoration

‘Criminals can’t be allowed get away with it. Wrongs must be righted, the punishment must fit the crime.’

Punishment on this view is intended to restore something that had been disrupted by the crime. For instance, it might be thought that by breaking the law, the criminal has infringed someone’s rights; this has disturbed the balance of fairness between the members of society. Punishment is an attempt to restore the order of just relations between people, including the victim, the perpetrator, and others who accept the restriction of their freedom and abide by the law. Penalties in sport reflect this rationale of punishment. Infringements of the rules are penalised by a referee (disinterested person acting in a representative capacity), who thereby removes from the offending team the unfair advantage gained by the foul, and compensates the opposing team for the disadvantage caused by the foul.

The first four theories are often grouped together since they all focus on the consequences of punishment: deterrence, defence or rehabilitation. They look to the future, in contrast to retribution and restoration theories, which are backward looking.

None of the first four theories can stand on its own as a justification of punishment, because none can answer the following critical questions:

- Why is it only the convicted criminal who may be punished?
- Why is it good for the convict to be punished?

Suppose, for example, we knew that by choosing someone at random and making an example of him by public flogging we could effectively put an end to illegal parking in our cities. Would we be justified in doing so? Reliance on the theory of external deterrence alone would seem to suggest that we would be justified.

Would we be justified in locking up those people whom we judge to be potential criminals, since this would be an effective way to protect society? Would we be justified in allowing reformatories and psychiatric hospitals to lock up the maladjusted in the hope of reforming them, using the best scientific techniques available? Exclusive reliance on the relevant theories would seem to justify these strategies, assuming that they would be effective.

Supporters of the deterrence, defence and rehabilitation theories add the 'retributive principle', meaning by it the specification that only convicted criminals may be punished, in order to deal with this difficulty. But this suggests that there is some element of **retribution** or **restoration** that is essential for understanding the point and therefore the justification of punishment.

Another weakness of the forward looking theories is their difficulty in making the punishment fit the crime. Should we keep prisoners locked up until they are reformed, no matter how minor the offence? Should we enlarge fines and prison sentences until the crime rate is negligible? Even if they could be effective, these suggestions go against our sense of fairness, and this indicates that consequences alone cannot justify the activity of punishment.

Restorative theories explain punishment as good for the convict, because she is thereby restored to a context of fairness as a member of society, and existence in society on fair terms is considered a good for anyone. Retributive theories also show how the punishment must be in proportion to the crime in order that fairness is achieved in the restored balance. So there is a basis for limiting punishment. Of course, society must have some sense of its own values and their priorities in order to be able to apply just punishment in these terms, as for instance with the question of the relative seriousness of crimes against the person and crimes against property.

### Related examination questions

(Part a) Describe and illustrate *two* criticisms of the view that punishment should be used as a deterrent. (18 marks) (2003)

(Part b) Assess whether we have an obligation to obey an unjust law. (32 marks) (2003)

## ● AUTHORITY

### Power

In basic physics, power is defined as the ability to do work. Work in turn is understood as the overcoming of inertia, the resistance offered by mass and weight. In social and political contexts, power is the ability to move people, i.e. the ability to get other people to do what one wants. There is a resistance to be overcome: it is the resistance offered by their will; they have their own projects and want to spend their time pursuing their own plans.

Power is exercised in two contrasting ways, **persuasion** and coercion. Persuasion provides arguments that people can accept as giving them reasons to do freely what they are asked to do. When persuaded, those who cooperate do so willingly, having their own reasons for doing what they are asked to do. At the other pole, cooperation is given reluctantly and unwillingly, and people are coerced against their will to do what they are told. Coercion is the effect of the threat or exercise of force.

Between these two poles of persuasion and coercion are many instances in which the factors are combined. Trades unions rely on an element of coercion when they threaten industrial action in order to bring the employers to the negotiating table. Not everything that seems to be persuasion is in fact such. Blackmail, browbeating, bullying, manipulation, can all appear to be forms of talking, but they are much more like coercion than persuasion to the extent that they deny people the genuine opportunity of freely choosing not to cooperate.

**Important distinction: forms of power in evoking cooperation**

**Persuasion:** people have their own reasons for cooperating.

**Coercion:** threat of force elicits reluctant and resentful compliance.

As is evident from the existence of police forces, armies, courts and prisons, states rely on an element of coercion. A fundamental concern of political philosophy is the clarification of the grounds on which the state might elicit our willing cooperation. What reasons might be provided to convince us that the state's power over us is legitimate, that we are obligated to obey its laws and directives, and that we have good reason to bear costs so as to ensure its survival? These are the typical questions of political philosophy, which can be given different answers depending on the ideological standpoint adopted.

The constitution of a state specifies the allocation of power, its division and distribution, and how it is acquired and transferred. This definition does not presume that the constitution is written. There are many instances of social power that are not directly related to the political in the narrow sense of institutionalised state power. It is important to recognise this so as to locate state power within a broad social horizon. Examples are the capability of advertisers, journalists, educators, preachers, as well as peer-group and other social pressures to influence people to behave in certain ways.



## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Do the other instances of power function without reliance on any element of coercion? Are they purely persuasive? How can we distinguish manipulation, for instance through subliminal suggestion, from coercion?

### Authority

In his analysis of different constitutions Aristotle (384–322 BC) evaluated some constitutions as better than others. One criterion was whether rule is conducted in the interests of the rulers or for the common good. Applying this criterion we can ask if we would prefer to be governed by people who attempt to enlist our willing cooperation by persuasion, showing us how rule is in our interests also (the common good), or by people who rely exclusively on coercion by threatening the use of force? To be deprived of the opportunity of challenging those who govern us by asking for reasons why we should cooperate is to be deprived of a significant aspect of our humanity. To be treated as beings who have to be coerced into action is to be treated as less than human.

People usually cooperate without having to rehearse the whole set of reasons for their action. They rely on a short cut, and point to the law, or tradition, or precedent, or the directives of an official, to explain themselves. Reliance on such a short cut is the recognition of authority. Instead of considering all the reasons that might be given in answer to the question, 'Why should I do what the Prime Minister is proposing to me?', I might simply answer that I choose to comply precisely because it is the Prime Minister who is proposing the course of action. Or, in response to the question 'Why should I obey the law?' I reply: 'Because it is the law!' Strictly speaking, this is not a reason for action, but a replacement of reasons with authority. This must seem regrettable to any philosopher who considers that a person is truly free only when she conforms to rules that she gives herself. Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) both emphasised the freedom involved in obeying a law one gives oneself. But from

another perspective, it is a valuable social institution which allows for action in response to problems.

If we consider the law in a society as the memory of solutions to problems of coordination, then it can be relied upon to provide guidance for the future. What worked before can work again, and because of the expectation that the same solutions will be applied, people can anticipate the fact and plan accordingly. A large part of barristers' work is the provision of advice on what their clients can expect would be the decisions of courts. Law is then authoritative, providing a short cut to a path of action for which the reasons need not be given in detail. This authoritative function of law is clear because it is explicit, but reliance on custom or on tradition is also a short-circuiting of the process of giving reasons.

There are several types of authority, and it is located in various places. In modern political systems that also exhibit the rule of law, the instances of authority and their sources are clearly identifiable. Constitutions allocate power in a society, and specify the means for its exercise, how it can be transferred and the conditions under which it might cease to be. In a state with a written constitution, the text itself is an authority. In a state with an unwritten constitution, practice and tradition are authorities. Similarly, the body charged with definitive interpretation of the text is an authority, for instance, the law lords, or a Supreme Court. In all of these cases, citizens will habitually rely on appeal to such authority to reach conclusions about the best or proper way to act, without having to rehearse the whole range of reasons. Among the types of authority are persons who are holders of office whose functions and powers are specified by texts or traditions. As well as individual officers, there are groups, such as Parliament, Congress, courts, councils and committees, whose functions and powers are also specified by texts or traditions. The texts and traditions are authorities also, but are in turn products of other groups and persons.

In the examples of authorities given above, anyone who recognises an authority and relies on it for guidance for action can reliably assume that others do so too. For certain authorities, the recognition involves an acknowledgement that the authority has a right to be obeyed. And as a person considers herself bound by the authoritative rule, so she expects that others will acknowledge their own obligation in respect of the authority. So, for instance, if I come upon the scene of a crash on a motorway, and find that there are police officers redirecting the traffic, then I spontaneously follow their direction, presuming that they know best, given their estimation of the nature of the obstacle, and presuming also that even if their solution is not ideal, it is best for all involved that some clear and consistent strategy be followed. Not only do I conform, without entering into long discussions about the nature of the problem and possible solutions, but I

expect others to conform out of an acceptance of the authority of the police officers, i.e. their entitlement to be obeyed. In fact, those who slow down to form their own view of the crash scene make the problem worse and impede the work of rescue and recovery.

There are other instances of authority in our societies where it cannot be assumed that the authority is commonly recognised. An authority might be recognised within a specific section of the population. In these cases appeal to the authority will not be helpful in handling conflict that crosses community boundaries. One obvious example is that of the diversity of religions, where religious groups have their own sacred texts and recognise authoritative instances for interpreting the texts, and guiding the life of their communities. Another example is the appeal to science, expertise or professional knowledge. Science functions as an authority for people who themselves do not engage in the relevant discipline, and indeed scientists themselves must accept some things as authorities since no one reconstructs the whole history of scientific discovery (log tables, periodic table of the elements, etc.). People rely on guidance by professionals in certain areas of their lives. The professionals are authorities in that they provide short cuts to guided action for their clients, who are freed of the need to conduct the whole process of argumentation that might otherwise be necessary. These are examples of people who are authorities, or have personal authority rooted in their competence or knowledge, but are not necessarily in authority, holding some office with its defined powers and responsibilities.

### Important distinction of persons as authorities

A person *in authority* is a holder of a position of leadership, who can give guidance, and adjudication in conflict situations.

*An authority* is a person who has some specialised competence or knowledge on which others can rely for guidance.

## Legitimacy

Authority has both advantages and disadvantages. Authority is a convenient social institution which allows for relative speed and efficiency in responding to problems and in coordinating social action. Authority allows for the accumulated experience of a community to be a resource for handling problems. The disadvantages include the prevention of innovation. Because it short-circuits argument, authority is in danger of preventing communal learning by insisting on



giving well-worn answers to new questions. When relying on authority we tend to interpret events in terms of precedent, with the resulting danger that nothing really new can occur.

The reliance on authority poses a threat to individual liberty, requiring individuals to suspend their own judgement in favour of the established procedures. It is in the face of this threat that the personal liberties such as the freedom of conscience, freedom of religion, the right to free speech and to peaceful assembly have been so strongly asserted. Given this ambiguous nature of authority as both useful and dangerous, the test of legitimacy is used to maintain a measure of control over authority.

The test of legitimacy is the challenge to an authority to answer the question why it should be accepted as a reliable source of guidance in a specific area of life. The challenge can be addressed to a text, a precedent, a tradition, an officer or a council. Max Weber's (1864–1920) distinctions of the sources of authority are helpful in mapping the process of legitimization of those in authority. He identifies three sources of authoritative rule:

- rational-legal, the form familiar to us from modern states that rely on the rule of law, and whose law is codified
- traditional, where authority is hereditary
- charismatic, where the qualities of character of a leader provide followers with sufficient grounds for accepting her as authoritative.

For the third type, the issue of legitimacy does not arise for those who accept the rule of the leader. The decision to follow the leadership of one whose claim to be obeyed is purely the force of her own personality is at the same time an acknowledgement by the followers of the entitlement of the leader to their obedience.

In the second type, entitlement to be accepted as the authoritative ruler is established by appeal to some traditional rule of succession, and the histories of royal families provide examples of how complex this might be in particular circumstances. When monarchs die without direct descendants, the issue of legitimate succession becomes urgent. Those prepared to obey the king or queen must be able to identify clearly who is in authority.

In the first type as sketched by Weber, the entitlement to be in authority is established according to rules that can be argued for in a rational way. In our modern states, the challenge to establish legitimacy for a state or regime is first answered in legal terms, by showing how the allocation of office and power had taken place according to the prescribed rules. But what legitimates the rules?

Liberal political philosophies in particular have attempted to sketch hypothetical valid arguments to provide legitimacy, but also to delineate the boundaries of legitimacy for state power. In most cases the arguments rely on some supposed starting point, such as the hypothetical covenants, compacts or original agreements to form society. All such arguments are weak to the extent that they rely on a supposed original agreement, because no such agreement ever took place. Society and state as we now have them did not originate in an agreement or original compact. Even the USA, which might appear to be an example of a society under government created where no previous society existed, could not have come into existence without the practice and experience of self-government in the colonies under the English monarchy.

## Obligation

Accounts of obligation can be summarised in the following list:

- consent of the governed
- original covenant, contract or compact
- achievement of the general will
- care for the common good
- the provision of justice, including the protection of rights.

Coercion, compliance rooted in the threat of punishment, is absent from this list. Coercion can effect compliance, but it can hardly be the reason that people would be able to give for their having a duty to obey the law. The sense of being obligated is a sense of duty, coupled with a recognition that others are entitled to expect, and not merely predict, one's obedience.

Liberal theories of various hues locate the source of obligation in the consent of the governed. Their assumption is that free people are only bound by such obligations as they freely take on. However, anarchists and others point out that people do not have the opportunity to assent freely to such regulations as are the product of modern legislatures, such as tax laws, health and safety regulations, etc. Against this objection it is argued that either the original act of consent to the form of government as contained in the original covenant or compact implies consent to the consequences of the establishment of government, or the continued existence of people within the jurisdiction and their enjoyment of its advantages imply tacit consent.

Where political order is assumed to be rooted in covenants, or compacts, or contracts, entered into by people who thereby create society under law, the obligation to obey the law is derived from this original commitment. For instance,

in Hobbes's account, the original agreement among people to create a sovereign who would ensure their mutual non-aggression entails a consent to whatever the sovereign should enact to ensure the conditions for their peaceful and prosperous coexistence. In fact, Hobbes excludes the possibility that subjects might have any grounds for criticising the acts of the legislator.

Locke explicitly limits the powers of government in terms of the rights of the compacting citizens: the only reason people would consent to relinquish some of their liberties would be for the sake of a greater security in the enjoyment of their properties, by which he means the set of rights to life, liberty and possessions.

Both Hobbes and Locke attempt to build into their theories such cases where the original consent had never been expressly given. Hobbes pointed to the case in which a conquered people agree to surrender to the conqueror, thereby consenting to accept the conqueror as the sovereign, in return for having their lives spared. Locke allows for the possibility of tacit consent, not expressly given, but legible in the acceptance of the benefits of existence under government. But these cases are difficult to analyse. Is it possible to speak of consent in any form where no alternative exists to the course of action that people are assumed to have consented to? Those who cannot emigrate owing to lack of resources or opportunity can hardly be said to have consented to the regime in which they continue to exist, even if they continue to enjoy whatever benefits the regime provides.

On the assumption that the purpose of the state is to protect and promote the common good, the legitimation of the state will depend on the state's success in achieving this purpose. If the common good is the good of all and of the whole, as distinct from the sectional good of particular groups or individuals, the application of this criterion will require some clarification of the good of all. For instance, if the protection of human rights is a common good of all citizens, then this standard of legitimation will assess the state's performance in preserving the rights of all. This links in with the discussion of the directive force of the law in an earlier section, where we had an example of an argument that rooted the obligation of the citizen to obey in the law's service of the common good.

A utilitarian version of this grounding of obligation would speak in terms of general welfare or utility, rather than the common good. If the purpose of the state, and of its law, is described in summary fashion as the securing of public well-being, or general welfare, on the assumption that there is some way of measuring them, then these purposes will specify the grounds for obligation. The state's failure to achieve its proper purpose undermines the obligation of citizens to comply.

Rousseau uses the curious language of the general will, and it is difficult to establish what exactly is meant. However, at a basic level we can interpret it to mean that a people forming society under government would want to have its well-being secured and protected by the state. The will of the people is the general will, intending the public welfare, or the common good, or the good of all, rather than the protection of the interests of some privileged subgroup. In these terms obligation is grounded in the relationship between the will of the individual citizen and the general will. The citizen assumes the obligation to put the good of all above her own private good.

### Related examination questions

(Part a) Describe and illustrate *two* types of authority. (18 marks) (2002)

(Part b) Assess the view that the distinction between authority and power does not survive close examination. (32 marks) (2002)

## ● THE STATE

The state sets itself apart from all other organisations and institutions in the following ways:

- It claims for itself the control of all legitimate use of force within its territory, and so will act to disarm others or prevent them from using force.
- It claims jurisdiction over all people who happen to be within its territory, whether or not they are citizens of the state or have consented to its authority.
- It claims the entitlement to license and regulate the activities of all other institutions and organisations within its territory.
- It claims to represent the people, the country and its institutions in international relations.

The universality of the claims made, applying to all persons and all other organisations within the territory, along with the willingness to make these claims effective through coercion, characterise the state. These features apply, whatever structures of government or legislation are relied upon, whether the constitution is written or unwritten, whether a parliamentary or a presidential system, whether common law or civil law system, whether a federal system or a single state. However, the form they take in any state will depend on its particular history.

## Government

The constitution of a state provides for the allocation of power, and specifies and limits the powers allocated. At any time the government is that group within the state which holds the assigned power of ruling. There is national government, and local government. Sometimes the term 'government' is used in a narrow sense to identify the holders of executive power: at national level, the Prime Minister and cabinet in a parliamentary system, or the President and cabinet in a presidential system. It can be used in a broader sense to include also the holders of legislative power, which is the majority in Parliament or in the Houses of Congress.

## Political and non-political forms of rule

There are forms of human association that do not presuppose conflict. Examples are military and religious groups. In military bodies, the command structure and the culture of military discipline and obedience ensure unity and coordination of action, and, in some religious organisations, commitment to the same values ensures harmony. Such organisations require a form of rule or government, but one whose purpose is the guidance of the whole to the common end. There have been attempts in history to govern states on the model of such unity and harmony. Some ideologies presuppose harmony and the absence of conflict, such as the self-governance by the people as outlined in Rousseau's *The Social Contract*, in which even political parties are frowned upon because of their tendency to introduce disharmony and sectional interest. Marxist theory expects that all conflict will be ended once the class war has been brought to an end by the victory of the proletariat.

Some regimes are prepared to implement extreme measures in order to ensure unity and harmony, and they exhibit the reliance on force in extreme forms: genocide, ethnic cleansing, the denial of human rights, the imposition of repressive laws, the terrorisation of the population. Can states that rely on such forms of rule be called political in the proper sense? Is tyranny a form of political rule?

Political forms of state rule in the full sense are those

- that accept that conflict is the ever-present context in which government is to be exercised, and
- that commit themselves to handling conflict by negotiation, conciliation and persuasion.

This fuller sense of politics can be used as a standard for evaluating other forms of rule. So while it can be meaningful to use the term 'political' in a loose way

to refer to all instances of conflict in states, different forms for the handling of conflict can be evaluated as better or worse, depending on the extent to which they rely on the exercise of force or on some form of persuasion.

### **The state's functions and services**

What are the functions of the state, and what services do we expect it to provide? Linked to the state's monopoly of the use of force is the guarantee of internal and external security. Defence from outside aggression, as well as the maintenance of police and court and penal systems to deal with violence against persons and property, as well as against the state itself internally, belong to the minimum services expected of any state. Hobbes draws our attention to the fact that civil society in the broad sense – 'commodious living', industry, trade, agriculture, public building, the sciences, culture and the arts – is only possible where people can enjoy the minimum of security guaranteed by a powerful state strong enough to threaten punishment effectively.

Locke's specification of the relevant role of the state is designed to protect the citizen from an excessive use of the state's power. While the citizen's rights to life, liberty and estates are guaranteed over against others, they must also be assured against the state itself and its officers. More recent versions of Locke's position, such as that presented by Nozick (*Anarchy, State and Utopia*) take a more radical stance and, assuming anarchy as the default position, attempt to show that only a minimal state could be legitimate.

At the other end of a spectrum from this limited specification of the functions of the state are ideologies that attribute to the state a more comprehensive set of functions. The ancient Greeks, Plato and Aristotle, provide examples of the comprehensive perspective. They see the state as exercising a moral function in relation to its citizens and as providing an all-embracing form of life. Plato in *The Republic* could imagine an ideal city as one in which the rulers, by virtue of their superior knowledge, could select people for the functions for which they were naturally suited, and thereby ensure both that everyone would contribute to the common life according to their own specialised capacities and that everyone would achieve the kind and degree of virtue that was necessary for their own function. The overall effect would be the achievement of social harmony in a city that managed its diversity without conflict.

Aristotle also proposed a highly moral agenda for the Greek political community. He assumed his Athenian listeners would agree that the citizens of any city such as Athens would be concerned about the character of their fellow citizens. So they would design their institutions and their laws to train citizens in the virtues needed in order to live well.

The high moral ideal of politics as articulated by Plato and Aristotle did not survive into the modern period. Augustine (354–430), observing the collapse of the Roman empire, was very conscious of the ambiguous nature of state power. On the one hand, he recognised the necessity of some authority with control of coercive force so as to limit the destructive capacity of human envy, greed, lust for power and the desire to dominate others. On the other hand, he pointed out that the same forces that threatened harm and destruction and needed to be controlled were the very ones employed in exercising control. The same corrupted motivation of desiring to dominate others was as likely to be expressed in the pursuit and exercise of state power as in disruptive elements against which the peace and safety of society required protection. A result of Augustine's analysis was a rejection of a naively idealistic view of the moral task of ruling.

Machiavelli (1469–1527) dealt another blow to the high moral ideal of political rule. As part of his book of advice addressed to princes this experienced Florentine civil servant highlighted what was obvious to all political leaders, that the pursuit and the increase of power were the precondition for achieving all other goals of ruling. Furthermore, he maintained that a ruler could not succeed in the pursuit of power if he were too squeamish about the means to be employed. Any prince who allowed himself to be bound by a strict moral code requiring truth-telling, the keeping of promises, and respect for the lives and property of others, would not have the necessary scope for action required to defend and retain his power. And without power, no other goal could be ambitioned.

We can summarise the scepticism with which any claim to a high moral purpose in politics would now be met:

- Who claims to know the good for others, and how can they justify this claim? How can it be true that they know the good for others, when those others do not all accept the claim?
- We do not expect that anyone is so virtuous that he can be trusted with unlimited power over others. All those who pursue power must themselves be subject to control, and limits must be placed on the power they are allowed to exercise.
- The nature of state power is such that it must rely on coercion. Those who exercise this coercive power are also in danger of giving free rein to their tendency of wanting to dominate others.

Despite the accumulated wisdom expressed in this rejection of an idealistic politics, the modern period has seen the resurgence of naive optimism with

regard to politics. This is evident in the attempt to establish reason in place of the traditional foundations of social order. It is also evident in the totalitarian experiments of the twentieth century. Rooted in secular ideologies, Communism and National Socialism represented for their followers new versions of a high moral ideal.

- The Enlightenment was associated with rationalism in politics, with the expectation that it would be possible to create social and political order based on reason, to which free and reasonable citizens could give their assent.
- Communism aimed at the elimination of all social conflict by the victory of the proletariat which would bring class warfare to an end. The abolition of the basis of class warfare by the state's control of all means of production would remove the cause of all conflict.
- National Socialism promised to fulfil the destiny of the German people, which required that the *Führer* and the party controlled all aspects of social, economic and political life.

### State provision of social welfare

Our modern states not only function to protect rights and preserve liberty. They are also involved in the provision of a broad range of services, from education to health care to social welfare. While libertarians and economic liberals in particular will argue that the state's involvement in such services should be restricted as much as possible, there are other arguments that can be made in their favour. For instance, a **utilitarian** position could argue for the duty of the state to provide welfare services including education, health care and social security so as to ensure the general welfare of society. The point of providing the services could also be formulated in terms of preventing conflict by ensuring that the needs and the interests of all members of society are satisfied up to a minimum level. This could be seen as much as a contribution to preventing violence against persons and property as is the deterrent effect of the existence of a penal system.

Liberals point to the danger of the violation of the individual's rights, as might occur where there is forced transfer of resources through redistributive taxation. Some say that citizens are then forced to work to support others. However, liberal arguments can also be made to justify the state's involvement in providing some welfare services, beyond the minimum functions of security. So, for instance, every citizen of a liberal democratic regime can be presumed to have an interest in ensuring that fellow citizens are sufficiently literate and well informed to be able to participate responsibly in the political process. Further,



coerced transfers can be accepted where there is no reasonable possibility that the necessary service might be provided on the open market. This applies to so-called public goods, such as defence, construction of a dam, maintenance of a power supply or a transport system, where investment in these things could not be economical on the open market. And the protection of public health – the prevention of epidemics, dangerous transmissible diseases and the avoidance of other threats such as those posed by radiation – can also be accepted on liberal premises, even though its implementation might require intrusion on personal liberties.

Ideologies that give a high value to equality as well as liberty are faced with a difficult trade-off problem. The more the state through its services attempts to diminish the inequalities of access to resources or the inequalities of opportunity, the more it is in danger of restricting the liberties of some through taxation and redistribution. Those who wish to uphold both values will not be able to avoid this trade-off, and there is no clear guideline as to how the dilemma might be resolved.

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### RECOMMENDED READING

- Kenneth Minogue has written the little book *Politics*, in Oxford University Press's 'Very Short Introduction' series (1995). It has the advantage of being readable, and very short.
- Not so short is Andrew Heywood's *Political Ideologies: An Introduction*, 3rd edition (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003). Heywood is an A Level Chief Examiner in Government and Politics, and he has written similar introductory textbooks such as *Politics* (1997), *Political Theory* (1999) (both published by Macmillan), and *Key Concepts in Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000).
- Jonathan Wolff is Professor of Philosophy at University College London. He teaches political philosophy and has produced a very readable introductory book intended for undergraduate students, but A Level students should find it readable also: *An Introduction to Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).
- A more thematic approach, but also readable, is D. D. Raphael's *Problems of Political Philosophy*, 2nd edition (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1990).
- Another thematic approach can be found in Adam Swift's *Political Philosophy: A Beginners' Guide for Students and Politicians* (Oxford: Polity, 2001). Swift concentrates on the themes of social justice, liberty, equality and community, and manages to condense many wide-ranging debates in clear and succinct discussions.
- On the questions of law, Simon Lee's *Law and Morals: Warnock, Gillick and Beyond* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986) is a short and readable survey of the relevant debates.

### GLOSSARY

**alienation** – Literally, making other, as in the transfer of property something is handed over to another. In political philosophy self-alienation means giving oneself into the power of another, so that people and societies, when alienated, are deprived of their proper independence and the control of their own lives.

**anarchism** – Anarchists deny the need for a state, and view any exercise of political power as an infringement of human freedom. They aspire to social existence in freedom and equality, without domination of any kind.

**authority** – An authority is a person, institution or text that people accept as privileged in providing guidance for their beliefs or their actions. Authority is personal when rooted in the competence of the person (e.g. a scientist). It is official when rooted in the office or function held and exercised by the person (e.g. a judge).

**civic republicanism** – An ideology that aspires to eliminate all forms of domination, so that citizens achieve their freedom by participating in self-government on a basis of equality.

**coercion** – Coercion is the effect of the threat or exercise of force. Cooperation is given reluctantly when people are coerced against their will to do what they are told.

**common good** – The good for the sake of which people cooperate in society. It is the good of the political community as a whole, which includes the welfare of individual members, but is not reducible to an aggregate of their particular goods.

**communism** – A version of socialism that sees the communal ownership of the social means of production, distribution and exchange – land, capital in the form of factories and machinery, financial institutions such as banks – as the key to solving problems of inequality and injustice.

**communitarianism** – Communitarians want the shared values and practices of a society to be supported and implemented through the application of political power. They consider community values rather than individual autonomy to be the guiding principle in politics.

**conflict** – Conflict occurs when the goals pursued by individuals or groups are incompatible or mutually frustrating.

**conservatism** – Conservatives oppose radical change and want to preserve established society as incorporating important values and achievements.

**democracy** – Democracy is government by the people, which may be either direct, when citizens participate directly in ruling, or representative, when citizens delegate power to elected representatives in a congress or parliament.

**descriptive** – In this mode philosophy contents itself with saying what is the case.

**deterrence** – The attempt to prevent a certain activity by adding socially imposed undesirable effects to its consequences.

**epistemology** – The branch of philosophy that examines questions about knowledge and how it can be acquired.

**equity** – Fairness in the law and in its application.

**force, directive and coercive** – The law relies on two forces for achieving the intended reasonable

arrangement of a social complex: the directive force arises from the reasonableness of the arrangements proposed, and the coercive force arises from the sanctions that are threatened.

**idealisation** – The glorification of a particular society in history as the fulfilment of all human hopes for a life worth living, the best that can be achieved.

**ideology** – In a descriptive sense an ideology is a body of thought held by a group of people, which they rely on to guide their action. In a normative sense ideology is evaluated negatively, as a body of ideas, which, although false, gives the illusion of truth.

**individualism** – A doctrine that maintains that human society is to be understood as an artefact, deliberately constructed for the purpose of satisfying the needs or interests of individuals, conceived of as existing apart from, prior to, or independent of society.

**law** – Law is an instrument for the reasonable arrangement of a social complex so that the complex as a whole and the elements that make it up achieve the purpose for which they cooperate. The law is made and promulgated by those in the social complex who have the responsibility to do so.

**legitimacy** – Authority is legitimate when it can provide a satisfactory answer to the challenge to explain why it should be accepted as a reliable source of guidance in a specific area of life.

**liberalism** – Liberal political ideologies give priority to individual freedom. They are convinced that a rational account of the sources and nature of political authority can be given, through an analysis of the freedom, rights, or interests of the individual.

**libertarianism** – This is an exaggerated form of liberalism which, instead of giving priority to freedom, makes it the absolute value overriding all others. The individual as self-owner is to be allowed an unrestricted scope for action, unhindered by government.

**nationalism** – Nationalism assumes that humankind is essentially divided into nations, and each nation has a right of self-determination. Criteria for identifying a nation

are: a common language, genetic relatedness, shared history and culture, occupation of a distinct territory, and the willingness to identify oneself as a member of the nation.

**negative and positive freedom** – Familiar freedoms such as the freedom of speech, as well as being freedoms from interference (negative), are freedoms of people to pursue their interests in finding out the truth about matters and to pursue their ideals (positive).

**normative** – In this mode philosophy evaluates, speaking about what is good and bad, and what ought, and ought not, to be the case. When we speak normatively, we appeal to standards that allow us to evaluate things, persons, institutions, actions and performances.

**obligation** – The sense of being obligated is a sense of having a duty, for instance, to obey the law, coupled with a recognition that others are entitled to expect, and not merely predict, one's obedience.

**ontology** – The branch of philosophy dealing with being, the composition of reality.

**persuasion** – Persuasion provides reasons that people can accept as giving them grounds to do freely what they are asked to do. When persuaded, those who cooperate do so willingly, having their own reasons for doing what they are asked to do.

**philosophical anthropology** – The branch of philosophy dealing with the broad range of questions about the nature of the human, and of the human person. Philosophy of mind deals with a subset of these topics.

**politics** – Politics is a form of rule in states based on a commitment to handle inevitable conflict by persuasion and conciliation rather than by the use of force and coercion. Not all forms of rule can be called political in this full sense.

**power** – In social and political contexts, power is the ability to get other people to do what one wants. It is exercised either by coercion or by persuasion or by some combination of the two.

**prescriptive** – Saying what is or is not to be done.

**proletariat** – Marx's word for the class of workers, those who have nothing to sell except their labour power.

**punishment** – In being punished, those convicted of breaking the law are usually deprived of some good. Unlike revenge, punishment is administered by a disinterested person acting in a representative capacity, for instance, a prison officer implementing the sentence imposed by a court.

**republicanism** – This ideology considers that sovereignty lies with the people, rather than with monarchy, and that government should be by the people, whether in direct or representative democracy.

**restoration** – A theory of punishment that sees it as restoring the just order of relationships that had been disturbed by the crime.

**retribution** – A way of explaining punishment by analogy with market exchanges. In punishment someone convicted of breaking the law is made to pay back to society whatever benefit had been gained in the crime.

**rights: liberties and claim-rights** – Rights are moral claims that people make on one another. They claim a liberty when they invoke a duty not to be interfered with, and when they invoke a duty to be provided with some thing or service, they assert a claim-right.

**rules, constitutive and regulative** – Constitutive rules make some social activity possible, e.g. financial markets. Regulative rules restrict what is permissible within the constituted activity, e.g. fraud.

**socialism** – Socialist ideologies give priority to communal interest and advocate the social control of economic activity so as to ensure achievement of common goals, chief among which is the satisfaction of basic needs of all the citizens.

**state** – The state is an organisation distinct from all others in claiming for itself the control of all legitimate use of force within its territory, and in claiming the entitlement to regulate the activities of all other organisations within its territory. Its primary purpose is to safeguard the rights of people and to ensure the conditions that will allow them to pursue a good life for themselves. To this end it has the means for making, applying and enforcing law, as well as the means for ensuring internal and external security and defence.

**theocracy** – Theocracies are regimes of government that claim divinely given principles, laws or policies as their basis of legitimacy.

**utilitarianism** – The view that the best political system, regime or policy is the one that leads to the best overall consequences. In early versions the consequences were calculated in

terms of pleasure and pain, hence, reference to 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number'.

**utopianism** – The glorification of an ideal but unrealisable social order in which all problems are solved and harmony, peace and justice prevail.

# 6

## • philosophy of science

UNIT 4 Nicholas Wilson

### KEY CONCEPTS ➤

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- |                                    |                        |
|------------------------------------|------------------------|
| ➤ induction                        | ➤ paradigm shift       |
| ➤ deduction                        | ➤ scientific law       |
| ➤ the hypothetico-deductive method | ➤ constant conjunction |
| ➤ reductionism                     | ➤ theory-ladenness     |
| ➤ falsificationism                 | ➤ research programme   |
| ➤ scientific revolution            |                        |
- 

### ● INTRODUCTION

Science is involved in most of our everyday activities. Its benefits are all around us: new medicines, televisions, computers, aeroplanes, the latest gadgets, new materials, and so on. All of this is the result of the practices and progress of the scientific community. The philosophy of science is the study of those scientific practices. Broadly speaking, it is the study of what science is, how it develops, and what we know from it. In this chapter, five main areas in the philosophy of science are critically discussed:

- scientific method (what scientists do and how they think)
- the nature of scientific development (how science changes over time)
- scientific knowledge and the aims of science (what we know in science and what science should be like)
- the objectivity of science (whether science is always objectively justified)
- natural and social science (the differences between natural sciences such as physics and biology and social sciences such as history and sociology).

## ● **SCIENTIFIC METHOD**

Practising scientists investigate the empirical world in particular, systematic ways. These ways are closely tied in with certain scientific modes of thinking and reasoning about the world. In this section, those practices and forms of reasoning are described and critically examined.

### **The role of observation, experiment and measurement in science**

Following the ideas of Francis Bacon (1561–1626) and John Stuart Mill (1806–73), practising scientists are commonly thought to operate in the following way. First, scientists carry out a careful observation of the empirical world and come across a phenomenon requiring an explanation. Then they make a guess or ‘hypothesis’ to explain what they have observed. Together with other assumptions, this hypothesis will have certain consequences which scientists can use to make predictions of future phenomena. Then, by taking measurements of and conducting experiments on what they have seen and on their predictions (and by making further observations), their hypothesis is either verified (‘confirmed’) or falsified. If it is falsified, the hypothesis is rejected and another hypothesis is put forward to explain the phenomenon. If it is verified, the hypothesis acquires the status of a theory which, when general enough and adequately supported by other experiments, can become scientific law (e.g. Newton’s law of gravitation). When a number of closely related scientific laws are discovered, a scientific field (or sphere of scientific knowledge, investigation or specialisation) is formed. (This account is vastly oversimplified and is philosophically objectionable in several ways.)

Let us look at an example of this behaviour in practice. It has long been observed that certain kinds of materials burn. Roughly, before the eighteenth century, scientists tried to explain this phenomenon by hypothesising that materials that burn possess a combustible substance called ‘phlogiston’. They hypothesised that this substance, phlogiston, is released during burning, characteristically causing the material to turn black. To test this hypothesis, scientists predicted that a

material would decrease in weight after burning (owing to the loss of phlogiston). Further experimentation and measurement proved this prediction incorrect. Typically, materials show an *increase* in weight after burning. So the 'phlogiston theory' was falsified.

Later, towards the end of the eighteenth century, a French scientist called Antoine Lavoisier (1743–94) formulated the alternative hypothesis that burning is the addition of a gaseous substance, oxygen, to a body. On this basis, he predicted that a material would typically weigh more after burning than before. Since this prediction turned out to be true, to that extent Lavoisier's theory was confirmed. After further extensive tests and experiments, this hypothesis turned out to have quite a bit of evidence in favour of it and it developed into an accepted truth (or law). The 'oxygen theory' of combustion is now an established part of our scientific knowledge.

## Induction

### Inductive reasoning

Scientists who follow the practice described above for investigating nature often use **inductive reasoning**. Inductive reasoning is one of two kinds of reasoning also used in everyday thought. The other is **deductive reasoning** (see p. 239 for more on deductive reasoning). There are various forms of inductive reasoning, but here we shall focus on simple enumerative induction, which starts with the premise that one kind of phenomenon has always been observed to follow another and ends with the conclusion that the former phenomenon will *always* follow the latter.

Here are three examples of inductive reasoning:

- 1 Premise: I have observed the sun rise every day for years.  
Conclusion: The sun will rise tomorrow.
- 2 Premise: All sodium observed so far glows orange when heated.  
Conclusion: All sodium glows orange when heated.
- 3 Premise: All the swans I have seen so far are white.  
Conclusion: All swans are white.

The general form of the inductive argument in each case can be represented as follows:

- Premise: n number of As have been observed so far to be Bs (for some number n).  
Conclusion: All As are Bs.



There are two important characteristics of induction. First, inductive arguments are not infallible. In example (3), for instance, the premise may be true but the conclusion is false. In Australia, (most) swans are black. So (even good) inductive arguments with true premises do not have to have true conclusions. Second, two ways in which inductive arguments can be good arguments is by being **inductively forceful** and/or **inductively sound**. An inductive argument is inductively forceful if, given no other information relevant to the truth or falsity of the conclusion, it is more reasonable to expect the conclusion to be true than false. For example, if every person you know of so far who has taken arsenic has died shortly afterwards, then, with no further information about the circumstances of their death(s), it is more reasonable to believe that arsenic is fatal to humans than not. (Inductive forcefulness depends on a number of features of inductive arguments, including how big the sample of As is, how representative the sample is of the total population of As, and so on.) An inductive argument is inductively sound if it is inductively forceful and if its premises are true.

### The main points about induction

- In enumerative induction, the premise of the inductive argument is a generalisation about a sample of a certain population. The conclusion of the inductive argument can either be a generalisation from the sample about the total population (e.g. all emeralds are green) or an assertion about a particular future event (e.g. the next emerald I see will be green).
- Inductive reasoning is fallible. A (good) inductive argument can have true premises and a false conclusion.
- An inductive argument is inductively forceful to the extent that, only given the information in the premises, the conclusion is more likely to be true than false. An inductive argument is inductively sound if it is inductively forceful and if its premises are true.

### The Problem of Induction

One of the most important points about induction mentioned above is that even good inductive arguments are not always infallible. Inductive arguments do not have premises the truth of which guarantees the truth of the conclusion. Aware of this, David Hume (1711–76) (1978: Book I, part III, and 1975: sections iv and

v) raised an important question: If inductive arguments are not deductively valid, what reason is there for thinking that inductive arguments will work in the future? For example, even if all the sodium in the past has glowed orange when it has been heated, who is to say it will not glow green on some future occasion? The **Problem of Induction** is how to justify inductive arguments, that is, how to explain why inductive arguments like (1)–(3) are *good* arguments. Since a great deal of our everyday reasoning and the reasoning of scientists involves induction, the Problem of Induction threatens our knowledge in many areas. It is therefore important to know whether in using induction we are behaving rationally (or not).



## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

What is induction? What is the Problem of Induction?

### Attempted solutions

#### *An inductive principle*

One possible response to the Problem of Induction is to supplement inductive arguments with the following principle:

Principle: For some number  $n$ , if  $n$  number of  $A$ s have so far been observed to be  $B$ s, then all  $A$ s are  $B$ s.

(Hans Reichenbach (1891–1953) advocates the use of such a principle in *Experience and Prediction*.) If such a principle were employable in inductive arguments as a premise, then inductive arguments would no longer be fallible since if both premises were true, the conclusion would automatically and necessarily follow from them. If it is true that whenever a million pieces of a substance glow a certain colour when heated then all of them do, and if it is true that a million pieces of sodium have glowed green when heated in the past, then it deductively follows that all sodium glows green when heated.

But even ignoring how big the number  $n$  has to be to render the principle probable, there is a distinct problem using it here to justify induction. The problem is what justification there is for believing the principle. It is not just obviously true. It is a generalisation and requires some kind of support. And since it is a generalisation, it will require induction as a support. But since induction is precisely what we are trying to justify, the principle assumes exactly that which we want to rationalise. In other words, this solution is **circular**.

### *Inductive arguments for induction*

Another way of responding to the Problem of Induction is to rely on experience. This response says that inductive arguments are rational forms of reasoning because they have worked in the past. And since they have worked in the past, it is reasonable to expect that they will work in the future. After all, in the past we thought induction would work in the future and we were right!

But this response assumes that induction is justified because it has worked in the past (and so will work in the future). But induction just *is* arguing from the past to the future. So this response says that arguing from the past to the future will work in the future because it has worked in the past. So the problem with this response is that it assumes that induction has been justified in the past in order to justify induction working in the future. Like the last response, then, this one is also circular.

### *Using probability*

A third, non-circular, solution is to use probability. This solution maintains that inductive arguments are best seen as only asserting *probable* conclusions and not certain ones. Thus an argument such as (1) should really be phrased as (4):

- 4 Premise: I have observed the sun rise every day for years.  
 Conclusion: The sun will *probably* rise tomorrow.

It can then be said that whilst an argument like (1) is not necessarily justified since we can never really know inductive conclusions for certain, an argument like (4) is justified because it only asserts a probable conclusion.

But there are difficulties with such a solution. A chief problem is that it merely changes the terminology of the original problem and therefore does not provide a genuine solution to it. The original problem was how to provide a justification for an argument such as (1). This solution just replaces the conclusion of (1) with the conclusion of (4). Now, it may be easier to provide a justification for (1) than (4). (What would that look like anyway?) But that does not mean that we no longer need a justification for (1). For we still use arguments with certain conclusions like (1) all the time. So all this solution seems to offer is another problem (which is how to provide a justification for (4)).

### *Rational by definition*

Peter Strawson, in his *Introduction to Logical Theory* (ch. 9), offers a fourth kind of reply to the Problem of Induction. According to Strawson, the terms 'rational' and 'reasonable' derive their meanings from paradigmatic (clear-cut) uses of them. That is to say, Strawson thought that those terms acquired the meanings

they do because of the ways they are used in clear-cut cases of rationality/irrationality and reasonableness/unreasonableness. (In the same way, you might have originally learnt the meaning of the word 'red' by seeing clear examples of its application and by hearing people refer to those examples as 'red'. This is called a 'paradigm case argument'.)

Strawson's crucial claim is that two paradigmatic cases in which the terms 'rational' and 'reasonable' are clearly correctly applied (and from which they derive their meanings) are deduction and induction. So, if any kind of reasoning is to be called 'rational' or 'reasonable', deduction and induction are (since we use them all the time). Therefore, Strawson argues, the Problem of Induction, in one sense, does not have a substantial answer. If the premises of an inductive argument are known to be true, he says, it is not necessary to justify the claim that it is reasonable to expect the conclusion to be true because it is part of the very concept of reasonableness that such an argument is justified.

A difficulty for Strawson's account is the presupposition that how ordinary people are inclined to use terms is always right. True, we may come to understand the meanings of certain terms such as 'red' from paradigm cases in which they are correctly or incorrectly applied, e.g. post-boxes, London buses, etc. But even assuming that this is the case with the terms 'rational' and 'reasonable', it is still possible for someone to understand a term and *misapply* it, that is, apply it incorrectly. For example, if I am colour blind, I might mistake a red light for a green one. So Strawson needs to say more about his linguistic theory of these terms if his argument is to be made plausible.



## QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

Which attempt to justify induction is most successful in your view?

### Related examination question

(Part a) Describe and illustrate the Problem of Induction. (18 marks) (2003)

## Deduction

### Deductive reasoning

Deductive reasoning is the other principal kind of reasoning commonly studied by philosophers. Unlike inductive reasoning, deductive reasoning is reasoning

which, if valid, uses premises whose truth guarantees the truth of the conclusion. In a deductively valid argument, it would be self-contradictory to accept the truth of premises and at the same time deny the conclusion.

Here are three examples of deductive reasoning:

- 5   Premise:        All philosophers are eccentric.  
      Premise:        Socrates was a philosopher.  
      Conclusion:    Socrates was eccentric.
- 6   Premise:        If this liquid is water, it is drinkable.  
      Premise:        This liquid is drinkable.  
      Conclusion:    It is water.
- 7   Premise:        Not all cats have tails.  
      Premise:        Some tail-less cats are black.  
      Conclusion:    Not all black cats have tails.

There are two ways in which deductive arguments can be good arguments: (a) if they are **deductively valid** and/or (b) if they are **deductively sound**. An argument is deductively valid if it has premises whose truth guarantees the truth of the conclusion. In a deductively valid argument, it is impossible for the premises to be true and the conclusion false. Only (5) and (7) in the above examples are deductively valid because, in each case, if the premises are true, the conclusion has to be true. For (5), if it is true that all philosophers are eccentric and that Socrates was a philosopher, then it *has* to be true that Socrates was eccentric. For (7), if it is true that not all cats have tails, i.e. that some cats don't have tails, and if it is true that some of those tail-less cats are black, then there must be some black, tail-less cats. But (6) is not deductively valid. If it is true that if this liquid is water, it is drinkable and if it is true that this liquid is drinkable, it does *not* follow that it is water. For there are many drinkable liquids other than water.

A deductive argument is deductively sound if it is deductively valid and if its premises are true. In the above examples, (7) definitely has true premises. (Arguably, (5) does not, because there might be at least one philosopher who is not eccentric!) Since (7) is also deductively valid, (7) is also deductively sound. It is true that not all cats have tails. And it is true that some tail-less cats are black. And it does follow that not all black cats have tails.



## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

What is the difference between induction and deduction? What makes for a good deductive argument?

### The hypothetico-deductive method of confirmation

Deductive arguments like (5), (6) and (7) are also used in the **hypothetico-deductive method** of confirmation (advocated by Karl Popper). According to this theory, scientific confirmation does not involve induction. (As a result, a big advantage of this view is that Hume's worries about induction do not arise.) Instead, on this view, science proceeds by first tentatively putting forward a hypothesis (or conjecture) about an event and then confirming that hypothesis (or not) when it, along with various other statements, deductively entails a datum. (Also see Popper's related falsificationist theory on p. 244.) This method is called 'the hypothetico-deductive method' of confirmation because it begins with a hypothesis and deduces empirically testable consequences from it. For example, the hypothesis that the pressure was low this morning may be confirmed when it rains in the afternoon since that hypothesis, together with other statements (e.g. the humidity was high), deductively entails its raining. This view of science contrasts with induction. In induction, we first observe certain instances of something and then form a generalisation. In the hypothetico-deductive method, we first propose a hypothesis and then, after deducing its consequences, test it empirically by observation.

But the hypothetico-deductive method (H-D theory) of confirmation has its problems. The theory supplies no account of the reasoning that leads scientists to their theories in the first place. The only reasoning the H-D theorist considers is that which takes place after the construction of the theory. But surely scientists don't first arrive at their theories by means of a non-rational stab-in-the-dark only then to consider what observational support there might be for them. Scientists are rationally led to their theories by the observational data. Laws are got by inference from what is observed. The H-D theory, by itself, cannot account for this. According to the H-D theory, the fundamental inference is always from higher level laws to observation statements, not the other way round.

Deductive arguments can be deductively valid and/or deductively sound. An argument is deductively valid if it is impossible for premises to be true and the conclusion false. An argument is deductively sound if it is impossible for the premises to be true and the conclusion false and if the premises are true.

## Related examination question

(Part a) Describe and illustrate the hypothetico-deductive method in science. (18 marks) (2002)

## ● THE NATURE OF SCIENTIFIC DEVELOPMENT

Few scientists would deny that science has made progress over the last, say, 500 years. We know more things about electricity, the human body, radio waves, viruses, and so on. What is more controversial is *how* science has developed and progressed over time. Here we examine three different theories about the nature of scientific development: **reductionism**, **falsificationism** and **relativism**.

### Reductionism

One common, intuitive view shared by many scientists and people alike is reductionism. According to reductionists, the progress and development of science, thought of as a body of scientific knowledge, is linear, cumulative and convergent. Reductionists usually support this claim as follows:

- 1 Scientific progress is linear because scientists are chiefly engaged in formulating, testing and verifying (or falsifying) *new* and *original* scientific theories, hypotheses, and so on. These theories and hypotheses are 'new' because they are not, at that time, part of the established body of scientific knowledge. For example, the theory mentioned on p.235 that burning is the addition of a gaseous substance, oxygen, to a body was substantially different from the phlogiston theory that had preceded it.
- 2 Science is cumulative because, as new and original scientific theories are developed and introduced into the scientific arena, they are incorporated into the established body of scientific knowledge and add to it. In this way, scientific knowledge accumulates. Thus the oxygen-addition theory of burning added to what scientists knew about combustion in the fifteenth century and increased the body of scientific knowledge about it at that time.
- 3 Lastly, according to reductionism, science is convergent because, as science progresses, it is thought to approach and tend towards an ideal, single, correct body of scientific knowledge. According to reductionists, theories, laws and even different branches of science are in principle reducible to one another. Eventually, it is hoped, they will be reducible to one, single, unifying 'science of everything'. Two commonly used examples of this convergent view of scientific progress are: (a) the absorption of Galileo's law of falling bodies into

the more widely encompassing Newtonian mechanics and (b) the major shift made early last century from Newton's gravitational theory (and laws of motion) to Einstein's more 'General' Theory of Relativity. Einstein's theory is not only closer to the 'truth', but also covers more facts. (Because of (1), (2) and (3), reductionism may thus be said to compare science to an expanding collection of Chinese boxes.)

Few would deny that some of the ideas put forward by reductionists are correct. For example, few would deny that one aim of scientists is and has been to attain new or unknown information about the empirical world. Moreover, few would deny that, when new scientific information about the world is discovered, it becomes incorporated into what is already known. Indeed, most would affirm that we possess more scientific knowledge today than we ever did.

However, there are at least a couple of problems with reductionism. One problem, voiced by Paul Feyerabend, is that it is simply not true that Galilean physics was 'reduced' to physics of a Newtonian kind. For example, Feyerabend says, one basic law of Galilean physics was that the acceleration of a body falling towards the earth is constant over any finite vertical interval near the earth's surface. However, this law is not deducible from any law or set of laws in Newtonian physics. In Newtonian physics, since the acceleration towards each other of two bodies increases with decreasing distance, a body falling towards the earth would show an increased acceleration as it approaches the earth's surface. (Precise assessment of this objection requires a more detailed investigation into both Newtonian and Galilean frameworks and into the exact nature of the reduction proposed.)

A second, similar problem occurs with the reduction of Newtonian mechanics to Einstein's General Theory of Relativity. In this case, Feyerabend argues, the reason the former cannot be reduced to the latter is that there is a significant difference in the meaning of the concepts involved in either theory. For example, in Newtonian mechanics, the concept of *length* is a concept of a relation between objects that is independent of the motion of the observer and gravitational fields. By comparison, in Einsteinian theory, length is a relation whose value is dependent upon gravitational fields and the motion of the observer. So a proposed reductionist transition from Newtonian mechanics to Einsteinian theory would involve a transition in the meaning of the concept 'length' (and other spatio-temporal concepts). Another way to phrase this is to say that 'classical Newtonian length' and 'Einsteinian relativistic length' are **incommensurable** notions. (See p. 246 for a fuller explanation of incommensurability.) Feyerabend also argues that classical mechanics cannot be reduced to quantum mechanics and that classical thermodynamics cannot be



reduced to statistical mechanics. (Reductionists might reply to this that different concepts of length could also be reduced. But this would need some substantial argumentation.)

## Falsificationism

A different view of scientific progress is Karl Popper's falsificationist theory. According to Popper, the standard induction-based view (p. 235) of what scientists do is incorrect. On this standard view, what scientists are usually thought to be doing is observing the empirical world (heating a piece of copper), formulating hypotheses to explain it (oxygen has been added to the copper) and then making inductive generalisations about objects of that type (the burning of any object involves the addition of oxygen to it). Instead, according to Popper, what scientists do (or what they should do if they are good scientists) is begin by formulating various hypotheses (or 'conjectures') and then try to falsify them by making predictions, further observations and measurements. If the conjecture is falsified, it is refuted and scientists will seek some alternative. But if the conjecture turns out not to be shown to be incorrect by experience, then it remains a conjecture and an undefeated one. Persistently undefeated conjectures, on Popper's view, should generally be accepted. Science moves forward by incorporating more and more persistently undefeated conjectures.

According to this view of scientific progress, then, science consists of a series of conjectures and refutations. One hypothesis is put forward after another to explain an event and it is then either falsified and refuted, in which case another hypothesis is put forward, or not, in which case it stands for the time being. This raises the questions of what distinguishes science from non-science and why science should be thought to be better as an explanation or more valuable than other practices such as astrology or Greek mythology.

Popper's answer to this question – which he called the problem of demarcation – was that science is falsifiable but that astrology, superstition and the like are not. So, for example, the theory that combustion is the release of a substance called 'phlogiston' is a testable theory because it entails that a burnt substance will decrease in weight after burning. But the astrological theory that Capricorns will prosper in their personal relationships on Wednesdays is not (clearly) testable. For even if the marriage of one Capricorn to another ends on a Wednesday, the astrologer who has made the prediction can always say that the end of the relationship is for the best and that both parties will find greater happiness in the future. Doing this seems to make the astrological claim unfalsifiable.

Popper's account of scientific development can be criticised in at least three ways. First, Popper's view of how scientists work in practice only supplies us with a

picture of how scientists come to acquire negative knowledge (knowledge of what is not the case). It does not give us a picture of positive scientific knowledge. For example, on Popper's account, scientists came to falsify the hypothesis that all swans are white through empirical investigation. Scientists then possessed the negative knowledge that it is not true that all swans are white. But Popper does not tell how we have acquired bits of positive knowledge – for example, the knowledge that all emeralds are green or that all bodies remain at rest or in uniform motion in a straight line unless acted upon by some force (Newton's first law). So Popper's theory needs to be supplemented somehow.

Second, whilst Popper's theory provides an adequate account of how scientific research starts out at the level of conjecture, it does not tell us much about the rest of the scientific process. Popper is right that as scientific research begins conjectures are put forward to explain some phenomenon and, as not all conjectures turn out true, they are sometimes falsified. (Einstein's General Theory of Relativity started out like this. It was initially met with widespread scepticism.) But Popper does not go further than this. For after some conjectures are refuted and superior alternatives are proposed, evidence will accumulate for some and not for others. Eventually, the best ones will acquire the status of established truths. (This evolution was also true for Einstein's General Theory.) Popper's account does not cover this stage of the scientific process in as much detail as it might.

A third criticism has been put forward by Thomas Kuhn (1922–). According to Kuhn, most theories are inadequate or incomplete in some way and so are vulnerable to counter-example and falsification. So, on Kuhn's view, most theories will eventually be falsified and hence should be rejected. But this is ridiculous, Kuhn maintains. What scientists should be doing when a hypothesis is rejected is not just finding another one but examining *why* it has been rejected. If it is known why it has been falsified, then it is possible to determine whether (or not) some close alternative should replace it, what kind of alternative or whether the research programme should be abandoned altogether. But in order to do this, Kuhn says, we need to know what kind of theory fits the facts better rather than just which theories have counter-examples. So what we really need is a combined verification–falsification procedure rather than Popper's sole falsification one.



## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Summarise reductionism and falsificationism. Which view has the greater problems?

## Relativism

The third theory of scientific progress and development we shall look at is Thomas Kuhn's. According to Kuhn, there are two distinct stages of scientific development. First, there is what scientists usually do. Kuhn calls this 'normal science'. Normal science consists of practising scientists operating within a standard, community-shared scientific framework (or **paradigm**) and treating anomalies and counter-examples to it as problems to be resolved from within the paradigm rather than as challenges to it. Typically, the scientific framework that is taken for granted is the only plausible one at the time. For example, in the nineteenth century, the accepted standard framework in physics within which scientists worked was Newtonian mechanics.

Then, when normal science reaches 'maturity', there is 'revolutionary science'. According to Kuhn, revolutionary science occurs when scientists have lost confidence in the accepted paradigm and begin to question it. For example, if scientists become aware of a substantial lack of 'fit' between the standard theory and certain data or if a second, rival theory arises that does not have many of the problems of the first, then another paradigm replaces the first and there is a **paradigm shift**. One example of this is the shift from Newtonian mechanics to Einsteinian theory in the early part of the last century.

On this view, then, science develops in stages. It begins with the conservative and ideological activity of scientists who accept theories dogmatically and work within them. It eventually leads to a scientific crisis or breakdown, which develops into a change of vision or paradigm. (Kuhn calls this a 'transfer of allegiance' or 'conversion experience'.)

One peculiar consequence of Kuhn's account is that scientific theories cannot be rationally and objectively compared to each other. In other words, they are incommensurable. This is because, according to Kuhn, a paradigm shift involves a change not only in scientific theory, assumptions, claims, etc. but also in the definitions of central terms in those theories, etc. For example, consider two theories of falling: Anaximenes' theory of falling, according to which the earth is a flattish disc suspended in empty space and objects fall in a line perpendicular to and through the disc; and Aristotle's theory of falling, according to which the earth is a sphere in a universe organised out of concentric shells and objects fall towards the centre of those shells. In Anaximenes' theory, the term 'fall' means something like 'go perpendicularly towards the disc' and in Aristotle's the term means something different, i.e. 'go towards the shell centre'. If an object was dropped and it 'fell' to the ground, both scientists would claim their theory had predicted that event. So it is hard to know how to compare and rank the two theories. (Feyerabend (1968) has also argued that the term 'warm' has a different

meaning in kinetic theory (referring to molecular movement and energy) from that in everyday, non-scientific language.)

So, on Kuhn's account, successive theories cannot be compared with one another since it is not possible to compare two theories that do not share the same language or meanings. One potential problem with this consequence is that Kuhn seems committed to a relativism about scientific change and development. Relativism is the counterintuitive view that since it is impossible to compare any two successive scientific theories (or paradigms), it is also not possible to say that one theory is better than another or that either theory is really truer than the other. Kuhn says, of scientists, that 'granting that neither theory of a historical pair is true, they nonetheless seek a sense in which the latter is a better approximation to the truth. I believe that nothing of the sort can be found' (Kuhn 1970: 265).

Kuhn responds to the charge of relativism in a couple of ways. He denies that he believes that 'scientific development is, like biological evolution, unidirectional and irreversible. One scientific theory is not as good as another for doing what scientists normally do' (1970: 264). So there is some question about what Kuhn actually believes.

Second, Kuhn says, to hold that, say, field theory is closer to the truth than the old matter-and-force theory is to hold that the ultimate constituents of the universe are more like fields than they are matter or forces. But how could we possibly know this? We have no idea what the ultimate constituents of the universe are like. So we have no idea which theory is closer to the truth. (Moreover, according to Kuhn, there are unclarities in the expression 'more like the truth'. For example, there do not seem to be any clear criteria for applying it to one thing rather than another.)

### **The three main views about the development of science**

- Reductionism (the intuitive view): The progress and development of science is linear, cumulative and convergent. Objections: Reductionism is not convincing in some cases, e.g. Galilean to Newtonian mechanics.
- Falsificationism (Popper): Science proceeds by conjecture, falsification, then alternative conjecture. Objections: No account of positive scientific knowledge; no examination of why conjectures fail (Kuhn).
- Relativism (Kuhn): Science moves from normal science to revolutionary science in paradigm shifts. Objections: Entails theory incommensurability and relativism.

## Related examination questions

(Part b) Assess the view that progress in science is achieved through refuting scientific theories. (32 marks) (2002)

(Part a) Describe and illustrate *two* ways in which the objectivity of science might be challenged. (18 marks) (2002)

(Part a) Describe and illustrate *one* explanation of how scientific revolutions occur. (18 marks) (2003)

## ● SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE AND THE AIMS OF SCIENCE

What do we know in science and what do we merely assume or believe to be true because it works? What is it for a scientific theory to work? What do we want a scientific theory to be like? In this section, three issues are looked at: (1) Do we *know* that scientific theories about things we have never seen ('unobservables') are true? Or are they just useful instruments for making predictions about observable phenomena? (2) What do scientific laws describe? Necessary connections in the world? Or just regularities between events that happen to occur at the same time? (3) What should and does science aim for? What do practising scientists ideally seek in formulating a scientific theory?

### Realism and instrumentalism

Many scientific claims refer to entities that cannot be directly seen or observed by the naked eye. For example, radio waves, quarks and viruses. Moreover, such claims are often thought to constitute scientific knowledge. But if such entities cannot be directly seen, how is it that what we claim to know about them constitutes knowledge rather than mere guesswork or probability?

Here we examine two views about the status of scientific theories of unobservable entities: **realism** and **instrumentalism**.

According to realists, we can and do know certain facts about unobservable entities, even though we have never directly seen them. For example, according to realists, the kinetic theory of gases – the theory that gases consist of particles of negligible size moving at random and undergoing elastic collisions – is known by scientists to be true, even though no one has ever directly seen or perceived any one of these particles. Furthermore, realists think that *observable* facts provide

more than adequate evidence for the existence of such entities and, therefore, that facts about such entities are in principle knowable. For instance, events such as a kettle whistling or a light coming on after a switch has been flicked provide evidence for the existence of gas molecules and electricity. The realist position, then, is that much of science correctly describes how the world really is (as opposed to how we perceive it) and that the terms used in scientific theories correctly pick out real objects in that world.

By contrast, according to instrumentalists, scientific theories are not necessarily true descriptions of the world but rather function as useful 'instruments' with which scientists can perform important calculations and manipulate the world. For example, an instrumentalist may think that the kinetic theory of gases, whilst not being a literal and true description of the world of gases, is still an extremely useful tool, allowing us to predict and explain many observable facts about gases: for example, variations in the temperature, pressure and volume of a gas under certain conditions. Instrumentalists may also think that science, whether giving a correct description of the world or not, certainly neither aims to provide nor does provide us with knowledge about unobservable entities. If instrumentalism is correct, then, it is not legitimate for us to believe a theory that tells us that chairs consist of atoms. But it should nevertheless be accepted since such a theory is explanatorily useful and predictively powerful.

There are three main arguments for realism: the argument from unification, the argument from prediction and the argument from explanation. The first argument – the argument from unification – maintains that scientists typically attempt to unify different types of scientific theory into one, single 'theory of everything'. For example, the replacement of Newton's laws by Einstein's General Theory of Relativity is sometimes said to be a clear example of when one theory became absorbed into another. Since this effort by scientists to unify everything would not work (and would not be working) unless scientific theories correctly described reality, it follows that science must consist of mainly accurate descriptions of the real world. (Moreover, the problem for the instrumentalist is that 'saving the phenomena' is not preserved under conjunction, i.e. if we have two contradicting theories that are both individually good at predicting phenomena, then we would not expect their conjunction to be good at predicting.)

The argument from prediction points out that scientists are often able to predict the occurrence of certain unexpected phenomena on the basis of their theories. For example, Einstein predicted, on the basis of his theory of relativity, that light would bend near the sun. This prediction was tested and verified in 1919 by an eclipse of the sun. The argument from prediction asks how such predictions would be possible if the theories on which they are based were not known to be true.

Finally, the argument from explanation asserts that if scientific theories about unobservables were not known to be true, then it would not be possible for scientists to explain observable phenomena using them. For example, scientists can explain an increase in the pressure of a heated gas in an enclosed container by talking about the behaviour of unobservable particles making up the gas. This explanation would not be available if a particular theory about unobservable objects, namely the kinetic theory of gases, were false. So realism must be true.

There are several ways instrumentalists can respond to each argument. First, the argument from unification. There are two possible replies here:

- 1 Instrumentalists may deny that what the unification in science aims at, or should aim at, is the unifying of different, true scientific theories into one true theory. Rather, they may claim, it aims at the unifying of different scientific instruments into one all-encompassing 'super-instrument' with which to solve any problem. In this way, instrumentalists can offer a different account of the unification of science from realists.
- 2 A second, more direct instrumentalist response is to say that unification is not necessary for science at all. Instead, what is happening is not the convergence of many different theories into one, single over-arching theory but their convergence into several, non-convergent theories, which deal with different scientific fields. Such instrumentalists might say that there will be one individual, unified theory for physics, one theory for biology, one theory for chemistry, and so on. So instrumentalists may also respond to the realist's argument by denying the assumption that science is progressing towards a single, unified theory.

Second, the argument from prediction. There are the same two lines of reply open to the instrumentalist in this case too: (1) The first response agrees with the realist that scientists successfully predict future phenomena. They then deny that this is because they rely on theories that are known to be true. Rather, it is because the *point* of a good scientific theory is that it can predict things. (2) Instrumentalists may also flatly deny that scientists successfully predict things. They may argue that since there have been just as many unsuccessful predictions of phenomena (if not more) as successful ones, the whole enterprise of prediction is merely a fluke. The reason why it *seems as if* science produces more correct statements about the future than not is because we notice the correct predictions more since those are the ones we are interested in. (This line of reply does not appear as plausible as the first one since scientific prediction does not seem to be just a chance matter.)



Third and last, the argument from explanation. Some instrumentalists claim here that explanation is not really an essential feature of scientific practice. Instead, they argue, the essential feature of scientific practice is to provide us with useful tools with which to manipulate the observable world. Other instrumentalists accept that explanation is an aim of science but deny that explanatory power is a (good) guide to truth.

The main independent positive argument for instrumentalism is that because past scientific theories eventually turned out to be false, our current theories (probably) will too. There are lots of examples to support this argument: those who thought the earth was flat, those who believed that atoms were indivisible, Newtonians and so on. The chief problem with such an argument is that theories are overturned at different rates in different scientific areas. So whilst in some areas – e.g. evolution and particle physics – one theory replaces another at a relatively rapid rate, in other areas this does not happen – for example, with the theory that water is  $H_2O$ . So, even if this argument were right, it would only possibly apply to some areas in science and not others.



## QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

Critically discuss arguments for a realist view of scientific objectivity.

### Scientific laws

Scientific laws play an integral role in scientific practice. This naturally raises the question: What are scientific laws? Consider the statements that when mercury is heated to  $356.5^{\circ}\text{C}$ , it boils and that when I watch England play football, they lose (when I have only seen England play twice and they have lost both times). Why is the first a scientific law but not the second?

In this section, we critically discuss two theories of scientific laws: theories that view laws as **necessary connections** and theories that see them as describing **constant conjunctions**.

#### Laws as necessary connections

One intuitively appealing theory of scientific laws is that scientific laws state necessary connections between events. There is a necessary connection between two events *A* and *B* if *B* would or could not occur unless *A* did. In other words, if events *A* and *B* are necessarily connected, if *A* does not occur, then neither would/could *B*. For example, take the scientific law that mercury boils at  $356.5^{\circ}\text{C}$ . This view maintains that these two events – the temperature being (at



least) 356.5°C and mercury's boiling – are necessarily connected to one another in virtue of the fact that if the temperature were not at least 356.5°C, mercury would (or could) not boil. It is a law because of the necessary nature of the link between these two events. By contrast, the statement that whenever I watch England play football, they lose is not a scientific law because, although they lose every time I see them play, my seeing them play is not necessarily connected to their losing. They would (could) have lost even if I had not seen them play. And they might have won in spite of the fact that I was there.

Hume had a couple of objections to such a theory. First, he asked, What evidence is there for the existence of such necessary connections between particular kinds of events? After all, we never directly see or observe them. For example, Hume said, when one billiard ball hits another (which then goes off at a predictable angle), all we see are the two billiard balls and the impact. We do not see any necessary link between the two that tells us what will happen in situations of this kind.

Second, Hume argued, if scientific laws described necessary connections between particular kinds of events, then those necessary connections would be knowable *a priori* (without investigating the empirical world). But scientific laws are not knowable *a priori*. Scientists do have to examine the outside world in order to discover what laws there are. So, Hume argued, scientific laws cannot describe necessary connections.

Neither argument is wholly persuasive. As for Hume's first argument, the fact that we cannot directly perceive necessary connections occurring in nature is not sufficient to show either that they do not exist or that we cannot talk sensibly about them. Moreover, there is plenty of indirect evidence for their existence. For example, mercury has *never* boiled at under 356.5°C (at standard pressures). So Hume must strengthen his objection to show the non-existence of necessary connections.

Regarding Hume's second argument, Saul Kripke (1980: Lectures 1 and 2) has argued persuasively that not all necessities are knowable *a priori*. For example, many philosophers are convinced that it is necessary that the morning star is the evening star because there is no possible situation in which that planet is not identical with itself. And they are also convinced that such a statement is also not knowable *a priori*. If the same were true for scientific laws, then Hume would be wrong to argue that they should be *a priori* just because they are necessary.

### Laws as constant conjunctions

In contrast with this, Hume denies that scientific laws describe necessary connections between events. Instead, according to Hume, scientific laws merely

describe regularities between events (or 'constant conjunctions'). A cause and effect are constantly conjoined to one another if events like the cause are always followed by events like the effect. For example, the event of the temperature of mercury being raised to  $356.5^{\circ}\text{C}$  and the event of its boiling are constantly conjoined because events of the first type are always followed by events of the second (under normal pressure, etc.). So on this view, scientific laws merely serve to elucidate patterns and regularities in nature rather than anything stronger.

An immediate problem for such a view is that it fails to clearly distinguish between all laws and all accidents. For example, on this view, the statement that whenever I watch England play football, they lose describes a law since the two events – England playing football and me watching them – are (so far) constantly conjoined. But this statement is clearly no law. As a result, some Humeans have modified their theory so as to exclude accidents such as this from scientific laws.

Two such theories are:

- 1 Laws as generalisations. This theory states that the important thing about scientific laws is that they are general enough. They need to contain terms and descriptions that pick out a wide range of things. For example, the statements that when England play, they lose and that this glass of mercury will boil at  $356.5^{\circ}\text{C}$  are too particular to be laws because they involve terms that refer to particular things ('England', 'this glass'). But the statement that mercury boils at that temperature is general enough to count as a law. (The problem with this theory is that it is possible to formulate laws using expressions that are particular. For example, the statement that any substance like the stuff in this glass boils at  $356.5^{\circ}\text{C}$  contains particular expressions but looks like a law.)
- 2 Counterfactual conditional theory. According to this theory, a statement counts as a law if it supports **counterfactual conditionals**. A counterfactual conditional is a statement of the form 'If such-and-such had happened, then so-and-so would have occurred' where the such-and-such part of the statement did *not* actually happen. For example, the following sentence is a counterfactual conditional: 'If Hitler had never been born, there would have been one less evil person in the world.'

On this view, then, the statement that mercury boils at  $356.5^{\circ}\text{C}$  is a law because it supports the true counterfactual conditional 'If this glass of mercury had not been heated to  $356.5^{\circ}\text{C}$ , it would not have boiled.' By contrast, the statement that whenever I watch England play football, they lose (when I have only seen England play twice and they lost both times) is not a scientific law because the sentence 'If I had not watched England play, they would not have lost' is not true. (The problem with this theory is that so far there is no clear philosophical

explanation of when counterfactuals are true or false. Is the statement that if Hitler had not been born, there would not have been a Second World War true or false? Without such an account, this response merely creates another problem rather than solving one.)

## The aims of science

Practising scientists naturally aim for a number of theoretical and practical ideals when constructing scientific theories. Six of these ideals are: truth, simplicity, coherence, explanation, prediction and action.

- 1 The most obvious ideal is truth. Ultimately, for scientists and other researchers, the primary goal is to provide a *correct* description of what is really out there. The problem with this ideal is that it is not always possible to test scientific theories in a simple and clear manner that yields a 'true' or 'false' outcome. This is sometimes because they are just too general to be tested or because they talk about the behaviour of unobservables or simply because they are too complicated or vague. By contrast, a sentence such as 'It will rain today' is specific and clearly defined and has a simple verification procedure to determine its truth or falsity.

For this reason, philosophers of science often employ a distinct notion of **verisimilitude** or 'approximate truth'. Popper appeals to this notion in his falsificationist theory of scientific development (p. 244). According to Popper, the degree of verisimilitude of a theory is the extent to which the theory corresponds to the totality of real facts (rather than just some of them). So although a scientific theory might be strictly 'false' in the sense that it has been disconfirmed by a few contradictory instances, it may still be legitimately said to be a good approximation to the truth because it explains many other facts. For example, although there are counter-examples to Newton's theory of mechanics (e.g. the movement of very small objects does not fit in with his theory), it may still be legitimately said to be superior to Galileo's theory because it is able to explain a greater realm of facts. 'Newton's theory continues to explain more facts than did the others; to explain them with greater precision; and to unify the previously unconnected problems of celestial and terrestrial mechanics' (Popper 1972a: 236). (Remember that instrumentalists might disagree that truth and verisimilitude are aims of science.)

- 2 Another desirable feature of scientific theories is simplicity. The degree of simplicity of a theory involves several distinct concepts. For example, it at least involves the following: the number of entities postulated, the number of facts

used and assumptions made, the nature of the laws involved, its symmetry, its 'elegance' (by which is meant roughly how neatly the theory works), the simplicity of deriving predictions from it, and so on. How simple a theory is will depend on the extent to which it possesses characteristics such as these. (For more on these notions, see Popper 1972b: 138.)

- 3 Scientists also prefer their theories to be coherent. The coherence of a theory is determined by the extent to which that theory fits in with other theories related to it. For example, the hypothesis that it rained today fits in better with the facts that there is a soaking umbrella in front of me and that the washing has been taken in than it does with the facts that my cat hates umbrellas and that  $2 + 2 = 4$ . If there are two theories that explain the same phenomena, have roughly the same predictive powers and are confirmed to approximately the same degrees by experimental data, then scientists would prefer the one with the greater coherence (with other known theories).

However, despite coherence playing a definite role in the determination of the value of a scientific theory, there are also certain difficulties in including it in such a judgement: (a) One difficulty is that the criterion of coherence might occasionally seem to be at odds with the criterion of truth. For it seems quite possible to conceive of a theory that is perfectly coherent but that does not correspond to reality at all because it is false. (b) Another difficulty is that the criterion itself is circular. For if the coherence of a theory is determined by the extent to which that theory fits in with other theories and if the coherence of those other theories is similarly judged by their coherence with the original theory, then it is not possible to use any theory as a definite starting point. (c) Also, the very notion of coherence is obscure. Does it merely involve logical consistency? Or do other theories have to imply or make probable the hypothesised theory? What else is involved?

- 4 A scientific theory should also be able to explain and predict certain kinds of phenomena. We want to know why things happen. So, at a fundamental level, a scientific explanation of some event should involve an account of *why* that event occurred (possibly including an account of why *other* events did not occur). For this reason, it is sometimes thought that there is a symmetry between scientific explanation and prediction. In scientific explanation, we have an account of why something had to happen. In scientific prediction, we are told why something *will* happen. On Hempel's hypothetico-deductive model, another way to put this is to say that, in scientific explanation, we already know what the explanandum is and are trying to give the explanans. In prediction, we already have the explanans (current and past facts) and want

to know what will happen (the explanandum). Science is also judged by its practical application, i.e. what actions we can take on the basis of our explanations and predictions. That is to say, science is also valued according to how successful scientists are in the light of what they (and we) want to achieve. (The nature of scientific explanation has also been discussed in some detail on p. 264.)

### Main revision points

- Two opposing views about unobservables are: (a) Realism: the view that we can and do know certain facts about unobservable entities, even though we have never directly seen them; and (b) Instrumentalism: the view that scientific theories are not necessarily true descriptions of the world but rather function as useful 'instruments' for making predictions. The three main arguments for realism are the arguments from unification, explanation and prediction. The main argument for instrumentalism is the argument from the falsity of past theories.
- Scientific laws can be seen either as stating constant conjunctions (Hume), in which case it might be added that they must be general enough or support counterfactual conditionals, or as stating necessary connections.
- Practising scientists aim for a number of theoretical and practical ideals when constructing scientific theories. Six of these ideals are: truth, simplicity, coherence, explanation, prediction and action.



## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

What are the problems with the two views about scientific laws? What are the principal aims of science?

### Related examination question

(Part b) Assess the instrumentalist view of scientific theory. (32 marks) (2002)

## ● THE OBJECTIVITY OF SCIENCE

It is widely thought that science is objectively justified. We think that the picture of the world provided for us by scientists is, by and large, a correct description of a reality independent of our perceptions. At the same time, however, there are a number of reasons for thinking this view about the objectivity of science to be mistaken. Below, three problem areas for the objectivity of science are looked at: problems concerning observation and categorisation in science, problems concerning scientific methodology and, lastly, problems concerning what is researched.

### Problems concerning observation and categorisation

The belief that scientific theories are justified objectively is closely associated with the belief that scientific theories are justified by observation. After all, it is observation that gives us direct and immediate access to the empirical world. But if, as some philosophers of science claim, observation is **theory-laden**, i.e. (partially) determined by what our theories are, then the objectivity of many scientific claims may be threatened.

One claim used to support the view that observation is theory-laden is the view that perceptual experience is influenced by theory. This view is often defended by pointing out a number of cases in which our perceptual beliefs change, sometimes dramatically, without any change in the perceptual stimulus. A famous example of this is the duck/rabbit drawing. This is a drawing that some people see as a duck, others see as a rabbit and that many people can see as both a duck and a rabbit.

Another well-known example is the Müller-Lyer illusion.



The illusion revolves around the fact that some people report that the second line looks longer than the first even though the lines are in fact of equal length. (Measure them!) Moreover, many individuals continue to perceive the lines as having different lengths even after they have been told that they are really the same. By contrast, some researchers claim that certain groups of people such as certain types of people in Africa do not suffer from such illusions. Examples such as these are supposed to demonstrate that ‘theory’ (context, background beliefs, previous experience, etc.) partly determines what we currently experience.

Two problems with the above argument are as follows: First, even if it is true that experience is sometimes permeated by theory, there are still limits to the

flexibility with which the experience is interpreted. So, for example, whilst we can interpret the duck/rabbit drawing as either a duck or a rabbit, we cannot see it as the Eiffel Tower or a car. This suggests that even if there are situations in which a visual stimulus is ambiguous, it does not mean that it could be seen as anything at all.

Second, ambiguous stimuli are relatively rare and usually only occur when the stimulus is seen in poor or non-ideal conditions. For example, Galileo drew two moons rather than two rings round his representation of Saturn when he was looking at it through a telescope much less advanced than our current versions. (However, this point does not apply to the Müller-Lyer illustration and the duck/rabbit drawing. Moreover, in certain circumstances, a stimulus is interpretable in different ways even when the conditions are ideal. For example, a straight stick may still appear bent when half in water even if in perfect lighting, in front of an expert observer, and so on.)

Another distinct problem with objectivity concerns categorisation. In contrast with Popper (pp. 244–5), John Stuart Mill thought that scientists should begin their investigations of nature by using induction. Further, he believed, scientists should also begin by assuming that all their initial inductions with true premises are true.

However, Mill thought that it would quickly be realised that most of the initial simple inductions that are made – the low-level ones – would need substantial modification. For example, it was quickly realised that low-level inferences about the colour of all members of a species from a number of instances of it would turn out to be false. This was the case with the inductively supported statement that all swans are white.

Despite this, Mill observed, such generalisations do work in other kinds of cases. For example, generalisations about the broad anatomical structure of all members of a species from a sample of them are generally reliable. So inductions made in this case do provide strong support for their conclusions. Mill concluded that after a period of time we would eventually get a better idea of which inductive practices were justified and which were not. We rely on statements of a high level of generality such as the statement that there is generally invariance of broad anatomical features amongst members of a species to determine which lower-level generalisations will come out true.



## QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

Is it true that scientific observation is dependent on theory and that scientific observation is not therefore neutral or objective?

## Problems concerning methodology

A second problem for the objectivity of science involves the objectivity of the *methodology* of scientists. One problem with the objectivity of the methodology of scientists is that scientific practice appears to be at least partly guided by the scientific theory of the time. This claim is defended by Popper (1972b). According to Popper, scientific practice does not merely consist in random collections of observations and data. Rather, he argues, it is a principled, logical procedure in which scientists search for particular kinds of data, which they can then use to test their theories. For example, if I have a theory saying that all swans are white, then it would not be sensible to gather any and all data that came my way (e.g. what colour my office is, where I put my shoes). Instead, I should gather data appropriate to determining the truth or falsity of my theory. Indeed, if science were more haphazard than this and not guided in some way, it would prove extremely difficult and time-consuming to verify or falsify any scientific theory at all.

Popper's intention is that this argument has two elements to it. First, he says, it suggests that it is impossible to make observations and collect data without being guided by some theory or other. Second, he says, even if that were possible, it would be useless as a theory-testing procedure since merely looking at the world randomly would not help to confirm or disconfirm any particular hypothesis.

However, Popper might seem incorrect to say that the fact that our attention is typically directed to specific things by theories straightforwardly means that science is not objective. Popper is right that if scientists did behave in this manner, our search for knowledge and appropriate evidence would be much more focused and restricted than it should otherwise be. We could only test theories. We could not come across new and interesting phenomena that might lead to a change in conventional science/scientific theory or a 'paradigm shift' (see pp. 245–7 on Kuhn). But Popper is wrong that our observations are *always* directed like this.

The process leading up to the discovery of X-rays is a good example of this. In 1895, a German physicist named Wilhelm Röntgen switched on a vacuum tube designed to emit cathode rays. Röntgen intended to test whether or not cathode rays thus emitted were capable of penetrating lead, at what distance, whether they could penetrate other materials, and so on. To his surprise, when he turned the vacuum tube on, a screen coated with a particular substance glowed some distance away. Investigating the phenomenon, he found that not only did the screen glow even when various objects were positioned in between the tube and the screen (except thick lead) but also that when he put a thin piece of lead in between the two, he could see the dark outline of the bones in his hand.



Further experiments led him to name the new phenomenon 'Agens' or 'X-rays'. But this discovery was not produced by any theory-directed data-gathering. Röntgen was not testing any particular theory to do with glowing screens. Rather, he just happened to be looking in that direction when he was observing the vacuum tube. (So some room should be made for the view that progress is made when conventional methodologies are ignored.)

However, Popper is correct to emphasise that we would not normally notice a variety of phenomena unless there existed some mechanism driving us to do so. But this does not mean that the mechanism should be identified with some theory or other. For example, we are far more aware of bright colours and loud noises than their dull and quiet correlates even though it is likely that no 'theory' in any proper sense of the term is driving us to do this. Rather, it is more plausible that we have been primed as humans to notice such things in order to aid our survival.

Two further facts can be added to this point: (1) Even when we are fully conscious of the fact that bright colours and loud noises in a particular setting are not important (to our survival) and so are not worth paying attention to, it is still very difficult to ignore them completely; (2) Even non-human animals notice such phenomena and surely they are not directed by anything that can be called a 'theory'.

## **Problems concerning research**

A third area of difficulty concerns problems about the objectivity of scientific research. The work of the philosopher of science Imre Lakatos is important in this area. According to Lakatos (1978), assessment in science and in scientific research should not (and usually is not) the assessment of a particular theory or set of theories or even the internal assessment of rival theories. Rather, it is the assessment of the comparative merits of rival research programmes. Research programmes consist of a central claim, a variety of auxiliary assumptions related to that claim and a number of techniques and methods for solving problems. According to Lakatos, one research programme is worse than a rival one within a scientific field if it is 'degenerative' compared to that rival. A research programme is degenerative if its proponents merely add untestable theories and hypotheses to it in order to cope with further recalcitrant data and evidence. By contrast, a programme is progressive if it makes progress by being able to explain and predict new phenomena. Lakatos also says that even a degenerating, implausible research programme with many *ad hoc* hypotheses and unnecessarily supplementary assumptions may be accepted if it is the only programme available.

Here's an example. The research programme centred around Copernicus involved Copernicus's central claim that the planets revolve around the sun, and various auxiliary assumptions – for example, that circles are perfect and that the planets' orbits are circular. Later, Kepler rejected the assumption that planets travel in circular orbits and assumed in its place that they move in elliptical revolutions. This move was not degenerative since by replacing Copernicus's assumption, Kepler was able to make a number of novel predictions which Copernicus had not. By contrast, Ptolemy's research programme based on the idea that the earth is the centre of the universe became increasingly degenerative (as opposed to progressive) because all its advocates appeared to do was supplement the theory with further unfalsifiable claims to account for contradictory experience and observation.

A further, interesting, feature of Lakatos's theory is that he refuses to be explicit about the circumstances under which a research programme has been falsified and should be rejected. The reason for this, he says, is that it is possible for a research programme to disappear and come back into favour for external reasons. One example he uses is the Copernican theory of planets. This theory was originally hypothesised by a Greek philosopher called Aristarchus of Samos. Aristarchus abandoned his theory because of what he thought was strong countervailing evidence. Later, in the sixteenth century, when technology and knowledge had greatly advanced and, importantly, when the telescope had been invented, it was revived by Copernicus. So, according to Lakatos, scientific programmes also depend to a large extent on external factors such as the timing of inventions and the stage of technology.

Thus, Lakatos concludes, it is sometimes rational for scientists to pursue research programmes even if they are obviously degenerative. For it may be that such programmes become progressive in time and with a change in external circumstances. As long as most of the scientists in a community share the aim of discovering true scientific theories, there is nothing wrong with being engaged in such programmes. To this end, Lakatos believes that two other types of external factors should help in deterring degenerative programmes: funding bodies and journals. Funding bodies should discourage scientists from pursuing degenerative research programmes by allocating money to the progressive ones. Journals should refuse to publish papers from degenerative programmes and should adopt a style that tallies with progressive ones.

However, there are also problems with Lakatos's theory. Lakatos has been criticised by Feyerabend for being excessively vague about what is good and what is bad science. Lakatos does not lay down any specific criteria for when a research programme has gone bad. According to Feyerabend, Lakatos's theory implies that

a scientist could be working on a hopeless research programme full of unnecessary, ad hoc hypotheses entailing predictions that are either falsified or are unfalsifiable and still could be acting rationally. Lakatos may argue, says Feyerabend, that the scientist is nevertheless rational because the programme might not have had enough time to develop (e.g. Aristarchus's theory). Moreover, his account may even entail that funding bodies would be justified in giving funding to such a programme and that journals might be rational in publishing papers produced from it.

Feyerabend is right that Lakatos has not laid down precise rules for determining whether or not a particular research programme is rational. And Lakatos's account is sometimes couched in vague remarks which do not seem to commit him to one idea of rationality rather than another. But it is wrong to think that this means that Lakatos's theory implies that anything is rational, however bad. For instance, Lakatos says that it would be irrational to allow a programme to degenerate over, say, a thousand years. Moreover, he also says that while funding bodies and journals may disagree in some cases and allow papers to be published from degenerating programmes, this will not always be the case and much of the time they will agree (on what is good and bad).

### Three main problem areas for the objectivity of science

- Problems concerning observation and categorisation in science: the view that observation is theory-laden is supported by examples such as the duck/rabbit drawing and the Müller-Lyer illusion. But these examples do not necessarily mean that observation is *completely* theory-dictated or that it is always dictated by some 'theory' or other.
- Problems concerning scientific methodology: the view that scientific practice is partly guided by the scientific theory of the time has been defended by Popper, who argues that science would otherwise be a pointless matter of random information-gathering. However, the invention of X-rays shows that progress is sometimes made when conventional methodologies are ignored.
- Problems concerning what is researched: the view that research is impacted by both internal factors and external ones is supported by Lakatos's theory of research programmes. Lakatos says that research is determined both by how degenerative a programme is (compared to its rivals) and by factors such as technology, funding bodies and journals.



## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

What are the major problems concerning the objectivity of science? Do those problems really imply that science is not objective?

### ● NATURAL AND SOCIAL SCIENCE

A distinction is often drawn between what are called 'natural sciences' such as physics, chemistry and biology and 'social sciences' such as history and sociology. In this section, we compare and contrast the two kinds of science and expose some of similarities and differences between both.

#### **Similarities and differences**

##### Methodology, theory-formation and confirmation

The work of Popper and Kuhn have had a major impact on views about the methodology and formation of theories in the social sciences. According to Popper, the theory of falsificationism applies equally to the natural sciences and the social ones. So, according to Popper, methodology in the social sciences principally involves putting forward a conjecture (e.g. the socio-political theory that institutions like universities chiefly arose because they helped to preserve class structures in society), and trying to falsify it. Those conjectures that stand the test should be accepted (at that time). Those that do not are falsified and should be rejected.

Popper also believed that falsificationism could serve as a criterion of whether (or not) a theory or field in the social sciences should properly be called 'scientific'. If a social scientific theory could not in principle be falsified, it did not count as science proper. If it could in principle be falsified, it did count as science. (For example, Popper thought that Marxist theory and Freudian theory would fail this criterion since he believed that both kinds of theory were unfalsifiable.)

Popper also thought that many theories in social science were incorrect. So, on Popper's view, social science as a whole faced a dilemma. Either the particular field or theory was falsifiable, in which case, Popper thought, it had already been falsified, or would be, and so should be rejected. Or the field could not be falsified, in which case it did not count as science.

It is true that many theories in the social sciences appear to have been refuted. Marxist theory appeared false because the proletariat revolution did not occur in the West. Freudian theory seemed to have problems because Freud's diagnoses

did not have the desired effects on his patients. And it is true that, in many of these cases, such theories were made 'unfalsifiable' by merely adding to the theory so as to preserve its basic structure. The West did not experience a revolution because of the extreme exploitation of the Third World working classes. Freud's diagnoses did not have the desired effects because of other factors in the patients' lives.

But there are nevertheless problems with Popper's criterion. For example, sometimes it may be entirely reasonable when holding a theory in the face of countervailing evidence to reject an auxiliary assumption of it and replace that assumption with another. According to Popper, this would be making the theory unfalsifiable, but it may merely make it a better theory.

### Explanation

Few philosophers would deny the applicability of the hypothetico-deductive model to the natural sciences (p. 241). What is more controversial is Hempel's application of it to the social sciences (see Hempel 1968). According to Hempel, the correct explanation of a social phenomenon, e.g. a historical, political or economic event, will involve appeal both to the particular facts preceding the event and to general principles that tie the events together. For example, the explanation of a particular capitalist crisis (e.g. Wall Street crashing) might presuppose both the particular facts leading up to that event and the general principle that capitalist crises in a society are due to the capitalist structure of that society.

A serious problem with Hempel's theory, though, is that it runs the risk of reducing every field into one. Thus, if Hempel is right, sociology might be reduced to psychology and psychology to biology and eventually biology to physics. But whilst this kind of reduction might have some degree of plausibility in the case of natural sciences, it is much less plausible for 'looser' subjects such as history and politics. For if they too were so reducible, then it might seem that supposedly 'free' human actions could be reduced to mere casual chains in physics. Counterintuitively, we would then lack free will.

### Objectivity

A final difference between natural and social science lies in different views on their objectivity. As we discussed previously, in the case of natural science, there are problems about the objectivity of natural science concerning observation and categorisation (pp. 257–8), concerning scientific methodology (pp. 259–60) and concerning what is researched (pp. 260–2). In the case of social science, the problems are more closely connected to societal differences.

## Social relativism

**Social relativism** is the view that what is right, correct, reasonable, acceptable, etc. in a society depends on the society in which the action, belief, etc. is placed. For example, it might be thought that how one should behave after eating is partly a matter of the particular manners of the society one is in. Burping after a meal might be rude in one society but complimentary or neutral in another.

But there are at least two problems with such a view. First, it is unclear what is meant by a 'society'. There are numerous ways of dividing up the population of, say, Britain into groups: by job types (teacher, banker, lawyer), by national differences (English, Welsh, Scots), by regional differences (Cornwall, Essex, Lancashire), by religious or cultural beliefs (Jews, Hindus, atheists), and so on. Which of these group divisions should be used to divide up societies? Or is a society merely a group of people in a particular geographical area? If so, then which area or areas?

This leads on to the second problem with social relativism. For if relativism is a true theory about societies that behave differently from one another, then surely it also applies to smaller groups that behave differently. And so surely it also applies to individual people who behave differently. Why should social relativism only apply to large groups that act differently? So social relativism implies that what is right, correct, reasonable, acceptable, etc. for one *person* depends on who that person is. The main problem with this is that, whilst cross-cultural relativism may be fashionable in some groups, not many will want to commit themselves to a full-blooded *individual* relativism.



## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

What are the main differences between the natural and social sciences? Are they significant?

### Related examination question

(Part b) Assess the extent to which scientific method is appropriate in the social sciences. (32 marks) (2003)

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## GLOSSARY

**ad hoc** (literally: for that purpose) – A belief, assumption, response to an objection, etc. is ad hoc if the only real reason it has been put forward is for theoretical purposes, e.g. to defend some theory from attack (rather than to explain some phenomenon).

**a priori** – A statement is knowable *a priori* if it can be known without investigating the empirical world, e.g. that  $2 + 2 = 4$ .

**circular** – An argument is circular if it assumes or presupposes the conclusion in one of its premises.

**constant conjunction** – A cause and effect are constantly conjoined if events like the cause are always followed by events like the effect.

**counterfactual conditional** – A counterfactual conditional is a statement of the form 'If such-and-such had happened, then so-and-so would

have occurred' where the such-and-such part of the statement did *not* actually happen. For example, the following sentence is a counterfactual conditional: 'If Hitler had never been born, then there would not have been a Second World War.'

**deductive reasoning, deductively valid, deductively sound** – Deductive reasoning is reasoning which, if valid, uses premises whose truth guarantees the truth of the conclusion. In a deductively valid argument, it is impossible for the premises to be true and the conclusion false. A deductive argument is deductively sound if it is deductively valid and if its premises are true.

**falsificationism** – Karl Popper's view that science proceeds not by induction but by proposed conjecture, falsification, then alternative conjecture.



**hypothetico-deductive method** – The hypothetico-deductive method of scientific explanation explains an event by citing the initial, prior conditions to the event and certain relevant laws.

**incommensurable** – Two theories are incommensurable if they cannot be rationally and objectively compared to each other.

**inductive reasoning, inductively forceful, inductively sound** – An argument that starts with the premise that one kind of phenomenon has always followed another and ends with the conclusion that the former phenomenon is *always* followed by the latter. An inductive argument is inductively forceful if, given no other information relevant to the truth or falsity of the conclusion, it is more reasonable to expect the conclusion to be true than false. An inductive argument is inductively sound if it is inductively forceful and if its premises are true.

**instrumentalism** – The view that scientific theories are not necessarily true descriptions of the world but rather function as useful ‘instruments’ with which scientists can perform important calculations and manipulate the world.

**necessary connection** – There is a necessary connection between two events *A* and *B* if *B* would or could not occur unless *A* did.

**paradigm, paradigm shift** – A paradigm is a standard, community-shared scientific framework within which scientists treat anomalies and counter-examples as problems to be resolved from within the framework rather than as challenges to it. A paradigm shift occurs when scientists become aware of a substantial lack of ‘fit’ between the standard theory and certain data or if a second, rival

theory arises that does not have many of the problems of the first. It eventually leads to a scientific crisis or breakdown, which develops into a change of vision or paradigm.

**Problem of Induction** – The problem of how to justify inductive arguments, that is, how to explain why it is rational to believe, say, that all emeralds are green just because they have appeared green in the past. Since a great deal of our everyday reasoning is inductive, the Problem of Induction purports to threaten our knowledge in many areas.

**realism** – The view that we can and do know certain scientific facts about unobservable entities, even though we have never directly seen them.

**reductionism** – The view that the progress and development of science, thought of as a body of scientific knowledge, is linear (involves adding new theories to old), cumulative (adds up) and convergent (is heading towards a single, unified theory of everything).

**relativism** – Thomas Kuhn’s view that science moves in paradigm shifts (see **paradigm, paradigm shift**).

**social relativism** – The view that what is right, correct, reasonable, acceptable, etc. in a society depends on the society in which the action, belief, etc. is placed.

**theory-laden** – A process is theory-laden if it is partially determined by what our theories are.

**verisimilitude** (literally, ‘approximate truth’) – The degree of verisimilitude of a theory is the extent to which the theory corresponds to the totality of real facts (rather than just some of them).

# 7

## • preparing for the examination

Michael Lacewing

### ● INTRODUCTION

To get good exam results, you need to have a good sense of what the exam will be like and what the examiners are looking for, and to revise in a way that will help you prepare to answer the questions well. This probably sounds obvious, but in fact, many students do not think about the exam itself, only about what might come up. There is a big difference. This chapter will provide you with some guidance on how to approach your exams in a way that will help get you the best results you can. It is divided into three sections: revision, understanding the question, and exam technique.

Throughout the chapter, I will highlight revision points and exam tips. You can find these collected together at the end of the chapter.

### ● REVISION: KNOWING WHAT THE EXAMINERS ARE LOOKING FOR

There are lots of memory tricks for learning information for exams. This chapter isn't about those. Revision isn't just about learning information, but also about learning how to use that information well in the exam. Being able to do this isn't

a question of memory, but of directed revision and concentration in the exam.

It may sound obvious, but in order to know how best to answer the exam questions, you need to think about how they are marked. The examiners mark your answers according to three principles, known as 'Assessment Objectives' (AOs). They are:

- A01** *Knowledge and understanding*: how well do you know and understand the central debates for an particular issue, the theoretical positions philosophers have defended, and the arguments they use to defend them? For units 3 and 5, how well do you understand the extract of text and its place in the philosopher's thought?
- A02** *Selection and application*: how well do you select relevant ideas, concepts, examples, and arguments that you encountered in the material or text you studied? How well do you use these ideas and examples to construct an answer that is coherent and relevant to the question asked? Are you able to present a good example that illustrates the point you want to make?
- A03** *Interpretation and evaluation*: how well do you interpret, evaluate, and analyse the arguments that you have read? Do you understand whether an argument succeeds or fails and why? How well do you compare arguments and counter-arguments to weigh up what the most plausible position is?

In addition, you will be marked on the clarity and accuracy of your language.

You can use these AOs to help guide your revision. AO1 leads straight to the first revision point:

**R1** Learn the theories. Who said what? What terms and concepts did they use? What arguments did they use to defend their positions?

This, you may think, is challenging enough! But AO2 means that you also need to be able to *use* your knowledge. Knowing all about utilitarianism, say, won't help you if you write it all down in answer to a question about Kant. Knowing what is relevant is a special kind of knowledge, which involves thinking carefully about what you know about the theories in relation to the question asked. The best way to learn what is relevant is to practise answering questions, either exam questions or questions you make up for yourself or a friend. Try to make up questions that are similar to the exam questions, using the same 'key words' (I'll

talk about these in the next section). Practising answering different questions on the same topic helps keep your knowledge flexible, because you have to think of just the right bit of information that will answer the question.

**R2** Practise applying your knowledge by answering questions about it. The best questions to practise with are past exam questions, but you can also make up questions for yourself.

An important part of being able to apply your knowledge is coming up with relevant examples. You can either remember good examples you have read, or create your own. In either case, you should know precisely what point the example is making. An irrelevant example demonstrates that you don't really know what you are talking about.

**R3** Prepare examples beforehand, rather than try to invent them in the exam. If you can use your own, that's great (you'll get extra marks if they are good). But they must be short and they must make the right point; so try them out on your friends and teachers first.

What of AO3? How do you revise for 'interpretation and evaluation'? This AO tests you on how well you can relate and compare arguments to overall theories and to other arguments. The best way to prepare for it is to spend time *thinking* about the arguments and issues. Thinking is quite different from knowing about. You might know Descartes's arguments against empirical knowledge (doubting the senses, dreaming, the evil demon), but you may never have stopped to really work out whether you think they are any good.

AO3 encourages you to do two things. One is to relate a particular argument to a philosopher's overall theory, to understand the relation between the parts and the whole. The second is to reflect on what a particular argument actually demonstrates, and whether there are counter-arguments that are better. Now this is what secondary sources – commentators on Plato, Descartes, etc. – try to do. So if you are working on a particular argument by Descartes, say, be guided by what the commentators have to say. Work through the arguments so that you understand for yourself the pros and cons of each viewpoint. As a minimum, be able to argue both for and against a particular view. Even if you can't come to a

firm conclusion about which viewpoint is right, try to come to a firm conclusion about why the different points each seem right in their own way, and why it is difficult to choose. Philosophy is not about knowing the 'right answers', it is about understanding why an answer *might* be right and why it is difficult to know.

**R4** Think reflectively about the arguments and issues. Practise arguing for and against a particular view. Using commentators where appropriate, think about which arguments are better, and why. Think about the place and importance of arguments in a philosopher's overall viewpoint.

These first four revision points relate to taking in and understanding information. There are two more points that will help you organise the information, learn it better, and prepare you for answering exam questions.

A good way of organising your information is to create answer outlines or web-diagrams for particular issues. (A web-diagram is a way to present a structure of ideas; each idea is in a bubble or at a node, with connections between ideas shown by lines drawn between the nodes. One or two ideas are often central, with other ideas coming off.) For example, if you are doing Unit 2 Philosophy of Religion, you could create an outline or web-diagram for the teleological (design) argument for the existence of God. Think about the essential points, and organize them, perhaps like this:

- 1 What is 'design'?
- 2 What is the classical design argument and who has presented it?
- 3 What is the modern version, and how is it different?
- 4 Who argued against the design argument, and what did they say?
- 5 What are its main strengths and weaknesses? Does the modern version answer some of the criticisms of the classical version?
- 6 What is your conclusion, and why?

With an outline like this, you should be able to answer any question that comes up on the design argument.

**R5** Create structured outlines or web-diagrams for particular issues. Try to cover all the main points.

Finally, once you've organized your notes into an outline or web-diagram, time yourself writing exam answers. Start by using your outline, relying on your memory to fill in the details. Then practise by memorising the outline as well, and doing it as though it were an actual exam. You might be surprised at how quickly one hour goes by. You'll find that you need to be very focused – but this is what the examiners are looking for, answers that are thoughtful but to the point.

**R6** Practise writing timed answers. Use your notes at first, but then practise without them.

There is one more thing which is important to revision that I haven't yet talked about: the structure of the questions and how the marks are awarded can help you to decide what to focus on. This is what we'll look at next.

## ● THE STRUCTURE OF THE EXAMS

Different units have different types of exam. If the examples given below aren't from papers you are doing, don't worry. The point of the examples is to show you the *structure* of the questions and the *marks* assigned to each part. The structure and the way the marks are divided up are the same for each question within a particular unit, whichever option or set text you are taking.

### AS exams

Each of the exams lasts for one hour. For Units 1 and 2, you must answer one question from a choice of two in the area you studied. In Unit 1, this is Theory of Knowledge. In Unit 2, this is either Moral Philosophy or Philosophy of Religion. Each question is structured in exactly the same way. Here is an example from Unit 1, Theory of Knowledge (from 2001):

- |  |                                   |
|--|-----------------------------------|
| 1  | Total for this question: 45 marks |
| <p>(a) Explain and briefly illustrate the meaning of <i>a priori</i> <u>and</u> <i>a posteriori</i> knowledge. (6 marks)</p> <p>(b) Identify and explain <u>two</u> reasons why empiricism may lead to scepticism concerning the <i>extent</i> of our knowledge. (15 marks)</p> <p>(c) Assess the view that all of our <i>concepts</i> are derived from experience. (24 marks)</p> |                                   |

The questions for Unit 3 (set text) are slightly different. First, you don't have a choice – only one question is asked on each set text, and you may have studied just one set text, so you have to answer that question. Each question gives a quotation from the set text, and then asks a series of questions all structured the same way. Here is an example (from 2001):

2 Text: Descartes's *Meditations*

Total for this question: 45 marks

Study the following passage and then answer all parts of Question 2.

...

- (a) With close reference to the passage above:
  - (i) Identify what Descartes understands by 'God'. (2 marks)
  - (ii) To what conclusion does a consideration of divine attributes lead Descartes? (2 marks)
  - (iii) Briefly explain how a consideration of 'infinity' leads Descartes to conclude that God exists. (6 marks)
- (b) Describe how Descartes distinguishes intellect from the imagination. (10 marks)
- (c) Critically discuss Descartes's attempt to show that his mind is independent of his body. (25 marks)

## A2 exams

The exams for Units 4 and 5 last for one hour. Unit 4 (either Philosophy of Mind, Political Philosophy or Philosophy of Science) is like Unit 2, in that you must answer one question from a choice of two from the option you studied. Here is an example of how the questions are structured (from Philosophy of Mind 2002):

1

Total for this question: 50 marks

- (a) Describe and illustrate two ways in which mental states allegedly differ from brain states. (18 marks)
- (b) Assess whether theories of the relationship between mind and body have successfully accounted for mental causation. (32 marks)

Unit 5 (set text) is like Unit 3. Only one question is set on each text, so you have to answer the question on the text you studied. Here is an example (from 2002):

2 Text: Hume's *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*

Total for this question: 50 marks

Study the following extract and then answer all parts of Question 2.

...

- (a) With close reference to the passage above:
  - (i) Identify one regular cause and one irregular cause. (2 marks)
  - (ii) Briefly explain Hume's position regarding probability. (6 marks)
  - (iii) Suggest and briefly develop one criticism of Hume's account of probability. (6 marks)
- (b) Outline Hume's distinction between impressions and ideas and one conclusion he draws from it. (11 marks)
- (c) Evaluate Hume's attempt to solve the problem of free will and determinism. (25 marks)

Unit 6 is examined by a long essay of 3,000–4,000 words, which you write over a number of supervised sessions lasting four hours altogether. There will be a choice of 12 questions, and your teacher will help you to select the best question for you.

## ● UNDERSTANDING THE QUESTION: GIVING THE EXAMINERS WHAT THEY WANT

The key to doing well in an exam is understanding the question. I don't just mean understanding the *topic* of the question, like 'empiricism' or Hume's theory of probability. Of course, this is very important. But you also need to understand what the question is asking you to *do*. And this is related, in a very strict way, to the three Assessment Objectives I discussed earlier. This section is on how exam questions 'work'.

### Command words

If you look at the examples of questions above, you will see that they start with different 'command words', such as 'explain', 'illustrate', 'identify', 'describe', 'outline', 'assess', 'critically discuss' and 'evaluate'. Obeying these instructions is crucially important to getting a good mark. If you are asked to 'describe how two mental states allegedly differ from brain states', and you argue that 'mental states don't differ from brain states because . . .' then you will fail to gain marks. And the same is true if you are asked to 'assess whether theories of the relationship between mind and body have successfully accounted for mental causation' and you only describe and illustrate what those theories actually claim.

These different command words relate to the different Assessment Objectives. The words 'describe' and 'identify' relate to AO1, *knowledge and understanding*.



You are being asked simply to say what the theories say. The words ‘explain’, ‘illustrate’, and ‘outline’ relate to AO1 and AO2. You are being asked to demonstrate your knowledge in a way that requires *selection and application*. Explanations and illustrations are only good if they are relevant, and set the points you make in a context. The words ‘assess’, ‘evaluate’, and ‘critically discuss’ relate to AO3, *interpretation and evaluation*. Of course, you’ll have to show relevant knowledge, too, but you need to go beyond this to weighing up the arguments.

The key to understanding what the question is asking, and so to getting a good mark, is to take notice of the command words.

### Question structure

Notice that the different command words always appear in the same parts of the question. So, in Units 1 and 2, ‘describe’ always appears in part (a), ‘assess’ always appears in part (c). This is because the marks given for each part of the question relate to a particular AO in a very strict way. You don’t really need to worry about the exact correlation. If you follow the command word instructions, you won’t go far wrong. But if you want to know, there is a table at the end of this chapter. Here are some rough generalisations that will help.

In the AS units, the marks for AO1 (knowledge and understanding) are distributed throughout parts (a), (b), and (c). The marks for AO2 (selection and application) are distributed in parts (b) and (c). All the marks for AO3 (interpretation and evaluation) are in part (c). In total, there are 18 marks available for AO1, 18 marks available for AO2, and 9 marks available for AO3.

In A2 Unit 4, the marks for AO1 and AO2 are distributed equally across (a) and (b), and all the marks for AO3 are in part (b). Overall, there are 17 marks for AO1, 17 marks for AO2, and 16 marks for AO3. In Unit 5, the division of marks isn’t so rigid, although marks for AO3 are still concentrated towards the final parts of the question. Overall, there are 16 marks for AO1, 16 marks for AO2, and 18 marks for AO3. In Unit 6, overall there are 10 marks for AO1, 20 marks for AO2, and 30 marks for AO3.

Why is this important? For the same reason that the command words are important. It tells you what you should be doing. If all the marks are for AO1 (knowledge and understanding), there is no point spending any time evaluating. And if there are 9 marks for AO3 (interpretation and evaluation), then no matter how clearly you describe the theories and arguments, you cannot get a good mark for the question if you do not also evaluate them.

There is another reason this distribution of marks is important. It can help guide your revision. In A2 exams, there are many more marks available for AO3,

especially in the long essay, than there are in AS exams. This means you need to spend more time concentrating on evaluating the arguments that you've studied.

## ● EXAM TECHNIQUE: GETTING THE BEST RESULT YOU CAN

If you've understood the question structure beforehand, and know what to expect in the exam, the question paper will not seem so daunting. You'll have a good idea about how to proceed, and a sense of how the parts of the question are testing different aspects of your knowledge. This section gives you some tips on how to approach the questions when you are actually in the exam.

Exams are very exciting, whether in a good way or a bad way! It can be helpful, therefore, to take your time at the beginning, not to rush into your answers, but to plan your way. The tips I give below are roughly in the order that you might apply them when taking the exam. You might be surprised at the number of things it can be worth doing before you write anything at all.

It is important to decide carefully which question to answer, and this means reading the whole of each question before making your decision. In Unit 1 Theory of Knowledge, this just means reading both questions. In Units 2 and 4, it means identifying the two questions that are relevant to you, and reading through them both. You might find that although you know the answer to part (a), you aren't sure about part (c). If you don't read the whole question first, but just start your answer to part (a) straight away, you could end up wishing you had answered the other question.

In Units 3 and 5, after identifying the right set text, there is only one question that will be relevant. But you should still read the whole question first. This is because you will need to think how long to spend on each part. If you discover that you are less sure of an answer to one part, you may want to leave a little bit of extra time for tackling that section.

**E1** Read through all the relevant questions before starting your answer. This will help you to decide which question you can answer best overall, taking into account all the parts, and will also help you to decide how long to spend on each part.

As I've already indicated, once you've decided which question to do, you need to think how long to spend on each part. Here the marks available for each part

should be your guide. You have 60 minutes for the exam, and there are 45 or 50 marks available. If you allow five minutes for making some notes at the beginning and five minutes to check over your answer at the end, then you've got one minute per mark. That means, for example, that in the AS Unit 1 exam, you should spend around five minutes on part (a), 15 minutes on part (b), and 25 minutes on part (c). However, you'll probably find that each part is a little harder than the last, so you may want to spend up to 30 minutes on part (c), and cut down (a) and (b) a little. And you may find that you know the answer to one part better than another, so you may want to leave a little more time for the part you find difficult.

The marks also give you an idea about how much you should write. If there are just two marks, then a single precise sentence will often be enough. If there are six marks, then three or four sentences is often enough. With the longer answers, something around 500 words is good for the AS exams, and around 750 words for the A2 exams.

**E2** The number of marks available for each part should be a rough guide to how long you spend on it and how much you should write. But allow a little extra time for the later parts and parts you find difficult.

Before you start to write your answer to any part, read the question again very closely. There are two things to look out for. First, notice the command words, and remind yourself what they are asking for. In part (a) of the example for Unit 4 above, you are asked to 'Describe and illustrate two ways in which mental states allegedly differ from brain states.' If you only describe, and do not provide examples, then you won't get full marks. Second, notice the precise phrasing of the question. For example, in part (c) of the example for Unit 1 above, the question asks you to 'Assess the view that all of our *concepts* are derived from experience.' This is different from the question of whether all of our *knowledge* is derived from experience. Noticing this will help you keep your answer relevant.

Because an exam is exciting (good or bad), many people have a tendency to notice only what the question is about, e.g. empiricism or Descartes's views on God. They don't notice the rest of the words in the question. But the question is never 'so tell me everything you know about empiricism'! *Every word counts.*

**E3** Before starting your answer, read the question again very closely. Take note of every word, and especially the 'command word' that tells you what to do.

You are now ready to start answering the question. But, especially with the longer answers (parts (b) and (c)), many people find it is worth organizing their thoughts first. What are you going to say, in what order? This is particularly important with questions that involve evaluation, since arguments require that you present ideas in a logical order. If you've memorised an outline or a web-diagram, quickly write it out at the beginning so that you note down all the points. It is very easy to forget something or go off at a tangent once you are stuck into the arguments. Having an outline or web-diagram to work from will help you keep your answer relevant and structured. It will also remind you how much you still want to cover, so it can help you pace yourself better. However, you might discover, as you develop your answer, that parts of the outline or diagram are irrelevant or just don't fit. Don't worry; the outline is only there as a guide.

**E4** Before you start your answer, especially if it will be comparatively long, it can be worth writing out your outline or web-diagram first. This can help remind you of the key points you want to make, and the order in which you want to make them.

All the questions ask for examples at some point. Finding and using a good example is very important. Good examples are concise and relevant, and support your argument. But you need to explain why they support your argument. An example is an illustration, not an argument.

**E5** Keep your examples short and make sure they support the point you want to make. Always explain how they support your point.

Because philosophy is about the logical relationship of ideas, there are a number of rules of thumb about presentation. Here are four important ones.

**E6** Four rules of thumb:

- (a) Don't use a 'technical term', like 'the greatest happiness principle' or 'the ontological argument', without saying what it means.
- (b) Describe a theory, at least briefly, before evaluating it. If you have described it in answer to a previous part, that is fine.
- (c) Keep related ideas together. If you have a thought later on, add a footnote indicating where in the answer you want it to be read.
- (d) Don't state the conclusion to an argument before you've discussed the argument, especially if you are going to present objections to that conclusion. You can state what the argument hopes to show, but don't state it as a conclusion.

Finally, it is very easy to forget something, or say it in an unclear way. Leave time to check your answer at the end. You might find you can add a sentence here or there to connect two ideas together more clearly, or that some word is left undefined. These little things can make a big difference to the mark.

**E7** Leave time to check your answer at the end. You may want to add a helpful sentence here and there.

## ● REVISION TIPS

R1. Learn the theories. Who said what? What terms and concepts did they use? What arguments did they use to defend their positions?

R2. Practise applying your knowledge by answering questions about it. The best questions to practise with are past exam questions, but you can also make up questions for yourself.

R3. Prepare examples beforehand, rather than try to invent them in the exam. If you can use your own, that's great (you'll get extra marks if they are good). But they must be short and they must make the right point; so try them out on your friends and teachers first.

R4. Think reflectively about the arguments and issues. Practise arguing for and against a particular view. Using commentators where appropriate, think about which arguments are better, and why. Think about the place and importance of arguments in a philosopher's overall viewpoint.

R5. Create structured outlines or web-diagrams for particular issues. Try to cover all the main points.

R6. Practise writing timed answers. Use your notes at first, but then practise without them.

## ● EXAM TIPS

E1. Read through all the relevant questions before starting your answer. This will help you to decide which question you can answer best overall, taking into account all the parts, and will also help you to decide how long to spend on each part.

E2. The number of marks available for each part should be a rough guide to how long you spend on it and how much you should write. But allow a little extra time for the later parts and parts you find difficult.

E3. Before starting your answer, read the question again very closely. Take note of every word, and especially the 'command word' that tells you what to do.

E4. Before you start your answer, especially if it will be comparatively long, it can be worth writing out your outline or web-diagram first. This can help remind you of the key points you want to make, and the order in which you want to make them.

E5. Keep your examples short and make sure they support the point you want to make. Always explain how they support your point.

E6. Four rules of thumb:

- (a) Don't use a 'technical term', like 'the greatest happiness principle' or 'the ontological argument', without saying what it means.
- (b) Describe a theory, at least briefly, before evaluating it. If you have described it in answer to a previous part, that is fine.
- (c) Keep related ideas together. If you have a thought later on, add a footnote indicating where in the answer you want it to be read.
- (d) Don't state the conclusion to an argument before you've discussed the argument, especially if you are going to present objections to that conclusion. You can state what the argument hopes to show, but don't state it *as* a conclusion.

E7. Leave time to check your answer at the end. You may want to add a helpful sentence here and there.

## ● MARKING SCHEME

Here's how the Assessment Objectives relate to the marks:

### **AS**

Units 1, 2

- (a) 6 marks for AO1
- (b) 6 marks for AO1, 9 marks for AO2
- (c) 6 marks for AO1, 9 marks for AO2, 9 marks for AO3

Unit 3

The mark allocation is not quite as strict, but roughly as follows:

- (a) (i) 2 marks for AO1; (ii) 2 marks for AO1; (iii) 4 marks for AO1, 2 marks for AO2
- (b) 4 marks for AO1, 6 marks for AO2
- (c) 6 marks for AO1, 10 marks for AO2, 9 marks for AO3

### **A2**

Unit 4

- (a) 9 marks for AO1, 9 marks for AO2
- (b) 8 marks for AO1, 8 marks for AO2, 16 marks for AO3

Unit 5

The division of marks between AOs isn't so rigid. Overall, there are 16 marks for AO1, 16 marks for AO2, and 18 marks for AO3. As with the other units, points for AO3 are mostly concentrated in part (c).

Unit 6

In the overall division of marks, there are 10 marks for AO1, 20 marks for AO2, and 30 marks for AO3.

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