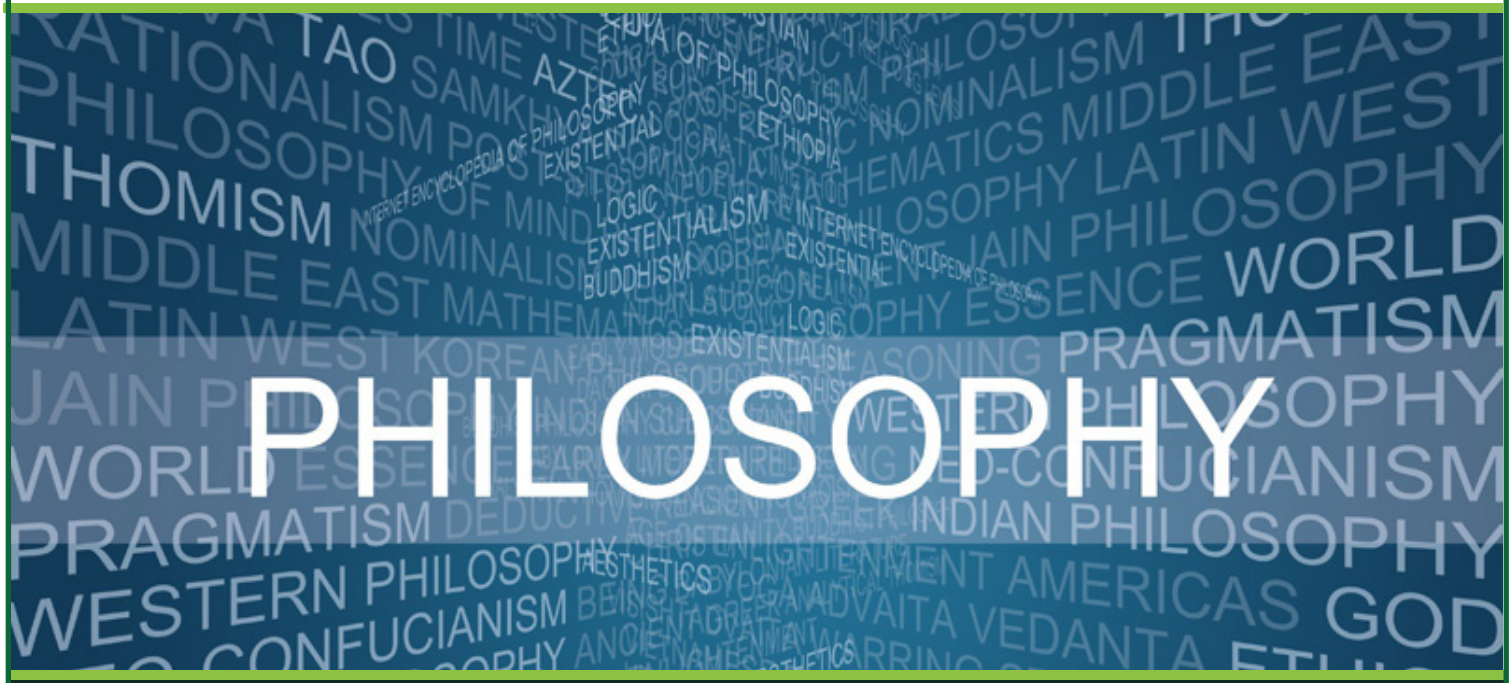
Bentley Wood
High School for Girls

Philosophy
GCSE to A level

Bridging Work

Year 11 into 12 for 2025/26



Summer work Philosophy.

Task 1

Read the following prezi presentation.

https://prezi.com/fxwucixdmgb1/introduction-to-epistemology-knowledge-and-scepticism/

Task 2

Read the two booklets attached on epistemology and ethics. Complete the activities in the booklets and the self checks at the end of each booklet.

Task 3.

Go to the following website:

https://www.philosophersmag.com/games

Then play the following three games:

- Should you kill the backpacker
- Philosophical health check
- Elementary, my dear Watson.

The point of the games is to test your reasoning. Make a note of the outcome. What issues does each game raise about our ability to make consistent moral and logical decisions?

(Feel free to try the other games too!)

Task 4.

Complete one question.

Select ONE of the questions below and write a short essay (up to 500 words) explaining what the statement means, reasons why you think it may be correct and reasons why it may not be correct; you then need to come to a clear judgement.

- Which would you rather be - an unhappy human being or a happy dog?
- If there is no free will, should we punish people at all?
- Is it wrong to have children, if you don't know whether they want to be born?
- If super-intelligent aliens want to eat humans, are they wrong?
- Would you choose to live in a computer simulation if it will make you a lot happier?

Task 5.

Read the following story by Ursula Le Guin: the ones who walk away from Omelas.

https://shsdavisapes.pbworks.com/f/Omelas.pdf

Answer the following question:

- Are certain actions wrong, regardless of whether they lead to the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people?

Task 6.

You must read at least one of the books listed below. Some are freely available online.

The following novels are great as an introduction to some of the themes covered in Philosophy.

- Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never let me go* (cloning)
- Jodi Picoult, *My sister's keeper* (medical ethics)
- Aldous Huxley, *Brave new world* (utilitarianism)
- Fyodor Dostoyvesky, *Crime and punishment* (utilitarianism and deontology)
- Emile Zola, *Germinal* (nihilism)
- David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas* (eternal return, reincarnation)
- George Orwell, *Animal farm* (political philosophy, animal rights)
- Yann Martel, *The life of Pi* (ethics; religious beliefs)
- Voltaire, *Candide* (the problem of evil)
- Kobo Abe, *The woman in the dunes* (human condition)
- Philip.K Dick, any of his books (science fiction)
- Margaret Atwood, *the Handmaid's tale* (women's rights; religion and equality)
- Joseph Heller, *Catch 22* (ethics of war)
- Jose Saramago*, the Cave* (reference to Plato)
- Jose Saramago *Blindness (*mass epidemic*)*
- Albert Camus *The Plague or the stranger* (existentialism, nihilism)
- Mary Shelley*, Frankenstein* (free will and determinism)

Task 7 (extension)

Films with a philosophical theme to watch

https://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/apr/14/force-majeure-films-philosophy-memento-ida-its-a-wonderful-life

https://livelearnevolve.com/watch-therefore-10-best-philosophical-films/

and if you have Netflix, watch the Good place! The explanation of key philosophical concepts is excellent!

Introduction to epistemology

TOPIC 1

Introduction

You will probably need about 2 hours to complete this topic.

Epistemology is an umbrella term used to describe the study of philosophical problems underlying theories of knowledge. Epistemology attempts to answer important questions such as:

- Is knowledge possible or is it just belief?
- Is science truly objective and beyond doubt?
- Are there things we cannot doubt?
- How much evidence is needed for us to be certain?
- Can we trust our senses?

In this course epistemology is divided into two areas:

- reason and experience (3.1 Unit 1 PHIL1 – compulsory)
- knowledge of the external world (3.2 Unit 2 PHIL2 – optional).

Reason and experience is covered in this part of the course. Knowledge of the external world is covered in Part 2 of the course.

It is compulsory to study reason and experience at AS level (and indeed in a lot of university Philosophy degrees) because the concepts it focuses on are so central to the study of Philosophy as a whole – how we build ideas and how we create knowledge about the world.

Objectives

When you have completed this topic you should be able to:

- explain what philosophers mean by knowledge
- explain how scepticism undermines the search for knowledge
- explain how rationalism and empiricism attempt to solve the problem of scepticism
- explain what philosophers mean by concepts and ideas.

What is knowledge?

Before we can start to explore the arguments developed by different philosophers in the search for knowledge, we first need to understand what philosophers mean by 'knowledge'.

Traditionally, there are three different types of knowledge:

- *practical knowledge*: knowledge that is skills-based, e.g. being able to drive or use a computer
- *knowledge by acquaintance*: knowledge that doesn't involve facts but familiarity with someone or an object, e.g. I know my mother, I know what an apple looks like
- *factual knowledge*: knowledge based on fact, e.g. I know that the sun rises every morning – I know it is true.

Philosophers are mostly interested in *factual knowledge* because they are trying to understand how we can achieve truth about the world.

One of the first philosophers to attempt a definition of knowledge was the famous Ancient Greek philosopher, Plato. One of Plato's main concerns was to distinguish knowledge from belief. He gave the example of two guides, one who knows the road to a certain destination, and the other who just uses guesswork. Both guides arrive at their destination but which one is more reliable?

Most people would argue that the guide who has expertise is more reliable. This is why Plato argues that true belief gives us knowledge of the world only by coincidence. It is never really certain and could change at any time. For example, I may believe in aliens and aliens may actually exist, but if I cannot give an adequate reason for my claim I can't really call it knowledge.

Plato argues that for a factual claim to be knowledge, it has to be a belief which is true and justified. His definition of knowledge is therefore that it must be a justified true belief.

For example, I know that Paris is the capital of France if and only if:

- I believe it
- it is true (Paris is the capital of France)
- I can give justification for my belief (e.g. I read it in an encyclopaedia).

Think about this in the first activity.

Activity 1

(10 minutes)

Read the following claims and decide whether they fit the criteria for justified true belief. Are they necessarily knowledge claims?

- Amy thinks that Great Britain is part of the European Union because she watched a documentary about it on television.
- Tom thinks that Great Britain is part of the European Union because Santa Claus told him so in a dream.
- Chris thinks that Mount Everest is 8848 m high because he read it in a Geography book.
- Anil thinks that Josh is in the library because he has just seen him in there.

Tom's claim for knowledge seems unlikely. It may be that Tom is correct in thinking that Great Britain is part of the European Union but his justification that Santa Claus told him in a dream is weak. In fact Amy's belief seems more likely because her justification for believing that Britain is in the European Union seems stronger – she saw a documentary. Tom has a problem with the justification for his belief, whereas Amy's claim seems to fit the criteria for justified true belief. But does it? Documentaries can be wrong and if this documentary is wrong then her justification is also weak.

Chris's claim that he read the information in a Geography book seems strong justification for his belief in the height of Mount Everest. But is it? How do we know that Everest is 8848 m high at this moment? The earth shifts and changes, snow melts and forms, rocks fall. Similarly, Anil has seen Josh in the library but is Josh still there? He might have seen Richard, Josh's brother.

You can see from this that although all the claims are justified true beliefs, they don't seem to be knowledge claims. There is a problem with justification. This is one of the main problems with theory of knowledge – can we trust our justification? Is it adequate or relevant? Can we ever be certain of anything? This is the area of doubt that scepticism focuses on. We will look at this next.

What is scepticism?

To be sceptical about something is to doubt or have reservations about it. Scepticism is also a philosophical movement. There are several forms of scepticism but they are all based on philosophical doubt: to what extent can we trust our senses? What can we know for certain? Can we know anything at all?

These are the classic arguments used by the sceptics:

- The **infinite regress argument**: for a belief to be knowledge, it must be true and justified. But how do I know my justification is final and can give me certainty? I would need to prove my justification right. This means that my justification has to be justified: the infinite regress is the idea that nothing can be certain because every belief needs to be proven true. This process goes on forever and is called the **infinite regress of justification**.
- Are our personal experiences sufficient to establish what we claim to know? Is there a guarantee that what we see, hear, smell, touch and taste are beyond doubt? For example, clear-sighted people and colour-blind people do not see the same colours. Hot water to a cold hand can feel hotter than to a warm hand, and vice versa. People who have had a limb amputated sometimes still have sensations and even feel pain in the missing limb. Our senses can therefore mislead us about the nature of the world.
- Waking dreams: some dreams seem so real that we may find it difficult to distinguish between waking and dreaming experiences. How do I know I am not dreaming right now?

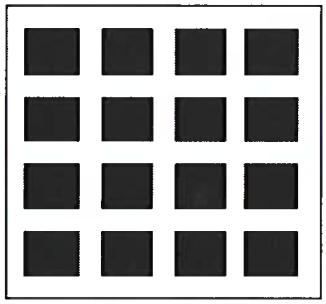
Activity 2

(10 minutes)

1 In what way do the following optical illusions illustrate the problem of scepticism?

a) The grid

Stare at the grid below for a few seconds. Is anything strange happening?

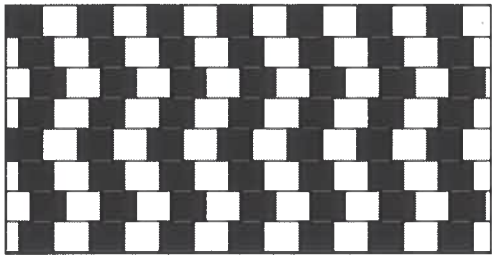


cont.

Activity 2 cont.

b) Sloping lines

Look at the picture below of sloping lines. Are they sloping?



c) Old or young woman

Is this an old or a young woman?

d) A straight stick dipped in water looks bent. Is it really bent?

2 In the film *The Matrix*, a computer hacker learns about the true nature of reality and discovers that human beings are kept unconscious in pods and fed sensations by machines. Why is this an illustration of scepticism?

Feedback to activities starts on page 11X

It seems that because there are some instances where we cannot trust our senses, we could reasonably infer that they deceive us all the time. This leads global sceptics to argue that knowledge is impossible because certainty can never be achieved. A famous Ancient Greek philosopher called Pyrrho of Ellis doubted every claimed piece of knowledge, and maintained that no one could know anything or arrive at the knowledge of truth. He carried his scepticism to such an extreme that his friends were obliged to accompany him wherever he went, to make sure he was not run over by carriages and did not fall down precipices.

But is Pyrrho's extreme scepticism really a tenable position? Common sense tells us that if we cross a busy road, we will get run over, that if we walk towards a cliff, we will fall and that walls don't disappear when we don't perceive them. Similarly, the idea that we could be in the matrix and our brains in a vat fed sensations by clever computers seems very unlikely. A more positive form of scepticism is needed – one which can raise doubts or undermine theories but which also aims to prove what we know by producing clear conclusions.

The sources of knowledge as an answer to scepticism

One way to solve the problem of the infinite regress and of scepticism as a whole is to think of beliefs that are self-justifying and/or cannot be doubted. Thinking about how we form knowledge claims about the world should help us do this. Try this in the next activity.

Activity 3

(10 minutes)

1 In the table below write down in the first column four things which you think you know (factual knowledge). Then trace the knowledge back to its origins and write in the next column how you know each thing. We have provided a couple of examples to get you started.

I know that ...	I know this because ...
Dandelions are yellow	I can see that their colour is yellow
2 + 2 = 4	I can work it out in my mind

2 Look at the origins of knowledge claims you have identified in the second column. Do they have anything in common?

You should have worked out that most of your knowledge claims actually came from your senses. Human beings have five senses available to them:

- taste
- touch
- sight
- smell
- hearing.

For example, I know that dandelions are yellow because my sense of sight gives me a particular colour experience. I need to trust that my senses give me correct information about the external world in order to gain factual knowledge. Some philosophers argue that we have to believe that our senses are accurate most of the time and that we can actually distinguish between real experiences and illusions. For example I know that if I see a pond of water in the middle of the desert, it is likely to be a mirage. Therefore, our senses can be the source of knowledge, even though they do not give us certainty.

But what about claims such as 2 + 2 = 4 or 'being good means treating others as you would like to be treated'? Do such claims ever relate to our senses?

It would be hard to claim that they do – some other process is involved which does not necessarily require the use of the senses. Philosophers usually argue that such ideas or concepts derive from thought alone, or what they call reason. I can work out from my mind alone that 2 + 2 = 4. I may have needed to be taught about numbers when I was a child but I do not need to physically see two objects added to two objects in order to work out that 2 + 2 = 4.

Knowledge claims derived from reason are very important in Philosophy because, if they are not derived from the senses, they are immune to doubt. Even if I doubt my senses, I still know that 2 + 2 = 4.

We can therefore see that two different sources of knowledge emerge:

- ideas that we gain from our senses
- ideas that we gain from reason.

It can be argued that these basic ideas are the basis of all our knowledge claims. This is shown in Figures 1.1 and 1.2.

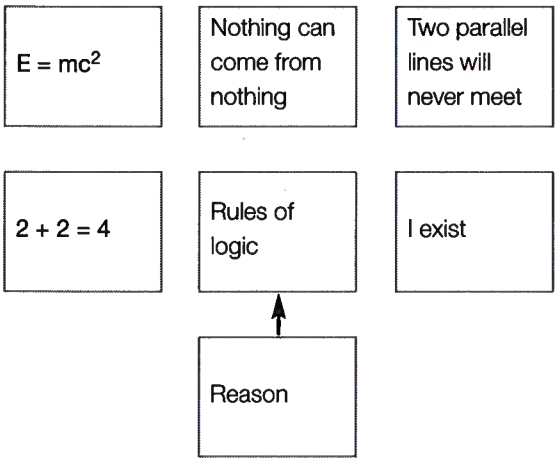


Figure 1.1 Reason as the source of our knowledge system

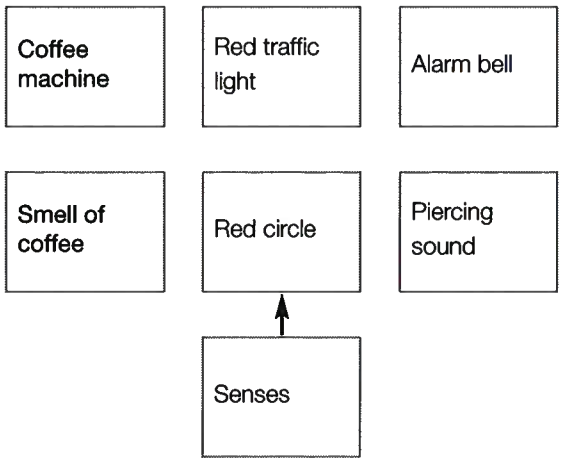


Figure 1.2 Senses as the source of our knowledge system

In the next two topics, we will be examining these two different types of knowledge and linking them to different philosophical schools:

- In Topic 2 we will look at empiricism – the view that knowledge comes from our senses.
- In Topic 3 we will look at rationalism – the view that knowledge comes from our mind or reason.

Empiricism and rationalism

Empiricism and rationalism are two opposing philosophical schools of thought. They both attempt to establish the source of our knowledge claims and to determine how we form concepts and ideas.

Empiricism argues that knowledge is based on experience whereas rationalism argues that knowledge is based on reason.

Empiricism

Empiricism was mostly developed by British philosophers from the seventeenth century. These philosophers were influenced by the developments in scientific knowledge from the end of the seventeenth century and the creation of bodies such as the Royal Society, which focused on discovering new ways to explain the world around us, scientifically, socially and politically. The key empiricists we will be looking at in this course are Locke, Hume and Berkeley.

Empiricism is the view that knowledge is derived from our senses. For example, I know what a red circle is because I have experienced through my senses the colour of red and the shape of a circle.

Rationalism

Rationalism originated with a French philosopher called René Descartes and gained popularity during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, mainly in Europe. However, we can find rationalist ideas long before Descartes in the writings of Plato.

Rationalism is the view that knowledge does not come from the senses but from reason. As we have seen from the arguments of scepticism, senses can deceive us and therefore cannot be trusted to give us true and certain knowledge. Rationalists argue that instead we should derive knowledge only from our reason and logical abilities.

Self check

Briefly explain and illustrate the two main sources of knowledge outlined above.

You will find the feedback to self checks at the end of this unit.

Summary

In this topic we have seen that knowledge can be understood in different ways, depending on how the verb 'to know' is used. We have:

- practical knowledge (knowing how to do something)
- knowledge by acquaintance (knowing someone or something)
- factual knowledge (knowing that something is the case).

Philosophers are concerned with factual knowledge – a fact is a statement that is true, and truth itself is one of the main concerns of philosophy.

Philosophers have focused some of their studies on building a theory of how we acquire and develop factual knowledge. This field of philosophy is called epistemology.

Factual knowledge in philosophy is usually defined as justified true belief – in order for me to know something, I must believe that it is the case, it must be true and I must have proof for my belief.

However, sceptics have argued that knowledge can never be achieved, because justification is never certain and in itself needs to be justified. This is called the infinite regress of justification.

Scepticism is a philosophical position which argues that every knowledge claim we make can be doubted. For example, our senses can deceive us (an example would be optical illusions) and we may not even be sure that we are not dreaming right now or that we are fed sensations by a computer (as in the film *The Matrix*). This means that, because we can question every belief we have and we can also question the evidence behind our beliefs, knowledge is impossible.

In order to address this problem, philosophers have looked at the source of our knowledge claims, to see if there is any belief that doesn't need justification (as it would then stop the infinite regress). There are two main schools of thought:

- rationalist philosophers argue that the mind can provide us with basic beliefs (I don't need my senses to know that 2 + 2 = 4)
- empiricists argue that senses are the source of knowledge (I need my sense of sight to know that dandelions are yellow).

We will look more closely at empiricism in Topic 2 and at rationalism in Topic 3.

Feedback to activities

Activity 2

1 These are all examples of optical illusions – natural phenomena like mirages where what our eyes perceive is different from reality. This shows that our senses can deceive us into believing something that is not real. This supports the sceptic's claim that knowledge cannot be achieved.

2 This is similar to the dream argument. In the same way I may not know whether I am in a dream or I am awake, I can never be completely sure that my experiences are real and not created by a super-computer feeding me sensations. It may go against common sense but it is logically possible.

Activity 3

Many of our knowledge claims are based on what we perceive, e.g. yellow dandelions, square tables or sweet cake, but some knowledge claims such as mathematical claims seem to use the mind rather than perception. I use my thinking ability or reason to work out that 2 + 2 = 4.

Topic 1

Introduction to ethics

Introduction

What would you do if a person close to you, terminally ill and in unbearable pain, asked you to help her die? Regardless of what the law says, would you agree? What would be the reasons behind your decision? Would you say a life defined only by pain is not worth living, or would you, on the contrary, think that even if the person is in pain, her life is still valuable and her experiences meaningful?

In such difficult situations, people usually appeal to moral principles; they would argue that assisted suicide is right or that it is wrong, or maybe that it's acceptable in certain cases. Such dilemmas and the questions that surround them are the basis of a specific field of philosophy called ethics. The aim of ethics, or moral philosophy, is to explain what we mean by morality and moral terms such as 'good', 'right', 'wrong' and so on, as well as what moral standards we should adopt. This is an essential aspect of philosophy, in so far as most of the decisions we make and the actions we decide to perform are informed by moral principles.

In this introductory topic, we will look at the main concepts that moral philosophy refers to and the different philosophical approaches to the issue of morality.

You will probably need about 2 hours to complete this topic.

Objectives

When you have completed this topic you should be able to:

- outline the core aspects of moral philosophy
- explain the difference between moral, immoral and amoral actions
- explain the difference between normative ethics, meta-ethics and applied ethics

- identify the aims of normative ethics, meta-ethics and applied ethics.

What is ethics?

Morality, understood in an everyday sense, broadly means having some kind of system of values – deciding what is right or wrong for oneself. **Ethics**, however, takes a much more systematic and critical approach to the question. The focus of ethics is indeed the notion of right and wrong, but what it attempts to explain is *why* people make certain moral decisions and how we create moral systems that tell us how to act. Some ethical theories also aim to tell us what moral standards we should choose and how we could achieve a 'good life'. While non-philosophers see morality as a set of rules to obey and principles to follow, moral philosophers want to know how those rules can be justified and also the logic behind moral judgement.

Moral or non-moral

One of the first tasks of moral philosophy is to be clear on what makes an action moral, and to differentiate between moral and non-moral judgements. Clearly, telling a friend that she should buy the red coat I have just seen in a shop is not a moral judgement, whereas telling her that she shouldn't buy a red coat made by child slaves in India is. But how can we explain the difference between the two?

The next activity will help you to think about this.

Activity 1

(Allow 10 minutes)

Which of the following are examples of moral issues?

1 We shouldn't litter the street.

2 You shouldn't tell white lies.

3 We should watch TV.

4 We shouldn't experiment on animals.

5 I should get three A levels.

Most people would argue that telling white lies and experimenting on animals are moral issues, whereas getting good grades or watching TV are not. However, the same key term, 'should' – which has some moral dimension – is used in all cases. 'Should' has a prudential use, which means that it is based on careful consideration – something has been thought about – but also a moral use, in so far as it makes implicit reference to some kind of guideline of behaviour or principle. A non-moral action doesn't involve the consideration of principles.

Thus, the main difference between moral and non-moral issues is that moral issues are based on values. A fact is a descriptive statement about the world, but could also be what the law says, what religions say or what takes place in nature – for example, it is illegal to have abortions in Ireland and people are banned from smoking in certain public places in England. A value, however, is never intended to be descriptive: it is a judgement about the world, and implies the acceptance or rejection of norms of behaviour, and the understanding of terms such as right or wrong.

Philosophers investigate the relationship between facts and values, which means how we view the world and the moral principles we adopt. This has led them to make a distinction between moral, immoral and amoral actions:

- An immoral action is an action that is considered morally wrong.
- A moral action is an action that is considered morally right or good.
- A morally neutral action is one that is independent from moral judgement – for example, the prudential use of the verb 'should' when we say 'You should eat more fruit.'
- An amoral action is one performed by someone who is not morally aware – that is, they don't have any concept or understanding of right and wrong.

Activity 2

(Allow 10 minutes)

Are the following actions moral, immoral or amoral?

1 A lion kills a zebra.

2 A toddler hits a baby.

3 A 19-year-old steals from a shop.

4 A child accidentally fires a gun and injures someone.

5 A 40-year-old mother hits her child.

We would probably consider the actions of the lion, the toddler and the child amoral. In the case of the lion, we would argue that it is not capable of thinking morally, and a baby, a toddler or even a child does not yet understand the moral implications of their actions. (In any case, the child's action is accidental.) What we need to think about, therefore, are the criteria for moral responsibility.

Philosophers recognise certain requirements as essential to be able to have moral choice and make moral decisions. A moral agent is a being who is capable of moral decisions and with this capacity comes responsibility for the moral or immoral behaviour chosen. The main criteria for moral agency are listed below:

- We need to be free to make choices (moral philosophers presume **free will**).
- We need to be rational (this means, for example, being able to look at the pros and cons of decisions and weigh up consequences).
- We need to be self-aware and conscious (in so far as we understand that we are the one performing the action).
- The act must be intentional.
- The act must have an effect on others, in so far as it can benefit or harm them. The core problem in ethics, however, is who we define as 'others'. Are the beings in our moral sphere moral agents like us? Or could they be those incapable of moral choice, such as animals, someone in a coma or a newborn baby?

Philosophers are aware of the problem, and make a distinction between moral agents and moral patients. While a moral agent is one who is capable of moral choice, a moral patient is not capable of making a moral decision but still partakes in the moral realm. Thus, many of us would not give a second thought about killing a wasp buzzing by a window, but we wouldn't hurt a newborn baby: a baby is part of the moral world, in so far as we have moral responsibilities towards it. This distinction will be particularly important when you look at applied ethics in Section 5.

The three main approaches to ethics

There are three main types of ethical theory:

1 **Normative ethics**

2 **Meta-ethics**

3 **Applied ethics**.

Normative ethics

Normative ethical theories are theories that set up moral standards and tell us how we should behave.

Normative ethics is concerned with the substance of ethics and its application. It is concerned with prescribing both ways of behaving and behaviour to avoid. It examines the norms by which people make moral choices. It involves questions about one's duty (what one 'ought to do') and questions about the values that are expressed through moral choices (what constitutes a 'good life'). It goes beyond merely descriptive ethics and looks at statements about behaviour.

Activity 3

(Allow 5 minutes)

From the following three statements, choose the one that you feel best defines ethics or morality in general.

1 To be moral is to take into consideration the consequences of one's actions in terms of preference, satisfaction, happiness and benefits for other people.

2 To be moral you should wish that your moral choices could stand the test of being made law for all – that other people would agree with them.

3 To be moral is to cultivate and display certain qualities, such as modesty, truthfulness and patience.

If you chose statement 1, you agree with **utilitarianism**, a normative movement that started in England in the nineteenth century, which claims that an action is good if it has positive or pleasurable consequences. It asserts that the foundation of moral principles should be the greatest happiness for the greatest

number of people. Utilitarianism is a **teleological** theory; this means that the moral evaluations of actions are based on the *consequences* of those actions. You will study this theory in Topic 2.

If you chose statement 2, you agree with **deontological** (from the Greek *deon* meaning 'duty') ethics or **Kantian ethics**. Deontologists, such as Emmanuel Kant (1724–1804), argue that to be moral is to follow your duty and only have good intentions when you perform an action. It argues that considering consequences could lead to immoral actions. You will study this theory in Topic 3.

If you chose statement 3, you agree with a normative theory called **virtue theory** or **virtue ethics**, which is the idea that to be moral is to develop certain characteristics that help us achieve the moral good. This leads to happiness or flourishing. You will study this theory in Topic 4.

Meta-ethics

Meta-ethics is a more abstract, conceptual take on morality. Rather than assert moral standards, it investigates moral terms themselves and looks at what moral concepts mean. In other words, it focuses on ethical language.

Most of moral philosophy before the twentieth century was essentially normative – that is, it investigated the kind of moral standards we should arrive at, and the rules that would allow us to regulate right and wrong conduct. At the beginning of the twentieth century, however, philosophers started to question normative ethics and to some extent started to see moral standards as culturally determined. Instead of asking what is moral, what makes an action moral, or how should I be moral, they decided to think about the meaning of terms such as right, wrong, good, bad, and so on, and argued that the best way to understand morality was to try to uncover what moral terms actually mean rather than thinking about how to act. This is often referred to as the linguistic turn. Such an outlook on ethics was not entirely new, however: it was already present in the philosophy of the eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher David Hume.

Meta-ethics is probably the most challenging aspect of this course. There are two main approaches to meta-ethics:

- **Cognitivism** – ethical language makes claims about reality which are true or false (fact-stating). Moral truths or facts exist. When we say the term 'good' we refer to a property that is objective and exists in the world.

- **Non-cognitivism** – ethical language does not make claims about reality which are true or false (fact-stating). Moral truths do not exist and moral judgements are just based on individual likes and dislikes.

You will look at a range of cognitivist and non-cognitivist positions in Section 5.

Applied ethics

This is the area that has the most relevance to our everyday life. One of the main aims of applied ethics is to solve moral dilemmas in a systematic and philosophical way. Some of the key questions dealt with by applied ethics are:

- Is abortion morally justifiable? At what stage of foetal development should it be illegal? Are foetuses people and therefore in possession of rights?
- Is euthanasia morally acceptable? If so, should we distinguish between assisted suicide, where the patient has made it clear he/she wants to die, and non-voluntary euthanasia, where the patient has not expressed a wish to die?
- Are animals part of our moral sphere? If they are not moral agents, in so far as they cannot make moral decisions, are they moral patients, which means we have a moral responsibility towards them?
- Can a war ever be just? Do nations or individuals have a duty to fight in some circumstances? Can there be a good war? What happens after war?
- Is simulated killing immoral? Killing virtual people is clearly not the same as killing living persons, but could we say that killing in a virtual world could have immoral consequences?

Activity 4

(Allow 15 minutes)

Spend some time thinking about the questions above and make some notes outlining your immediate response to these issues. You may find it interesting to come back to your notes when you've completed your work on applied ethics in Section 5.

Self check

(Allow 15 minutes)

Explain the difference between the three areas of ethics.

You will find feedback to self checks at the end of the section.

Summary

Ethics, or moral philosophy, is the field of philosophy that deals with issues of right and wrong. It takes a systematic approach to the problem of morality by investigating what we mean by morality and why it is so essential to human flourishing. There are three main approaches to ethics. The first, normative ethics, tries to establish objective and universal moral standards for us to follow. There are three main normative theories:

- Utilitarianism argues that good consequences make individual actions moral and that the purpose of human life is to achieve happiness.
- Deontology argues that to be moral is to follow one's duty and have good intentions when we perform an action.
- Virtue theory considers how we could become a good person ('How should I be?') rather than looking at the morality of actions ('What should I do?').

Meta-ethics is a more abstract form of philosophy that investigates the linguistic meaning of moral terms. Meta-ethics has debated whether moral truths exist (moral realism), i.e. whether the term 'good' reflects something that exists in the world.

The third approach to ethics is applied ethics; this attempts to solve moral dilemmas, such as the moral status of simulated killing, eating animals or telling lies.

Key terms

applied ethics: the application of ethical theory to issues arising in life, for example stealing, or eating meat

cognitivism: the linguistic and ethical view that certain statements can express moral truths and that moral judgements can be true or false; cognitivism is associated with moral realism

deontological: the moral value of an action lies in the action itself so an action is right or wrong whatever its consequences (cf. teleological)

ethics: the field of philosophy that investigates morality and issues of right and wrong

free will: having the means to determine the course of your own life

Kantian ethics: a deontological ethical theory developed by Kant, it claims that we can determine what is right and what our duties are through the categorical imperative which is a command that we are obliged to follow; as rational agents we can work out the imperative using reason

meta-ethics: approach to ethics that aims to understand the nature of moral terms such as good, right or wrong, and the meaning of moral judgements

non-cognitivism: a meta-ethical view associated with moral anti-realism which argues that moral truths do not exist and that values cannot be derived from facts

normative ethics: a category of moral philosophy that explains how we ought to live, what constitutes right conduct and the reasons for good actions; the three main types of normative theory are utilitarianism, deontological or Kantian ethics and virtue theory

teleological: a theory of morality that derives duty or moral obligation from what is good or desirable as a consequence or as an end to be achieved (cf. deontological)

utilitarianism: the normative ethical view that an action is morally right if it has good consequences, such as pleasure or happiness; different forms include hedonistic utilitarianism (Bentham); non-hedonistic qualitative utilitarianism (Mill); non-hedonistic utilitarianism, e.g. preference utilitarianism (Singer); act utilitarianism; rule utilitarianism

virtue theory or **virtue ethics**: a normative ethical theory that locates moral value not in an action or its consequences but in the agent performing the action; stresses the need to develop a virtuous disposition and to judge actions in a broader context; knowing how to act entails practical wisdom, involving insight and experience

