Ethical Thought

This section covers AO1 content and skills

D: Meta-ethical approaches – Naturalism

Naturalism: objective moral laws exist independently of human beings

The best way to approach Naturalism is to begin with re-visiting a concept from Year 1. In philosophy, the terms ‘empirical’ and ‘empiricism’ were used. These terms are usually quite heavily associated with philosophers Locke and Berkeley but especially with the Scottish philosopher David Hume. The empirical philosophical view is particularly pertinent when it comes to consider the philosophical discipline of epistemology; that is, the study of how and what we ‘know’. The word epistemology is derived from the Greek episteme (knowledge) and logos (words or discussion), i.e. ‘discussion about knowledge’.

Key terms

Cognition: the mental action or process of acquiring knowledge and understanding through thought, experience, and the senses

Empirical: knowledge gained through the senses

Epistemology: philosophy of knowledge derived from the Greek episteme (knowledge) and logos (words or discussion) i.e. ‘discussion about knowledge’

Peripatetic: philosophical view found in ancient Greek philosophy that ‘Nothing is in the intellect that was not first in the senses’

Tabula rasa: literally means ‘a clean slate’ and refers to the peripatetic axiom

Key quotes

Naturalism is an approach to philosophical problems that interprets them as tractable through the methods of the empirical sciences or at least, without a distinctively a priori aspect of theorising. (Jacobs)

Ethical naturalism is the idea that ethics can be understood in the terms of natural science. One way of making this more specific is to say that moral properties (such as goodness and rightness) are identical with ‘natural’ properties, that is, properties that figure into scientific descriptions or explanations of things. (Rachels)

The epistemological position empiricism takes is that all knowledge is derived from the senses; that is, what we see, hear, touch, smell and feel is responded to by our intellect which gives the experiences meaning. David Hume advocated that we are born in a state of tabula rasa, which literally means ‘a clean slate’. In other words, we are born with an absence of preconceptions, predetermined views, or indeed anything in our minds. Everything that we know and learn has its origins in the world of sense experience. This is not a new idea, indeed, it affirms the peripatetic axioms of ancient Greek philosophy and it is also referred to in Aquinas’ writings: ‘Nothing is in the intellect that was not first in the senses’.

When a proposition (statement) is put forward based upon what we experience, it is first of all verified (checked for validity, i.e. does it make sense and have meaning in relation to what we experience) and then assessed through empirical means for the extent of its truthfulness or ‘truth value’. This means that the world of sense-experience is appealed to as the basis for establishing the meaning and truthfulness of a statement, proposition or theory. Once verification of meaning is established by cognition, the truth value of a proposition can be assessed.

David Hume argued that we were born tabula rasa
**Key quote**

According to the naturalist, there is only the natural order. If something is postulated or claimed to exist but is not described in the vocabulary that describes natural phenomena, and not studied by the inquiries that study natural phenomena, it is not something we should recognize as real.

(Jacobs 1E7)

**Cognitivism and realism**

Linked to this philosophical approach are the ideas of **cognitivism** and **realism**.

Cognitivism is the view that we have a natural faculty of a process information and terms and you will meet this again when studying religious language. Cognitivism holds that a statement or proposition must be related to our experience in order to verify whether or not it makes sense (true), or whether or not it is meaningful (false). Cognitive is the linguistic aspect of the empirical approach, that is, it establishes primarily whether or not a proposition has valid empirical meaning. This was crucially important to philosophers that belonged to what was called the Vienna Circle or **Logical Positivists**.

Often, an underlying assumption of cognitivism is that the world around us is objective or real, that is to say, independent of us and our minds and so can be used to establish knowledge and truth. This philosophical position is referred to as realism; however, there are many different discussions within philosophy as to how a realist understanding of the world is deemed, how this relates to cognitivism, and indeed, what the result of that implies for our knowledge of the world.

This is not our concern here. For our studies we take realism to mean that the world around us is simply 'there' and it is not just our imagination, a delusion nor psychological projection. In other words, it is a real existence that is mind-independent of us and therefore judgements about moral behaviour are 'real' because they directly relate to objective facts of existence.

For example, take the statement: 'The kind neighbour takes out my bins to the road every Monday morning.' In cognitive terms this makes sense as it concerns with our world of experience and what we know — our minds recognise the notions of kindness, neighbour, taking, etc. Realism acknowledges that this is true when we experience, through our sense of sight, the neighbour physically taking out the bins and realism acknowledges that we did not just imagine it.

The 'kindness' aspect is the final assessment. Therefore, a cognitive, realist approach affirms that a judgement as to the neighbour's moral character can be found through the experience of this being a helpful act and bringing happiness to others involved (from experience we can see that a 'kind' act is that which brings happiness). The language is meaningful, and the moral judgement relates directly to the consequences of the physical act: A cognitive, realist approach, then, sees a moral or ethical proposition as being related directly to the empirical world, truthful and valid.

### Key terms

**Cognitive:** the meta-ethical view that ethical sentences express meaningful propositions and can therefore be true or false.

**Logical Positivists:** famous group of philosophers interested in logical philosophy also known as the Vienna Circle.

**Proposition:** statement.

**Realism:** view that an object exists in reality independently of our mind (mind-independent).

**Ethical Naturalism:** the view that ethical propositions can be understood by analyzing the natural world.
The classical example of Ethical Naturalism as an ethical theory is that of Utilitarianism as proposed by Mill. A Utilitarian approach is typically Naturalistic in that it applies ethical reasoning from the basis of the experience of happiness and that the most useful ethical action is seen as that which brings the maximum levels of 'happiness or pleasure'. Utilitarians argue that everyone should do the most useful thing. The most useful thing is seen as an action or actions that result in maximum levels of happiness or pleasure. Therefore, actions that produce the most happiness are seen as good. However, Mill was very interested in establishing an ethical society, not just individual guidance, and therefore the most important contribution by Mill then, can be argued to his introduction of the idea of universalisability. This proposed that everyone ought to aim at the happiness of everyone, as increasing the general happiness will increase individual happiness. This argument then supports the idea that people should put the interests of the group before their own interests.

Mill's theory of Utilitarianism mirrors the progressive statements on the previous page:

- Moral terms can be understood by analysing the natural world in relation to the effects of our actions.
- Ethical statements are cognitive and can be verified or falsified in relation to what we know about actions and their consequences from the empirical world, namely, the amount of happiness or pain they create.
- Verified moral statements are objective truths and universal so we can establish that everyone ought to aim at the happiness of everyone, as increasing the general happiness will increase individual happiness.
- The objective features of the world, namely, the impact of acts that create happiness and acts that create suffering, make our ethical propositions about the nature of such action true or false.

The most important point about Ethical Naturalism is that it supports the view that objective moral laws exist independently of human beings and are grounded in the empirical nature of existence. Having established the link between an objective external existence (realism) and that a cognitivist approach can verify or establish the validity of what we experience (empiricism), then it logically follows that what we know about what we experience makes our ethical statements objective. Therefore, we can recognize objective moral laws that exist independently of human beings and that are located firmly in the world around us.

As Naturalism places great emphasis on the empirical then it opens itself up to the realm of the sciences and so we find we have social Naturalism, biological Naturalism, evolutionary ethics, psychological Naturalism and philosophical Naturalism. There also exists the whole question of whether or not the purpose of Naturalism is descriptive or normative, as we shall see later with evolutionary ethics.

For the purpose of this Specification, Ethical Naturalism should be understood as set out here: that is, as empirical, cognitive, and realist, and also in relation to the contribution to philosophy of F. H. Bradley to which we now turn.

**AO1 Activity**

Think of an everyday scenario and write a paragraph describing it with reference to some of the key terms above.

**Study tip**

Start to create a glossary of key terms but make sure that you have a separate column for the definitions so that it makes it easy to cover them up and test yourself.

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**F. H. Bradley's Ethical Studies and Idealist Moral Philosophy**

The rest of this section will look at F. H. Bradley. The following pages may seem comprehensive when Bradley appears to be just one part of the Specification list, however, F. H. Bradley's work is the key text for TIA and is a whole entity in relation to Naturalism and the intention is that the following pages can be used to select appropriate evidence and to illustrate naturalistic propositions and its overall position. Obviously, you will need to take all this into an examination with you but that does not mean it is not relevant. Any of the following can be used to support your answers. It also makes sense to consider Bradley's full argument as presented in chapter five of his work Ethical Studies which is where he expounds key elements of ethical naturalistic theory.

Francis Herbert Bradley was born on January 30, 1846 in Clapham, Surrey, England. His father was an evangelical preacher. Bradley studied at Marlborough College and left it in 1863. In 1865, Bradley got into University College, Oxford. He was later elected to a fellowship at Merton College, Oxford in 1870 which was tenable for life, had no teaching duties, and could be continued only by marriage. Bradley never married and therefore, without teaching duties, had much time to continue writing. Although Bradley was inspired by Hegel's dialectical method, Bradley did not look upon himself as a Hegelian philosopher. However, his views on ethics were aired in his highly polemical work Ethical Studies published in 1876. This was a series of related essays to work dialectically through the definitive theories towards a better understanding of ethics.

F. H. Bradley was a famous British philosopher belonging to the tradition of British Idealism or Neo-Hegelianism as they are sometimes called. He was heavily influenced by the philosophers Hegel and Schelling. Technically, Bradley cannot be regarded as a Naturalist philosopher: his major work on ethics, Ethical Studies, is a highly polemical work typical of the Hegelian tradition. George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel was a German philosopher who tried to overcome the idea of dualism, that is the distinction of the metaphysical and the physical by considering one view (thesis) and then the contrary view (antithesis) and then the contrary view (synthesis) and then combining them (synthesis) – although it was not quite as straight forward as this may suggest. This method was known as dialectical synthesis. Bradley, a British idealist philosopher, following Hegel's methodology, attempted to present a more developed form of Naturalism by combining it with Kant's philosophy of duty.

The Stanford Encyclopedia suggests that sometimes Bradley's work is taken out of context and considered as his 'final' position on philosophy and this has happened with regard to Naturalism. Although Bradley gives a good account of it, Naturalism is not his final position and this explains some of the confusion when he is presented as a Naturalist philosopher in some books.

**Key quotes**

There is a broad sense of 'moral naturalism' whereby a moral naturalist is someone who believes an adequate philosophical account of morality can be given in terms entirely consistent with a naturalistic position in philosophical inquiry more generally. According to such broad metaphysical naturalism, all facts are natural facts. Natural facts are understood to be facts about the natural world, facts of the sort in which the natural sciences trade. (Lemmon) ... the famous 'My Station and Its Duties,' where he outlines a social conception of the self and of morality with such vigour that it is understandable that the mistaken idea that it expresses his own position has gained some currency. (Stanford)
Bradley's Hegelian Ethics and the development of the Naturalist philosophy

It is in the essay entitled My Station and its Duties (chapter five of Bradley's book Ethical Studies, 1867), where he attempts to unify Kant's theory of duty with the Utilitarianism of Utilitarianism. As mentioned above, Ethical Studies is a progressive work in that contains seven different proposals about, and positions on, ethical theories, each of which is seen as superior to the previous one and yet at the same time retaining some of the validity of its predecessor. Therefore, the presentation of this in essay five is seen to be an advancement of one type of Naturalism (ethical Hedonism and Utilitarianism) and an improvement on the deontology and transcendental idealism of Kant. In true Hegelian fashion, Bradley rejects both Utilitarianism and Kantian ethics, but in My Station and its Duties, combines (through dialectical synthesis) the empirical basis of Naturalism with the idea of universal obligation evident in Kant's idealistic ethical theory.

Bradley is attracted by the Naturalist approach of Utilitarianism but is uncomfortable with its subjective nature and the lack of unity that it brings, as Norman confirms, the aim of My Station and its Duties is to present 'all these particulars into a coherent whole'. Bradley is also interested in Kant's transcendental notion of duty, but yet is dissociated from the detachment from the empirical realm that is, according to Norman, 'divorced from any way of becoming particular and concrete'. Norman continues, 'The initial movement is from the hedonistic utilitarianism of pleasure for pleasure’s sake to the Kantian morality of duty for duty's sake, and from that to the social morality of “My Station and its Duties.”

Key terms

- **Deontological**: ethical system that outlines a set of duties
- **Self-realization**: Bradley’s view that the self wanders through a philosophical course of discovery that ends with the one being united with the whole
- **Transcendental Idealism**: Kant’s philosophy that the human self, or transcendental ego, constructs knowledge out of some impressions and from universal concepts called categories that it imposes upon them.

Key quote

The moral world is a world of active agents, choosing things and doing things, and projecting themselves upon their environment. (Warnock)

John Donne, Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions, Meditation 17

Bradley's essay My Station and Its Duties

In looking at Bradley's vision of ethics in My Station and its Duties, it may help us to consider the two opposing views that he wanted to leave behind (Hedonistic Utilitarianism and Kantian ethics). Two passages from English Literature may help us to explain Bradley's problem and solution from a different perspective. The first is a famous prose passage written by the Metaphysical poet John Donne in the 17th century.

No man is an island,
Entire of itself,
Every man is a piece of the continent,
A part of the main.
If a clod be washed away by the sea,
Europe is the less.
As well as if a promontory were,
As well as if a manor of thy friends
Or of thine own were.
Any man's death diminishes me,
Because I am involved in mankind,
And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls;
It kills thee.

(Aldous Huxley, The Doors of Perception)

The problem that Bradley had was that he wanted to demonstrate that Hedonistic Utilitarianism did not recognize the 'self' as part of the whole (as in Donne's poem) and that it was too egodcentric. At the same time, he also rejected Kant's transcendental idealism of the 'self' as some kind of separate but interactive autonomous will (like Huxley's passage). Bradley's position in My Station and its Duties was to demonstrate that the 'isolated self' was actually part of the 'island' of the whole social organism. Bradley wished to unite Huxley's separated self to the empirical world of Donne. He writes:

For he does not even think of his separate self; he grows with his world, his mind fills and orders itself, and when he can separate himself from that world, and know himself apart from it, then by that time his self, the object of his self-consciousness, is penetrated, infected, characterised by the existence of others. Its content implies in every fibre relations of community.
For Bradley, the whole point of ethics was concerning the ‘self’ but not in abstract—alone with no relation to the physical world, like metaphysical philosophers would suggest. Instead, the realisation should be that the ‘self’ could be fully appreciated when understood within, and not to be seen as separate from, the whole and the best way to understand oneself, one’s purpose and one’s duty was to find one’s niche, or ‘station’ as Bradley expresses it. As Bradley writes:

“To know what a man is (as we have seen) you must not take him in isolation. He is one of a people, he was born in a family, he lives in a certain society, in a certain state. What he has to do depends on what his place is, what his function is, and that all comes from his station in the organism.’

Bradley goes on to explain that the problem with Kantian ethics was that it was far too ‘abstract’ and yet simultaneously ‘subjective’ because it was not ‘real in the world’ but simply an ‘inner notion in moral persons’. Bradley states, ‘It did not come to us so as to be a whole, it came as what it is in itself, it was like an inner notion in moral persons, which, at least perhaps, had no power to carry itself out and transform the world.’ In other words, although supposed to be a universal notion of duty, Kantian ethics and universalisation depended too much upon the unpredictable will of the individual.

Bradley’s solution was that through a process of ‘self-realisation’, whereby one actively identifies one’s place in the social organism of the ‘we, in fact do, put ourselves forth and see ourselves actual in outer existence’. That is it, it is the enactment and interaction with the world around us is where the self discovers its ethical sense of duty. This is the process of self-realisation. Such self-realisation eradicates the sense of self-isolation that is merely a delusion. Bradley is clear that the true idea of ‘self’ is imbued with the society within which it operates. Therefore, in relation to the wording of the Speculation:

**Ethical sentences express propositions:**
Bradley’s essay sees ethical sentences as cognitive (verifiable) and also meaningful because they relate to this world and are not part of some abstract, intuitive conscience. Ethical sentences depict interactions with our world and recognise we are part of a whole. For Bradley, it is because an agent’s ‘station’ and ‘duty’ are to be found within the empirical realm that the nature of ethical statements expressed are both verifiable (cognitive) and relate to the facts of the world in which we live (Bradley follows Hegel and refers to this as the ‘concrete universal’). However, it is with the duty element that Bradley clearly sees as beyond the Kantian notion of a priori knowledge but grounded firmly in the experience of the real world. Our place and role in the historical community provide us with a measurable observable basis for a satisfying life. Our goal is to realise our true self, which we learn (through observation) in the family and community, and adapt the values of our society — and those of other societies that offer sound criticisms of our society.

**Objective features of the world make propositions true or false**
Bradley’s essay acknowledges that our knowledge of society around us can assert, confirm or deny the claims of ethical propositions in relation to realising and finding one’s station in life in accord with the process of self-realisation.

**Meta-ethical statements can be seen in scientific terms**
An ethical judgement of value can be made within the parameters of the empirical world without any appeal beyond this. Ethical decisions are part of the process of self-realisation, of engaging with, and becoming part of the whole through embracing the ‘concrete’ reality by finding one’s niche, place or station of duty within the organism as a whole. This socially interactive process is the crucial aspect for Bradley.

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**Key term**

**Concrete universal**: Bradley’s view that the self is not isolated but is derived from dialectical relations with the world

**Key quote**

There is nothing better than my station and its duties, nor anything higher or more truly beautiful.

(Bradley)

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**WJEC / Eduqas Religious Studies for A Level Year 2 and A2 Religion and Ethics**

**Key quotes**

Thus a morally good or a morally bad act is a kind of self-expression or self-assertion... for when we judge a man's acts from a moral point of view it is as his acts, part of his whole system of actions, that we judge them.

(Warneck)

To aim, therefore, at identifying oneself, whether with the object of one’s thought or with the world in which one is living and acting, is to do no more than to aim to remove illusion, and to exist in reality.

(Warneck)

Bradley’s starting point with ethics, according to Mary Warnock, is that he acknowledges a certain set of ‘facts’: ‘the fact that we often feel ourselves to be under some obligation’ or the fact that ‘we have morally failed in some way’. This foundation, for Bradley, was the fact of ‘moral consciousness’ that united everyone and each goal of self-realisation served the end of what he calls the self as a whole, that is, society. Bradley’s notion of self-realisation, according to Mary Warnock, is ‘directed over a period of time to a way of life, a system of interconnected actions’. That is, a person’s moral acts are judged over a period of time and as part of their actions overall. Morality becomes an act of self-assertion or self-expression.

Bradley’s view of morality is general at best. However, any moral act destroys the illusion that we are isolated from the world and embrace reality. Therefore, the ultimate aim or end of morality is not just to remove the illusion of separateness from the world but actually to bring any sense of separateness to an end. In other words, through self-realisation, Bradley’s Naturalistic ethic went beyond simply identifying what the ‘is’ purports to be but also that ‘I am what I ought to be’. Bradley states: ‘How does the contradiction disappear? It disappears by me identifying myself with the good will that I realise in the world, by my refusing to identify myself with the bad will of my private self’.

**Key quotes**

There is here no need to ask and by some scientific process find out what is moral, for morality exists all round us, and faces us, if need be, with a categorical imperative, while it surrounds us on the other side with an atmosphere of love.

(Bradley)

This is the Hegelian morality which stresses the social character of the individual, and finds the content of moral life in the actions which derive from particular social relations and functions.

(Norman)

Bradley writes:

What is it then that I am to realise? We have said it in ‘my station and its duties’. To know what a man is (as we have seen) you must not take him in isolation. He is one of a people, he was born in a family, he lives in a certain society, in a certain state. What he has to do depends upon what his place is, what his function is, and all that comes from his station in the organism.

For Bradley, a person’s individual station of duty accomplishes a universal work through self-sacrifice the self is restored. In other words, through realising one’s station and its duties within the whole moral organism we realise who we are and what behaving ethically is. This is achieved, not through biological predisposition alone, but influenced greatly by the environment around us as we grow and develop. Norman questions the biological influence of ‘genetic inheritance’ but sees the main strengths of Bradley’s argument as reflecting Hegel’s ‘division of ethical life into the family, civil society,... and the state’. As Warnock writes, a person ‘is not born in a vacuum, but has a definite place in society and history’. Unfortunately, Bradley tends to focus mainly on the state which tends then to move into seeing morality as ‘more or less equated with patriotic duty to one’s country’, according to Norman.

Norman notes that ‘Bradley’s ethics of social relations needs to be revised in this way if it is to be plausible and acceptable. It requires this radical extension of the kinds of moral relations to be considered. When thus enlarged, however, it becomes a theory of tremendous importance...’

Norman agrees that Bradley’s philosophy does transcend the issues of disinterested altruism in Utilitarian theory and the explanation of altruism in Kant’s appeal to
The advantages of My Station and Its Duties

The proposals found in the essay My Station and its Duties are a marked improvement on Utilitarianism and Kant's idea of duty for three reasons:

1. My Station and its Duties is to do with the 'concrete' and considers actual facts. It also does not waiver into the unpredictable or unaccountable because 'in my station my particular duties are prescribed to me, and I have them whether I wish to or not. The individual is 'always at work for the whole.' However, actual facts dictate that duty will not be the same at every time and in every place. Bradley writes, within certain limits I may choose my station according to my own liking, yet I and everyone else must have some station with duties pertaining to it, and those duties do not depend on our opinion or liking.

Key quote

In short, man is a social being; he is real only because he is social, and can realise himself only because it is as social he realises himself. The mere individual is a delusion of theory; and the attempt to realise it in practice is the squandering and mutilation of human nature, with total sterility or the production of monstrosities. (Bradley)

2. My Station and its Duties is 'objective' because it brings together subject (individual) and object (the world around us). It is this 'bringing together' that is the completing of the whole and the justification of abstract objectivity for Bradley. In other words, the whole works and functions as it should when everyone works within their particular station.

Key quote

Morality is 'relative', but nonetheless real. At every stage there is the solid fact of a world so far materialised. There is an objective morality in the accomplished will of the past and present, a higher self worked out by infinite pain, the sweat and blood of generations, and now given to me by free grace and in love and faith as a sacred trust. (Bradley)

3. My Station and its Duties in uniting subject and object gets rid of the contradictions found in self-seeking Utilitarianism through the empirical self and also the abstract but distant duty of Kant, which Bradley refers to as the 'non-sensuous moral ideal'. Bradley's theory is that all sense of conflict between duty and individual sensuality is resolved as all these elements become part of the wider world.

Key quote

It is a concrete universal because it is not only above, but is within and throughout its substance, and is so far only as they are. It is the life, which can live only in and by them, as they are dead unless within it, is the whole soul, which lives as far as this body is as unreal an abstraction as the body without it. It is an organism and a moral organism, and it is conscious of itself, because only by the will of its self-conscious members can the moral organism give itself reality. It is the self-realisation of the whole body, because it is one and the same will which lives and acts in the life and action of each. It is the self-realisation of each member because each member cannot find the function which makes him himself, apart from the whole to which he belongs; to be himself he must go beyond himself to live his life he must live a life which is not merely his own, but which nonetheless, but on the contrary all the more is intensely and emphatically his own individually.'

Key term

Non-sensuous moral ideal: Bradley's term for Kant's general theory of duty

Bradley's ethical guidance

So what normative ethical guidance does Bradley offer? It all appears very vague. Bradley's view is that there cannot be a moral philosophy which will tell us what in particular we are to do, and also that it is not the business of philosophy to do so. Indeed, for Bradley such an idea was 'simply ridiculous'.

Despite this, throughout his essay, Bradley does offer statements such as:

1. I am what I ought to be...
2. My station and its duties teaches us to identify others and ourselves with the station we fill...
3. It teaches us that a man who does his work in the world is good...
4. First in the community is the individual realized...
5. The realm of morality is nothing but the absolute spiritual unity of the essence of individuals, which exists in the independent reality of them...
6. The work of the individual for his needs is a satisfaction of the needs of others as much as of his own...
7. Them as myself, myself as them.

Bradley then quotes Hegel in support: 'the wisest men of antiquity have given judgement that wisdom and virtue consist in living agreeably to the ethos of one's people. This is about as specific as it gets for Bradley as he also states that 'the view which thinks moral philosophy is to supply us with particular moral prescriptions confuses science with art.'

Bradley's moral Naturalism breaks down the antiethics of deasutipism and individualism but at the same time, as denying them separately preserves the truths of both: to be an individual requires the whole and return the whole determines a person's individuality. Bradley's ultimate moral injunction is to be aware of the morality that is all around us, that 'faces us, if need be with a categorical imperative, while it surrounds us on the other side with an atmosphere of love'.

There are some commentators who have tried to contextualise what Bradley meant by the term 'my station and its duties' by arguing that the Victorian era of which Bradley was part typically emphasised a tightly organised social structure involving class, social etiquette and social expectations for moral behaviour. In short, the Lords were Lords, and the working class were working class, and one knew one's place and passively accept it because 'obedience to the norms of society were accepted'.

On the one hand, according to Bradley's own views, there may be some truth to this view of social censure; on the other hand, it is not fair reading of Bradley's 'my station and its duties' as nowhere did Bradley suggest that morality was about passive acceptance and is a far cry from the idea of self-realisation that aims to 'put ourselves forth'. Finding one's station in life and the accompanying set of moral duties is integral to the process of self-realisation and, although determined to some extent by society, is not constrained by it. Natural talents and abilities are to be expressed as this is all part of a natural process. Indeed, Bradley recognised that morality 'evolved' but his idea of a moral evolution was part of a process of constant change and development and yet at the same time being able to retain its objectivity. Bradley writes:

'All morality is and must be *relative*, because the essence of realisation is evolution through stages, and hence existence in some one stage which is not final; here, on the other hand, all morality is *absolute*, because in every stage the essence of man is realised, however imperfectly.'
So the question remains, 'how do we know and come to identify what our duty is？' Bradley's solution in *My System and Its Duties* was that this 'knowledge' had a physical basis and a clear scientific explanation.

**Naturalism and science: evolutionary ethics**

**Key quote**

If naturalism is true, ethics is not an autonomous science; it is a department or an application of one or more of the natural or historical sciences. (Broad)

*In terms of the Naturalist claim that meta-ethics statements can be seen in scientific terms, Naturalism no longer remains exclusively in the domain of philosophy. Bradley recognised this in *My System and Its Duties* when he acknowledges the role of nurture through upbringing, psychology and social behaviour when he writes:*

> If we suppose the world of relations in which he was born and bred never to have been then we suppose the very essence of him not to be. If we take that away, we have taken him away, and hence he now is not an individual in the sense of owing nothing to the sphere of relations in which he finds himself but does not contain those relations within himself as belonging to his very being, he is what he is, in brief so far as he is what others are also.\*

Bradley also acknowledges the process of evolution but views the whole 'process' through the notion of self-realisation: 'Evolution must evolve itself to self-realisation, progress itself forward to a goal which is itself, development being out of nothing but was in, and bring it out, not from external compulsion, but because it is not.' It is true that Naturalism therefore opens itself up to the field of scientific inquiry and it is no surprise then that there has been an explosion of interest in the last 40 years in explaining ethics from a scientific perspective whether it be biological or psychological.

**Key quote**

Whence morality? That is a question which has troubled philosophers since their subject was invented. Two and a half millennia of debate have, however, failed to produce a satisfactory answer. So now it is time for someone else to have a go ... Perhaps [biologists] can eventually do what philosophers have never managed, and explain moral behaviour in an intellectually satisfying way. (The Economist)

Charles Darwin once wrote: 'An American monkey, after getting drunk on brandy, would never touch it again, and thus is much wiser than most men.' This is a quote amusing but also an interesting and insightful quotation. If animals can make decisions based on experiences of what is pleasure and pain, then in light of Naturalism then surely begs the further question 'what can we learn from other species about the nature of ethics?' The theory of evolution or 'natural selection' as Charles Darwin termed it, opens up the possibility that as we have evolved as a species physically, then our knowledge and understanding of our own behaviour has also evolved. Morality, too, has changed and evolved - not always for the better one may add - and certainly the picture of 'progress' as Bradley saw it was more akin to a biological understanding of what the process of evolution involves.

Biologically speaking, human beings have evolved as apes and within the ape species from some distant pre-ape / pre-human relative. As part of the ape family our closest relatives are the other great apes (orangutan, gorilla, chimpanzee and bonobo). The bonobo and chimpanzees have more in common with humans than gorillas and are our closest living relatives, so much so that in 1991 Jared Diamond's book *The Third Chimpanzee* caused a stir when it argued that humans, bonobos and chimpanzees should form the same sub-category within the great apes.

With such advancements in our scientific understanding of biology, it is no surprise that one of the most recent areas to contribute to the debate about Ethical Naturalism is the field of evolutionary ethics. A combination of psychological and biological approaches, evolutionary ethics tries to demonstrate that ethics can be explained through empirical means, that is, purely physical as opposed to metaphysical, explanation. This has famously been explored by evolutionary scientists such as Professor Richard Dawkins in his explanation of the 'selfish gene' and also by psychology and behavioural science even to the point where experiments on the impact of smells on 'moral behaviour' have been carried out - one only has to browse through the annals of the journal *Psychological Science* to see! One such experiment observed that a team of researchers found that when people were in a room sprayed with a citrus-scented cleaner, they behaved more fairly when playing a classic trust game; another experiment suggested that the smell of cleaner made subjects more likely to volunteer for a charity; and, one study concluded that pleasant scents can trigger generosity!

For the scientific study of ethics, the explanation for ethical behaviour can also be found by looking at our behaviour towards each other and providing scientific analysis. Dawkins has even explained possible reasons for altruism. Some, however, feel that this is no good for the philosophical study of ethics as it may explain how ethical behaviour may work but not why ethics works this way. We shall look at this further and evaluate such claims in the A02 section.

**AO1 Activity**

There has been a lot to comprehend with the work of F. H. Bradley and so try to design a flow diagram that indicates the key aspects of each section, e.g. Hegel's dialectical, Bradley's developed Naturalism, *My System and Its Duties*, advantages, moral guidance, science.

**Study tip**

In answering a question on Ethical Naturalism, it may be helpful to mention the two different examples studied here: Utilitarianism and Bradley's *My System and Its Duties* to demonstrate that you are aware that there are different expressions of Ethical Naturalism.
Challenges to Naturalism

There have been many challenges to Naturalism as an adequate explanation for the nature of ethics. The challenges are not restricted to those listed in this part of the specification, as challenges also include alternative theories that have been proposed, such as Intuitionism and Emotivism. Indeed, as this theme progresses, you will see how each theory interacts and responds to another challenge. In terms of Naturalism itself, immediately there are three.

Hume's Law (the is-ought problem)

Possibly the most famous objection to Naturalism is that in maintaining that ethical propositions can be identified from natural phenomena, this then reduces ethical propositions to observational or descriptive meaning or a mere explanation of what is happening. For example, when a person gives money freely to another who is less fortunate, we can see that it has brought more comfort to the life of the less fortunate and had no real material detriment for the giver. However, to draw from this a conclusion that: 'it is good for the more fortunate person to give money to a less fortunate person' has nothing at all to do with the actual actions. A new layer of knowledge has been introduced that is not part of the original state of play. This new layer, according to critics of Naturalism, is NOT part of the actions but something quite separate. Logically, one cannot draw from the argument an element that was not included in the first place. That is, to say what is happening does not logically lead to the conclusion of what ought to happen. The observation was first put forward by David Hume and is sometimes referred to as Hume's Law or Hume's Guillotine and states that it is not logical to derive an 'ought' from an 'is'. Hume writes:

In every system of morality, which I have hitherto met with, I never remarked, that the author proceeds for any time in the ordinary way of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God, or makes observations concerning human affairs; when once I am surprised to find, that instead of the usual conclusions, is, and is not, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an ought, or an ought not. This change is imperceptible but is, however, of the last consequence. For as this ought, or ought not, expresses some new relation or affirmation, it is necessary that it should be observed and explained; and at the same time that a reason should be given, for what seems otherwise inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it.'

In terms of moral propositions, Hume's view is debated and is related to another one of his principles, often referred to as Hume's Fork (see diagram). This sees the principles of a priori knowledge (conceptual and prior to experience) and a posteriori knowledge (relating to experience) as completely separate types of knowledge, and as the premises on a fork cannot converge, neither can the types of knowledge. For Hume, a moral proposition is neither stating a propositional, that is, a posteriori empirical 'fact', nor is it a priori truth and so does not really belong to the world of logic or empiricism; such a statement is a statement of value or judgement that cannot be deduced logically or demonstrated empirically from a series of events. The philosophers Bertrand Russell and Alfred Ayer have made Hume's Fork a basis for further development of their own empiricist philosophy, and especially in the case of Ayer, it had a marked influence on their moral philosophy.

**Key terms**

Hume's Fork: sees the principles of a priori knowledge (conceptual and prior to experience) and a posteriori knowledge (relating to experience) as completely separate types of knowledge.

Hume's Law: that an 'ought' cannot be derived from an 'is'.

**Key quote**

Naturalism in ethics, like attempts to square the circle and to 'justify induction', will constantly recur so long as there are people who have not understood the fallacy involved.

(E. M. Hare)

**Key quote**

Naturalism provides a view from the outside, and from that perspective, it provides all sorts of interesting information. But it misses something that can be experienced only from the inside, namely the normative force of the reasoning. (Rachels)

**Hume's Fork**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RELATION OF IDEAS</th>
<th>MATTERS OF FACT</th>
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<tr>
<td>A priori</td>
<td>A posteriori</td>
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<tr>
<td>Analytic</td>
<td>Synthetic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deduction</td>
<td>Inductive</td>
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<tr>
<td>Necessary</td>
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</table>

1.10 By which term is Hume's Law also known?

1.11 What do the two premises of Hume's Fork represent?

Professor Philip Stratton-Lake of Reading University explains the 'is/ought' challenge to Naturalism with reference to cooking a lobster.

"Empirical investigation can tell us many things about the world, but it does not seem that it can tell whether certain acts are right or wrong, good or bad... For instance, if science tells us that a lobster’s neurological system is sufficiently advanced for it to feel pain, we’d revise our view about the permissible killing of its body. But all that science would have told us is that the lobster feels pain when boiled alive. Science does not inform us that killing it alive is wrong. That seems to be something that cannot be known empirically."

This is a good analogy but it also reveals something else about Hume’s argument. When Stratton-Lake says, we’d revise our view about the permissibility of killing it alive. To illustrate this we can return to the example first put forward:

- A person gives money freely to another who is less fortunate.
- We can see that it has brought more comfort to the life of the less fortunate.
- The action also had no real material detriment for the giver.
- A conclusion is drawn that: if it causes no material detriment we ought to give money freely to a less fortunate person.

The matter of fact, following Hume’s analysis, is that the conclusion drawn has nothing at all to do with the actual actions themselves and that we have introduced an extra element of judgement or value that is not inherent in the actions themselves. The example has merely demonstrated that one thing has led to another. The conclusion is not valid.

We observe the actions but unless we have, say, a premise that ‘comfort and financial difficulties for oneself’ are good and that we ‘ought to pursue this’ then we cannot induce the conclusion we ‘ought’. In other words, if we want this conclusion to be derived from the reasoning, we must reveal the hidden premise that could support it.

Even then, this premise is incorrect because it has equated ‘good’ with ‘comfort’ and ‘financial health’ but the question still remains, has there been established? Can this be demonstrated? We cannot do this without first defining what ‘good’ is. If not then we must reject the premise and without a premise we see that it has failed again.

This is important for two reasons:

The first is to do with what Hume was actually stating in the extract above. There is disagreement amongst philosophers. Traditionally, it has been understood as meaning ethical propositions can never be considered as empirically valid. However, some philosophers question this conclusion and argue that Hume was simply pointing out that the logic is inconsistent and nothing more. Secondly, it is exactly this point about the logic that is the starting point for our next challenge from Moore, namely that if we are to discuss ethics meaningfully then we need to establish the most basic of questions: what do we mean by ‘good’? Moore writes:

... this question, how good is to be defined, is the most fundamental question in all ethics... Its definition is, therefore, the most essential point in the definition of ethics... Unless this first question be thoroughly understood, and its true answer clearly recognised, the rest of ethics is as good as useless from the point of view of systematic knowledge. (Moore)

Challenges: Moore’s Naturalistic Fallacy (moral language is indefinable)

We will be looking at the work of G. E. Moore in the next section on Intuitionism. Indeed, it was Moore’s critique and rejection of Naturalism that was a crucial element in the development of his own theory of ethics. Moore’s contention was
very simple. He began his ethical enquiries with what he considered the most obvious question to ask: ‘what is good?’

By this, Moore is concerned with what he calls the ‘intrinsically value of good’ as an end in itself. He sees this as a peculiar use of the word good that differentiates it from good or right actions that are means to an end in bringing about good. Ethics, then, is based entirely on the underpinning notion of what good is.

Moore writes:

Let us then, consider this position. My point is that good is a simple notion, just as yellow is a simple notion, that just as you cannot, by any manner of means, explain to anyone who does not already know it, what yellow is, so you cannot explain what good is. Definitions of the kind that I was asking for, definitions which describe the real nature of the object or notion denoted by a word, and which do not merely tell us what the word is used to mean, are only possible when the object or notion in question is something complex.

Moore is not saying that things can’t be ‘good’: indeed, there are many things that can be identified by their ‘goodness’, for example, pleasure, love, happiness, health and so forth. What Moore was pointing out was that a particular quality that is described as ‘good’ cannot be used to define ‘good’. In other words, we cannot identify a single property or quality that explains what goodness in itself is. We can say a door is yellow because it is a yellow door, but when we ask what yellow is, we do not reply it is door or doorliness. A yellow door would help us understand the notion of yellow but the door does not define what yellow is. In the same way with ‘good’, we can identify pleasure as good but to answer that ‘goodness’ is pleasure, that is convenient merely to satisfy our quest for a definition as there are other many things that are also good or a means to goodness. There is no shortage of possible definitions: naturalness, virtuous, wisdom, love, peace, beauty, etc. This means that good in itself cannot be a natural property and to identify it with a particular natural property does not define good. Good in itself is unanalysable.

Moore called this the Naturalistic Fallacy and just as Hume argued you cannot derive an ought from is, Moore argued you cannot derive goodness through nature and experience. Good is simply good.

Key quotes

If I am asked, ‘What is good?’ my answer is that good is good, and that is the end of the matter. Or if I am asked ‘How is good to be defined?’ my answer is that it cannot be defined, and that is all I have to say about it. (Moore)

It does not matter what we call it provided we recognise it when we meet it. (Moore on the Naturalistic Fallacy)

Another way Moore tried to explain was in relation to parts. He argued that things are often defined in relation to their constituent parts, for example, a horse, namely four legs, etc., or a chariot, four wheels, etc. The problem with good is that it has no constituent parts itself; it is just a simple notion or concept. He writes:

‘Good, then, if we mean by it that quality which we assert to belong to a thing, when we say that the thing is good, is incapable of any definition, in the most important sense of that word. The most important sense of definition is that in which a definition states “what are the parts which invariability compose a certain whole?” and in this sense good has no definition because it is simple and has no parts. It is one of those innumerable objects of thought which are themselves incapable of definition, because they are the ultimate terms of reference to which whatever is capable of definition must be defined.’

Key quote

Moore makes it perfectly clear that what he thinks you cannot legitimately do to ‘good’ is to analyse it. It is impossible to name its parts because it has no parts. (Warneke)

In particular, Moore was keen to attack the principles of Utilitarianism that clearly equates the definition of good with pleasure. However, ethics is about discovering any property that defines goodness that is potentially part of other properties—a sort of common denominator. For example, pleasure, happiness and love may be analysed to see whether or not we can identify the ‘goodness’ elements within them. Since we cannot discover this, we cannot say that they are all exactly the same as good. That they are all very different; this would be nonsense. However, that is exactly what theories such as Utilitarianism do in identifying goodness as happiness.

Moore writes:

‘Yet a mistake of this simple kind has commonly been made about good … Ethics aims at discovering what are those other properties belonging to all things which are good. But far too many philosophers have thought that when they named those other properties they were actually defining good; that these properties, in fact, were simply not other, but absolutely and entirely the same with goodness. This view I propose to call the Naturalistic Fallacy and of it I shall now endeavour to dispose.’

Therefore, Moore concluded that:

- Good is a simple concept or notion that cannot be broken down;
- Good, in itself, is not relational, nor dependent upon any other constituent part and neither is it a constituent part itself;
- The term ‘good’ is therefore indecomposable;
- That not to recognise this would render any pursuit of ethics as ‘useless’ as he confirms: ‘Unless this first question be fully understood, and its true answer clearly recognised, the rest of ethics is as good as useless from the point of view of systematic knowledge.’

G. E. Moore also then relates the implications of this to his second question ‘what ought we to do?’. Whilst Hume’s Law made an observation about logical process and inducing an inappropriate conclusion from what is the case, Moore focuses on the linguistic process of meaning and the nonsensical conclusions that had to be drawn if one identifies good with a natural quality.

He looks at Mill’s Utilitarianism and explains the linguistic contradiction in trying to find an ‘ought’ from something that is unanalysable. He finds simply that in setting to find out what one ‘ought’ to do from identifying the meaning of good with pleasure, one only arrives at the end of not what we ought to do, but of what we already do. Moore’s reasoning is as follows:

- If we think that we can define good by a natural quality such as what is desired we are mistaken. Then to argue that we ‘ought to’ pursue desire because it is good is another fallacy.
'That fallacy, I explained, consists in the contention that good means nothing but some simple or complex notion, that can be defined in terms of natural qualities. In Mill's case, good is thus supposed to mean simply what is desired; and what is desired is something which can thus be defined in natural terms. ' (Anmore)

- We are mistaken because it creates a tautology. That is, if 'desire' is good then we ought to seek desire. Unfortunately, this then means that we ought to seek what we do in fact seek.
- Mill tells us that we ought to desire something (an ethical proposition), because we actually do desire it; but if his contention that 'I ought to desire' means nothing but 'I do desire' were true, then he is only entitled to say, 'We do desire so and so, because we do desire it'; and that is not an ethical proposition at all; it is a mere tautology. (Moore)

- Moore's contention is that since good is indefinable we cannot identify it as a natural quality because we consider what this implies ethically in terms of duty, obligation and 'ought' (normative proposition) all we are doing is describing what we are already doing and not a normative proposition.

The whole object of Mill's book is to help us to discover what we ought to do; and in fact, by attempting to define the meaning of this "ought", he has completely debared himself from ever fulfilling that object: he has confined himself to telling us what we do do. (Moore)

**Challenges: The Open Question Argument (moral facts cannot be reduced to natural properties)**

The open question argument, as it is called, is really a demonstration of the futility of defining good within the parameters of empiricism; quite simply, all attempts will fail because they simply leave an unanswered question about 'good'. In other words, if we can define the ethical notion of good then we can state precisely what that good is in relation to psychological, biological or sociological truths. There would be a simple rule for defining good, with no definitive answer. For example, 'Have you done your homework?' or 'Shall we have tea at 6pm?' or 'Is the sum of 2 + 2 equal to 4?'. The answer to such questions can be a straight 'yes' or 'no'. The problem is that this does not work with good.

The main issue is that in attempting to define good by natural properties (e.g. pleasure) we are actually pending an open question, that is, a question with no definitive answer. This is because we still can legitimately ask 'is pleasure good?' once we have defined good as pleasure. It would not be a meaningless question to ask. But if we have succeeded in defining good then we should not need to ask this further question because it would be illogical.

- For example, if 'pleasure is the same as good' then we could say 'whatever promotes pleasure is good' but this would be an unnecessary statement equivalent to 'whatever promotes pleasure promotes pleasure'.
- Also, if we ask whether or not the promotion of pleasure is good, then we will in effect be asking 'are good things good?' which is, of course, nonsense.
- Since it is never absurd to ask of natural properties 'is this good?', we know that we can logically ask the question 'is the promotion of pleasure good?' and, in fact, it is not nonsense because pleasure is a complex notion and not a simple notion.
- Therefore, if that is the case, then good cannot be identified as, or defined by, natural properties which are by their very nature complex notions.

Moore writes:

The hypothesis that disagreement about the meaning of good is disagreement with regard to the correct analysis of a given whole, may be most plainly seen to be incorrect by consideration of the fact that, whatever definition may be offered, it may always be asked, with significance, of the complex so defined, whether it is itself good.

**Key quotes**

Moore claims that we can test any naturalistic definition of goodness by asking whether something that has those natural properties is good, and then seeing whether that question is open or closed. If the definition is true, then the question must be closed, so if it is open, the definition must be false. (Stadnok, Stratton-Lake)

Suppose, for instance, someone proposes that goodness can be defined in terms of causality and pleasure. To be good, they claim, is just to cause pleasure. Moore's view is that if this definition were correct, it would be a closed question whether something that causes pleasure is good. For in effect one would be asking whether something that causes pleasure causes pleasure, and that is clearly a closed question. But, Moore insists, the question 'is something that causes pleasure good?' is an open question. One could, without conceptual confusion, debate whether something that causes pleasure is good. So goodness cannot be defined as that which causes pleasure. (Stadnok, Stratton-Lake)

**AO1 Activity**

Go through the three challenges again and try to summarise them yourself so that you can deliver a quick presentation to someone else that will last no longer than one minute.

**Study tip**

Try to think of your own challenges to Naturalism or make a list of what you consider to be its strengths and what you consider to be its weaknesses.
AO1 Developing skills

It is now important to consider the information that has been covered in this section; however, the information in its raw form is too extensive and so has to be processed in order to meet the requirements of the examination. This can be achieved by practising more advanced skills associated with AO1. The exercises that run throughout this book will help you to do this and prepare you for the examination. For assessment objective 1 (AO1), which involves demonstrating knowledge and understanding skills, we are going to focus on different ways in which the skills can be demonstrated effectively, and also refer to how the performance of these skills is measured (see generic band descriptors for A2 [WJEC] AO1 or A Level [Edexcel] AO1).

Your task is this: Below is a summary of Naturalism. It is 279 words long. You need to use this for an answer but could not repeat all of this in an essay under examination conditions so you will have to condense the material. Discuss which points you think are the most important and then re-draft into your own summary of about 140 words.

The most important point about ethical Naturalism is that it supports the view that objective moral laws exist independently of human beings and are grounded in the empirical nature of existence. Having established the link between an objective external existence (reality) and that a cognitivist approach can verify or establish the truth or not (objective knowledge) of what we experience (empiricism), it logically follows that what we know about what we experience makes our ethical statements objective. Therefore, we can recognize objective moral laws that exist independently of human beings. What are the implications of this world around us? In other words, ethical language can be understood by referring to, and closely analysing, what we experience from the natural world around us. For example, we all understand that to experience the kindness of an action is a good experience and that an unpleasant experience is a bad experience. To consider this, we can see that we experience our meaning by comparing it with others that kind acts are good and cruel acts are bad because of the happiness or suffering that these experiences contain. We can all recognise this and this means the same to everyone. If the ethical descriptions and statements have meaning for everyone, then also follows that they are objective truths and universal. We can discuss ethics meaningfully and establish certain propositions about good and bad ethical behaviour. If these experiences are uniform and universal then this also means that the statements 'kindness is an ethically good act' and 'cruelty is an ethically bad act' are true because these experiences are grounded in the objective features of the world around us.

When you have completed the task, refer to the band descriptors for A2 [WJEC] or A Level [Edexcel] and in particular have a look at the demands described in the higher band descriptors towards which you should be aiming. Ask yourself:

- Does my work demonstrate thorough, accurate and relevant knowledge and understanding of religion and belief?
- Is my work coherent (consistent or make logical sense), clear and well organised? (WJEC band descriptor only but still important to consider for Edexcel)
- Will my work, when developed, be an extensive and relevant response which is specific to the focus of the topic?
- Does my work have extensive depth and/or suitable breadth and have excellent use of evidence and examples?
- If appropriate to the topic, does my response have thorough and accurate reference to sacred texts and sources of wisdom?
- Are there any insightful connections to be made with other elements of my course?
- Will my answer, when developed and extended to match what is expected in

Issues for analysis and evaluation

Whether ethical and non-ethical statements are the same

This argument is really evaluating whether or not ethical statements are related to the empirical world just as non-ethical statements are and concerns the debate between Ethical Naturalism and Intuitionism mainly.

Ethical Naturalism is empirist in orientation and argues that ethical propositions are no more than statements of fact that can be justified by appeal to the natural world, therefore ethical statements are not beyond non-ethical statements. Although there are different ways to interpret ethical statements, they all relate to what is actually real and objective. For instance, Mill sees ethical statements as real statements about pleasure or pain. For Bradley, it is all about realising the concrete universal and through self-realisation finding one's duty. These different ways at least agree that ethical and non-ethical statements are the same. Evolutionary ethics argues that it is all to do with how we assess and adapt biologically, psychologically and socially just like Charles Darwin's drunken monkey. If we know that fire is hot then we do not touch the flame, how is this any different from deciding how to live ethically when we know that violence causes pain and so avoid it?

We may feel, deeply, that a moral sentiment is 'real' and absolutely provable like any claim about the objective world; for example, it is directly related to actions that we can work out a sense of justice in society. Indeed, this viewpoint reflects not only Naturalism but also moral viewpoints based on religion and revelation. For example, the parable of the Good Samaritan in Christianity teaches through clear actions that it is good to help someone in need or who is suffering. There is nothing metaphysical about this.

It is ethical dilemmas and problems that cause debate and disagreement but surely this is all part of learning how to best adapt to life in a collaborative way. One of the most famous statements of Naturalist ethics has been made by Richard Dawkins who argued that 'selfish genes' can explain the behaviour of human beings by using evidence of the evolution of certain behaviour traits in apes. Dawkins identifies different ways in which 'selfish genes' may bring about altruistic behaviour in individuals. Kin selection is no more than genes replicating themselves by creating individuals who are prone to nurture and defend; we see this in parental love and family affection. Dawkins explains collaboration and sharing but most importantly what he calls the Handicap Principle: Here, Dawkins demonstrates that some animals take on the most dangerous job of watching for predators and providing for the less fortunate. For Dawkins, this all explains the general capacity for normative judgement and guidance, and the tendency to exercise this capacity in social life. Animals also demonstrate sentiments and are able to detect them in others, can be motivated by others, make simple judgements and exhibit certain particular systems of norms or types of practice. This all shows that morality is actually embedded in the process of evolution and has a purely naturalistic explanation.

Key quote

The problem is one of finding room for ethics, or placing ethics within the disenchanted, non-ethical order which we inhabit, and of which we are a part. (Blackburn)
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It is ethical dilemmas and problems that cause debate and disagreement but surely this is all part of learning how to best adapt to life in a collaborative way? One of the most famous statements of Naturalist ethics has been made by Richard Dawkins who argued that 'selfish genes' can explain the behaviour of humanity by using evidence of the evolution of certain behaviour traits in apes. Dawkins identifies different ways in which 'selfish genes' may bring about altruistic behaviour in individuals. Kin selection is no more than genes replicating themselves by creating individuals who are prone to nurture and defend; we see this in parental love and family affections. Dawkins explains collaboration and sharing but most importantly he what he calls the Handicap Principle. Here, Dawkins demonstrates that some animals take on the most dangerous jobs of watching for predators and providing for the less fortunate. For Dawkins, this all explains the general capacity for normative judgment and guidance, and the tendency to exercise this capacity in social life. Animals also demonstrate sentiments and are able to detect emotions in others, can be motivated by others, make simple judgements and exhibit certain particular systems of norms or types of practice. This all shows that morality is actually embodied in the process of evolution and has a purely naturalistic explanation.

Key the problem is one of finding room for ethics, or placing ethics within the disenchanted, non-ethical order which we inhabit, and of which we are a part. (Blackburn)
The extent to which ethical statements are not objective

Ethical Naturalism in some sense promotes the views that ethical propositions are objective because they can be evidenced through empirical means. So, for example, Mill (Utilitarianism) and Bradley (My Statism and Its Duties) felt that their respective ideals such as happiness and duty were perfectly objective.

However, this may not be the case at all. Even David Hume recognized the fact that ethical statements were value statements and meant something very different from empirical facts. He was the first philosopher to suggest that they do not have meaning but are simply expressions of emotions or approval and disapproval. If this is accepted as the case then empiricism cannot accept the claims to objectivity of an Ethical Naturalism as proposed by Mill (Utilitarianism) and Bradley (My Statism and Its Duties). In fact, values suggest personal views and personal views differ. This makes ethical statements more subjective. Mackie suggested this when he argued: ‘In short, this argument from relativity has some force simply because the actual variations in the moral codes are more readily explained by the hypothesis that they reflect ways of life than by the hypothesis that they express perceptions, most of them seriously inadequate and badly distorted, of objective values.’

This line of argument asks that if morality were objective, why are there so many arguments about morality throughout the world? Indeed, the very fact that this course considers Divine Command Theory, Virtue Theory, Ethical Egoism, Naturalism, Intuitionism and Emotivism presents a fundamental challenge to the claim that ethical statements are objective due to the great variety and difference in how ethical statements are explained. How does one begin to distinguish between something actually being right and another seeming right to that person? It still may be concluded by that person that their view is right, but someone like Moore or Mackie would then say that ethical statements are not just different moral statements but different moral arguments by saying, ‘I know it’s right when I have got a disagreement over an ethical issue or a challenge to their ethical theories.

Key quote

There is nothing about simple properties which implies that they are non-natural. There is nothing inherent in a simple natural or metaphysical property. Consequently, one cannot conclude that goodness is a non-natural property simply by showing that it is a simple property. One has to argue for non-naturalness in some other way. (Hutcheson)

However, there are clear challenges to Naturalism. Moore argued that contrary to ethical Naturalism, ethical statements are a priori matters of truth just as with mathematics and can be identified through use of one’s intuition. In this sense ethical propositions are very different to non-ethical propositions. Firstly, Hume’s is-eought problem can be used to show that Naturalism is wrong – you cannot derive a value from a fact. Therefore, ethical statements are not the same as non-ethical statements. Secondly, the ethical term ‘good’ is indefinable because it is a simple notion like the word yellow but it is also self-evident; non-ethical statements are not self-evident and so not the same as ethical statements. Thirdly, the term good always raises an open-ended question when we attempt to define its meaning with reference to a natural or non-ethical property. All these arguments present ethical prepositions and language as very different from non-ethical statements.

It could be argued that ethical language is value laden in a different way from non-ethical language. For example, the statement ‘this is a good door’ is not an ethical statement and yet uses the word good. The judgement made may be down to its specific purpose, such as opening easily, looking good, retaining heat in a house or its durability. However, when we make the statement ‘this is a good person’, the goodness element is not entirely about purpose if we did have one but is more about the person’s moral qualities. It is something very different and so linguistically, ethical statements are very different from non-ethical statements.

We could maintain that ethical and non-ethical statements are the same as maintained by Ethical Naturalism. Ethical Naturalism would reject Moore’s linguistic analysis for a more pragmatic and empirical approach to ethics. Ethics is about action and not about a priori concepts. Evidence abounds to support this and also the fact that contemporary science (biology and psychology) are working towards a suitable, empirical explanation.

Alternatively, we could conclude that ethical and non-ethical statements are entirely different matters. This could be by arguing that ethical understanding of good is innate and accessed through our intuition. The support of ethics being about values, good and evil adds strength to this position. The evaluative nature of ethics, however, is not confined to ethics alone and does have some relevance in non-ethical statements.

There may be somewhere the two converge. Bradley attempted to do this but he, himself admitted that he had failed to unite the conceptual with the empirical and had to find an alternative answer to Hume’s Fork.

Study tip

It is vital for AO2 that you actually discuss arguments and not just explain what someone may have stated. Try to ask yourself, ‘Was this a fair point to make?’, ‘Is the evidence sound enough?’, ‘Is there anything else to this argument?’, ‘Is this a strong or weak argument?’. Such critical analysis will help you develop your evaluation skills.
consistently? Do we mean they are a priori objective as with mathematical formulas? Is objectivity just an abstract concept that has no real appropriateness for the real world? Do we mean they are beyond question or challenge? Or, do we mean that they mean the same for all and can be recognised and followed by all? Is objectivity perceived by all? To each question we may get a different answer as to whether or not ethical statements are objective.

There is also the question as to whether ethical statements can really be objective if there are so many theories, or that one theory develops from another; for example, Bradley’s claim that through the dialectical methodology we can arrive at an ultimate answer in general, although not always, the concept of objectivity is associated with the meta-physical and deontological systems, that is a priori, conceptual whereas ethical systems that are more empirically based do recognise some form of subjectivity.

Key quote

In short, this argument from relativism has some force simply because the actual variations in the moral codes are more readily explained by the hypothesis that they reflect ways of life than by the hypothesis that they express perceptions, most of them seriously inadequate and badly distorted, of objective values.

(MacKinnon)

There are several possible conclusions. The most obvious is that ethical statements do reflect objective and absolute truths. Alternatively, ethical statements are merely a ‘sign of the times’, that is, products of human culture. Overall, however, it appears that all we can ascertain is that some ethical statements and positions are objective whereas others are contingent and reflect the need for human interpretation and creativity.

Study tip

It is vital for AO2 that you actually discuss arguments and not just explain what someone may have stated. Try to ask yourself, ‘was this a fair point to make?’ ‘is the evidence sound enough?’ ‘is there anything to challenge this argument?’ ‘is this a strong or weak argument?’ Such critical analysis will help you develop your evaluation skills.

AO2 Activity

List some conclusions that could be drawn from the AO1 reasoning from the above text; try to aim for at least three different possible conclusions. Consider each of the conclusions and collect brief evidence to support each conclusion from the AO1 and AO2 material for this topic. Select the conclusion that you think is most convincing and explain why it is so. Try to contrast this with the weakest conclusion in the list, justifying your argument with clear reasoning and evidence.

AO2 Developing skills

It is now important to consider the information that has been covered in this section; however, the information in its raw form is too extensive and so has to be processed in order to meet the requirements of the examination. This can be achieved by practising more advanced skills associated with AO2. The exercises that run throughout this book will help you to do this and prepare you for the examination. For assessment objective 2 (AO2), which involves ‘critical analysis’ and ‘evaluation’ skills, we are going to focus on different ways in which the skills can be demonstrated effectively, and also refer to how the performance of these skills is measured (see generic band descriptors for A2 [W/JC] AO2 or A Level [Edgjas] AO2).

Your task is this: Below is a summary of two different points of view concerning ethical Naturalism. It is 150 words long. You want to use these two views and lines of argument for an evaluation; however, to just list them is not really evaluating them. Present these two views in a more evaluative style by firstly condensing each argument and then, secondly, commenting on how effective each one is (weak or strong are good terms to start with). Allow about 200 words in total.

1. Moral naturalism, while attractive, has been dismissed by many in the light of G.E. Moore’s Open Question Argument (Moore 1903, 5-21). Moore’s thought is as follows. Suppose ‘N’ to abbreviate a term expressing the concept of some natural property, N, maximally conducing to human welfare perhaps [2], and suppose a naturalist proposes to define goodness as N. We swiftly show this to be false by appealing someone were to ask of something acknowledged by N, whether anything superior. This, Moore urges, would open up the question: The point is, essentially, that this is a stupid question. Suppose we ask, ‘are you not a bachelor?’ ‘I am a bachelor in the terminology of the time, sir. Does goodness and unmarried mean, bachelor and unmarried mean, are not one and the same.

2. For Bradley, it is because an agent’s ‘station’ and ‘duty’ are to be found within the empirical realm that the nature of ethical statements expressed is both verifiable (cognitive) and relates to the facts of the world in which we live (realism). However, it is with the duty element that Bradley clearly sees as beyond the Kantian notion of a priori knowledge but grounded firmly in the experience of the real world. Our place and role in the historical community provide us with a measurable observable basis for a satisfying life. Our goal is to realise our true self, which we learn (through observation) in the family and community, and adapt the values of our society — and those of other societies that offer sound ethical principles which we may find acceptable.

When you have completed the task, refer to the band descriptors for A2 (W/JC) or A Level (Edgjas) and in particular have a look at the demands described in the higher band descriptors towards which you should be aspiring. Ask yourself:

- Is my answer a confident critical analysis and perceptive evaluation of the issue?
- Is my answer a response that successfully identifies and thoroughly addresses the issues raised by the question set?
- Does my work show an excellent standard of coherence, clarity and organisation? (WJC band descriptor only but still important to consider for Edgjas)

Will my work, when developed, contain thorough, sustained and clear views that
- are supported by extensive, detailed reasoning and/or evidence?
- Are the views of scholars/schools of thought used extensively, appropriately and in context?
E: Meta-ethical approaches: Intuitionism

Intuitionism: objective moral laws exist independently of human beings and moral truths can be discovered by using our minds in an intuitive way

The best way to approach Intuitionism is to begin with re-visiting a concept from Year 1. In philosophy, the term *a priori* was used. This term is usually quite heavily associated with the areas of philosophy such as logic and rationalism. Remember that a *priori* refers to knowledge that we may have prior to experience; that is, an innate, conceptual awareness of principles, for example, those associated with mathematics like shapes and numbers. G. E. Moore had proposed that 'good' was a simple concept and indefinable other than in relation to itself, then just as with mathematics, the principles of ethics are *a priori* and exist independently of human beings. In addition, these are self-evident truths and therefore truths that do not need to be 'established' and known through some kind of rationalisation.

It is important to note that Moore did not explain how a recognition of good was to be implemented, processed or caused. It just is. Just as 'good' is indefinable, or at best defined as 'good', in the same way we just recognise 'goodness' through 'intuition' and it does not need any working out. He wrote:

Again, I would wish it observed that, when I call such propositions Intuitions, I mean merely to assert that they are incapable of proof; I imply nothing whatever as to the manner or origin of our cognition of them. Still less do I imply (as most Intuitionists have done) that any proposition whatever is true, because we cognise it in a particular way or by the exercise of any particular faculty. I hold, on the contrary, that every way in which it is possible to prove a true proposition, it is equally possible to cognise a false one.

In other words, once we begin to apply reason or suggest something is worked out through reason, error becomes possible. This was important for Moore and relates to his two key questions about moral philosophy.

In the preface to his book Principia Ethica Moore also suggests that there are two key questions for moral philosophy: (1) what kind of things ought to exist for their own sake? and (2) what kind of actions ought we to perform? His answer to the first question was that such things that ought to exist for their own sake were intrinsically good. We can see these things even though they are indefinable, and we cannot present any evidence to support this other than simply recognising this. The answer to the second question was that we ought to perform actions that bring about this intrinsic goodness and this can be supported by empirical evidence.

The term 'Intuitionism' is also referred to as 'ethical non-naturalism' because it removes itself from the idea that objective moral laws can be induced from the empirical world. However, this does not mean it is a 'metaphysical' approach to ethics as it also clearly asserts that moral principles are 'there' in the same way concepts such as numbers 'exist'. Intuitionism has also been referred to as a 'non-metaphysical moral realism'.

Key quote

Our first conclusion as to the subject-matter of Ethics is, then, that there is a simple, indefinable, unanalysable object of thought by reference to which it must be defined. By what name we call this unique object is a matter of indifference, so long as we clearly recognise what it is and that it does differ from other objects. (Moore)

Moore sees no connection between meta-ethics and metaphysics since meta-ethics is concerned with the very first question about ethics, namely, the nature of goodness. As we have seen from the Naturalistic fallacy, no exploration or enquiry into the innate properties of the empirical and physical world could provide insight into what 'goodness' is.

Mary Warnock states: 'Moore conceives it is possible that metaphysics might have some relevance to the question of what we ought to do, though it could have none to the question of what is good. For what we ought to do is determined by some practical and causal questions about the consequences of our acts.'

George Edward Moore was born on November 4, 1873, to Daniel and Henrietta Moore and grew up in South London. He was schooled at Dulwich College, where he studied the classics in Greek and Latin. Moore studied at Cambridge University at the age of 18 and became interested in the study of philosophy becoming good friends with fellow student Bertrand Russell, and in later life Ludwig Wittgenstein, who was a student under Moore. Moore graduated with a first-class philosophy degree and won a fellowship to continue his studies. Moore returned to Cambridge in 1911 after a seven-year break from studies and taught and lived there for the rest of his life. As well as professor of philosophy, Moore was editor of Mind and was well respected by friends and colleagues, renowned for being a man of impeccable moral character. Moore died in Cambridge in 1958.

Intuitive ability is innate and the same for all moral agents

The word 'good' is not meaningful even though it cannot be defined; it is simply that to say something is 'good' is saying something that cannot be paraphrased by another word. The term that is often used for this by intuitionists is that good is *sui generis*, meaning that it is without comparison and unique (from the Latin of its own kind). This understanding and ability to recognise 'good' is innate and the same for all moral agents. Moreover, the 'goodness' that we perceive is not some relative truth based upon empirical perceptions; it is objective and the self-evident truth for all.

Moore writes:

'Everyone does in fact understand the question 'Is this good?'. When he thinks of it, his state of mind is different from what it would be, were he asked, 'Is this pleasant, or desired, or approved?' It has a distinct meaning for him, even though he may not recognize in what respect it is distinct. Whenever he thinks of 'intrinsic value', or 'intrinsic worth', or says that a thing 'ought to be', he has before his mind the unique object – the unique property of things – that I mean by 'good'. Everybody is constantly aware of this notion, although he may never become aware at all that it is different from other notions of which he is also aware. But, for correct ethical reasoning, it is extremely important that he should become aware of this fact; and as soon as the nature of the problem is closely understood, there should be little difficulty in advancing so far in analysis.'

Moore was careful to differentiate between intuition and things that are self-evident. Intuition is the process by which we arrive at the 'knowledge' and
recognition of the things that are self-evident. Intuition is a conscious mental state that recognises what is self-evident. The self-evident concept of good, however, is not a mental state at all.

In other words, conscious intuition reveals objective truths, self-evident truths and not things that may be common sense, an obvious fact or truths relating to a particular empirical context. What is obvious, or evident, to one person may well not be to another; however, an objective proposition is self-evident, which means it is evident in itself and does not depend upon normal, natural perception. For example, the number 4 is a self-evident truth; it may well be the case that it is not evident to some and yet evident to others. However, it still remains a truth independently of whether or not we perceive it as so. A proposition may be evident to someone but a self-evident proposition is just there in itself anyway in the first instance and known through intuition. Intuition does not provide justification for a self-evident proposition; intuition just accesses that self-evident proposition.

Richard Norman points out that Moore is keen to define the type of ‘intuitionist’ philosopher that he is because his intuitionism is different in two respects: (1) intuition is not about belief in what actions are right, but about things that are good in themselves, and (2) he does not want to imply that there is some special way in which we can know them to be true, as Norman writes, ‘He means only, he says, that we can know them to be true, and that we cannot give any further reasons why they are true ... it is simply a belief which one knows to be true, but for which one has no reasons.’

**Key quote**
The first thing to note is that a self-evident proposition is not the same as an obvious truth ... What is obvious to you may not be obvious to me. But self-evident is not relative in this way. Although a proposition may be evident to one person but not to another, it could not be self-evident to one person, but not to another. A proposition is just self-evident, not self-evident to someone.

(Standford/ Stratton-Lake)

Intuition allows for objective moral values

The last two chapters of Moore's *Principia Ethica* are concerned with two questions:

- What should we do?
- What things are good?

Firstly, Moore’s answer to the first question is very simple: any moral obligation has inherent within it the obligation to do good and produce the greatest amount.

Moore states:

Our duty, therefore, can only be defined as that action, which will cause more good to exist in the Universe than any possible alternative. And what is 'right' or 'morally permissible' only differs from this, as will not cause less good than any possible alternative. When, therefore, Ethics presumes to assert that certain ways of acting are 'duties' it presumes to assert that to act in those ways will always produce the greatest possible sum of good.

This is our duty, to perform actions that cause more good to exist than any possible alternative. We do this by calculating and weighing up of the consequences of actions.

**Key quote**

The individual should rather guide his choice by direct consideration of the intrinsic value or worthness of the effects which his action may produce.'

(Moore)

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This sounds surprisingly familiar if we consider that it is a similar proposition to what utilitarian philosophers may proclaim. Indeed, Wardenkq observes, 'on the question of conduct Moore is in far closer agreement with the utilitarians than with any other moral philosophers. ... They differ only about the question of how to assess the value of the consequences.' Moore's Intuitionism has therefore come to be seen by philosophers as a form of consequential intuitionism.

Indeed, Moore had already argued as to why there are disagreements in ethical debate and in particular with his own view when he states:

'Though I therefore I cannot believe that everybody, unless he is mistaken as to what he thinks, will think the same as we do. It is as with a sum in mathematics. If we find a good and palatable error in the calculations, we are not surprised or troubled that the person who made this mistake has reached a different result from ours. We think he will admit that his result is wrong, if his mistake is pointed out to him. For instance, if a man has to add up 5 + 7 + 9, we should not wonder that he made the result to be 34, if he started by making 5 + 7 + 25. And so in Ethics, if we find, as we did, that 'desirable' is confused with 'desired,' or that ends is confused with 'means,' we need not be discouraged that those who have committed these mistakes do not agree with us. The only difference is that in Ethics, owing to the intricacy of its subject matter, it is far more difficult to persuade anyone else that he has made a mistake or that that mistake affects his result.'

In other words, the reason people do not see what Moore is arguing about intuition and ethical debate is because their different answer is down to their mistake in methodology or working out the problem. Somewhere along the line we can identify the mistakes others. However, Moore argues that if they have made that mistake initially, it is very difficult to ethical debate to point out, it is very difficult to ethical debate to point out that the rest of the argument may be sound, actually is built upon an error.

At the end of the *Principia Ethica* Moore identifies some intrinsic moral goodness (chapter 6 The Idea). His method for identification of such goods is to propose such things that if they were to exist independently and abstractly they would still be considered good. Moore writes: ‘Indeed, once the meaning of the question is clearly understood, the answer to it, in its main outlines, appears to be so obvious, that it runs the risk of seeming to be a platitude. By far the most valuable things, which we know or can imagine, are certain states of consciousness, which may be roughly described as the pleasures of human intercourse and the enjoyment of beautiful objects.’

For Moore, the purity of human friendship and aesthetic beauty were intrinsic goods on the basis that we can perceive them as existing in isolation from everything else and still class them as good. Moore did deny that there were other goods, but just that sometimes they are mixed due to the complexity of the natural world. He writes: ‘It is necessary to consider what things are such that, if they existed by themselves, in absolute isolation, we should yet judge their existence to be good; and, in order to decide upon the relative degrees of value of different things, we must similarly consider what comparative value seems to attach to the isolated existence of each.' In general, Moore's goods are similar to Aristotle's virtues and his recognition of their mixed nature is in line with his initial analysis of simple and complex in relation to establishing 'what is good.'

Moore's evils are divided into three groups:

1. The first class consists of those evils which, while always to include an enjoyment or admiring contemplation of things which are themselves either evil or ugly.
2. The second class of bad evils are undoubtedly mixed evils, but I treat them next, because in a certain respect, they appear to be the converse of the class last considered.
3. The third class of great positive evils appears to be the class of pains.
Key quote

In *Principia Ethica*, he defended his claim that beauty on its own is good by appealing to intuitions about a very specific, beautiful world. ... Moore likewise insisted that before we make judgments of self-evidence we must make sure that the propositions we are considering are clear; failure to do so, he claimed, explained much of the disagreement about ethics. (Stanford / Hurka)

AOI: Activity

Try to list some examples of virtues that can be seen to be good that arise from personal relationships and think of ways in which these good can become mixed or distorted. For example, apocryphal (see Situation Ethics book 1) can be spoiled by poor intention. Honesty is good but can be affected by the situation that calls for discretion.

Study tip

Moore's theory of intuition needs to be carefully explained so that you know exactly what Moore is referring to. It may help by thinking of things that it is not, rather than what it is, to help you.

Intuition needs a mature mind so not infallible

Intuition itself as a foundation of knowledge is the belief at some point there must be a framework, basis, anchor, or starting point from which all other judgements can be made. Aristotle recognised this in his book *Nicomachean Ethics* when he stated: ‘Some, indeed, demand that the law prove this, but this is because they lack education; for it shows lack of education not to know of what we should require proof, and of what we should not, for it is quite impossible that everything should have a proof; the process should go on to infinity, so there would be no proof.”

What Aristotle is arguing is that knowledge always rests upon something, for example, evidence or something that is relative to it. If we cannot explain it (e.g., hot and cold), if we continue looking retrospectively upon knowledge then there must be a “first cause” (e.g., Causal argument year 1 book) otherwise knowledge would be infinite. The basis for knowledge had to begin with something. The key question is whether this begins with our education (nurtured), or whether or not it is simply a priori and innate within us. In other words, Moore suggests that this process of intuition (by which we have access to self-evident knowledge) is a priori.

For intuitionists, then, knowledge of good is innate and a priori knowledge. However, although not subject to rational proof in the same way empirical knowledge is, the implications of what is recognised as intuitively good does reveal a sense of infallibility to the idea of self-evident truths when it comes to consideration of acting upon this knowledge. Moore, as we have seen, conceded that what could be intuitively recognised as good was not to do with actions and consequences but a recognition of the thing that was good in itself. Therefore, any fallibility of intuition is directly related not to the a priori, self-evident awareness and recognition of good, but rather in how we practically put this knowledge into action.

Key term

Infallibility: without error

Platitude: a moral comment that has been used too often to be meaningful, cliché

Specification content

Intuition needs a mature mind so not infallible.

Key quotes

What then is it for a proposition to be self-evident? Locke says that a self-evident proposition is one that 'carries its own light and evidence with it, and needs no other proof... Price tells us that a self-evident proposition is immediate, and needs no further proof... Ross writes, a self-evident proposition is 'evident without any need of proof, or of evidence beyond itself' (Stanford/Stratton-Lake).

If nothing is self-evident, nothing can be proved. (C.S. Lewis)

Key term

Prima facie duties: first impression, accepted as correct until proved otherwise

QuickPare

1.16 What two things did Moore suggest were self-evidently good?

1.17 Why does an application of intuitive thought need a mature mind?
Ought is indefinable but can be recognised by intuition

H. A. Prichard was a very distinguished moral philosopher who taught at Oxford during the first half of last century. Like Moore, Prichard argued that moral knowledge was indefinable, but it was not the ‘good’ that was the basis of intuitive moral insight. (Morales) The distinction was that ‘goodness’ (i.e. that which is good in itself) is the basis of our intuitive recognition and that ‘rightness’ or ‘rightness’ was the overworking of this. As we have seen, this created some possible incoherence when considering how Moore suggested this was pursued and the consequentialism that followed did not sit comfortably with other intuitions. For Prichard and (and Ross) it was the ‘rightness’ or sense of obligation or duty that was the intuitive element of our moral thinking. Their approach became more deontological. That is, when there are moral conflicts we learn to decide upon the greater obligation, and over time, develop a more advanced, intuitive sense of right and wrong. Despite empirical evidence, it was still the sense of duty and moral intuitionism that was the driver in deciding what to do and NOT a goal of creating the most possible good. Prichard and, later, Ross, were philosophers who had a slightly different approach to Moore in that they were concerned about the sense of ‘oughtness’ and ‘duty’ as a key element of intuition and defining the way we think morally rather than its being a consequence of our moral insight as Moore had attested.

Born in London in 1871, Harold Prichard attended Clifton College in Bristol and was admitted to New College, Oxford to study mathematics. After receiving a First Class Honours in mathematics in 1891, he then studied Greats (ancient history and philosophy) taking First Class Honours in 1894. After a brief period working for a firm of solicitors in London, he returned to Oxford where he spent the rest of his life, first as Fellow of Brasenose College (1895–98) and then of Trinity College (1898–1924), Prichard published remarkably little, only two lectures and two papers in moral philosophy, the most famous being his widely anthologised paper, ‘Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?’, published in 1912. However, Prichard is reported to have written much more that he never published – writings that were nevertheless circulated among his colleagues over whom he apparently had substantial philosophical influence. Anthologies of his unpublished writing were made after his death.

For Prichard moral knowledge was unique, sui generis and also was clearly separated from reason and empirical influence. Prichard rejected Moore’s intuitive consequentialism that argued that ‘what we ought to do’ is to act so that we produce the greatest amount of good through our actions. Prichard argued that since our moral intuition can be found in our sense of obligation or duty when we recognise what we ‘ought’ or ‘should’ do, then any reasoning about what we ‘ought to do’ or ‘should do’ has already been answered. Moral truth is contained within the sense of obligation that we intuitively feel when confronted with a situation. This truth, however, is not subject to reason and since this is the case, the way to behave morally is equally not the result of rational analysis and debate. We just ‘know’ what we ought to do.

Duty remains an irreducible, indefinable and an irreducible concept just like Moore’s ‘good’ and yellow in three ways:

1. In the normative realm it maintains the non-naturalist view that normative truths of duty are sui generis, neither reducible to nor derivable from empirical investigation. They are self-evident.
2. Neither are the truths of duty extracted from moral judgements, normative truths or values that have a non-norm moral origin.

Key terms

Irreducible: cannot be broken down into further parts
Underivative: is not dependent on or derived from something else, a simple concept

quickite

1.18 How did Prichard disagree with Moore about what we ought to do?

Ought is indefinable but can be recognised by intuition.

The duties are specific (e.g. to keep promises and not to harm others) and do not derive from a more general consequentialist duty to promote good consequences. As Thomas Hurka writes, ‘The main reason we ought to keep our promises or not harm others is that we ought to’ those duties, like the normative realm in a whole and moral duty in general, are self-standing.

Key terms

Claim: Prichard’s term for an argument put together from general reasoning

General reasoning: using the empirical evidence around us to present logical argument.

Moral reasoning: application of intuition

Preliminaries: gathering of claims

Unreflective consciousness: intuition that is not determined by philosophical reflection.

3. Two ways of thinking (general and moral)

The last section ended with considering the fact that duties can conflict when an ethical decision needs to be made. In one sense, this is logical if there is only one right way to act. It may be that we respond that ‘the real world is not as simple as that and moral issues are complex’ but this response is very much based in what Prichard calls the world of general reasoning.

General reasoning is basically using the empirical evidence around us to present logical argument. For any moral decision, the appreciation of certain facts concerning the circumstances involved is referred to as ‘preliminaries’. However, such preliminaries, no matter how strong, do not hold any obligation. In addition, Prichard speaks not of conflicting duties but of the fact that general reasoning may throw up different ‘claims’ and the ultimate ‘claim’ may well be the ultimate moral duty but it does not necessarily have to be. Prichard was careful to point out that an appeal to general reasoning must not let it become the driver for recognising one’s proper moral duty only can do this.

Moral reasoning is the recognition and assertion of one’s duty by intuitive thought. It is present in our unreflective consciousness according to Prichard.

Key terms

Prichard makes clear, being in a position to grasp the self-evidence of an obligation may require appreciating certain facts about one’s circumstances that are ‘preliminaries’ to the process of thinking about ethical issues. Part of a process that Prichard calls ‘general’ in contrast to moral thinking. (Timmons)

If we ask ourselves what this something else is, we seem driven to say that … what is called a conflict of duties is really a conflict of claims on us to act in different ways, arising out of various circumstances of the whole situation in which we are placed. (Timmons)
Key quotes
Prichard is not suggesting that nothing can get us to feel an obligation — for example, seeing something or hearing something or learning about something. What he is denying is that any description of such facts, no matter how complete, entails or otherwise implies any particular obligation. (Kaufman)
The sense that we ought to do certain things arises in our unreflective consciousness, being an activity of moral thinking occasioned by the various situations in which we find ourselves. (Prichard)
Moral reasoning subsumes general reasoning. The danger in this relationship between the two types of reasoning is that general reasoning will not take a subordinate role. Indeed, to focus on the complexity of moral issues is in itself an appeal to the consequentialist position. However, to be guided by this alone would be tantamount to surrendering moral intuition.
Prichard was fearful of the consequential nature of general thinking and pointed out that it is here where the potential for distortion of duty can be found. For example, although he agreed that a moral duty must always mention its explanatory grounds, in trying to derive the obligation to keep promises from a duty to promote the good, consequentialism could turn the obligation to keep promises into a quite different obligation that promotes other values, i.e. discretion, honesty and trust. We have the same problem here as with the open question argument because we can then ask, ‘is this honesty good?’ In effect consequentialism turns the duty to keep promises into something it is not, and thereby distorts the moral phenomena. As Thomas Hurka writes, “in trying to explain the duty to keep promises, consequentialism destroys it.”
Moral thinking must not work like that because it is intuitive and self-evident. Prichard does acknowledge that while issues can appear complex, we must not let general reasoning distort moral phenomena and turn it into consequentialism. Prichard refers to another example from Aristotle to demonstrate how the identification of an intuitive ultimate good such as eudaimonia (well-being) can be distorted in a different way when duties are derived from it. For instance, concerning the duty to relieve pain if it is for someone else, is that doing so will make our lives better? Or, is that doing so will make the other person’s life better? The answer is yes. But the question is whether the right motive, in our own eudaimonia, can be true that this is the right motive. The obvious and right explanation is that relieving another’s pain will make his or her life better, so the duty is fundamentally other-directed and not directed towards our own well-being.
Key quotes
Even when consequentialism yields the right verdict about which act is right, he holds, it overemphasizes the explanation of the act’s rightness . . . and in ignoring it consequentialism distorts the moral phenomena. (Hurka)
Even when consequentialism yields the right conclusion about what we ought to act, it gives the wrong reason for it . . . According to Prichard, we ought to pay our debt because we incurred it, and not because (or only because) of any good that will result. (Hurka)
Ross also argued that “even when consequentialism is right about which acts are right, it is wrong about why they are right. If we think we ought to keep a promise, he insisted, the reason is not that this will have good consequences; it is simply that we promised.” (Hurka)
Key quote
This idea of distorting the moral phenomena was central to Prichard’s argument that moral duty in general is undervenous. (Hurka)
Descartes was the famous philosopher you need to turn on your own idea: I think, therefore I am (Latin: cogito ergo sum) and introduced the principle of doubt to determine a truth.

Key term
Eudaimonia: Aristotle’s term for happiness of well-being

Key terms
Descartes’ principle of skepticism: that doubt can be resolved through challenge Ex hypothesis: according to the hypothesis proposed

So we have now established that general reasoning can be dangerous if it is given too much emphasis. However, the question still remains: ‘how can we ensure that moral duty succeeds?’

Prichard’s Intuitionism is very clever in the way it proposes its methodology for this and it is linked closely to empirical reasoning. Indeed, Prichard uses Descartes’ principle of skepticism to demonstrate that moral reasoning is confused by doubt. In other words, general reasoning is used to support and confirm what we originally perceived through intuition. We sometimes need to check the addition of our minds, even though we know our method is correct; we sometimes confirm our initial observations with a “second glance.” Prichard writes:

Just as the recognition that the doing of our duty often vitally interferes with the satisfaction of our inclinations leads us to wonder whether we really ought to do what we usually call our duty, so the recognition that we and others are liable to mistakes in knowledge generally leads us, as did Descartes, to wonder whether hitherto we may not have been always mistaken. And just as we try to find a proof, based on the general consideration of action and of human life, that we ought to act in the ways usually called moral, so we, like Descartes, propose by a process of reflection on our thinking to find a test of knowledge, i.e. a principle by applying which we can show that a certain condition of mind was really knowledge, a condition which ex hypothesis (according to the hypothesis proposed, i.e. intuition) existed independently of the process of reflection.

In other words, the way general thinking is used is for reflective purposes in relation to the intuition and not for evaluative purposes to build an argument or case as for what is right, in a given situation we should be intuitively aware of what the right course of action should be. We are presented with plenty of alternatives and arguments but they are there not to convince us they are there to direct us to decide the doubtful as we originally thought of was the correct course of action. It is almost like reverse consequentialism! Hurka observes that “the stage of being motivated by such skepticism is not pointless; it is an essential part of philosophical reflection. But its end result should be to return to our original convictions, and so it is with moral duty.” Therefore, the purpose of general reasoning is to shore up our initial intuition and not to distort it.

Key quotes
Modern epistemology, which begins with Descartes, is a response to the fact that we can doubt many of the things that we think we know to be true, and the theorising that follows is an effort to find a procedure by which we can demonstrate that we really do know what we think we know . . . Prichard thinks that similarly, modern moral philosophy’s primary aim is to find a way by which to demonstrate that what we think we do our duty, really is obligatory. (Kaufman)
We might, he thinks, come to doubt the truth of such insights, but the mistake of moral philosophy is to assume that such doubts can be assuaged by argument. The only appropriate response, in the moral as in the mathematical case, is that the doubts themselves are illegitimate. Reflection can serve a useful purpose only inssofar as it returns us to a place in which we can recognise the self-evidence of the claims we began by doubting. (Le Bar)
Therefore, general reasoning is not used independently to arrive at some sort of conclusion by presenting and manipulating evidence and argument. Absolutely not. These are the claims Prichard speaks of. Instead, general reasoning is used to shore up the knowledge already gained through intuition as to what our obligation is. It is useful to see what Prichard actually writes:

The sense that we ought to do certain things arises in our unreflective consciousness, being an activity of moral thinking occasioned by the various situations in which we find ourselves. At this stage our attitude to these obligations is one of unquestioning confidence. But inevitably the appreciation of the degree to which the execution of these obligations is contrary to our interests raises the doubt whether after all these obligations are really obligatory, i.e. whether our sense that we ought to do certain things is not illusion. We then want to have it proved to us that we ought to do so, i.e. to be convinced of this by a process which, as an argument, is different in kind from our original and unreflective appreciation of it. This demand is, as I have argued, illegitimate.

Hence in the first place, if, as at almost universally the case, by Moral Philosophy is meant the knowledge which would satisfy this demand, there is no such knowledge, and all attempts to attain it are doomed to failure because they rest on a mistake, the mistake of supposing the possibility of proving what can only be apprehended directly by an act of moral thinking. Nevertheless the demand, though illegitimate, is inevitable until we have carried the process of reflection far enough to realise the self-evidence of our obligations, i.e. the immediacy of our apprehension of them. In the second place, suppose we come genuinely to doubt whether we ought, for example, to pay our debts owing in a genuine doubt whether our previous convictions that we ought to do so is true, a doubt which can, I think, only arise if we fail to remember the real nature of what we now call our past convictions. The truth really lies that it is still getting us into a situation which occasions the obligation, or — if our imagination be strong enough — in imagining ourselves in that situation, and then letting our moral capacities of thinking do their work. Or to put it the matter generally, if we do doubt whether there is really an obligation to originate A in a situation B, the remedy lies not in any process of general thinking, but in getting face to face with a particular instance of the situation B, and then directly appreciating the obligation to originate A in that situation.

Extract from H.A. Prichard Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake? (1912)

1.20 Why was Descartes an important philosopher for Prichard?

quickfire

1.21 How can moral reasoning be distorted according to Prichard?

quickfire

Study Tip
It is popular to think that Prichard uses evidence to support and determine a moral decision in line with intuition. Make sure that you understand that evidence is there to dent doubt with regard intuition and to shore up that intuitive thought.

No proof of moral intuition exists: the argument from queerness

Possibly the most famous of challenges to the proposal of Intuitionism was that of J.L. Mackie in his book, Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong, published in 1977 (pages 38–42). Mackie’s position is that there are no objective ethical values, that is, values that can be known, verified and part of the empirical world and yet at the same time independent of us.

Mackie argues that what Intuitionism does present us with implausible oddities and strange suggestions that ultimately make the whole theory queer; hence, he refers to it as The argument from queerness. Mackie writes:

‘Even more important, however, and certainly more generally applicable, is the argument from queerness. This has two parts, one metaphysical and the other epistemological. If there were objective values, then they would be entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe. Correspondingly, if we were aware of them, it would have to be by some special faculty of moral perception or intuition, utterly different from our normal ways of knowing everything else.’

Firstly, it is this very ‘queerness’ of moral properties that makes it implausible that they exist. Mackie’s is a very heavily empirically based objection and no different from Kant’s challenge against the cosmological argument for the existence of God that if a God did exist, this first cause would be so very different from anything that we experience or know and so would be able to recognise or know about it. This is because our knowledge is limited to the phenomenal world of space and time and is not possible to speculate about what, if any, God or gods may or may not exist independently of space and time. Secondly, Mackie refers to Hume when considering how knowledge can never provide an ‘intuitional’ motive of the will and that any ethical term that does this has to add the element of queerness to a particular description. In the end, Mackie summarises the proposal that moral judgements are made and issues solved by an ethical intuition ‘is a travesty of actual moral thinking’.

Intuitive ‘truths’ can differ widely and there is no way to resolve conflicting intuitions

The main problem with Intuitionism for many philosophers is that because there is no real, established list of duties or obligations then not only are people unaware of what they should do, what they think they should do will also differ widely. Ross and Prichard did make reference to some suggested duties, Prichard in his various essays through Illustration and Ross through a more systematic presentation of what he called ‘prima facie’ duties. However, the fact that duties vary from person to person and situation to situation, the wide difference is potentially unavoidable. Strawson-Lake concurs. If intuitions are intellectual seeming, one might ask why certain moral propositions seem true whereas others do not. For example, if two people met the same moral dilemma and yet had different intuitions about what was the right thing to do then how would this be resolved? Rather than solving moral problems it appears to make them more complex to actually work out. More pertinently, even the Intuitionist philosophers cannot agree on what duties and obligations are universal. This may be due to the fact that they have slightly different approaches as we have seen — Moore is more consequentialist and yet Prichard and Ross are more deontological — yet the fact still remains that they disagree. As Richard Norman observes, ‘clearly Ross’s experience may be different from Moore’s, for what is self-evidently true for one of them is self-evidently false for the other.’

No proof of moral intuition exists: the argument from queerness
Linked to the idea of conflicting duties is the criticism that differences occur because an individual is more or less left to their own devices and no amount of logical discourse could deter a decision because intuitionism is not based on normative objectivity.

Key quote
Philosophers who claim that fundamental value judgements are self-evident are necessarily committed to claiming that their truths are always apparent to everyone.

(Norman)
It is not surprising, then, that other philosophers have concluded that these fundamental value judgements are really not the expression of self-evident truths at all; they are merely the expressions of personal preferences, of feelings and emotions, of individual likes and dislikes.

(Norman)

Key skills
Knowledge involves: Selection of a range of highly accurate and relevant information that is directly related to the specific demands of the question.

This means:
- Providing relevant material for the question set.
- Be focused in explaining and examining the material selected.

Understanding involves:
Explanation that is exhaustive, demonstrating depth and breadth with excellent use of evidence and examples including (where appropriate) thorough and accurate supporting use of sacred texts, sources of wisdom and specialist language.

This means:
- Effective use of examples and supporting evidence to establish the quality of your understanding.

A01 Developing skills
It is now important to consider the information that has been covered in this section; however, the information in its raw form is too extensive and so has to be processed in order to meet the requirements of the examination.

Your next task is this: Below is a summary of Mackie’s argument from queerness. You want to explain this in an essay but you are your teacher’s notes and so to write them out is simply copying them and not demonstrating any understanding. Re-write your teacher’s notes but you need to replace the words used (apart from key religious or philosophical terminology) with different words so that you show that you understand what is being written and that you have your own unique version.

Mackie’s argument from queerness: Queerness is present in our experience of the world as a non-universal property and hence cannot be the basis of a moral framework.

Key quote
Finally, Ethical Intuitionists allowed that various other factors can lead to disagreement. Clarke, for instance, allows that stupidity, corruption, or perverseness... John Balduy also acknowledges that self-evident moral principles... have been discredited, even by philosophers and men of letters... And Price maintained that all forms of knowledge, including intuitive knowledge, may be evinced in different degrees. Intuition may be clear and perfect but may sometimes be faint and obscure. Such variance in degrees of clarity allows that a self-evident proposition may be imperfectly and obscurely grasped, and this may lead someone to deny its truth... Given all these ways in which the truth of a self-evident proposition may be missed, it is no surprise that there is no universal assent. But the absence of universal assent is quite consistent with self-evidence, as long as one does not regard self-evidence to mean, or imply, obviousness.

(Stanford/Stratton-Lake)

Overall there are many philosophers who see moral disagreement as throwing doubt over the claim that moral propositions are self-evident. If specific moral propositions are known and correctly understood, then, everyone who has an understanding would accept them and there would be universal agreement and acknowledgment between these people. Therefore, since there is not such universal agreement, then there can be no self-evident moral propositions.

A01 Developing skills
It is now important to consider the information that has been covered in this section; however, the information in its raw form is too extensive and so has to be processed in order to meet the requirements of the examination.

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Issues for analysis and evaluation

Whether moral terms are intuitive

One line of argument would be that many people would say that they experience things as intuitively ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ and some people may refer to it as ‘instinct’. In other words, they take it for granted that it is ‘the way it is or should be’ and that it is an ‘objective feature of the world’ or ‘a fact’. Intuitionism supports this common experience of morality even for those who do not believe in God. For those who believe in God, they may argue that intuitive ethical thinking is very similar to religious experience, revelation or an awareness of objective moral codes that exist independently of the empirical world.

From a philosophical perspective, Prichard argued that moral knowledge was unique, sui generis and also was clearly separated from reason and empirical influence. This line of thinking did not see ‘what we ought to do’ as produce the greatest amount of good through our actions like Moore advocated. Instead, to guard against the accusation that ethical thinking is empirical, Prichard argued that our moral intuitions can be found in our sense of obligation or duty. In other words, moral truth is contained within the sense of obligation that we intuitively feel when confronted with a situation. Prichard made sure that there could be no empirical challenge to intuitionism by stating that this truth, however, is not subject to reason. If this is the case, the way to behave morally is also not a result of empirical analysis or rational debate. His argument concluded that we just ‘know’ what we ought to do. This is a difficult argument to counter.

In support of Prichard, many religious, philosophers and sociologists could argue that the world is an ordered place, this order is given in the laws of nature, the laws of mathematics, the laws of ethics and the fact that there is a common sense of morality in many cultures. Intuitionism supports this view of the world by presenting moral terms as innate (undervived and true apart from analysis). Indeed, appealing moral terms is ‘intuitive’-inside the analytic is not the definitions reduce or limit the ideal of ‘good’ and ‘bad’.

Key quote
Prichard maintains that our feelings of obligation are basic and immediate – prima facie, to borrow an expression from fellow ‘Intuitionists’ W. D. Ross – and for anyone who has ever felt morally obligated, this seems pretty hard to deny. (Kaufman)

However, one could argue that if moral terms were intuitive, then we would expect morality to be uniform the world over at least we would expect there to be uniformity (a common intuition) between those who consider and reflect seriously on morality. However, anthropology can give examples where this is not the case! Psychologists and sociologists can demonstrate that what appears to be intuitive approaches to morality are really the result of conditioning from family, tribe and/or culture.

The typical response may be that some are not using intuitive thinking and are being guided by general reasoning and this would account for any differences. Indeed, we are back to square one with Prichard’s definition of duty as both intuitive and self-evident. Within our own culture there are widely different views on specific ethical issues amongst those who have reflected deeply but are we to consider that these people are not listening to their intuition? There is no way to verify intuitionism! There is no empirical evidence for it and there is no agreement on the origin of intuitionism. Even the Intuitionists disagree amongst themselves on what morality consists of, for example Moore’s version is different from that of Prichard and from that of Ross.

AO2 Activity
As you read through this section try to do the following:
1. Pick out the different lines of argument that are presented in the text and identify any evidence given in support.
2. For each line of argument try to evaluate whether or not you think this is strong or weak.
3. Think of any questions you may wish to raise in response to the arguments.
This Activity will help you to start thinking critically about what you read and help you to evaluate the effectiveness of different arguments and from this develop your own observations, opinions and points of view that will help you to make any conclusions that you make in your answers to the AO2 questions that arise.

AO2 Activity
List some conclusions that could be drawn from the AO2 reasoning from the above text; try to aim for at least three different possible conclusions. Consider each of the conclusions and collect brief evidence to support each conclusion from the AO1 and AO2 material for this topic. Select the conclusion that you think is most convincing and explain why it is so.

Key questions
Is our intuition really a trustworthy guide to ultimate truth? What about my intuition that there is a ghost in my closet?
Is there really one true order to the universe, or is that viewpoint merely an interpretation of reality?
Is there really no uniformity amongst the various moralises the world over?
Do people in our own culture really disagree on the most important aspects of morality?
Do you need to have empirical evidence to know if an action should be judged as moral or immoral?

This is the very basis of the challenge to the proposal of intuitionism that J. L. Mackie proposed in his book, Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong, published in 1977 (pages 38–42). Mackie argues that what intuitionism does, in hiding behind the explanation of self-evident truths, is to present us with implausible oddities and strange suggestions that ultimately make the whole theory queer; hence, he refers to it as ‘the argument from queerness’. Mackie argues, ‘if there were objective values, then they would be entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe... Correspondingly, if we were aware of them, it would have to be by some special faculty of moral perception or intuition, utterly different from our normal ways of knowing everything else.

This is similar to Kant’s challenge against the cosmological argument for the existence of God that if a God did exist, this ‘first cause’ would be so very different from anything that we experience or know and so would not be able to recognize or know about it. This is because our knowledge is limited to the phenomenal world of space and time and it is not possible to speculate about what may or may not exist independently of space and time.

Another argument was presented by David Hume. David Hume argued that knowledge can never provide an ‘influencing motive of the will’ and that any ethical term that does this has to add the element of queerness to a particular description. This also supports Mackie’s argument that intuitionism is ‘a travesty of actual moral thought’.

It appears we can adopt different conclusions as follows: Moral terms are intuitive; or, moral terms come from testing our views over and over again in different situations; or, moral terms are both given by our intuition and develop in response to real-life situations. Ultimately, it would seem the problem of ‘testing’ and evaluating whether moral terms are intuitive all reduces to the principle that intuition is self-evident. Therefore, when we demonstrated that ethical terms were not intuitive we would be wrong according to intuitionists and that we simply have not used our intuitions correctly.

Key quote
Moreover, since the truths which are supposed to be self-evident are, by definition, ones for which no reasons can be given, there can be no way of resolving the disagreement or of showing which of the views in question is really the apprehension of a self-evident truth. (Norman)

Study tip
It is vital for AO2 that you actually discuss arguments and not just explain what someone may have stated. Try to ask yourself, ‘was this a fair point to make?’, ‘is the evidence sound enough?’, ‘is there anything to challenge this argument?’, ‘is this a strong or weak argument?’. Such critical analysis will help you to develop your evaluation skills.
AO2 Developing skills

It is now important to consider the information that has been covered in this section; however, the information in its raw form is too extensive and so has to be processed in order to meet the requirements of the examination. This can be done by practising more advanced skills associated with AO2. For assessment objective 2 (AO2), which involves ‘critical analysis’ and ‘evaluation’ skills, we are going to focus on different ways in which the skills can be demonstrated effectively, and also to how the performance of these skills is measured (see generic descriptors for A2 (WJEC) A32 or A Level [Edexes] A22).

Your next task is this: Below is a brief summary of two different points of view concerning the validity of the theory of intuitionism. You want to use these two views and lines of argument for an evaluation; however, they need further reasons and evidence for support to fully develop the argument. Re-present these two views in a fully evaluative style by adding further reasons and evidence that link to their arguments. Aim for a further 100 words.

Many people would say that they experience things as intuitively ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ — in other words as ‘objective features of the world’ or ‘facts’. Intuitionism supports this common experience of morality — even for those who do not believe in God. There is no way to verify intuitionism! There is no empirical evidence for it and there is no agreement on the origin of intuitionism (God? Gut feelings? Genetics?). Even the intuitionists disagree amongst themselves on what morality consists of!

When you have completed the task, refer to the band descriptors for A2 (WJEC) or A Level (Edexes) and in particular have a look at the demands described in the higher band descriptors towards which you should be aspiring. Ask yourself:
- Is my answer a consistent critical analysis and perception of the theme in the style of A2
- Is my answer a response that successfully identifies and thoroughly addresses the issues raised by the question?
- Does my work show an excellent standard of coherence, clarity and organisation?
- Will my work, when developed, contain thorough, sustained and clear views that are supported by extensive, detailed reasoning and/or evidence?
- Are the views of scholars/schools of thought used extensively, appropriately and in context?
- Does my answer convey a consistent critical perception of the nature of any possible connections with other elements of my course?
- When used, is specialist language and vocabulary both thorough and accurate?

Key skills

Analysis involves identifying issues raised by the materials in the AO2 section, and presents sustained and clear views, either of scholars or from a personal perspective, ready for evaluation. This means:
- That your answer is able to identify key areas of debate in relation to a particular issue
- That you can identify and comment upon, the different lines of argument presented by others
- That your responses comments on the overall effectiveness of each of these areas or arguments

Evaluation involves considering the various implications of the issues raised based upon the evidence gleaned from analysis and provides an extended detailed argument with a clear conclusion.

Key quote

1.23 According to Russell, whose did question of value belong?

Key terms

Emotivism: theory that ethical propositions are simply expressions of approval or disapproval
Verification principle: methodology that only statements that are empirically verifiable (i.e. verifiable through the senses) are cognitively meaningful

Meta-ethical approaches: Emotivism

Emotivism as an ethical theory

The theory of emotivism is usually associated with the British philosopher A.J. Ayer and, quite independently of Ayer’s work, the American philosopher Charles L. Stevenson. Whilst Ayer was more influenced by the Logical Positivists and the ideas of the verification principle, Stevenson was influenced more by the later ideas of Wittgenstein on the meaning of language.

However, prior to the popularisation of the theory of moral language as emotive, this had already been raised by empiricists such as David Hume and then by one of Moore’s closest friends at Cambridge, Bertrand Russell. Ayer acknowledges this in his first edition preface: The views which are put forward in this treatise derive from the doctrines of Bertrand Russell and Wittgenstein, which are themselves the logical outcome of the empiricism of Berkeley and David Hume.

A year prior to the publication of Ayer’s book, Language, Truth and Logic (1934), Bertrand Russell had published a book called Religion and Science (1917) in which he argued that moral judgements of right and wrong were justified if they promote good but in terms of whether or not an act is a good act he states: there is no evidence either way. Each's view is only based on their own feelings. He also argued that moral statements were a form of rhetoric to raise the emotions of others. Russell writes: “Questions as to what is right or wrong are wholly outside the domain of knowledge. That is to say, when we ask that this or that has value, we are giving expression to our own emotions, not to a fact which would be true if our personal feelings were different.” He concluded the contrary to Moore when he argued that for anything to have intrinsic value is a matter, not of objectivity as Moore claimed, but of pure subjectivity. For example, the classic case with the goodness of beauty, which, as we know from the common phrase that ‘beauty is in the eye of the beholder’, is totally a matter for debate and personal perspective.

Key quote

Moore would agree that moral judgements are neither analytic nor empirically verifiable. But he believed that they are nevertheless true or false, because they are about non- natural properties. But Ayer respecks that our ‘sentiments’ are simply our feelings of approval or disapproval. Feelings are not cognitions of value, and value does not exist independently of our feelings. (Lacewing)

In other words, whilst Moore indicated that self-evident truths did not need justification, Russell drew a different conclusion that for something to
be ‘self-evident’ just means that it cannot be deemed true or false and, in that case, in the words of Richard Norman, ‘they make no statements and they convey no knowledge’.

This principle of non-verification was taken up by Alfred Ayer in relation to his work with the Logical Positivists who were all mainly from mathematical, scientific or engineering backgrounds. The Logical Positivists, you will have, or will learn from the Philosophy topic on Religious Language, were interested in types of knowledge and language that could be verified through either analytical or synthetic means by appeal to logic or empiricism. This in itself relates back to Hume’s Fork.

Warnock summarises his position well when she writes:

‘Ayer’s general contention is, briefly, that any statement that has meaning must fall into one of two categories. Either, it must be analytic, that is necessarily true but not concerned with empirical matters of fact; or it must be empirical, if it is empirical, it can never be more than probable; it is, in fact, a hypothesis. Both the meaning and the probability of the hypothesis are established by empirical verification. That is to say, if a statement is to qualify for the second category, it must be capable of verification by sense experience.’

The problem for ethical propositions is that to be verified they must fit into one of the two categories of Hume’s Fork (see earlier diagram and explanation). Either, they fit into the category of logic, mathematics and symbols as analytic propositions; or they fall into the second category of the empirical judgment of the experience of science and propositions of empirical matter of fact.

**Key quote**

Even the most enthusiastic utilitarian would never maintain that one literally saw or heard the goodness of an action. (Warnock)

There are no other categories of knowledge and language.

The problem is, as Hume, Russell and Ayer analysed, ethical propositions do not fall into either category. Furthermore, as Hume had observed years earlier, when you pronounce any action or character to be vicious, you mean nothing, but that from the constitution of your nature you have a feeling or sentiment of blame from the contemplation of it. Hume points out that such feelings are ‘not qualities in objects, but perceptions in the mind’. Reason cannot find a motive for an action and neither can an ethical proposition be grounded in anything else other than our own experience.

Whilst Hume gave a typical Naturalist account of such feelings by linking them ‘objectively’ to biological heritage and social conditioning, Russell and Ayer drew a very different conclusion.

**Key quote**

On Hume’s account, our ethical nature is characterised by the capacity for sympathy, or the ability to feel with (empathise with) others. On such an account any variation in moral codes must be a consequence of differing social conditions, while ultimately all such codes must express some fundamentals which humanity shares. (Hayward)

In order to discover precisely what Ayer concluded, it would be beneficial to refer closely to his argument presented in chapter 6 of his seminal work, *Language, Truth and Logic* (LTU). At the outset, however, Ayer never proposed that ethical propositions were of no value or worth or that ethical debate was not worthy of pursuit, as he states clearly in later writings, but simply that they are not factual or

that is not possible to verify them. In LTU, he writes that his task is: to show what people are doing when they make moral judgements and no more.

**A.J. Ayer: Ethical statements are neither verifiable nor analytic**

Ayer sets off with the recognition that whilst ethical statements are of value, ‘significant’ (he does not explain how) and ‘scientific’ in one sense (he does not explain how), in another sense because they are simply emotions they become unscientific, insignificant and unverifiable. Ayer seems to acknowledge that ethical statements do have some meaning and relevance but he does not elaborate because his investigation is all about how language works in the literal sense and what is happening when we use it. He writes:

‘We shall set ourselves to show that, in so far as statements of value are significant, they are ordinary “scientific” statements; and that in so far as they are not scientific, they are not in the literal sense significant, but are simply expressions of emotions which can be neither true nor false.

Ayer sees four categories existing within ethical philosophy.

1. Propositions which express definitions of ethical terms.
2. Propositions describing the phenomena of moral experience, and their causes.
3. Exhortations to moral virtue.
4. Ethical judgments that attempt to ascribe value.

Ayer argues that philosophers do not always differentiate between these classes. It is unfortunately the case that the distinction between these four classes, while it is, is commonly ignored by ethical philosophers; with the result that it is often very difficult to tell from their work what it is that they are seeking to discover or prove. Indeed, Ayer sees only the first class, that of definitions and definitions of ethical terms as the area that could be considered to constitute ethical philosophy.

According to Ayer, the second category belongs to the scientific disciplines of psychology and sociology. The exhortations are really commands and have the intention and purpose of provocation and do not belong to any branch of philosophy or science. The fourth category certainly does not belong to moral philosophy according to Ayer as it is simply a matter of personal approval or disapproval. However, it is possible that such value judgments could be somewhat translated to ethical fact? Ayer postulates.

**Emotivism is not subjectivism**

The position held by subjectivism is that values arise out of the different attitudes that a person or society/culture has towards things. In other words, our emotions about the things that we see ascribe some sort of value to them. For example, we may feel that corporal punishment is bad, but is it really our feelings about the action the very thing that makes the action a ‘bad’ thing? For Ayer, emotions and attitudes towards issues that elicit in ethical propositions in no way affect the moral value of the object of such a proposition.
Ayer writes:

If we say this, we are not, of course, denying that it is possible to invent a language in which all ethical symbols are definable in non-ethical terms, or even that it is desirable to invent such a language and adopt it in place of our own; what we are denying is that the suggested reduction of ethical to non-ethical statements is consistent with the conventions of our actual language. That is, we reject utilitarianism and subjectivism, not as proposals to replace our existing ethical notions by new ones, but as analyses of our existing ethical notions. Our contention is simply that, in our language, sentences which contain normative ethical symbols are not equivalent to sentences which express psychological propositions, or indeed empirical propositions of any kind.

**Rejection of Intuitionism**

As we have already seen, Ayer overtly rejects Intuitionism. His reasons are not the same as those of Russell, who, if we remember, rejected intuition because it was purely subjective and not a basis for knowledge. For Ayer it was a simple matter of verification. This occurs especially where there is a debate about establishing which value is true when there are different intuitions. Since there is no way to solve this then its value cannot be determined and thus demonstrates that an appeal to intuition is pointless. Ayer writes:

In admitting that normative ethical concepts are irreducible to empirical concepts, we seem to be leaving the way clear for the *absolutist* view of ethics—that is, the view that statements of value are not controlled by observation, as ordinary empirical propositions are, but only by a mysterious *intellectual intuition*. A feature of this theory which is seldom recognized by its adherents is that it makes statements of value unfalsifiable. For it is nonsense that what seems intuitively certain to one person may seem doubtful, or even false, to another. So that unless it is possible to provide some criterion by which one may decide between conflicting intuitions, a mere appeal to intuition is worthless as a test of a proposition’s validity.

In addition, Ayer points out that any ethical element in a proposition adds nothing to its factual content. He uses stealing as an example and demonstrates that to say ‘You acted wrongly in stealing that money’ is no different from saying ‘You stole that money’. There is no further statement being made about ‘stealing money’ that can be evaluated as true or false. It is simply a moral disposition.

**Key quotes**

For in saying that a certain type of action is right or wrong, I am not making any factual statement, not even a statement about my own state of mind. I am merely expressing certain moral sentiments. And the man who is ostensibly contradicting me is merely expressing his moral sentiments. So that there is plainly no sense in asking which of us is in the right. For neither of us is asserting a genuine proposition. (Ayer)

In every case in which one would commonly be said to be making an ethical judgement, the function of the relevant ethical word is purely ‘emotive’. It is used to express feeling about certain objects, but not to make any assertion about them. (Ayer)

**Key term**

Pseudo-concepts: something treated as a concept but can only be mentally apprehended and not empirically verified.

For Ayer ethical language was nothing more than personal approval or disapproval.

**Ethical statements can be persuasive**

Despite all this, Ayer did give one concession to ethical propositions. In a sense it was a great shame that he did not elaborate further on this aspect; however, it appears that since ethics is only one aspect of his whole theory about LI, then he dealt with it within the framework of the purposes of his book and the simple notion of verification. As Mary Warnock observed, ‘Ayer, perhaps unsurprisingly, presents his case for emotivism as though it rested primarily on a desire to find an ethical theory which would not conflict with the verification doctrine’.

The area he conceded that ethical propositions may have some worth was as means of persuasion. He writes: ‘It is worth mentioning that ethical terms do not serve only to express feeling. They are calculated also to arouse feeling, and so to stimulate action. Indeed some of them are used in such a way as to give the sentences in which they occur the effect of commands. Thus the sentence “It is your duty to tell the truth” may be regarded both as the expression of a certain sort of ethical feeling about truthfulness and as the expression of the command “tell the truth”.’

In conclusion, there is no way that we can find a criterion for determining the validity of ethical judgments according to Ayer. Ethical statements have no objective validity whatever. If, as established above, the ethical element says nothing more about the statement then it is illegitimate to ask whether that additional element is true or false. According to Ayer, ethical statements are ‘pure expressions of feeling and as such do not come under the category of truth and falsehood’. We cannot verify them just as we cannot verify a cry of pain!

Therefore, ethical propositions are simply what Ayer called, *pseudo-concepts* and unanalyzable. Ayer saw his theory falling within the discipline of psychology. They are also to do with the moral habits of a person or group of people, and a study of what causes them to have precisely those habits and feelings. This was an area of study for sociology and anthropology. Even the discipline of casuistry (applying an ethical rule to a given moral situation) is not a scientific discipline but rather one of analytical investigation as to how a moral system is structured.

Once again, if ethical arguments were a form of logic or scientific procedure then the concept of goodness and rightness would be demonstrably different from the actions or situation. Since these concepts have been shown to add nothing to the action or situation then they are not independently verifiable. As Ayer puts it, ‘There is no procedure of examining the value of the facts, as distinct from examining the facts themselves.’

**Key quotes**

Ethical argument is not formal demonstration. And not in a scientific sense either. For the goodness or badness of the situation, the rightness or wrongness of the action, would have to be something apart from the situation, something independently verifiable, for which the facts added as the reasons for the moral judgement were evidence. (Ayer)

There is no procedure of examining the value of the facts, as distinct from examining the facts themselves. We may say that we have evidence for our
Ethical terms are just expressions of personal approval (hurray) or disapproval (boo)

Now that we have covered Ayer’s argument in L1, there are two areas of the Specification left to cover in relation to Emotivism as a theory. Since Emotivism extends beyond Ayer, it would be beneficial to look at these two areas briefly in relation to the work of Charles L. Stevenson as well as Ayer. Stevenson was an American philosopher noted for his work on Emotivism and is seen as the philosopher who developed it into a full-bodied systematic theory. In 1917 he published in the Mind an article entitled ‘The Emotive Meaning of Ethical terms’. He followed this up with two later papers and then produced his book, Ethics and Language, published in 1954 by Yale University Press, which is seen to be a classic systematic presentation of the theory. For some reason, at a point in time that the current author cannot accurately locate, there emerged in response to Ayer’s proposals a nickname for his theory of emotivism. This was because Ayer insisted that ethical propositions were simply emotive and feelings of either approval or disapproval. Emotivism therefore became known also as the ‘hurray-booh’ theory as it was felt that Ayer proposed that ethical terms are just expressions of personal approval (hurray) or disapproval (boo). To be fair to Ayer, his role was simply to indicate what was happening with language when we use ethical propositions in line with his overall theory of verification. When something could not be verified, Ayer offered a simple reason and explanation but to explore further the thing that could not be verified was not his intention. As we have seen, he saw this as the role of science. Nonetheless, one glimpse of an alternative to ethical terms only being expressions of personal approval (hurray) or disapproval (boo), was when he suggested that there was an alternative purpose of persuasion. It is with this glimpse that we see an alternative approach that was taken by Charles Stevenson. Surprisingly, Stevenson developed his work at the same time as Ayer quite independently and in a different direction.

For Stevenson, interest was not really in verifying ethical language but he did accept that if we seek scientific verification, then this was not the most helpful way to view the theory of emotivism. He started with the word ‘good’ and argued that to make ethical questions clear any definition should be: (1) enable disagreement about goodness; (2) have a certain magnetism or appeal to act in its favour; (3) not be subject to verification by scientific method. He saw this as understanding the true nature of emotivism but preferred the term ‘interest theory’. Stevenson was interested in how ethical propositions were used in two ways: (1) how they acquired power; and, (2) how dynamic power in using an ethical proposition influenced its meaning. Stevenson realised that we actually use ethical propositions, or in fact any words, for a variety of purposes, e.g. arouse sympathy, persuade, drop hints, approve, disapprove, command, etc. He referred to this as the ‘causal or dispositional property’ of a word or proposition. He writes, ‘The emotive meaning of a word is the tendency of a word, arising
through the history of its usage, to produce (results from) affective responses in people. In other words, there are certain ethical words that are very well suited to an emotive meaning because they have a dynamic use. To leave an emotive element of such words out would mean we are misled to believe that it is purely descriptive when in actual fact this ignores its dynamic usage and so its actual meaning is distorted. The reason that the term ‘good’ is inadequate because in any definition it the emotive element will be distorted. Stevenson argued that good has a pleasing emotive meaning and that this is a rough description of meaning and not a definition; however, it is adequate enough.

Stevenson suggested that the emotive aspects of ethical propositions were used in a variety of different ways although he tended to see prescriptive definitions as a common use. His research is vast, and the book Ethics and Language is 356 pages long but these initial observations serve to show that there is much more to ethical propositions than just being expressions of personal approval (Deutsch) or disapproval (boo).

**Key quote**

While Stevenson granted that moral language didn’t have factual or cognitive content, he argued that it had emotive meaning. Moral propositions aren’t true or false, but they aren’t meaningless either – moral language allows us to express emotions. (Messerly)

**Emotivism explains why people disagree about morality**

**Key quote**

Thus he could easily account for our differences regarding ethics – we have different emotions, and when we disagree, Stevenson said we have a disagreement in attitude. But reasons or arguments will not change other people’s attitudes. (Messerly)

The obvious conclusion to be drawn from Emotivism is that if ethical propositions are really just expressions of approval or disapproval then it follows that people inevitably will disagree about morality because we are all simply expressing our own opinions.

Moreover, it may then be suggested that there can never be any agreement in ethical debate and also that maybe ethical debate becomes pointless. Ethical debate would just become our emotional response to facts that we all agree on; since emotions are not verifiable and cannot contribute to meaningful logical discourse, ethics becomes meaningless.

However, for Stevenson ethical debate was meaningful and to demonstrate this he made a distinction between propositions, distinguishing between propositions about ‘belief’ and propositions about ‘attitude’. Attitudes are statements that reflect the emotive use of ethical language in debate; they reveal how the person feels and sees things. Beliefs are more to do with facts that can be verified such as the ‘nature of light transmission’ to use Stevenson’s example, or, something like the date that you last met somebody. Beliefs are not about ethical convictions.

• War is the last resort, and abortion is the legal termination of a foetus, are examples of beliefs.
• War/abortion is always wrong and war/abortion is sometimes wrong are attitudes.

**Key terms**

Propositions about beliefs: statements of fact or verifiable by empirical means

Propositions about attitude: views or value judgements about statements of belief

**Key quote**

It is disagreement in attitude, which imposes a characteristic type or organisation on the beliefs that may serve indirectly to resolve it, that chiefly distinguishes ethical issues from those of pure science. (Stevenson)

**Key quote**

In normative ethics any description of what is the case is attended by considerations of what is to be felt and done about it; the beliefs that are in question are preparatory to guiding or redirecting attitudes. (Stevenson)

According to Stevenson, what happens in ethical debate is that people are trying to change others’ attitudes not their beliefs. It would be vain to say that these attitudes are just describing the feelings of the individuals involved, however, if we account for emotive meaning we can see that each is trying to affect the other’s feelings and influence them. The disagreement is a disagreement not about attitudes – the debate concerns not a focus on how one attitude is better than another – but rather it is a disagreement in attitudes towards the issue in hand. Therefore, Emotivism can explain why people disagree about morality without making ethical debate meaningless. In fact, Emotivism makes ethical debate meaningful.

**Key quote**

It is thus possible for there to be meaningful agreement in ethics, and the emotivist theory cannot be criticised on the grounds that it excludes this possibility. (Nagel)

One advantage of this theory is that it easily explains how and why it is that moral judgments motivate us. If moral language were just descriptive, stating how things are, why would that get us to act in certain ways? We need to care. And what we care about is captured in our attitudes to the world. (Lacouëng)

**Challenges to Emotivism**

Mary Warnock points out that Emotivism is too broad a theory for ethical language. It is not precise enough because it does not differentiate between ethical and non-ethical emotional use of language. For example, if emotivism attempts to influence someone’s attitude then how exactly is it an advertisement for donations to Water Aid different from advertising a McDonald’s burger as 100% pure beef with nothing added in order to suggest it is healthy food?

Other general challenges include the fact that ethical language and debate is not always ‘emotive’, sometimes we use it to distance ourselves from others’ views or indeed display indifference and not moral judgement and some see morality and ethical debate as a rational and logical process of reasoning. We now look at three more specific challenges.

**No basic moral principles can be established**

A general criticism of emotivism is that the theory only values meta-ethics. Ayer used meta-ethics to reduce ethical statements to mere sentiments that express no factual information whatsoever. If this is the case then no basic moral principles can be established. Likewise, Stevenson confined his approach to meta-ethics in that he looked specifically at the meaning and use of language. Even when he applied this to ethical statements there was no real insight offered into meta-ethical definitions or normative principles.
Key quotes
Stevenson analyses emotive meaning by connecting meaning to use. The purpose of moral judgments is not to state-facts, but to influence how we behave through expressions of approval and disapproval. Words with emotive meaning do just that. If moral language is just descriptive, how can moral truths motivate us? Emotivism, by contrast, connects caring, approving, disapproving, with the very meaning of ethical words. (Laws/ing)

Key skills
Knowledge involves:
Selection of a range of thoroughly accurate and relevant information that is directly related to the specific demands of the question.

This means:
- Selecting relevant material for the question.
- Being focused in elaborating and examining the material selected.

Understanding involves:
Explanation that is extensive, demonstrating depth and breadth with excellent use of evidence and examples including, where appropriate, thorough and accurate supporting use of sarcasm, satire, sources of wisdom and specialist language.

This means:
- Effective use of examples and supporting evidence to establish the quality of your understanding.
- Ownership of your explanation that expresses personal knowledge and understanding and NOT just a chink of text from a book that you have read and memorised.

Not liking the taste of a certain food is a very different expression of disapproval from disapproving about whether one approves of cruelty to animals.

AO1 Developing skills
It is now important to consider the information that has been covered in this section; however, the information in its raw form is too extensive and so has to be processed in order to meet the requirements of the examination.

This can be done by practising more advanced skills associated with AO1. For assessment objective 1 (AO1), which involves demonstrating ‘knowledge and ‘understanding’ skills, we are going to focus on different ways in which the skills can be demonstrated effectively and also refer to how the performance of these skills is measured (see generic band descriptors for A2 [WJEC] AO1 or A Level [Edexcel] AO1).

- Your next task is this: below is a brief summary of one challenge to emotivism. You want to explain this in an essay but as it stands at present it is too brief. In order to do so, you need to demonstrate more depth of understanding, develop this summary by providing examples that will help you explain it further. Aim for 200 words in total.

Moral debate, even if it’s just about persuasion, will never be able to establish a unanimous, universal agreement on those actions that are considered as wrong. There is no sense of authority to appeal to. In addition, what would happen in ethical debate? History has proven that minority interests and ‘emotions’ (to use Ayer’s perspective) have actually been the correct way forward. Look at slavery, homophobia and women’s rights not as moral issues but as relating to basic human rights and the law. The outcome has shown that basic principles of what is wrong can be established through ethical argument. Emotivism does not seem to reflect what has actually happened through ethical debate.

There are many more examples that could be used even if we do not have a set of guidelines established and put everything ethical down to personal emotions. If we accept emotivism, Madie has pointed out that we are not clearly differentiating between the things we disapprove of. He comments that there is a vast difference between his ‘dislike of carrots’ and that of genocide.

Therefore, it seems that saying that there is no universal agreement that some actions are wrong would be contradicting what actually happens in reality and is not adequate enough to explain our different types of disapproval.
Issues for analysis and evaluation

The extent to which moral terms are just expressions of our emotions

The first argument could be that moral terms do not attempt to define what terms like 'right' or 'wrong' mean, they are just an individual's emotional response to situations. Alfred Ayer suggested this. Indeed, viewing moral terms as expressions of emotion would explain the diversity of moral opinion that we see across cultures and within our own culture. Any intuitional response that seeks to explain these differences by positing that there are different intuitive abilities at work, cannot be substantiated with any evidence at all other than 'we know this is the case'.

Again, another argument could be that we can measure emotions and even explore the biological foundations of emotions. There has been no similar claim when it comes to Intuitionism. Instead of empirical evidence for Intuitionism there are conflicting and unsubstantiated claims that intuitions come from God, the 'gut' or genetics.

One could argue that the Emotivism view is very logical and scientific. Emotivism recognises the importance of the scientific approach to language and that words have particular meanings. These meanings must be empirically verified and, as they cannot be verified, Emotivism rejects, therefore, the abstract use of words in previous philosophical discussion.

Also, Emotivism does not necessarily mean that moral terms have no value. For example, Stevenson pointed out that what happens in ethical debate is that people are trying to change others' attitudes and we account for emotive meaning we can see that each is trying to affect the other, feelings and influence them. Therefore, Emotivism can explain why people disagree about morally without making ethical debate meaningless. In fact, Emotivism makes ethical debate meaningful and is, according to Stevenson, more than just an expression of emotion.

Key quote

And therefore we should, I think, conclude that the validity of ethical judgements is not determined by the facilitating tendencies of actions, any more than by the nature of people's feelings; but that it must be regarded as 'absolute' or 'intrinsic', and not empirically calculable. (Ayer)

However, if moral terms were only expressions of emotions then there would be no point in real moral debate. The emotional responses people give are based on some inner belief or conscience and surely something more deeply rooted than mere emotions. Any Ethical Naturalist would obviously disagree and argue that moral terms express propositions, which can be seen as true or false by considering objective features of the world.

You could also argue that asserting moral statements as mere expressions of emotions is a way of defining moral terms. This leads us back to Moore's naturalistic fallacy and the rationality of not defining moral terms.

It is also held by some that emotional debates are needed to engage with what ethics is all about. What Emotivism does is just look at meta-ethics but not ethics proper. Indeed, one could argue that Ayer was wrong because his exclusion of groups 2-4 was simply due to the fact that all he was interested in was meta-ethics.

If Emotivism were true, there would be no point to moral discussions. This runs counter to the instincts of many who feel that these discussions are valid. Also, if Emotivism is true, it must reduce a moral statement to the same level as all other statements that do not come from a source that is logically verifiable. Moral statements are therefore at the same level as statements used in advertising, bribes and blackmail. An Intuitionist would say that this cannot possibly be the case.

Another argument would be that if moral statements are nothing more than a creation of family/culture/society, why are people able to 'stand outside' of their culture/family/society and challenge them morally? Therefore, there must be a basis for morality other than human emotions.

In addition, how do we differentiate 'right' between two people's moral opinions? Nothing can be resolved, and therefore some would see this as unworkable. Stevenson argues that ethical language has a dynamic nature and magnetism but it could be suggested that rational ethical statements are not judged on the basis of emotional response but assessed by the nature of their argument. Mary Warnock has clearly pointed out that a claim that 'murder is wrong' is not simply about seeking approval. Such a serious ethical proposition is to be challenged, questioned, debated and determined with caution. If ethical statements were really just due to emotions then our moral obligations would not be consistent at all and there would be chaos.

It could be argued, however, this is one of the strengths of Stevenson's views in that it does allow Emotivism to move beyond a simple exchange of voices; it allows for persuasion, challenge and the clear expression of reasons. Why is it considered a bad thing for moral debate to be based upon gaining others' approval or avoiding their disapproval? This appears to have been most of the practice in applied ethics throughout history.

Key quote

While Stevenson granted that moral language didn't have factual or cognitive content, he argued that it had emotive meaning. Moral propositions aren't true or false, but they aren't meaningless either – moral language allows us to express emotions. Thus he could easily account for our differences regarding ethics – we have different emotions. And when we disagree, Stevenson said we have a disagreement in attitude. But reasons or arguments will not change other people's attitudes. (Messersly)

One conclusion could be that moral terms are expressions of emotions but there is more to moral language than just approval, as Stevenson has demonstrated. Alternatively, moral terms are not at all the expressions of emotion, they are objective and absolute features in the world and this would be the conclusion of Naturalism. It could also be concluded, however, that moral terms may have both an emotional pole and an objective pole and that it is difficult or impossible to untangle one from the other.
Whether one of Naturalism, Intuitionism or Emotivism is superior to the other theories

One line of argument would be that Emotivism, like Naturalism, does not ask us to simply believe that morality exists or is a given (as does Intuitionism). It appeals to our scientific minds. However, rather than saying (with naturalists) that morality can be measured or observed in the natural world, Emotivism has a robust presentation of morality as a social and psychological creation.

One could suggest that it is egalitarian! All moral expressions can be explained by this theory, from ‘thou shalt not kill’ (as a ‘boof’ to killing) to ‘be nice and help everyone’ (Hurrah! for nice people). Even the seemingly emotionless moral idea that ‘principles should rule over feelings’ can itself be seen as a creation of an emotional society?

In addition, Emotivism saves you from pointless conversations! It advises you that you can discuss matters of fact (i.e. what happens to a fetus in the abortion process); but warns you from thinking you can have a discussion of moral values (rightness/wrongness of abortion) since these are merely expressions of emotion.

Key questions
‘Moral judgements express feelings or attitudes’ it is said. ‘What kind of feelings or attitudes?’ we ask. ‘Feelings or attitudes of approval’ is the reply. ‘What kind of approval?’ we ask, perhaps remarking that approval is of many kinds. It is in answer to this question that every version of emotivism either remains silent, or by identifying the relevant kind of approval as moral approval – that is, the type of approval expressed by a specifically moral predicate – becomes vacuously circular. (MacIntyre)

On the one hand, it could be argued that Intuitionist has the virtue of corresponding with the sense that many of us have that certain actions are just ‘right and good’ or ‘wrong and bad’. Indeed, Emotivism reduces a moral statement to the same level as all other statements that do not come from a source that is logically verifiable; moral statements are therefore at the same level as statements used in advertising, bribery and blackmail. It becomes no more than propaganda.

An Intuitionist would say that this cannot possibly be the case. For Richard, moral reasoning was far superior to general reasoning when it came to ethical decisions and that Intuitionism was a clear differentiator between ethical and non-ethical propositions. In this case, moral statements are not reduced but actually stand firm. Naturalism, on the other hand, sees itself as the solution because it argues that we can have objective truths of moral values that can be established through empirical means. Indeed, they would argue that Utilitarianism is their champion in that we can clearly see how this works in society, for example, with our political system and aspects of law.

Naturalism may be seen as superior as it encourages moral discussion and debate. After all, if Emotivism were true, there would be no point to moral discussions. This runs counter to the instincts of many who feel that these discussions are valid.

Intuitionism has the virtue of corresponding with the sense that many of us have that certain actions are just ‘right and good’ or ‘wrong and bad’ – Emotivism reduces a moral statement to the same level as all other statements that do not come from a source that is logically verifiable; moral statements are therefore at the same level as statements used in advertising, bribery and blackmail. An Intuitionist would say that this can’t possibly be the case.

Intuitionism and Rationalism can be seen as superior to Emotivism because if, as Emotivism demands, moral statements are nothing more than a creation of family/culture/society, why are people able to ‘stand outside’ of their culture/family/society and challenge them morally? Therefore, there must be a basis for morality other than human emotion.

Key quote
The central ethical terms – ‘right’, ‘wrong’, ‘good’ and ‘bad’ – only have emotive meanings, of expressing approval or disapproval. But many moral terms (‘steal’, ‘honesty’, ‘respect’) have both descriptive and emotive meanings. To be told that someone is ‘honest’ is to learn something about them. For instance, they can’t be honest while lying frequently. And whether someone lies frequently is a matter of fact. But the term ‘honest’ isn’t just a description; it also has an emotive meaning of approval. (Laszewski)

All three theories have their strengths and their weaknesses. It could be suggested that they look at different aspects of ethics. For instance, Emotivism tends to focus on how the propositions are used (Stevenson) whereas Naturalism tends to calculate decisions based upon evidence and experience. Intuitionism is unique in that it considers the objective nature and how ethical awareness compels us to behave. Would there be any use trying to adopt Bradly’s Hegelian dialectical methodology and synthesise through combining all aspects and seeing them as different ways of achieving the same goal?

Depending on which line of argument is accepted one could conclude that there is no real answer and that any of Naturalism (or emotivism, or intuitionism) is superior to the other theories. Indeed, since there is no way, ultimately, to prove what is the source of our morality, judging that one of these meta-ethical positions is superior is not possible. In addition, it could be concluded that there is no profit that there is an objective or absolute source of morality; then Naturalism or Emotivism has to be subject to the other theories.
The extent to which the different meta-ethical theories encourage moral debate

One line of argument could be that Emotivism definitely discourages moral debate, as disagreement is not about ‘rightness’ or ‘wrongness’ but about different emotional stances. The only debate you can have is about facts (defined via logical positivism), not the moral positions that are apparently based upon these facts. In other words, whilst it may appear that a debate is actually taking place it is no more than an exchange of emotions and is not a meaningful debate. Emotivism tends to reduce ethical debate to a very basic level according to this line of thinking.

In addition, it could be argued that Intuitionism discourages moral discussion as it says morality is known intuitively. There can never be an explanation of why we should act morally as we always knew that we ought to. The key to Pritchard’s Intuitionism is that it is moral thinking that determines the outcome and not general reasoning. Therefore, we are technologically encouraged not to engage too much in debate.

Nevertheless, in response to this, Pritchard does consider it necessary to consider all ‘claims’ and ‘preliminaries’ before confirming (through Descartes’ sceptical doubt) that our intuition was the correct recognition of duty. Since, intuitive thinking does develop and need a mature approach of thought it could be argued that, in fact, Intuitionism as according to Pritchard does encourage moral debate.

For those who follow absolutist and objective approaches to ethics (i.e. Utilitarianism, Divine Command theory, etc.), there is no point of having the dialogue with the natural world and social sciences. This is because added insights cannot change one’s moral stance. However, again, quite to the contrary, thereby the whole debate about the application of Natural Moral Law, for example, the principle of Double Effect and indeed the position taken by theologians such as those who are familiar with Proportionalism. This whole area has been a minefield as the great depth and breadth of Roman Catholic moral theology will attest to over the past 50 years.

Key quote

There is no particular Socratic or Derridian or Kantian way to live your life. They don’t offer ethical codes and standards by which to live your life. (Stephen Fry)

The various approaches that align with Naturalist ethics can certainly encourage debate since they encourage observation and measurement – you can debate the validity of the observations and the measurements (i.e. activity X causing more pleasure than pain?). Utilitarianism is the classic example for encouraging engagement with social and political issues, both of which have an underlying ethical basis. The greatest happiness principle and the principle of universality are pertinent examples in relation to law and democracy. Even Bentham’s Hedonic Calculus is relevant to how Utilitarianism developed through ethical debate and created Act and Rule versions.

Also, it is the whole purpose of moral debate according to Stevenson’s version of Emotivism. Indeed, Emotivism explains why people do engage in debate about morality for persuasion and affirmation of attitudes. Indeed, Emotivism itself, as a theory, has encouraged much debate about morality as it is so extremely reducive! It provokes discussion about the essence of ethics as few other approaches can.

Also, if we follow Ayer’s Emotivism then it does not address why many feel that whether or not the basis of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ is established, ethical debate is not just about emotions but also to do with a process of reasoning using evidence to support an argument. It can be acknowledged that the outcome of the argument may be explained as personal opinion but the argument itself is still important. Indeed, how is it any different to Pritchard’s Intuitionism? Therefore, to suggest that ethical debate is pointless appears ‘to be throwing the baby out with the bathwater’.

Key quote

In matters of conscience, the law of the majority has no place. (Gandhi)

Study tip

It is vital for AO2 that you actually discuss arguments and not just explain what someone may have stated. Try to ask yourself, ‘was this a fair point to make?’, ‘is the evidence sound enough?’, ‘is there anything to challenge this argument?’, ‘is this a strong or weak argument?’. Such critical analysis will help you develop your evaluation skills.

One conclusion could be that meta-ethical approaches do encourage moral debate even though some of these encourage more debate than others. Another alternative conclusion could be that one of the meta-ethical approaches actually encourages debate. Emotivism rules it out. Intuitionism prevents any discussion on the source of morals, and in Naturalism there are only calculations and no real debate about morality. Finally, there could also be a conclusion that suggests there will always be debate regardless of these theories. Since these are ‘meta’ ethical approaches rather than normative ethical theories, their intention is not to focus on debating particular issues but outlining a general approach to ethics. We will still have to discuss particular moral decisions.
AO2 Developing skills

It is now important to consider the information that has been covered in this section; however, the information in its raw form is too extensive and so has to be processed in order to meet the requirements of the examination. This can be done by practising more advanced skills associated with AO2. For assessment objective 2 (AO2), which involves 'critical analysis' and 'evaluation' skills, we are going to look at different ways in which the skills can be demonstrated effectively, and also refer to how the performance of these skills is measured (see generic band descriptors for A2 [WJEC] AO2 or A Level [Eduqas] AO2).

Your next task is this: Below is an argument concerning whether Naturalism, Utilitarianism or Emotivism is superior to the other theories. You need to respond to this argument by thinking of three key questions you could ask the writer that would challenge their view and force them to defend their argument.

On the one hand, it could be argued that Naturalism has the virtue of corresponding with the sense that many of us have that certain actions are just 'right and good', or 'wrong and bad'. Indeed, Emotivism reduces a moral statement to the same level as all other statements that do not come from a source that is logically verifiable; moral statements are therefore at the same level as statements used in advertising, bribes and blackmail, it becomes no more than propaganda.

An Intuitionist would say that this cannot possibly be the case. For Frichard, moral reasoning was superior to general reasoning when it came to ethical decisions and that Intuitionism was a clear difference between ethical and non-ethical propositions. In this case, moral statements are not reducible to purely physical and firm.

Naturalism, on the other hand, seems in the solution because it argues that we can have an objective set of moral values that can be established through empirical means; indeed, they would argue that Utilitarianism is their champion in that we can clearly see how this impacts society, for example with our political, moral and aspects of law.

When you have completed the task, refer to the band descriptors for A2 [WJEC] or A Level [Eduqas] and in particular have a look at the demands described in the higher band descriptors towards which you should be aspiring. Ask yourself:

- Is my answer a confident critical analysis and perceptive evaluation of the issue?
- Is my answer a response that successfully identifies and thoroughly addresses the issues raised by the question set?
- Does my work show an excellent standard of coherence, clarity and organisation?
- Will my work, when developed, contain thorough, sustained and clear views that are supported by extensive, detailed reasoning and/or evidence?
- Are the views of scholars/schools of thought used extensively, appropriately and in context?
- Does my answer convey a confident and perceptive analysis of the nature of any possible connections with other elements of my course?
- When used, is specialist language and vocabulary both thorough and accurate?