

# Yr11 Philosophy (R.S)

## 'Taster' session;

### introducing Ethical Theory

- To get you accustomed to using 'thought experiments' .
- To consider underlying reasons for your own value judgements
- To understand the key ideas behind some ethical theories, especially the concepts of absolutism & relativism
- To begin to apply some of the ideas of key philosophers

How would you solve the following thought experiments?

You are a doctor working in a hospital. One day a healthy young man walks into reception and says that several members of his family are in danger of dying because they need organ transplants. One needs a heart, one needs a lung, two need kidneys and one needs a liver. He wants you to give him a painless but lethal injection, then take his organs and use them to save his relatives. If you don't, he says he will go to a back street doctor who has agreed to 'have a go' at the operations for a small price.

How would you solve the following thought experiments?

An empty train is fast approaching a junction. You are standing by the points. If you do nothing, the train will go straight on and will run over a baby who has crawled onto the line. If you alter the points, the train will be diverted and will run over a drunken old tramp who is lying on the track.

- Do you divert the train?

How would you solve the following thought experiments?

You are on a business trip visiting a foreign country and, as part of your tour, your hosts show you around a local prison. You are shocked to find that the guards are about to execute six political prisoners. The prison governor explains that as today is a festival, you have the opportunity to save the lives of 5 of these prisoners; in a gesture of goodwill to his important guest he explains that if you will shoot one of the prisoners dead, then the others will be spared.

## Feedback

Talk through your dilemma and response with those around you.

Are they generally in agreement with you?

## Feedback

- Did anyone want to say ‘it depends’?
- If so, you probably fall into the category of ‘**moral relativist**’.
- If you had very clear cut answers, & found it pretty easy to say ‘Do X’ then you could well be a ‘**moral absolutist**’.
- Were reasons (i.e.‘*reasoning*’) relativist or very black and white?

# A few ethical theories simplified

1. Situation ethics –do whatever will promote a loving outcome, as long as being loving is your real motive
2. Use your reason to follow God's will –do good & avoid evil to fulfil your purpose as a human being
3. Do whichever action will promote the greatest amount of happiness.
4. Follow universal rules which are designed to promote happiness in the majority of cases.
5. Only act in such a way that your actions can be universalised –i.e. everybody can / should do them
6. Change your behaviour to fit the norms of the country / culture / group you are in. (cultural relativism)

# What's the difference between absolutism & relativism?

Absolutists tend to think that if an action is wrong, then it is always wrong, no matter what the circumstances are, or the potential consequences, or even the motive. For example, an absolutist might say no to all abortions, or all forms of human genetic engineering. The country where it takes place is irrelevant, as is the historical time period.



# On the other hand...

- Relativists are much more focused on these factors –i.e. likely consequence, individual situation, motive, culture etc.
- Thus for a relativist, a 10 year old pregnant incest victim may be reasonably offered an abortion, while a well-off 25 year old in a stable, loving relationship (whose contraception failed) might not be. It all depends...

\*\*\*\*\*

- For an absolutist, either abortions are wrong, or they are not. (Hence a radical feminist could be absolutist. (*'You can't oppress me by controlling my reproductive organs!'*))

# Cultural Relativism... What if we were to say 'When in Rome...'?

Consider this;

A woman living in Southern Ireland flies to England for an abortion. At what point does her action become wrong? When she sets off? When she flies back over Southern Ireland's air space? When she returns home? When she gets found out & judged by her fellow countrymen?

# Another example...

A government authorises the use of torture in another country where it is not illegal. If there's no law against it, can it be wrong?

# Who decides / how do we decide which actions are wrong?

List actions you consider to be wrong, but which aren't actually illegal in the UK.

A few examples might be extra-marital affairs (adultery), cheating on homework, gossip, using someone (i.e. for sex or to get ahead at work etc)

# What are your ideas?

- Feedback to the group. What suggestions do we have?
- Where have these ideas come from, if not the law?
- Does something supersede the law? If so, what?

# My value judgements

Put these 7 actions in order of how wrong you consider them to be. Then, on the next slide, explain your first and last choices. (if 1=worst)

- Manslaughter
- Pornography
- Theft
- Sexting
- Adultery
- Rape
- Murder

# Explain your judgements

- Least wrong is .....
- Most wrong is .....
- A different criteria I could have used to decide this is ...

So, are some **views** or actions  
(always) wrong?

- If so, which?
- Does this mean that some views / actions are less wrong / right? Are they always right?
- So, are you an absolutist or a relativist?



# What about when it comes to...

- Wife beating?
  - Rape?
  - Torture?
  - Paedophilia?
  - Pollution?
- 
- Are you a relativist or an absolutist then?

# Euthanasia dilemma

An old man, on life support, with partial brain death, is unlikely to ever effectively communicate with people again

- What should be done? Either choose from the following options or come up with an alternative.

- A. Let him die in whatever legal way is possible
- B. Kill him, in the quickest, most painless way possible,
- C. Keep him alive as long as there is hope of some recovery
- D. Keep him alive indefinitely, regardless of the lack of hope of a recovery –all life is worthwhile
- E. Do whatever will protect the innocent people involved –whoever they may be.
- F. Do whatever the law allows / recommends
- G. Do what the Bible teaches is the right thing
- H. Do whatever you want, and hang the consequences
- I. Do whatever you'd be happy for everyone to do in similar circumstances. (universalisation)

# Now, with your neighbour(s)

- Discuss what you've decided & why.
- Find out what their response is & why.
- Can you convince your neighbour to your way of thinking.

# Abortion dilemma

- A young teenaged girl has been raped & is now pregnant. Which course of action would you advocate?

- A. No abortion, because its murder, and that as wrong as what was done to her
- B. No abortion, because its murder, and that will make her feel twice as bad
- C. Whatever will make the most people involved happy.
- D. Do whatever the girl wants –be loving towards her.
- E. Do whatever will protect the innocent people involved –whoever they may be.
- F. Do whatever the law allows / recommends
- G. Do what the Bible teaches is the right thing
- H. Do whatever she wants, and hang the consequences
- I. Do whatever you'd be happy for everyone to do in similar circumstances

# Now, with your neighbour(s)

- Discuss what you've decided & why.
- Find out what their response is & why.
- Can you convince your neighbour to your way of thinking.

# A few ethical theories simplified

1. Situation ethics –do whatever will promote a loving outcome, as long as being loving is your real motive
2. Use your reason to follow God's will –do good & avoid evil to fulfil your purpose as a human being
3. Do whichever action will promote the greatest amount of happiness.
4. Follow universal rules which are designed to promote happiness in the majority of cases.
5. Only act in such a way that your actions can be universalised –i.e. everybody can / should do them
6. Change your behaviour to fit the norms of the country / culture / group you are in. (cultural relativism)