Pre-Sixth Ethics
Preparation Work

To be ready for September

Name: ..........................................................
Utilitarian Guided Reading Questions

1. Name the two major Utilitarian theorists of the last 200 years.
2. Outline some of Bentham’s achievements.
3. Explain what is meant by ‘The Principle of Utility’ or ‘The Greatest Happiness Principle’ (phrases can be used interchangeably).
   a. Write the quote;
   b. Detail your personal explanation of that quote.
4. What are the two ‘Masters’ that control humans according to Bentham?
5. What makes an action morally right for Bentham?
6. Describe Bentham’s method of quantifying (measuring) pain & pleasure, the ‘Hedonic Calculus’ by constructing and filling in a chart like this (see below) Then explain how the Calculus is used.

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<th>Factors to consider in his calculation</th>
<th>Meanings</th>
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7. What is the first major problem with Utility that is outlined in the text?
8. How does John Stuart Mill’s theory of Utility differ from, and develop Jeremy Bentham’s?
9. Who is able to judge which pleasures are of a superior or inferior quality?
10. What is Mill’s famous quote and what do you think it means?
    a. Write the quote;
    b. Explain the quote with your own different wording.
11. Explain the objection to Utility about disinterestedness and objectivity towards loved ones?

Then explain how a Utilitarian might respond to the criticism?
12. Explain the objection that Utility could disregard the justice of an individual for the pleasure / ‘good’ of the majority.
13. In summary, explain Bentham and Mill’s Utilitarian approach in five short bullet points (only five for both of the theories combined!).
14. Explain your opinion as to whether Utility helps us to be moral (give at least two reasons to support your answer).
Utilitarianism is the view that the moral rightness or wrongness of an act depends on the consequences of the act for human happiness. You can find expressions of the view in Priestly and Locke, but its most famous defenders are Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. Reasonable people can disagree about whose treatment is best, and you might be annoyed to see that Mill’s book, not Bentham’s An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation, gets star billing here. Mill, you might think, is only reworking and correcting Bentham’s earlier insights. A case could be made, though, for the claim that Mill takes the view further, and his account does have more meat on the bones than the version appearing in Bentham’s book. If it makes you feel any better, we will consider Bentham’s treatment in some detail first.

It is hard, anyway, to have anything but genuine affection for someone like Bentham, and leaving him out of a consideration of Mill is not just an intellectual error; it feels wrong. Bentham is just too remarkable to ignore. In addition to his work in philosophy and legal theory, he designed portable houses, heating systems and refrigeration units, counterfeit-proof bank notes, plans for the freezing of peas, and the infamous Panopticon, a prison designed to keep inmates under the constant surveillance of only a few guards. He coined a stupefying number of words too – ‘maximise’, ‘minimise’, ‘rationalise’, ‘demoralise’, ‘unilateral’, ‘detachable’, ‘exhaustive’ and ‘international’ among them. We can look away from ‘catastatic’ and ‘krestic’ physiurgics, which, sadly, never caught on. He also made arrangements to have his body stuffed, mounted and put on display allegedly to serve as a visual inspiration to his followers after his departure from this earth. The autoicon, as it is called, is still on view in a corner of University College London. His followers, the Philosophical Radicals, proposed changes to the law on the treatment of animals, homosexuality, suffrage, property, taxation and much else, changing lives for the better because of his principles.

Bentham was clearly excellent in many respects. How could someone like this possibly be left out of an account of the nature of happiness?

The greatest happiness principle

Bentham’s large contribution to philosophy is his attempt to place rationality at the heart of morality and legislation. The punishments recommended by the law of his day seemed grounded not in rational principle, but in falsehoods and fictions. In particular, the severity of a given punishment seemed to be a function of nothing more than the offence the crime caused in the hearts of lawmakers. Further, he argues that the words ‘ought’, ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ have no clear meaning, certainly no clear and rational expression in law. He cuts through the absurdities and prejudices underpinning legal complexity and the confusions of moral language with a single principle: the principle of utility or the greatest happiness principle.

He says very clearly what he means by the principle: it approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever, according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the part whose interest is in question. The principle, and the conception of happiness on which it depends, is based on human nature. Human beings, Bentham argues, are governed by two masters: pleasure and pain. Increasing an individual human’s happiness is nothing less than increasing the balance of pleasure over pain in her life. Increasing human happiness in a society, therefore, is a matter of increasing the general balance of pleasure over pain in the community. Morality falls out of all of this just as quickly. Any action which conforms to the principle of utility, which augments the overall balance of pleasure over pain, ought to be done: it is morally right.
The hedonistic calculus

You might already be wondering how pleasures and pains are to be balanced or weighed up. If alternative courses of action present themselves to me, how on earth do I decide which augments the happiness on the part of those whose interest is in question? How much pleasure results from donating some money to charity as compared to spending the money on a festive lunch for me and a few friends? Pleasures and pains just do not seem like the sorts of things which admit of quantification. Is the pleasure attending our full stomachs worth less than the elimination of a little pain in Africa? Bentham’s answer is to propose a decision procedure called ‘the hedonistic calculus’. Not only are pleasure and pain quantifiable, but he formulates a system for their quantification.

The following factors, he argues, should figure into the calculation: the intensity, duration, certainty, propinquity, fecundity, purity and extent of the pleasure or pain. You then consider the persons whose interests seem most affected, and reflect on the immediate pleasures or pains which result, as well as the pleasures and pains which quickly follow. Bentham, slide-rule in hand, says that you must then, ‘[s]um up all the values of all the pleasures on the one side, and those of all the pains on the other. The balance, if it be on the side of pleasure, will give the good tendency of the act upon the whole . . .’

Even this short sketch of Bentham’s views suggests some difficulties. We will focus on a few which Mill addresses in Utilitarianism, and we will also have a look at his disastrous proof of Bentham’s principle.

Mill considers the objection that the doctrine of utilitarianism is somehow degrading, not worth the name ‘moral theory’, because it is a species of hedonism. Hedonism comes in many flavours, but all versions share the claim that pleasure is good, if not the supreme good. Certainly Mill’s characterization of utilitarianism fits the mould: ‘the greatest happiness principle holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By “happiness” is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain . . .’ As Bentham argued before him, then, Mill maintains that actions are right just insofar as they produce pleasure. This is hedonism, if anything is. You can wonder, as some of Bentham’s detractors did, how the desire for pleasure could inform morality. Isn’t morality in the business of teaching us to choose what is right, not simply what feels good? We were going to choose what feels good anyway, if left to our own devices, and what is needed from a moral code is something which helps us occasionally to look beyond pleasure towards something higher, more exalted — something noble. Isn’t the utilitarian suggesting a beastly life of maximized pleasure, a life fit for a pig but not a human being?

The quality of pleasure

The response Mill gives is perhaps his largest and most interesting departure from Bentham’s views. He points out that it is not the utilitarian whose conception of pleasure and happiness is degrading, instead, the objection itself depends on a degrading representation of human nature and the pleasures of which we are capable. The objection supposes that the sort of pleasure human beings can enjoy is nothing more than base or beastly pleasures. This is to overlook the quality of pleasures, to fail to distinguish between higher and lower pleasures. Bentham got himself into trouble by suggesting that poetry is no more valuable than the simple-minded game of Pushpin from the point of view of calculating pleasure. Mill argues that the quantity of pleasure is not the only factor which must figure in our reflections on what is right: the quality of the pleasure matters too. Certainly we are capable of experiencing beastly pleasures, but pleasures of a higher quality are possible as well. The objection, and perhaps Bentham’s earlier formulation of utilitarianism, misses this distinction.

How can you tell whether one pleasure is qualitatively better than another? Mill claims that someone who has experienced both higher and lower pleasures will generally prefer the former, no matter what quantities are involved. For example, if you have experienced both
backrubs and Bach, you will have a marked preference for Bach. Mill, apparently standing atop a stump, points out that

It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool, or the pig, are of a different opinion, it is because they only know their side of the question.

Not only is there a marked difference between the two sorts of pleasures, but the higher ones are also of such a quality that no quantity of the lower can match them.

Well, on some mornings, I just don’t know. Pigs look fairly happy, and, if we are supposed to maximize happiness, shouldn’t the utilitarian urge us to join the swine in the filthy mud and submerge ourselves in beastly pleasures? Such pleasures are easier to come by and, anyway, why take the risk of dissatisfaction associated with trying to live the elevated life of the aesthete? Mill’s answer seems to be that once you have had and fully appreciated both kinds of pleasure, you will prefer higher to lower ones. But if the right thing to do is to maximize pleasure, this alleged preference is beside the point. Even if everyone in fact prefers higher pleasures, doesn’t the principle of utility counsel that we should aim for whatever pleasure we can get? Would it not therefore be better to be a pig satisfied?

It might be that this reaction misses part of the point of utilitarianism, namely the claim that it is not just my pleasures which should concern me, but the happiness of everyone affected by my actions. We should not be thinking in terms of our own little pig sties, but of the happiness of the community itself. Mill hints that a few miserable intellectuals are a small price to pay for a culture in which it is possible to experience higher pleasures. But the claim that individuals must be concerned with the happiness of everyone suggests another set of difficulties.

Further objections to the view

The level of disinterestedness required to be a good utilitarian might be too much for anyone to achieve. Is it really possible for me to forget the fact that some of the people affected by my actions are near and dear to me, friends and family and lovers? Can an individual really sum up pleasures and pains, without a thought for who is feeling those pleasures and pains? Utilitarianism seems to be telling us to be more than a little cold and unsympathizing in our calculations. If morality leads us anywhere, you might think, it should lead us in the opposite direction.

In reply to the first charge — that utilitarianism expects too much of us, that we simply cannot achieve the level of disinterestedness it recommends — Mill argues that the motives underpinning moral choice can in practice be as varied as you like; what matters are the consequences. A person might rescue a drowning baby because she believes in the general sanctity of human life or because she hopes for a reward. What matters is that she undertook the action, that the right consequences were brought about, not her motives or the level of interest she in fact had in the child. Whether she jumped in to save her own baby or someone else’s baby is beside the point: what matters is that the baby is rescued. Our being interested in each other’s welfare is compatible with the view that the consequences, not the motives, matter in the moral evaluation of action. After all, it is happiness for all that we are after. The focus for purposes of moral evaluation might be on consequences, but our focus in acting can sometimes be elsewhere.

In reply to the second complaint — that utilitarianism chills our feelings towards individuals, makes us consider just the consequences of actions and not the people who act — Mill argues that other things besides the consequences of actions can and do matter to us. Some people have good or bad characters, some are brave or wise or benevolent, and all of this is a part of our estimation of them as persons, but not our estimation of the moral worth of their actions. Utilitarianism, again, is compatible with this part of our moral lives. There is no inconsistency in saying that facts about more than the consequences of action matter to us.
The disastrous proof

Following a consideration of these and other objections, Mill formulates what he calls a 'proof' of the principle of utility, and philosophers have wondered about its status ever since. It is not entirely clear what Mill is up to in this part of the book. Just what is he trying to prove? You might think of him as arguing as follows. Utilitarianism holds that pleasure has a particular sort of value: it is the pleasure caused by an act which renders that act morally good. What proof do we have that pleasure has this special value, a value with a moral consequence? Why think pleasure is something we ought to pursue as an end, even as the supreme end? Mill writes: 'The sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is desirable, is that people do actually desire it. If the end which the utilitarian doctrine proposes to itself were not, in theory and in practice, acknowledged to be an end, nothing could ever convince any person that it was so.'

Mill seems to argue that pleasure really is desired by everyone, so it is, therefore, desirable. But does this make pleasure valuable in the way required of a moral system? All Mill has shown, if he has shown anything, is that pleasure is in fact desired, but this cannot be enough to get him to the conclusion that pleasure ought to be desired. Talking about facts will only tell us what is so, not what ought to be so. It looks like his conclusion needs an 'ought' in it, but only manages an 'is'.

The argument looks a lot worse if you reflect further on Mill's talk of desirability. He says that the only things visible are things seen; the only things audible are things heard. Similarly, he seems to argue that the only things desirable are things desired — and what everyone desires is pleasure. So pleasure is desirable. Does the analogy work? Visible things are not just things seen, but things which can be seen. Audible things are things which can be heard. Certainly what people desire is whatever can be desired. But saying that pleasure can be desired is not the same thing as saying pleasure is desirable. Mill is only entitled to the lesser claim (pleasure can be desired), and he needs the stronger one (pleasure is desirable) for his argument to work.

Is it, anyway, even true that people desire pleasure first and foremost? Mill's argument presupposes that when I desire something, what I desire is the pleasure which attends getting that something. When I desire a beer, what I really desire is the pleasure which comes along with having a beer. But sometimes, or so it can seem, what I really want is a beer, not the pleasure I get from drinking it. If you talk yourself into the view that pleasure is really only a secondary thing, you can start thinking that what we desire is a very mixed and complex bag and that pleasure and pain only figure into our psychology from time to time. This would be bad for utilitarianism, holding as it does that seeking pleasure and avoiding pain are, as Bentham puts it, our two masters.

Justice

There is a final worry which is much harder for utilitarians to deal with, and it has something to do with justice. Suppose our community is suffering from a great deal of pain in the form of insecurity. Perhaps a string of violent murders has been committed, and no one among us feels safe enough to sleep or go out at night. There is a lot more pain than pleasure in our many lives. Maybe our law enforcement officials do a little hedonistic calculus, and come to the conclusion that stitching up an innocent scapegoat will calm our fears. Maybe it will put the real criminal off. Anyway, punishing someone they know is innocent will only cause comparatively little pain in the form of a single ruined life. If they handle it well, no one will ever find out. Maybe they can pick someone who annoys the rest of us: putting him away would do a lot of good. Perhaps, on reflection, killing him by painless injection would remove whatever pain his suffering in prison might add to the ledger. The rest of us can get on with racking up our pleasures. Does utilitarianism not only condone what looks like a monstrously immoral act, but also recommend it, call it morally right?
There is a hard bullet to bite here. Some maintain that the scapegoat is a good idea. If our moral intuitions suggest otherwise, so much the worse for them. Utilitarianism’s insight has to do with what matters to us, the consequences of action for human happiness, not something as wishy-washy as lofty intentions. But unless the intentions and the consequences match up some of the time, you might conclude that the happiness secured is somehow undeserved.

15 Thus Spoke Zarathustra
Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900)

Nietzsche occupies the strange position on the Venn Diagram of Philosophers at the intersection of the areas picking out those who are German, unconventional, influential, outrageous, difficult and incredibly readable. He is all of these things, but it is the fact that he is an excellent stylist which explains a large part of Nietzsche’s continuing attraction. No one would change a word of it, but the prose can get in the way of the philosophy; readable though it is; Nietzsche does not always give an argument for his conclusions, nor does he put those conclusions in the clearest possible language. He seems to have a penchant for shocking turns of phrase, and this too can get in the way of coming to an understanding of him. His writing is also open to many interpretations, and this is a consequence he no doubt had in mind. All of this is at least partly explained by Nietzsche’s view that our fascination with truth is a kind of illness which is itself in need of investigation. There are no facts but Nietzsche’s view. Instead there are as many interpretations as there are creative people, and the right thing to do is to try out as many interpretations as possible as a kind of experiment.

His conclusions are, anyway, almost always provocative, and Nietzsche claims that Thus Spoke Zarathustra contains the whole of his philosophy – all of his conclusions, or perhaps interpretations, such as they are. Nietzsche ranges widely in the book, as you might expect, but we will focus on just the largest parts of it: his attack on Christianity, the will to power, the Superman, and the doctrine of eternal return. This is a lot to manage in a short space, but the ideas are interconnected, and it is hard to understand just a part of it without some grip on the rest.

The book begins with Zarathustra, a kind of prophet, in meditation at the top of a mountain. He has spent ten years in seclusion and reflection, with only his eagle, a symbol of pride, and his serpent, a symbol of wisdom, for company. He decides to come down from the
expects to find natural law at work in every society in the world since all societies are made up of human beings who share a common nature. Natural law can be deduced from an examination of human nature and the ends for which human beings are created.

When we term God as good from our human perspective, Aquinas maintained that we name him as the goal of all desires or that to which all desires tend. Natural law can show all human beings what is good — religion is not needed for this and this is similar to St Paul’s claim that the law is written in the hearts of all men (Romans 2:14ff). Reason can bring people to act rationally to develop the virtues. For Aquinas, ‘God is good’ is analytic in that it expresses a truth about God (that God is fully whatever it is to be God), but it is also synthetic as God represents the goal and destiny of all human beings, even though human beings may not recognise this. Aquinas based this idea on ‘fitness for purpose’ — since he held that humans were made by God for fellowship with God it follows that God, as their creator, must be the means by which human happiness will be found. Aquinas did not consider that morality was based on commands from God — a position which William of Ockham held as he considered that morality was based on revelation — Ockham held that if God commanded adultery then this would be right because of the command. Aquinas considered that if this was the case then God’s commands could be irrational and arbitrary. Instead God makes human beings with a certain nature and this nature enables human beings to use their reason and their experience to understand what is right.

Aquinas considered, following Aristotle, that all men will the good. Human beings may seek some apparent good, but this is not a true good — it is only an apparent good because it does not conform to the perfection of the human nature which all human beings share. Aquinas considered that there is an ’ideal’ human nature which we all have the potential to live up to or to fall away from and our moral actions are crucial in determining where we stand in this respect. If a person does something that is morally wrong, he or she will do this because they consider this to be a good although the possibility of

the individual being mistaken certainly exists (examples might include smoking, drinking too much or even taking drugs). Aquinas says that: ‘A fornicator seeks a pleasure which involves him in moral guilt’ (Summa Theologica 1a, 19, 9). The fornicator seeks a pleasure which he thinks is a good, but this is only an apparent good as it diminishes a human being’s nature.

Sin, for Aquinas, involves a falling short from the good — it means a human being becoming less than he or she is intended by God for him or her to be. To pursue an apparent good rather than the real good is to fall short of our real potential — it is to ‘get it wrong’ and to be mistaken. No one seeks evil for itself, it is only sought as an apparent good and therefore rests on a mistake. Hitler and Stalin did not seek to do evil — they sought what they thought were goods but they were mistaken — they strove for apparent rather than real goods.

Sin is a theological word but there is no real difference between this theological idea and acting against reason. Aquinas says: ‘the theologian considers sin principally as an offence against God, whereas the moral philosopher considers it as being contrary to reason’ (S. T. 1a, 11ae, 71, 6, ad 5).

Since Aquinas argued that it is possible to be mistaken in which goods are chosen, it is obviously necessary to determine what is the right thing for a person to aim for. In essence, this is what discussion of natural law is about — seeking to explore what is the right good to aim for. Human beings have the ability, using their will and reason, to make deliberate moral choices (S. T. 1a, 11ae, 1, 1) which Aquinas terms ‘human acts’ to distinguish them from those acts performed by a person which are based on instinct. However, human reason must be used correctly, which leads Aquinas to talk of the ‘right use of reason’ — reason may be used to plan a murder or to decide to be virtuous, but only in the second case is reason being used ‘rightly’. This obviously raises the problem of how one determines what is the ‘right’ use of reason when there are genuine differences of opinion as to what is good in a particular situation. A person’s reason and their will both work together to help determine the choice they will make — if a person uses their reason correctly to determine what is
right and then wills to do it is, according to Aquinas, a free choice.

A person may will to make a morally wrong choice which he or she does not carry through — perhaps because the choice is not available. A man may, for instance, decide to defraud his employer of a substantial sum of money but he never gets the chance because he is moved to a new job.

Aquinas distinguished ‘interior acts’ and ‘exterior acts’ and is clear that the former are the most important — indeed morally good or bad acts are generally interior acts. An act may be good in itself but done for a wrong intention — for instance giving to charity may be good in itself but if it is done in order to attract praise then there is a bad intention (‘for instance, we say that to give alms for the sake of vainglory is bad’ (S.T., 1a, 11ae, 20, 1)). This does not entail that intention alone is decisive. As Copleston says in his book Thomas Aquinas:

As Aquinas says, there are some things which cannot be justified by any alleged good intention . . . If I steal money from a man in order to give it to someone else, my action is not justified by my good intention . . . It is not possible to father on Aquinas the view that the end justifies the means . . . (p. 207).

In every act or proposed act, Aquinas considers that the will aims towards some end — in other words there is something which is considered to be a good (whether it is, in fact, a good or not). Aquinas needs, therefore, to establish the aim or end towards which human actions are to be directed.

Aquinas’ answer is, perhaps, not unexpected. Considering that he was a Christian theologian writing from a world that was steeped in Christian thought only one final end could possibly be posited — and that is God. This raises the obvious question of those people who do not accept the existence of God and it might seem that their ends or aims would be different from those of the believer. Aquinas is by no means the only advocate of a natural law approach to morality and his understanding differs from others such as Aristotle due to his belief in a personal God. This leads Aquinas to maintain that not only do human beings in general have a purpose beyond death, but each individual also has a particular purpose which is directly related to each person’s talents and abilities. Hugo Grocius claimed in 1625 (in Prolegomena II) that the foundations of natural law would be valid even if there was no God and Aristotle would have agreed with this, but in the absence of God the understanding of natural law would be significantly different as there would then be no life after death and thus the purpose of human existence would be changed. In addition, if God did not implant natural law in human beings then it might be argued that there was no reason why an individual should obey natural law.

Aquinas’ approach is sophisticated and he seeks to address the problem of those who do not believe in God. Even such an individual would seek to fulfill his or her nature and to make the most of individual potentialities — it will therefore follow that such individuals would still incline to obey natural law, as it is in obeying this natural law that human potential is fulfilled. However, the ends that people seek are different and it may be possible to tell what ends they seek by looking at how they live — they may, for instance, look for money, power or reputation as ends in themselves and, if they do so, they will be making a mistake as to where their true happiness lies.

Aquinas does not simply assert that God is the final end for human beings — he considers alternatives. If, for instance, it is suggested that some form of sensual pleasure should be the final aim or end in life, Aquinas would reject this as it is then only the body’s appetites and potentialities that are being satisfied and animals can seek the same thing. Similarly scientific knowledge cannot be the end as this good could only be sought by a small number of people who have the academic ability. Having said this, Aquinas’ view that God is the final end for human beings may be regarded as an assumption and it can, of course, be challenged. However, if the assumption is accepted and if there is, indeed, a God who created the world and human beings, then it is perfectly sensible to claim (although, of
course, not necessarily true) that human beings were created for fellowship with this God.

It is interesting and important that Aquinas considers that all human beings share a single nature and, therefore, there should be a single aim or objective for all human beings — this justifies him in rejecting knowledge as an aim (as only some people have the ability to seek this knowledge). The one thing that every person can desire is the vision of God which is promised for the next life. It is only this beatific vision which will be fully and completely satisfying for every human being and humans can choose to seek this or to turn away from it.

The power of reason is vital for Aquinas — reason can determine what acts are necessary for the good of a human being whether this is taking food or drink or acting morally. Any act that furthers the end for human beings is morally good (whether this is eating or giving to charity). However, this is not to say that the acts are ends in themselves because means and ends are not separable. As Copleston says:

...in the teleological ethic of Aristotle morally obligatory acts are not means to an end which is simply external to these acts, since they are a partial fulfilment of it; nor is the end something external to the agent...Aquinas followed Aristotle in holding that the final end of man consists in activity, and activity is obviously not external to the human agent in the sense that a picture is external to the artist...God is glorified by the highest possible development of man's potentialities as a rational being, and every moral act of man therefore has an intrinsic value (p. 211).

Both Aquinas and Aristotle maintained that a person can acquire a habit or disposition to either vice or virtue. Virtuous habits should be fostered by repeated acts of virtue and human beings should live without excess, according to the 'mean' (which can broadly be defined as that which is in accordance with right reason). Aquinas and Aristotle both deplored excess in any form — the classic example from Aristotle is that the brave man is neither cowardly (one example of excess) nor foolhardy (another example of excess). It might seem difficult to fit this Aristotelian notion with Christian figures such as Mother Julian of Norwich, Teresa of Lisieux or Teresa of Calcutta, and Aquinas does consider this point as he does ask whether giving one's goods away to the poor might be considered excess. His conclusion is that it would not if this action was inspired by Christ (S.T. 1a, 11ae, 64, 1, obj. 3) although it is hard to see how Aquinas could then resist a similar argument by many fanatical religious figures who claimed loyalty to Christ.

We have seen that Aquinas considers that natural law can be deduced by experience from looking at human nature and its purposes. Human beings have a duty to preserve themselves in existence (by, for instance, eating and drinking), to be rational and even to preserve the species. The last may seem self-evident, but it does not appear to fit well with the celibacy of priests in the Roman Catholic Church and, of course, Aquinas was himself a priest. Aquinas meets this point by saying that the need to propagate the race applies to the race as a whole;

The natural precept about taking nourishment must necessarily be fulfilled by every individual; for otherwise he could not be preserved. But the precept about generation applies to the whole community, which not only must be multiplied corporally but also make spiritual progress. And so sufficient progress is made if some only attend to generation, while others give themselves to the contemplation of divine things... (S.T. 1a, 11ae, 152, 2, ad 1).

This is a neat way of overcoming the problem, but it is not clear which 'ends' must be fulfilled by the individual and which by the group and there could be debate about the allocation between these headings. Also if only some attend to spiritual progress, does this help only those individuals or the community as a whole? This might also open debate about the possibility of only a number of individuals being homosexually inclined since only some need to be heterosexual in order to propagate the human race.
The Puzzle of Ethics

Aquinas considered that from a general principle, such as the need to propagate the species, detailed rules can be deduced such as the need for monogamy and the education of children. However, it would be possible to challenge Aquinas on the first of these — by saying that, for instance, it is not self-evident that monogamy is the best way of propagating the species. Aquinas’ method is to begin with a general injunction that good is to be sought and evil avoided and then to unpack these by means of subsidiary principles (or perhaps assumptions would be a better word — although some might challenge this) that become more and more specific. It is not, however, a mere deduction of specific principles from general ones — at each stage Aquinas considers that the contemplation of human nature and its ends is required.

The problem is that at every stage the judgements being made may be challenged and there may be assumptions that govern the law that is deduced which may not be generally accepted. As an example, one might start with the general principle of propagation and then move to monogamy (although even this step might be challenged). One could then look at genital organs and consider their purpose — if their purpose is decided to be for procreation, then any use of these organs for other purposes such as pleasure (through masturbation, genital homosexuality or conventional sex using contraception) would be held to be wrong because they go against the intended purpose for these organs. However, who is to define the purpose? If, as part of the function of genital organs, one included as the purpose ‘that they are intended so that two people who love each other should be able to express their love and obtain pleasure in doing so and that propagation might, when appropriate, thereby take place’ then one might rule out masturbation and homosexuality, but not sexual foreplay or even adultery. Other functions might give different purposes. For instance is the purpose of a mouth for eating or for kissing or for both? Who is to decide? If kissing is part of the function of mouths, then kissing would become a good rather than, arguably, an evil. The need to make assumptions which may be challenged is, therefore, implicit in Aquinas’ whole approach and weakens its effectiveness.

Aquinas, Natural Law and Proportionalism

It may also be argued that Aquinas’ approach is not holistic – it fails to consider the human being as a psycho-physical unit. To separate, for instance, genitalia out as having a particular purpose on their own without considering the whole complexity of a person’s relationship to his or her body, psychology, sexuality in general, the ability of human beings as embodied persons to express and receive love and to come to their full humanity may be a diminution of human beings as people. We are not an accumulation of ‘bits’ – we are whole human persons and all moral judgements must take our complexity as human persons into account.

Aquinas considered that the feudal order of society of his time — with Kings, barons, knights, freemen and serfs — was the natural order. He was conditioned by his culture just as we may be conditioned by ours. It is far from easy to determine the function or purpose of different human organs or of society without being influenced by one’s own preconceptions.

Aquinas believed that all human beings have a fixed, uniform human nature — this led him to maintain that there was a fixed natural law (subject to the differentiation between primary and secondary precepts above) for human beings. It may be argued that human beings do not have a single human nature and that the moral law may vary over time — in this case the whole idea of natural law may be challenged (this goes against the quote from Cicero at the beginning of this chapter). As an example, if there is held to be a single human nature then all human beings ‘should’ (according to their nature if it is ‘correctly’ ordered) be heterosexually inclined. If, therefore, someone was homosexually inclined (say due to a difference in genetic make-up) then this would be a disorder in their nature — their nature would be ‘faulty’ in that it was not what it ‘should’ be. This is one reason why Roman Catholic approaches to homosexuality tend to be clear cut — although Catholic theologians draw a distinction between an inclination which may be due to faulty genetic make-up and practising homosexuality which is due to a free decision and is therefore morally blameworthy. Against this it may be held that there is no single human nature — that some people are, for instance,
The Puzzle of Ethics

homosexually inclined and others are not and this in itself is neither right nor wrong. In this case the issue may be more about how individuals should use their sexuality given their make-up rather than conformity to a specific human nature. Recent scientific studies have shown that homosexual tendencies may well be genetic. It could be (and there is no evidence for this) that in the face of an overcrowded world, nature produces an increase in those genes which direct sexual activity away from procreation. Aquinas would have difficulty coping with such a possibility.

The natural law approach to morality is much more flexible than is generally supposed. M. J. Longford (The Good and the True – An introduction to Christian ethics, SCM Press, 1985, p. 204) puts it like this:

It is true that Aquinas did also appear to hold some absolute moral rules, such as the one that disallowed lying; but this is not what is stressed in the account of natural law. His overall position is that there are what are called ‘primary precepts’ which are exceedingly general (such as the duty to worship God, and to love one’s neighbour) and ‘secondary precepts’ which are more specific, such as the duty to have only one husband or wife. However, the secondary precepts all have to be interpreted in the context of the situation, and it is here that the flexibility of natural law arises. At one point [Aquinas] argues as follows: ‘The first principles of natural law are altogether unalterable. But its secondary precepts . . . though they are unalterable in the majority of cases . . . can nevertheless be changed on some particular and rare occasions . . . . Aquinas argues, ‘The more you descend into the details the more it appears how the general rule admits of exceptions, so that you have to hedge it with cautions and qualifications.’

This is an important qualification and shows that there may be more flexibility in the natural law approach than is often supposed. It may also open the door to a natural law approach to morality coming together with situation ethics (see ch. 10) – for instance through a form of proportionalism.

Aquinas, Natural Law and Proportionalism

Whereas Aquinas is firm in his insistence on the primary precepts of natural law, he seems to show more flexibility when discussing the secondary precepts which ‘unpack’ these and sometimes modern supporters of a natural law approach to ethics do not sufficiently recognise this.

It is, perhaps, important to recognise that although many Catholic theologians today tend to support Aquinas’ natural law approach, in the Middle Ages his was not the only view in the Church. It would be wrong to think, even today, that all Catholic moral theologians are Thomists – there is a real debate in the life of the Roman Catholic Church and this debate is an on-going process, although it is, perhaps, fair to say that Aquinas’ legacy of the view that there is a single moral law and later theologians’ opinions that the Church represents this view is still the orthodox Catholic position (put forward most strongly in recent Vatican documents such as Veritatis Splendor [October 1993]) – even if there is, arguably, no requirement to accept Aquinas’ philosophic position if one is a Catholic.

Aquinas is suitably modest when making claims about the ability of moral philosophers to determine which actions should be performed in particular situations. He was a philosopher as well as a theologian and recognised the need for reflection. Aquinas did not think moral problems could simply be settled, a priori, by deduction – ultimately each individual has to make his or her own decision (Ethics, 2, c.2, lectio 2) and the place of conscience will be vital in this. An action is either right or wrong in so far as it fosters or undermines the good for man and Aquinas would be the first to recognise that there may be disagreements as to what behaviour will foster this good. However, in spite of these disagreements Aquinas is firm in the view that there is an absolute natural law: Disagreements occur because of the difficulty of determining this.

At the end of the Second World War, Nazi war criminals were tried at Nuremberg according to what were claimed as universal moral laws which were closely modelled on natural law thinking. The phrase ‘natural law’ was avoided – instead reference was made to
'crimes against humanity', but the thinking behind the legal actions
was clearly based on natural law. It is possible to develop a natural law
approach to ethics which does not depend on the existence of God,
but any such approach is inevitably going to involve the notion of
purpose and this, in turn, is going to depend on particular meta-
physical claims. Aquinas has to make assumptions at key points when
developing his approach and any humanistic natural law alternative
will have to make alternative assumptions (such as that there is no
God or life after death) against which the purpose of human life
should be measured.

Proportionalism

Proportionalism holds that there are certain moral rules and that it
can never be right to go against these rules unless there is a propor-
tionate reason which would justify it. The proportionate reason is
based on the context or situation but this situation must be suffi-
ciently unusual and of sufficient magnitude to provide a reason
which would overturn what would otherwise be a firm rule. On this
basis, moral laws derived from natural law or similar approaches can
provide firm moral guidelines which should never be ignored unless
it is absolutely clear that, in the particular situation, this is justified by
a proportionate reason.

The position of proportionalism is well put in John Macquarrie's

Perhaps the most divisive debate in contemporary Catholic moral
theology concerns the existence and grounding of universally
binding moral norms. The Scholastic moral theology of the
manuals held that certain acts were intrinsically evil on the basis
of the act itself, independent of the intentions, circumstances and
consequences. Revisionists maintain that the evil in acts such as
contraception or even direct killing is not moral evil but pre-
moral evil which can be justified for a proportionate reason.
Final Evaluative Task

*What do you think?*

Over the A/S you will study a selection of the big ideas that have been expressed in western ethics (how to live well). You will need to explore those big ideas & learn to say whether you agree or disagree, giving clear reasons why. To aid with that process we want you to start forming ideas about the following questions:

- What do you think a good life looks like?
- How do you think people should live their lives?
- What are the best methods to use when deciding what is right and wrong?

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>A skilled Response will:</th>
<th>An excellent response will add:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Give responses to the questions that express ideas clearly and with enough depth of explanation to get others to understand your points (test it on a relative / friend first)</td>
<td>A minimum of three identifiable examples from current news, literature or historical events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use a minimum of two examples to illustrate &amp; explain each of your ideas</td>
<td>A strong sense of argument in the writing with proof to back it up, seeking to convince others of the value of the ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clearly outline any influences or proof you feel exists for the ideas you hold (religious book, case from history etc)</td>
<td>At least one anticipated criticism of their own ideas and explain why they think it doesn’t undermine their ideas</td>
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*What do you think a good life looks like?*
How do you think people should live their lives?
What are the best methods to use when deciding what is right and wrong?