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Introduction

This book is written primarily for students who are taking the AQA AS level course in philosophy. It covers the modules concerning **Theory of Knowledge**, **Moral Philosophy** and **Philosophy of Religion**. Some of the material on God and Moral Philosophy will also be of use to students taking other courses in which the topics are covered and to A Level Religious Studies students whose courses include some Philosophy of Religion and Ethics.

A problem faced by students lies in the fact that core philosophical arguments are very often buried in discursive text. Though it is necessary to have access to these arguments, they can be very difficult to discern. The purpose of this book is to make the most important arguments explicit, to spell them out, and to do so in a way which enables the student to understand exactly what is being argued. This done, the path is then laid out whereby the student may intelligibly comment on the validity and soundness of the argument. The material could be used either by the tutor for class discussion and teaching or as a source book for individual work by students.

There are no conventional chapters. Instead, the book is divided into sections, each one dealing with one of the above modules. At the beginning of each section there is a summary of the structure of the module. This is followed by a preliminary discussion. This is designed to stimulate students into thinking for themselves about the issues focussed on in the text that follows. The central ideas and concepts involved in that module are then discussed. There follow the main arguments relevant to the topic, an explanation of each part of the argument (where necessary) and a series of responses. Finally, there are questions and points for further discussion. Often they deal further with possible responses to the arguments and positions presented. These points the tutor or student may use as is required but I would like to think that they will be used. I have tried to make them matters for thought not mere recall. Because the concepts of validity, soundness and other related logical notions are of central importance, there is a separate section, at the beginning of the book, which deals with these issues.

Note, that although some essential background information is given (both to the content of the modules and the individual arguments) this book is not intended as yet another general textbook on philosophy. Excellent material of that sort already exists. Rather, this is intended to be a resource book of philosophical arguments. Further, the background material to the modules is intended as a summary or series of reminders of what has been taught more fully in class or read with greater thoroughness elsewhere, rather than as a beginners guide itself. Finally, I have not included every idea, theory, argument that is covered in the course. I have restricted myself to the inner core of the course material. This book, then, is best regarded as a supplement to a more thorough general guide or textbook.

Acknowledgements

Full references of quoted sources are given on the page on which they are cited. A writer owes many debts. I have benefited from reading Christopher Hamilton's excellent AQA AS level philosophy textbook *Understanding Philosophy* (Cheltenham, Nelson Thornes, 2003). In the section on practical ethics I draw upon certain aspects of discussion in Jonathan Glover's *Causing Death and Saving Lives* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1977). The section on Virtue Ethics draws on much I have learned on a recent Open University course on the subject: *A432 Applying Virtue Ethics*. In my discussion on Moral Realism, I have benefited from reading Thomas Nagel's, *A View From Nowhere* (Oxford, OUP, 1986). Much of the material has been adapted from teaching notes used in courses I have taught on an extra-mural basis.

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Logic and Argument

Essential Concepts and Ideas

When people argue we often find much use of such expressions as ‘that’s a valid point’, ‘that’s a fallacy’, ‘that’s a true argument’, that’s logical (or illogical)’, and so on. In Logic the words ‘valid’, ‘invalid’, ‘true’, ‘false’, ‘logical’, as well as a host of others have precise meanings. In philosophical contexts at least, stick to them.

Argument

In philosophy an argument is not a (perhaps unpleasant) disagreement. (Though disagreements, unpleasant or otherwise, can and do emerge amongst those who hold to conflicting arguments.) An argument is a sequence of reasoning in which one proceeds from certain starting points (called **Premises**) and reaches (by logical means) a finishing point (called a **Conclusion**).

Following From / Entailment

If the argument is a good one, the conclusion is said to **follow from** the premises. (Alternatively we may say that the premises **entail** the conclusion.) Take the following argument:

Argument A

1. All men are mortal
2. Socrates is a man
3. Therefore, Socrates is mortal

(1) and (2) are the **Premises** of this argument and (3) is the **Conclusion**. The argument is a good one because the conclusion **follows from** the premises. Now take the following argument:

Argument B

1. All men are mortal
2. Socrates is a man
3. Therefore, Socrates drinks wine

This argument is no good, even though the conclusion is (no doubt) still true. This is because the conclusion does **not follow from** the premises.

Valid and Invalid

Argument A is said to be **valid** because the conclusion follows from the premises. Argument B is said to be **invalid** because the conclusion does not follow from the premises. This distinction is important. In a valid argument, the truth of the conclusion follows from the truth of the premises. **This means that the conclusion cannot be false if the premises are true.**

Truth Values

Logicians talk about **truth-values**. There are two truth-values – **True (T)** and **False (F)**. Valid arguments are said to preserve truth-value. If the premises are T, the conclusion must be T. You can see that in Argument A, if the premises are both T, the conclusion *must be* T also. In Argument B, in contrast, though the conclusion may well be true, the truth of the premises does not guarantee its truth. The two premises would still be true even if the conclusion were false. Now take Argument C.

Argument C

1. All men are immortal
2. Socrates is a man
3. Therefore, Socrates is immortal

You may be puzzled if asked whether this argument is valid or invalid. In fact it is valid. It passes the test. The conclusion follows from the premises. *If* the premises were true, so must the conclusion be. Of course, one of the premises is false but note, the truth value, in this case F, is still preserved: one of the premises is false and, because the argument is valid (the conclusion follows from the premises) so must the conclusion be false.

This is important. You may be dealing with a valid argument but that is no guarantee that your premises are true. If you do not like where an opponent's argument is leading, there are two possible ways of showing the argument to be unreliable. You can try to show that your opponent's argument is invalid or try to show that one of his premises is false. (It may, of course, suffer from both defects.) However, if you agree that the premises are true and the argument is valid, you must accept the truth of the conclusion – on pain of plain irrationality.

Do not get mixed up between truth and falsehood on the one hand and validity and invalidity on the other. The words 'true' and 'false' apply to the individual statements or propositions in an argument; the words 'valid' and 'invalid' apply to the arguments as a whole. You cannot make 'a valid point' (however many times you hear it said) and you cannot have 'a true (or false) argument'. A valid argument with true premises is the kind of argument we should aim for. Such an argument is said to be **sound**. It is one you can thoroughly rely on.

Refute and Deny

There was once an interchange between a labour and a conservative MP in the House of Commons in which the one accused the other of supporting a policy which would have this or that undesirable consequence. The other stood up and, with no nonsense, said, 'I refute that entirely', and promptly sat down in silent high dudgeon. Under the strict terms of the philosophical act, he had refuted nothing. To refute means to disprove someone's argument, it does not mean just 'deny'. If Inspector Morse, showing off his logical acumen, uses argument to show that I must be the murderer, and I show, by counter-argument, that I could not have even been at the scene, I have refuted Morse – credit to me indeed. If, like the TV criminal I say, 'I was at 'ome gunner, with the missus', I have merely denied the charge. This impresses the police a good deal less. Philosophers too. To refute an argument is hard work; sticking one's back to the wall and shouting is quite easy. (I do though note that my dictionary allows 'refute' to mean (loosely) to deny. I note it with sadness. It has all the air, as dictionaries now do, of accommodating linguistic sheer bone-idleness and crowning it as 'the evolution of the language'. Say what you like elsewhere but be more careful when engaging in philosophy.)

Different Forms of Valid Argument

There are different forms of valid argument. Take the following:

Argument D

If it has snowed, the buildings will be white

It has snowed

Therefore, the buildings will be white

We could refer to the individual propositions here with symbols: 'P' for 'If it has snowed' and 'Q' for 'The buildings will be white. We can then see that the argument has the form:

Argument E

If P, then Q

P

Therefore Q

This is a valid form of argument. Any argument – regardless of the truth of the Ps and Qs – which has this form would be valid (providing the P and the Q in any one argument do not

vary). It says that ‘If P is true, Q will be, goes on to say that P is, indeed, true, and arrives at the conclusion that Q is true’.

Still thinking of P and Q the same way, is the following argument valid?

Argument F

If P then Q
Q
Therefore P

No. The conclusion, though it may well be true, doesn’t follow from the premises. It could be that if it *had* snowed the buildings would be white. It could indeed be that the buildings are white, but this might have been due to workmen having painted them that colour.

Arguments of this form are invalid.

How about:

Argument G

If P then Q
Not Q
Therefore not P

Yes. If it had been snowing, the buildings would indeed be white. Given that they aren’t white, how could it have been snowing?

(How could all this accommodate the fact that snow often doesn’t settle?)

Now take:

Argument H

If P then Q
Not P
Therefore not Q

No. Snow is not the only possible cause of white buildings. Remember the paint.

In the ‘If P, then Q’ premises both P and Q appear. The ‘P’ (the part following ‘If’) is called the antecedent and the ‘Q’ (the part following the ‘then’) is called the consequent. In the second premise of Argument F we are said to be ‘affirming the consequent’ and in the second premise of Argument H we are said to be ‘denying the antecedent’. Both are fallacies – invalid forms of reasoning. Arguments E and G are valid: their conclusions *do* follow from their premises. They are common forms of argument and each has its own names. Argument E is called ‘**modus ponens**’; Argument G, ‘**modus tollens**’. Be careful though. It is hardly fallacious *just* to deny the antecedent or to affirm the consequent. We may well have good reason to do so. The fallacious bit is in the reasoning we have done based on doing these things.

All this can lead to some odd seeming results. Take the following:

If Henry VIII was once King of England, then triangles have 3 sides.

Put it in the form of an argument:

Argument I

**Henry VIII was once King of England
Therefore, triangles have three sides**

This is a valid argument. This is simply because it would be self-contradictory to affirm the premise and yet deny the conclusion. Can you see why? In fact, the premise is neither here nor there; it would be self-contradictory to deny the conclusion *all on its own* because it is a necessarily true statement. It is necessary because triangles just must have three sides – they wouldn't be triangles with any other number of sides. It is impossible both to affirm the premise and deny the conclusion simply because it is impossible to deny (in this case) the conclusion. In fact this makes **any statement whatsoever imply a necessary truth**. Whatever the premise, if the conclusion is a necessary truth, then the premise must imply the conclusion because it would be impossible for the premise to be true and conclusion to be false. That is so simply because it would be impossible for the conclusion to be false anyhow.

Now look at this:

Argument J

**A triangle has four sides
Therefore beer is made from malted barley**

This too is valid. Again this is because it is self-contradictory to affirm the premise and yet deny the conclusion. You should be able by now to spot why: it is just because it is self-contradictory (in this case) to affirm the premise. This, in turn, is because the premise is necessarily false and it is self-contradictory to affirm a necessarily false statement. In fact **a necessarily false statement implies any other statement whatsoever**. The argument will be valid whatever the conclusion. Indeed, the conclusion, in a sense, drops out of the picture.

Note

The expression 'iff' is used in several arguments in this book. This is not a mis-print.
'iff' is logical shorthand for 'if and only if'

Normative Ethics: Virtue Ethics

Argument 6

Compare these two short lists:

1. Do not kill
2. Do not kill without good reason
3. Do help those in distress
4. Do help those in distress unless doing so would bring unreasonable harm on others

1. Kindness
2. Charity
3. Moral sensitivity
4. Courage*

The first is a list of moral rules; the second is a list of what we call the moral *virtues*. Notice the second and fourth items in the list of rules: they are there to remind us that moral rules nearly always seem to require qualification to fit particular circumstances. It may be good (in general) not to lie but if doing so were the only way to save a life, one may think twice. On the other hand, it seems easier to state virtues without qualification (though not easy to give a completed and incontestable list) Virtue Ethics is an approach to normative ethics that emphasises the primacy of the virtues. It is an approach that goes back to the ancient Greeks – most notably, Aristotle – but had largely been ignored in Ethics in modern times as Deontology and Utilitarianism have tended to dominate the scene. More recently it has been revived and nowadays commands considerable respect as a third and quite distinct approach. One of the earlier modern exponents of this view was the philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe (1919-2001). Her argument – in ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’ (1958) - concluded that we should rid ourselves of the notions of moral duty and obligation. There is no useful work that these notions can do. She noted that Aristotle did important work in ethics with scarcely any notion of ‘The Moral’ in the sense imposed by Deontology and Utilitarianism. Summarising matters, her argument runs thus:

Argument 6a

1. **The notions of moral duty and obligations only make sense in the context of a (moral) law-giver (God, say).**
2. **Morality is possible without a (moral) law-giver.**
3. **So, morality is possible without the notions of moral duty and obligation.**

What we have instead is the notion of the virtue – and that should be what takes centre-stage. Take the following argument:

Argument 6b

1. **What makes us good is determined by the kind of people we are and our relations with others.**
2. **The kind of people we are and our relations with others are determined by our characters (i.e., by the virtues we possess).**
3. **So, what makes us good is determined by the virtues we possess.**

Response

A believer in God may want to deny (2) (in Arg 6a) or (perhaps more sensibly) discern a different role for God in our moral framework. (For example, God may not so much ‘lay down the law’ as wish us to be people of a certain kind, that is, persons with certain kinds of virtue.)

* The four so called ‘Cardinal Virtues’, which go back to ancient times are; prudence, temperance, justice and fortitude. Christianity added: love, hope and charity.

A Comparison of the Three Approaches to Normative Ethics

	Utilitarianism	Deontology	Virtue Ethics
Irreducible Starting Point	States of Affairs Consequences	Duty	Notion of Morally Good Person <i>(not defined in terms of: duty or tendency to maximise utility)</i>
Focus on	<i>Ways of Doing Act Appraisal Decision Procedures Discrete Acts Moral quandaries</i>	<i>Ways of Doing Act Appraisal Decision Procedures Discrete Acts Moral quandaries</i>	<i>Ways of Being Agent Appraisal Good character Disposition to ongoing long-term patterns of action Living well (Eudemonia)</i>
Motivation	For the sake of: Utility Maximisation Disposition to do this	For the sake of: Duty	For the sake of: Virtue
Primary Object of Moral Evaluation	States of Affairs Consequences	Moral Law <i>Degree of accordance with this</i>	The Agent Persons The Will
Concept of Good	Defined in terms of: States of affairs Consequences <i>Utility Maximisation</i>	Defined in terms of: Right Action <i>Right action for its own sake</i>	Defined in terms of: The Agent <i>The will is the only properly good thing.</i>
Concept of Virtue	Defined in terms of: Tendency to Utility Maximisation	Defined in terms of: Acting in accordance with moral Rules	Defined in terms of: Character Trait that a person needs to flourish / live well
A Virtuous Agent is one who	Acts so as to: Maximise Utility	Acts in accordance with moral Rules	Exercises the Virtues
Concept of Duty	Defined in terms of: Utility Maximisation	Defined in terms of: Acting in accordance with Moral Rules	Defined in terms of: Acting in accordance with the Virtues
Concept of Right Acts	Defined in terms of: accordance with Utility Maximisation	Defined in terms of: accordance with The Moral Law	Defined in terms of: What a virtuous agent would do
A Correct Moral Rule is one that	Maximises Utility	a is laid upon by God b is required by Natural Law c is rationally required	a virtuous agent would do under the circumstances

Problems of VE as Compared to Other Two Approaches and Some VE Responses

The Problem of Justification

We need to have an independent account of human flourishing but no such account seems to work: if we define flourishing in terms of the virtues we simply beg the question in favour of the virtues. **Response:** All theories rely on some basic moral intuitions which are not, and cannot be, proved, and which are taken by the theory as self-evident.

The Problem of Universality

The lack of any universal criterion for deciding between different conceptions of the virtues implies that there are no restraints on the virtues VE might recommend. Moreover, not only does VE allow us to be content with our 'local virtues', ugly as they might be, it suggests that we build our entire ethical view upon them. **Response:** This is no less a problem for rule-based theories.

The Problem of Action Guidance

VE cannot possibly guide action. **Response:** The agent may be led to ask 'If I were to do such and such now, would I be acting justly or unjustly (or neither), kindly or unkindly [and so on]?' This willingness to reflect is all that is needed.

The Problem of Reductionism

VE defines all of our moral concepts in terms of the virtuous agent. **Response:** VE not committed to any sort of reductionism involving defining all of our moral concepts in terms of the virtuous agent. On the contrary, it relies on a lot of very significant moral concepts – e.g. charity or benevolence.

The Problems of Moral Scepticism and Moral Pluralism

We may not know which character traits are *the* virtues. In different cultures we may encounter different opinions. **Response:** Again, this is no less a problem for rule-based theories. (Whose rules are *the* rules?)

The Problem of Eudaimonia (Roughly 'Living Well')

The concept of Eudaimonia is hopelessly obscure. **Response:** Deontology and utilitarianism share obscurity of central concepts - *rationality* and *happiness*.

The Problem of Circularity

VE says that right action is what the virtuous agent does and then says that what makes an agent virtuous is that he or she performs the right action. **Response:** The theory is not trivially circular; it does not specify right action in terms of the virtuous agent and then immediately specify the virtuous agent in terms of right action. Rather, it specifies the virtuous agent in terms of the virtues, and then specifies these, not merely as dispositions to right action, but as the character traits required for *eudaimonia*.

The Problem of Unresolvable Conflict

The requirements of the virtues can conflict. **Response:** The requirements of *rules* can also conflict.

Generosity: An Example of a Conceptual Analysis of a Virtue

Generosity is a virtue but what is involved in the having of it? For a Virtue ethicist, to ‘act from’ a virtue means more than merely acting in *accordance* with that virtue (as though following a rule) for this ignores a crucial causal element. Fundamentally, one must be in a virtuous state and this state must (in large part) be what *motivates* the behaviour. However, it seems plausible also to suggest a number of crucial extra conditions. Following Audi (*Moral Knowledge and Ethical Character*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1977) one may isolate six conditions in all – the general features involved in virtuous action:

1. **The Field:** range of matters / things the virtue is concerned with or what situations call for that virtue.
2. **The Target:** what the virtuous action hopes to achieve.
3. **The Agent’s Understanding:** of the field
4. **The Agent’s Motivation:** for performing the action
5. **The Agent’s Action:** being based on that motivation
6. **The Beneficiaries:** who they should be

In an article on caring, Van Hooft (‘Acting from the virtue of caring in nursing’, *Nursing Ethics*, vol.6, no.3, London: Arnold, 1999, pp.189-201) remembering that Aristotle thought that a virtuous person should *feel* right in performing the action, adds:

7. **The Agent’s feeling Appropriate Emotions / inclinations:** in relation to the field.

Van Hooft includes within the 7th condition the following condition which I will separate.

8. **The Emotion should be felt to the right Degree.**

He then adds a further condition:

9. **A Preparedness of the Agent to Reflect:** on what they are doing / have done.
(Leaving room for a sense of integrity.)

One can see in this the spirit of Aristotle insofar as a number of these conditions suggest that acting from a virtue involves acting from knowledge, choice and (fairly long-standing) dispositions of character.

Armed with our conceptual framework, we can now locate the concept of generosity within it. First, its *field*? Generosity is aimed at other people. Also, crucially, our act will involve some expenditure on our part – of time, money, attention and even some *giving of self*. Virtues typically test our characters; generosity tests us because it involves sharing some of our own resources with others. This is not to deny that some people may be able to exercise virtues perfectly and without effort. The overwhelming majority of us fall short of this, of course, and even those with perfect virtue may have come to be so after extensive and very hard training. Most of us seem to fall somewhere between *akrasia* (weakness of will) and *enkrateia* (strength of will). In the former case, the agent typically fails to do what they accept they ought to do; in the latter case, the agent typically does it, but still has to expend effort in the process. The situations will be occasions in which there is a perceived need of ‘the other’ and the capability of ‘the self’ to offer some service. Further, the wanted consequence should be connected to the (perceived) benefit of the recipient: it should be thought that the act does them genuine good. We might, for instance, make a long-lost or newfound friend feel welcome and wanted. We wish our beneficiaries to feel as though they are worthy of being made more comfortable, of having a specific lack made good or, perhaps worthy of just a ‘bit of a fuss’. This provides the *target* of the virtue: one has been generous to the extent that one’s actions have been directed upon the aim of acknowledging the *value of the other* (whether or not it is appreciated).

What then must the agent *understand*? It seems plausible to suggest that the agent have some grasp of how 'the other' is supposed to benefit and of the wider significance of the benefit. Arms manufacturers fail to be generous if they give an extra big discount to the bullet-spitting dictator of a third-world country (and not just because the manufacturer hopes to gain future custom). A rich father, who continues to give money to a spendthrift son, acts too foolishly to be generous. This brings us to the question of just who *the beneficiaries* should be. The suggestion is - others who merit the generosity. There must be the reasonable possibility of benefit and the reasonable expectation of its not being abused: blind or cynical giving is not generous giving.

What of the agent's *motivation*? If the agent expects some personal return in giving they are hardly being generous. Of course, the agent may (quite legitimately) feel good in acting generously. All that shows (not unimportantly) is that there exists a link between the virtuous life and a feeling of well-being. Moreover, feeling that one is 'doing as one would be done by' may not be inappropriate. However, if an agent spends some time with his ageing and rich aunt as she lies in her death bed simply because he expects as a result to receive extra benefit in her will, he would scarcely rank as generous: selfish giving is not generous giving. The agent's *action* has to be motivated in *the right kind of way*. His action should be appropriately motivated. This amounts to its being driven by appropriate reasons and emotions. Feelings of care and concern suggest themselves as candidates. The agent may perceive a need (as in, say, being generous to a charity) or perceive that the act would show 'the other' to have value (as in, say, generously feeding a long-lost friend).

Moreover the emotions need to be felt to the *right degree*. This may vary, for it is possible to act generously out of habit – that is, under conditions in which emotions are likely to be minimal. This possibility does not make the emotions irrelevant, for the habit (if it is genuinely to be one of generosity) will have to have been formed under conditions in which emotion had a higher profile role to play. (Think of the child being persuaded to share.) Habit, we may say, doesn't void the role of emotions, it simply allows emotion a more assured place in the system of motivation; emotions come to motivate *as much* out of default as intensity. The emotions, then, may never be totally absent but perhaps they mustn't be permitted too large, or unconstrained a role either. Intense emotion may get in the way; good judgement is often cool judgement.

Points for Discussion

1. Can Anscombe be right in saying that we can give up the notion of moral obligation?
2. Can there be a single set of virtues for every human being?
3. Is being virtuous necessary for happiness?

Practical Ethics: Abortion

Argument 7

Abortion is one of the major moral issues of the day. One reason for this may be that abortion, under some circumstances, is legal: abortion is actually practised. This gives those who speak against it an extra reason to be passionate about the issue, and not infrequently vehement.

The main argument against abortion is:

Argument 7a

1. **The deliberate killing of an innocent human being is wrong.**
2. **Abortion is the deliberate killing of an innocent human being.**
3. **Therefore, abortion is wrong.**

Responses

There are two possible responses to this. First one may wish to argue that although abortion is the killing of an innocent human being, it may still be justified on occasion. The second response is to deny that abortion is killing an innocent human being. We will consider these in turn.

Can We Justify Killing the Innocent Human Being?

Argument 7b

- 1 **We should always cut down on evil (Recall Negative Utilitarianism.)**
- 2 **To have laws prohibiting abortion under any circumstances simply drives the practice underground. This, in turn, increases the risk of dangers to health which arise from old wives tales and 'back street' practitioners. It is also an open invitation to those who would wish to exploit the situation for their own financial gain. Make abortion legal, at least under some carefully prescribed circumstances, and you cut down on these evils.**
- 4 **Therefore abortion should be made legal.**

Responses

The problem is that although it shows that we cannot prohibit abortion without suffering the consequence of other evils, it does not show that abortion itself is not an evil. If the foetus has a right to life, then we cannot kill it with impunity just because having a law protecting it from such an ultimate abuse causes difficulty elsewhere. This argument, therefore, does not even address the ethics of abortion itself.

A second argument maintains that it is no business of the law to interfere in such matters as abortion. This is an area of private morality. Peter Singer, a well-known philosophical writer in practical ethics, claims that this attitude can be traced to a principle expounded by the great 19th. Century defender of Liberalism, John Stuart Mill, who wrote, ". . . the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilised community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others . . . He cannot rightfully be compelled to do or forbear because it will be better for him to do so, because it will make him happier, because in the opinion of others, to do so would be wise or even right." ('On Liberty')

This principle (which Mill did not specifically intend as an argument in favour of abortion) is often brought to bear on debates concerning the repeal of victim-less crimes. It was popular for instance among those who thought that homosexuality should not be a matter for the law.