

Subject specific vocabulary: Moral philosophy

The following subject specific vocabulary provides definitions of key Moral philosophy terms used in our A-level Philosophy: 7172 specification.

Your students should be familiar with, and gain understanding from all these terms.

Act utilitarianism

An action is morally right if and only if [we can reasonably expect/predict that] it maximises utility. This is decided on a case-by-case basis, such that it is possible for the same type of action (e.g. a lie) to be morally right on one occasion and not on another.

Acting (merely) in accordance with duty (Kant)

Acting as duty demands, but motivated by something other than a recognition of your rationally-determined duty. For example, a shopkeeper treating a customer honestly because it is good for business.

Acting out of duty (Kant)

Acting as duty demands and motivated by a recognition of this rationally-determined duty. For example, a shopkeeper treating a customer honestly because it is his duty to do so.

Categorical imperative (Kant)

It is an imperative: a statement commanding a course of action; it is a statement about what one ought to do. It is categorical: it applies to all agents regardless of their specific ends/goals. It normally has the form "Do X".

Character traits/dispositions (Aristotle)

A tendency an agent has to act or feel particular ways, displayed over time. Aristotle thinks of a person's virtues (and, indeed, vices) as being character traits/dispositions.

Clashing/competing duties

A perfect duty clashes with another (different) perfect duty when fulfilling one perfect duty means that you cannot fulfill the other. A perfect duty clashes with itself when fulfilling that duty in one sense (or to one person) means that it cannot be fulfilled in another sense (or to another person). Note that for Kant if a perfect duty clashes with an imperfect duty, you must fulfil the perfect duty.

Clashing/competing virtues

A virtue clashes with another (different) virtue when exhibiting one means that you cannot exhibit the other. A virtue clashes with itself when exhibiting it in one sense (or to one person) means that it cannot be exhibited in another sense (or to another person).

Cognitivism about ethical language

The view that moral utterances (e.g. "murder is wrong") are true or false, they express propositions/beliefs.

Consequences of actions determine moral value

The objection that consequences are important in determining the morality of an action and that Kantian ethics, due to its focus on intention/motive alone, cannot account for this importance of consequences.

Contradiction in conception (Kant)

A maxim leads to a contradiction in conception if acting on that maxim is not conceivable (/possible) in a world in which all people acted as you propose to act.

Contradiction in will (Kant)

A maxim leads to a contradiction in the will if a world in which all people acted as you propose to act would conflict with other things that you must rationally will.

Deontological ethics

Ethical theories that are based on the existence of duties/rights. They focus on acts/motives conforming to particular rules.

Doctrine of the mean (Aristotle)

The idea that virtue (e.g. courage) exists between a vice of deficiency (e.g. cowardice) and a vice of excess (e.g. rashness). This applies to actions and to feelings.

Eating animals

Using animals/parts of animals as food.

Emotivism (about ethical language) (Ayer)

The view that the function of moral utterances is (merely) to express the emotions of the person. Often referred to as the “boo-hoorah!” theory of morality – “X is morally wrong” is best understood as an expression of emotion such as “X boo!”. This involves both (1) moral non-cognitivism (moral utterances (e.g. “murder is wrong”) are not true or false, they are doing something other than expressing propositions/beliefs) and (2) moral anti-realism (there are no moral properties/facts).

Error theory (Mackie)

The view that there are no mind-independent/objective moral properties and so all moral utterances (which presuppose the existence of such properties) are false (i.e. are in error). This involves both (1) moral anti-realism (there are no moral properties/facts) and (2) moral cognitivism (moral utterances (e.g. “murder is wrong”) are true or false, they express propositions/beliefs).

Ethical language / moral utterances

An utterance that at least appears to express a proposition whose truth or falsity depends on whether moral properties/facts exist.

Eudaimonia (Aristotle)

The 'good', the final end that we are all striving for, desirable as an end in itself and not for the sake of anything else. It is best translated as “flourishing”, living/doing well.

Good will (Kant)

A person has a good will if they make their decisions for moral reasons alone (i.e. out of duty, rather than merely in accordance with duty).

Habituation (Aristotle)

Habituation is the development of positive moral character traits/dispositions through continued practice. This is required given that people are not innately virtuous.

Hedonistic utilitarianism

An action is morally right if and only if [we can reasonably expect/predict that] it maximises utility, where utility is understood as pleasure/absence of pain.

Higher pleasure (Mill)

A more valuable pleasure. The best test for pleasure A being a higher pleasure than pleasure B is that pleasure A is preferred by someone who has experienced both. For Mill pleasures unique to human beings (such as those that employ the intellect, e.g. reading, debate etc.) are higher than those that are possible for both humans and non-human animals (e.g. those based on sensations).

Hume's Fork

The division of knowledge into only two types (a) "matters of fact" (a posteriori, contingent, synthetic) and (b) "relations of ideas" (a priori, necessary, analytic). Used to challenge the claim made by moral realists and moral cognitivists that moral knowledge is possible by arguing that moral utterances are neither "matters of fact" nor "relations of ideas".

Hume's is-ought gap

Hume's claim that we cannot justifiably infer what ought to be done ('ought' statements) from facts about what is the case ("is" statements) alone. Used to challenge the claim made by some moral realists that moral obligations/duties can be justified by statements about what is the case. Some see it as showing that moral utterances are non-cognitive.

Hume's motivation argument

Hume argues that a moral judgement/commitment/state of mind (by itself) motivates us to act in a particular way, whereas believing a proposition (by itself) does not. This shows that moral judgements/commitments/states of mind (like "X is wrong") are not beliefs (so are not true or false) and so do not express propositions, showing that moral cognitivism is false."

Hypothetical imperative (Kant)

It is an imperative: a statement commanding a course of action; it is a statement about what one ought to do. It is hypothetical: it applies to agents on the condition that they have (in Kant's wording, that they "will") specific ends/goals. It has the form "Do X if you will Y".

Individual (moral) right

A moral right is an entitlement (not) to do something or (not) to be some way, or an entitlement that others (not) do something or (not) be some way. The existence of such moral rights is used to object to utilitarianism since maximising utility might require violating such rights.

Individual liberty

In its most straightforward sense liberty is the absence of obstacles/constraints external to you (sometimes called 'negative' liberty). The existence of such liberties is used to object to utilitarianism. The existence of such liberties is used to object to utilitarianism since maximising utility might require violating such liberties.

Intentions of the individual

The objection that intentions are important in determining the morality of an action and that utilitarianism, due to its focus on consequences alone, cannot account for this importance of intentions.

Intuitionism

The view (associated with non-naturalism) that we come to know about non-natural moral properties through our faculty of intuition (non-inferential a priori knowledge).

Involuntary action (Aristotle)

An involuntary action is one that (1) is not voluntary (either because it is done under compulsion (so fails to meet the “control condition”) or because it is the result of ignorance (so fails to meet the “epistemic condition”)) and (2) is regretted.

Lower pleasure (Mill)

A less valuable pleasure. The best test for pleasure A being a lower pleasure than pleasure B is that pleasure B is preferred by someone who has experienced both. For Mill pleasures that are possible for both humans and non-human animals (e.g. those based on mere sensations) are lower than those that are unique to human beings (such as those that employ the intellect, e.g. reading, debate etc).

Lying / telling lies

Making a statement that one does not believe with the intention that someone else believe it.

Mackie's argument from relativity

Mackie argues that moral anti-realism can give a better explanation of the differences in moral views across time/geography (“moral relativity”) than moral realism can.

Mackie's arguments from queerness

Mackie argues that moral properties (were they to exist as the moral realist thinks they do) would be unlike any other properties we know of and would have to be accessed in a way unlike our normal ways of gaining knowledge. The existence of such properties is implausible, and so, therefore, is moral realism.

Maxim (Kant)

An intention that guides you in choosing your actions. Specifying a maxim involves specifying the type of intended action, the circumstances/conditions in which it will be performed and the end/aim/purpose of this action.

Mill's 'proof' of the greatest happiness principle

Mill argues that because happiness is desired/valued it is therefore desirable/valuable. He then argues that because only happiness is valuable for its own sake we therefore ought to maximise happiness and actions are morally right to the extent that they cause happiness.

Mill's "greatest happiness principle"

Actions are morally right to the extent that they cause happiness, where happiness is understood as pleasure and the absence of pain. (Original statement: "*[A]ctions 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; by unhappiness, pain, and the privation of pleasure*" (Mill)).

Moore's 'open question argument'

Moore argues that "It is X, but is it morally good?" is always an open question. This means that the concept "morally good" is not synonymous with any other concept and therefore the property of moral goodness is not identical/reducible to any other property. Used as an objection to any reductive moral theory, including moral naturalism.

Moore's Naturalistic Fallacy

Moore argues that moral goodness is a simple concept which cannot be analysed/understood/defined in terms of any other concept/s. Someone commits the naturalistic fallacy when they attempt to give an analysis/definition of moral goodness. Moral goodness might be correlated with other properties but it is not identical/reducible to them, it is an irreducible property (and, for Moore, a non-natural property).

Moral anti-realism

The view that either (a) there are no moral properties/facts at all or (b) there are moral properties/facts but they are all mind-dependent.

Moral integrity (Williams)

Someone acts/lives with moral integrity (for Williams) to the extent that they make decisions based on their own commitments, projects, values, ways of living. Used to object to utilitarianism since the utilitarian decision-making procedure is incompatible with moral integrity as a decision-making procedure.

Moral naturalism

The view that mind-independent/objective moral properties/facts are natural/physical. This involves (1) moral realism (there are mind-independent/objective moral properties/facts) and (2) moral cognitivism (moral utterances (e.g. "murder is wrong") are true or false, they express propositions/beliefs). This is often connected with empiricism - we come to know about them using the senses/scientific investigation.

Moral nihilism

The view that there are no moral properties/facts of any kind, that there can be no moral knowledge, and perhaps also that we should stop speaking/thinking using moral terms/concepts. Moral anti-realism is objected to on the grounds that it will lead to moral nihilism, which is unacceptable.

Moral non-naturalism (Moore)

The view that mind-independent/objective moral properties are non-natural/non-physical. This involves (1) moral realism (there are mind-independent/objective moral properties/facts) and (2) moral cognitivism (moral utterances (e.g. "murder is wrong") are true or false, they express propositions/beliefs). This is often (and is for Moore) connected to rationalist intuitionism - we come to know about these moral properties through our faculty of intuition (non-inferential a priori knowledge).

Moral progress

An improved understanding of morality and/or an increase in morally good behaviour. Used as an objection to moral anti-realism since the existence of such progress shows that there must be objective moral truths/standards.

Moral realism

The view that there are mind-independent/objective moral properties/facts.

Moral reasoning, persuading, disagreeing

Moral reasoning or persuading is the use of moral claims within arguments as premises and/or conclusions. Moral disagreement occurs when people take opposing moral views. Used as an objection to moral non-cognitivism, since the existence of such practices shows that moral statements express propositions.

Morality is a system of hypothetical imperatives (Foot)

Foot argues that while moral imperatives might seem to be categorical, they are in fact hypothetical because it is not irrational to disobey them (unless they contradict our desires/aims).

Naturalist forms of utilitarianism

If utility is understood as a natural/physical property (e.g. as being identified with pleasurable physical sensations (by Bentham)), then such forms of utilitarianism would be classified as moral naturalist accounts.

Naturalist forms of virtue ethics

If the function of humans (and thus a virtuous life for humans) can be understood in terms of a natural/physical property humans have that animals/plants do not (i.e. as being identified with a capacity to reason/act for reasons (by Aristotle)), then such forms of virtue ethics would be classified as moral naturalist accounts.

Non-cognitivism about ethical language

The view that moral utterances (e.g. "murder is wrong") are not true or false, they do not express propositions/beliefs. Instead they have some different function/express some other mental state.

Non-hedonistic utilitarianism

An action is morally right to the extent that [we can reasonably expect/predict that] it maximises utility, where utility is not understood as pleasure/the absence of pain.

Non-voluntary action (Aristotle)

A non-voluntary action is one that (1) is not voluntary (either because it is done under compulsion (so fails to meet the “control condition”) or because it is the result of ignorance (so fails to meet the “epistemic condition”)) and (2) is not regretted.

Not all non-universalisable maxims are immoral

There are maxims which cannot be universalised without contradiction but are moral (intuitively or according to Kant's second formulation).

Not all universalisable maxims are distinctly moral

There are maxims which can be universalised without contradiction but are either immoral (intuitively or according to Kant's second formulation) or are neither moral nor immoral.

Partiality

Giving/desiring to give preferential treatment to particular individuals (e.g. those we love/relatives/compatriots etc.). Used to object to utilitarianism since maximising utility might preclude such preferential treatment.

Practical reasoning/wisdom (the relationship between virtues, actions and reasons)

Practical wisdom is the reasoning we use to make choices about our actions and it requires (1) general knowledge of the good, (2) particular knowledge of how to achieve that good, (3) good reasoning skills, and (4) willpower. Practical wisdom is context-dependent and requires experience/practice/habitation. Practical wisdom is what helps us to identify how to achieve our virtuous ends, is required for an action to be fully virtuous (it is additional to just doing what a virtuous person would do, which could be done with no understanding at all and/or for the wrong reasons) and it also requires virtue since it must have a morally good aim/end.

Preference utilitarianism

An action is morally right if and only if [we can reasonably expect/predict that] it maximises utility, where utility is understood as preference-fulfillment/desire-satisfaction (rather than as pleasure/the absence of pain). This is a non-hedonistic version of utilitarianism.

Prescriptivism (about ethical language) (Hare)

The function of moral utterances is to prescribe (to command) ways of acting/living which apply universally (to everyone, including the speaker). So "x is morally right" means "do x" (an imperative) and includes the commitment that everyone in the same (/sufficiently similar) situation should do x (universality). This involves both (1) moral non-cognitivism (moral utterances (e.g. "murder is wrong") are not true or false, they are doing something other than expressing propositions/beliefs) and (2) moral anti-realism (there are no moral properties/facts).

Problems with calculation

Issues with carrying out the calculating/predicting required for determining what to do according to utilitarian theories. This might include (a) difficulties knowing the future and the causal connections between events, (b) difficulties knowing what counts as utility for people (what they find pleasurable/prefer), (c) difficulties with measuring utility (e.g. for Mill, is any amount of 'higher' pleasure of more value than an infinite amount of 'lower' pleasure?), (d) difficulties about how much of the future can/should be taken into account, (e) difficulties with making calculations quickly, (f) difficulties relating to which beings are included in the calculation (just humans? animals also?).

Qualitative hedonistic utilitarianism (Mill)

An action is morally right if and only if [we can reasonably expect/predict that] it maximises utility, where (a) utility is understood as pleasure/absence of pain and (b) some pleasures (higher pleasures) are of higher quality than others (lower pleasures) and are therefore given more weight.

Quantitative hedonistic utilitarianism (Bentham)

An action is morally right if and only if [we can reasonably expect/predict that] it maximises utility, where (a) utility is understood as pleasure/absence of pain and (b) only the quantity of pleasure/pain is considered.

Rule utilitarianism

An act is morally right if and only if it is in accordance with a set of rules that [we can reasonably expect/predict] will, if accepted, maximise utility.

Simulated killing

The enactment of (a dramatisation of) a killing within a fictional context (e.g. a computer game).

Stealing

Taking something that someone else owns with no intention of returning it and without their permission. Violating someone's property right/s.

The first formulation of the categorical imperative (Kant)

Act only according to maxims which you can will as a universal law (one followed by everyone) without this leading to a contradiction.

The function argument (Aristotle)

Aristotle's argument that the function of humans is what humans can do that non-humans can't, namely reasoning/acting for reasons. Performing this function well (by way of the development of virtues) is what a good life for a human requires.

The importance of feelings (Aristotle)

For Aristotle virtue requires having appropriate feelings; virtuous feeling exists between a vice of deficiency (feeling too little) and a vice of excess (feeling too much). A virtuous person is someone whose emotional responses are in harmony with correct moral reasoning about how they ought to act.

The possibility of circularity involved in defining virtuous acts and virtuous persons in terms of each other

The objection that Aristotle's ethics defines a virtuous person as someone who does virtuous acts and defines virtuous acts as acts done by a virtuous person. This is an example of a circular definition making it impossible to learn what a virtuous person or virtuous act is unless we already know what one of them is.

The relationship between Eudaimonia and pleasure (Aristotle)

Pleasure is good when it is taken in virtuous forms of activity. However, pleasure, unlike eudaimonia, is not the only good, and is not an end-in-itself. It is part of eudaimonia which is an end-in-itself.

The relationship between virtues and function (Aristotle)

Virtues are those qualities (positive character traits) required for humans to perform their function well.

The second formulation of the categorical imperative (Kant)

Act in a way that treats yourself and others never solely as a means but always as an end.

The skill analogy (Aristotle)

An analogy made by Aristotle where he compares the development of virtues with the development of a skill. They have the following similarities: they require practice/habitation, an exemplar/teacher can be helpful, they are not innately present.

The value of certain motives

The objection that particular motives (e.g. love, friendship, kindness) have moral value and that Kantian ethics, due to its focus on duty alone as a motive, cannot account for this importance of these other motives.

Tyranny of the majority

A situation where the majority (or at least the most active group) oppress a minority (or less active group) through social opinion ("social tyranny") or law ("legal tyranny"). Used as an objection to utilitarianism since maximising utility might require such tyranny.

Utilitarianism

An action is morally right if and only if [we can reasonably expect/predict that] it maximises utility.

Utility

Utility is understood as either the tendency of something (i.e. an action, policy, person) to cause good effects or the good effect itself that is caused. How 'good' is then understood differs, including some seeing it in terms of pleasure (hedonistic accounts) and some in terms of preference-satisfaction (non-hedonistic preference accounts).

Utility calculus (Bentham)

Steps/criteria to consider when measuring/predicting utility caused by an action: (1) intensity and (2) duration of the sensation, (3) certainty that the sensation will occur, (4) propinquity (proximity of the sensation in time), (5) fecundity (likelihood of the sensation being followed by more of the same kind), (6) purity (likelihood of the sensation not being followed by the opposite sensation), and (7) extent (the amount of people whose sensations are affected by the action).

Verification principle (Ayer)

A proposition is meaningful if and only if either: (1) it is analytically true/false or (2) there are conditions under which its truth could be conclusively empirically verified in practice (strong version) or (at least) its probable truth could be empirically verified in principle (weak version). Used to challenge the claim made by moral realists/cognitivists that moral utterances express meaningful propositions/beliefs by arguing that moral claims meet neither condition.

Vices (Aristotle)

Negative moral character traits/dispositions acquired through habituation. They can be split into vices of excess (e.g. rashness) and vices of deficiency (e.g. cowardice).

Virtues (Aristotle)

Positive moral character traits/dispositions acquired through habituation. Possession of virtues enables human beings to fulfil their function through making good/rational moral choices thus living a good (eudaimon) life. Virtues (e.g. courage) lie between a vice of excess (e.g. rashness) and a vice of deficiency (e.g. cowardice).

Voluntary action (Aristotle)

A voluntary action is one that meets two conditions: (1) the control condition (it is done intentionally by the agent and not compelled externally) and (2) the epistemic condition (the agent is aware of the non-moral facts about what it is they are doing).

Whether a trait must contribute to Eudaimonia in order to be a virtue; the relationship between the good for the individual and moral good.

Aristotle says that virtues are traits that contribute to human flourishing; that doing what is morally good contributes to one's individual good. However, there are examples of people who don't flourish (where their lives are not good for them) but who live a good/virtuous life (they do what is morally good).

Whether Aristotelian virtue ethics can give sufficiently clear guidance about how to act

Aristotle's virtue ethics does not make it clear how we should act. The doctrine of the mean does not give specific enough guidance about how to act and what constitutes virtue in specific situations. According to Aristotle, ethics is uncodifiable/not rule-based. This is seen as an objection because a successful ethical theory should give clear guidance on how to act and moral knowledge should be possible.

Whether pleasure is the only good (Nozick's experience machine)

Nozick creates a thought-experiment in which there is a machine that can cause you to have experiences indistinguishable to the subject from experiences of the real world. Once plugged in you would not know/remember that you were plugged in. Nozick argues that pleasure cannot be all that was valuable to us, since we have good reason/s not to plug in, even if doing so would guarantee that we had more pleasurable experiences than 'real life' would give us. It is used to object to hedonism in general (the view that only pleasure motivates us and/or has value) and thus also to object to hedonistic utilitarianism.