

# ETHICS

## Preparation for studying Ethics at A Level

### The course

The course involves studying a number of ethical theories. These theories are guidelines or structures designed to help people make moral decisions. In reality we don't use those theories when we make decisions but we might use some of the principles that they include. And, if we don't, maybe we should be!

There are four theories that we study. In chronological order they are: Natural Law (by Thomas Aquinas), Kantian Ethics (Immanuel Kant), Utilitarianism (the versions by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill) and Situation Ethics (by Joseph Fletcher).

We also look at three ethical issues: euthanasia, business ethics and sexual ethics. We study these in depth and, importantly, we apply the theories to consider what those theories say the right or the wrong thing to do is regarding these issues.

Then there are two topics which are more 'stand-alone'. They are: conscience and ethical language (what do moral words represent – facts or opinions). These two topics are studied in Year 13.

### General preparation for studying Ethics at A level

There are lots of programmes, films and books which have ethical themes. When you watch them think about the principles on which the ethical decisions are being made. For example:

- Are people acting out of selfish desires?
- Or they showing altruism?
- Are they focusing on the outcomes of their actions?
- Or are they trying to 'do the right thing'?

If you are able to, watch some of the following:

- The Good Place (a series on Netflix)
- Million Dollar Baby (it's a slow burner though)
- Saving Private Ryan (the scene where the reconnaissance group are walking through the fields)
- Vertical Limit (only the opening scene though; the rest is not good!)

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q0gx\\_D--iDw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q0gx_D--iDw)

There are also lots of novels which have ethical themes in them. The best ones are:

- *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee (this is a brilliant book; a classic which everyone should just read anyway!)
- *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy
- *White Teeth* by Zadie Smith

## More specific preparation for studying the Ethics component of the OCR A level

- *A Little History of Philosophy* by Nigel Warburton

This is a great introduction to some of the greats of philosophy. It is very accessible and it gives you a glimpse into the main ideas of lots of different thinkers. You don't have to read all of it (though you can if you want to broaden your knowledge). The most useful chapters to read are the ones on: Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Kant (two chapters), Hume, Bentham, Mill, Sartre.

- *50 Philosophy Ideas You Really Need To Know* by Ben Dupre

This is a similar sort of book in that the ideas are in easy-to-digest format

- *Think* by Simon Blackburn

This is a good book for learning the philosophers mentioned above, in a little more depth.

- *The Pig That Wants To Be Eaten* by Julian Baggini

This contains lots of philosophical and ethical puzzles. They are good for developing your skills of critical analysis as opposed to learning content.

- *A level Religious Studies for OCR: AS and Year 1 student book: Christianity, Philosophy and Ethics* by Libby Ahluwalia and Robert Bowie

This is a course textbook covers every aspect of the philosophy and ethics content; specifically referring to the questions which are raised in the specification. For that reason, it is very useful. It isn't very pretty though and there aren't many activities to do but it is a very useful reference book. We don't study Christianity as the religion though so that part isn't relevant.

- Wikipedia!

If you can't get your hands on any books then can read about Wikipedia pages for: Aristotle, Aquinas, Immanuel Kant, David Hume, Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill and Peter Singer. There might be further articles referenced on those pages which you will find interesting to read. I suggest that you make notes on what you find out so that you can read them back over and then put the ideas into your own words

## TED talks

If you search 'ethics' on the TED website then you will find a lot of different talks on all sorts of ethical issues. Any of them would be useful to listen to. However, if you want to watch ones which are more relevant to our course then I would recommend the following:

- *The why and how of effective altruism*, Peter Singer (about how we make moral decisions and how we should make moral decisions)

[https://www.ted.com/talks/peter\\_singer\\_the\\_why\\_and\\_how\\_of\\_effective\\_altruism](https://www.ted.com/talks/peter_singer_the_why_and_how_of_effective_altruism)

- *Why we make bad decisions*, Dan Gilbert (about how we make moral decisions and how we should make moral decisions)

[https://www.ted.com/talks/dan\\_gilbert\\_why\\_we\\_make\\_bad\\_decisions](https://www.ted.com/talks/dan_gilbert_why_we_make_bad_decisions)

- *What motivates people to be honest in business*, Alexander Wagner

[https://www.ted.com/talks/alexander\\_wagner\\_what\\_really\\_motivates\\_people\\_to\\_be\\_honest\\_in\\_business](https://www.ted.com/talks/alexander_wagner_what_really_motivates_people_to_be_honest_in_business)

- *Let's talk about dying*, Peter Saul (about euthanasia and end of life care)

[https://www.ted.com/talks/peter\\_saul\\_let\\_s\\_talk\\_about\\_dying](https://www.ted.com/talks/peter_saul_let_s_talk_about_dying)

## A specific task: Attitudes to homosexuality

This is the first episode of 'Out There', a documentary series on attitudes to homosexuality by Stephen Fry.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IMPI25oraVc>

As you watch it think about the following questions. Then write them up properly when you have finished the programme.

1. Do you think there is a 'right' and a 'wrong' attitude towards homosexuality? What makes these attitudes right or wrong?
2. Some people argue that different cultures have different ideas about morality and that these attitudes should be respected regardless of whether we disagree with them (this is called cultural relativism – that morals are relative to culture). Do you think that we should respect the beliefs and attitudes of cultures different to our own or should we try to persuade them to share our views (in other words should we play 'the moral policeman')?
3. What do you think the purpose of this documentary was? Has it achieved these aims?

