

My Revision Notes: AQA AS Religious Studies: Religion and Ethics and Philosophy of Religion

AS Unit B Religion and Ethics 2

2.1 Kant

(a) Explain Kant's idea of the *summum bonum* in relation to his theory of ethics.

Kant referred to the highest good as the *summum bonum*. The highest good was the best possible good and he saw this as comprising of virtue and happiness.

We recognise that true virtue should be rewarded by happiness, for it would not be a rationally satisfying state of affairs if happiness came to the unvirtuous or unhappiness to the virtuous. If people were virtuous but were also in pain and misery, their virtue would still be valuable but, nevertheless, the total situation would not be the best possible. The desired state of affairs in which human beings are both virtuous and happy is called by Kant the *summum bonum* (highest good). This we recognise to be what ought to happen. Now, in Kant's famous argument, 'ought' implies 'can'. This means that an obligation to achieve something implies the possibility that the goal can be achieved (otherwise there can be no obligation). It has to be possible, therefore, for the *summum bonum* to be achieved.

Kant was aware that the basic ideas behind his ethical system are 'postulates', by which he meant things we assume or take for granted as being the case. Kant identified three postulates for his ethical system: freedom, immortality and the existence of God.

Firstly, our moral experience shows that we are under an obligation to achieve goodness or virtue, and not merely an 'average' level of morality but the highest standard possible. If we recognise the 'ought' and the 'can', then we must also postulate freedom to act according to our duty because morality without freedom would be illogical.

However, while humans can achieve virtue, it is outside their power to ensure that virtue is rewarded or coincides with happiness in this lifetime. Such proportioning clearly does not take place before death, so Kant also argued that there must be survival after death. The *summum bonum* must therefore be achieved in a different life or world and so supposes the existence of life after death (immortality).

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Therefore, finally, there also is a need to postulate the existence of God as the one who has the power to bring virtue and happiness into harmony in that next life. This

is the only way that fairness will be achieved in the universe with virtue and happiness harmonised. It is important to understand that Kant was not arguing that morality is invalid if God's existence is denied; rather, for Kant, the fact that something is a duty or obligation is sufficient reason to do it. Nonetheless, he thought that God was demanded if the goal of morality was to be realised.

(b) 'Kant's theory of ethics is completely incompatible with a religious approach to ethics.' Assess this claim.

It is clear that Kant's theory of ethics is in stark contrast to teleological, consequential systems such as Situation Ethics and Utilitarianism. In addition, the inflexibility of an absolutist system is inconsistent with the ideas of forgiveness, tolerance and non-judgement that are found in teleological theories. If a system is therefore inflexible its application can appear to be lacking virtue and thus clearly inconsistent with virtuous religious teaching. Finally, it could be argued that Kant's system can be totally independent of God as human beings make their own decisions and the law is autonomous and independent of religion.

Nonetheless there are, in contrast to this, some people who would consider Kant's theory of ethics as compatible with a religious approach to ethics. For example, the idea that a moral law is given by God supports the idea of moral absolutes. Indeed, some Christians would indicate that the Ten Commandments are clear examples of categorical imperatives at work. There are clear parallels with natural moral law which is closely associated with the Roman Catholic tradition, especially in terms of the idea of reason. One could argue that the *summum bonum* is clearly a religious concept and Kant himself was openly religious. In addition, the idea of virtue and reward is the basis of religious morality; for example, heaven and hell, the idea of judgement.

In conclusion, it is very apparent that the truth of the statement is directly related to the perspective held with regard to what one considers a religious approach to ethics to be!

2.2 Natural Law and ethics

(a) Explain Aquinas' development of the idea of Natural Law.

For Aquinas, the natural law was located in the activity of human reasoning. By applying reason to moral problems, we will find that we act consistently with the natural law. Such acts are deemed good acts, or natural good, since they are in line with our true human nature and purpose. For Aquinas, the natural law was created by God and designed to achieve the ultimate purpose – to enjoy fellowship with God, to be perfect in the image of God. For Aquinas, obeying Natural Law meant carrying out actions that develop our image to reflect the image of God more closely.

Aquinas recognised that sometimes we do not do the things that we should. We reason wrongly. One example of reasoning wrongly would be if a good was pursued that actually was not a good as understood by Natural Law (i.e. it did not develop perfection). It is what is referred to as 'an apparent good'. For example, applying compassion to someone who requests to end their life may seem a good thing to do but is not in the natural order of things according to Natural Law. Aquinas argued that our sinful nature can lead us astray to choose things that we desire but which may not be contributing to our development into the image of God.

It is therefore important to develop correct reasoning. For Aquinas, one way that correct reasoning can be developed is through the cultivation of certain virtues. Aquinas' natural virtues include prudence, temperance, fortitude and justice. There are also theological virtues (revealed by the Bible) which include faith, hope and charity.

An important development by Aquinas was his distinction between the intention of an act and the act itself. For those looking on, it may well be judged that an action was good. However, if the onlooker knew the real motive or intention, then it may be seen rather differently. Likewise it is not acceptable to do a bad act intentionally even if the aim is to bring about good outcomes

This approach to understanding intentions is important when applying Natural Law to moral dilemmas. It is at the heart of what is known as the 'doctrine of double effect'. This states that even if a good act results in bad consequences, then it is still right to do that act. It is still right to do that act, even if it was known that bad consequences would result. The important issue is the intention. If the intention was not to bring about these bad consequences, then the unfortunate side effects do not make the act morally wrong. An example of this would be treating a pregnant woman for cancer in order to save her life but at the same time destroying the unborn child. Since the death of the unborn child was not the intention of the act that produced it but rather an unfortunate side effect, then the act that brought it about is deemed good and morally right, according to Natural Law ethics.

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Aquinas identified five primary precepts that apply to all human beings without exception. They are good acts because they lead us towards the main human

purpose or goal. These five principles are: preserve innocent life; live in an orderly manner in society; worship God; educate children; reproduce to continue the species. From these primary precepts Aquinas argued that secondary ones can be deduced. The difference between the primary and secondary is that the primary precepts are always true and held universally, without exception. They are also self-evident. In contrast, the secondary precepts are not strictly universal since they may not hold in certain circumstances. They are also derived from reasoning from the primary precepts. An example of a secondary precept would be 'Do not steal'. This reflects the primary precept of 'orderly living in society'.

(b) 'Aquinas' system of Natural Law ethics is outdated.' Assess this claim.

In support of the statement it can be seen that John Finnis has developed Natural law theory and refined it meaning that Aquinas' original outline is no longer required. Whereas Aquinas' system is a God-centered approach to ethics, the system developed by Finnis is very much suited to today's secular world. In more general terms it could be argued that the doctrine of double effect lacks compassion and could not be applied today because it is too simplistic for today's modern and complex moral dilemmas. Some would say that there are other better ethical systems that are far better to use and not all would accept it – even Christian thinkers. Perhaps the most fundamental flaw is the assumption that the primary precepts are true and universally accepted. Quite simply put, the primary and secondary precepts may be wrong.

However, despite these major criticisms, there are some who would argue against the statement. Indeed, to say it is outdated does not necessarily mean that it has to be rejected. For many, an absolutist and deontological ethical system offers guidance and clarity in contrast to teleological systems. Such guidance is very similar to our idea of a 'law' and without law there would be chaos so it cannot be totally outdated in this respect. Finally, it is in fact relevant to many people today, for example, those that follow the Roman Catholic tradition and so in this respect it is not outdated.

In conclusion, whilst elements may be seen by some to be outdated, the implications of this need to be considered carefully before outright rejection of a system that has stood firm for many hundreds of years.

2.3 Religious views of the created world

(a) Explain what is meant by the view that any world created by God must be the best of all possible worlds.

All creation narratives or the explanations for our existence contain within them teachings about the nature of God and in return the nature of human beings and their purpose for being here. The Christian creation story clearly has within it the message of how 'good' the creation is. This has been taken further by theologians and philosophers to mean that it is therefore the best of all possible worlds.

One reason involves an understanding of the Hebrew word 'tam' that occurs in Genesis 1 and is translated as 'good'. Its meaning is much debated and it is translated in different ways, often as 'good' or 'perfect' but its best rendering is probably 'mature', 'complete', 'whole' or, as we may say, 'the finished article'. In other words, it is completely fit for purpose. In this sense, there can be none better than this and so 'perfection' is understood in these terms.

Another consideration has to be the philosophical deliberations over the all-loving nature of God and the conclusion that God's nature must reflect perfection and ultimate good. That this is 'the best possible world' might be asserted in connection with the totality of God's attributes, since an all-powerful, all-knowing and perfect creator might be supposed to produce the best possible world.

Since the beginning of Christianity, debates have been held to consider the apparent contradiction of an all-powerful and all-loving God creating a less than perfect world. When the philosopher Leibniz explored the implications of what the best possible world actually was. Leibniz he argued that the best possible world had to be a world wherein the balance of good is greater than evil. This then allowed for what Augustine called the 'fall' of humanity from grace and perfection into sin and imperfection. In other words, this was a new understanding of 'perfection'.

However, this calls into question the nature of that which is good, as it inherently contains evil. This then gave rise to the later 'theodicies' of Christian theologians who defend the nature of God and God's 'fallen' creation in the light of the presence of evil. For example, Richard Swinburne, professor of philosophy, argues that this world is the best one of several possibilities. Some thinkers have also used quantum physics to justify the world as a creation of God, in that it is the optimisation of God's plan through multiple universes.

All in all, the debate about the meaning of the phrase 'any world created by God must be the best of all possible worlds' is still debated today.

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(b) 'The view that this world is perfect is totally inaccurate.' Discuss how far this is true.

In support of the statement above, we have seen that there are different understandings of the Hebrew word 'tam' that suggest that it is not meant as 'perfect' but is better translated as 'complete' or 'whole', which is very different to a narrow understanding of the ideal of perfection. Another major objection to the idea of perfection is the existence of free will, and also that the idea of redemption of humanity through the death and resurrection of Jesus is in God's overall plan. In addition, the problem of evil and suffering that exists in the world demonstrates that the world is not perfect for many. In relation to this, one only has to look at the central teachings that human beings are sinful creatures (the Fall) to realise that the world is not perfect.

Despite this, Irenaeus (c.130–202) argued that God actually allows for the use of evil to achieve a state of perfection and so there is a view that argues that perfection does not have to include the idea of an absence of evil. The theodicy (defence of God in the face of evil and suffering) of Augustine exonerates God of all responsibility for any imperfections that arise. This would then support the fact that the Hebrew word 'tam' has been interpreted by many to mean 'perfect'. Indeed, God's attributes are traditionally ones of perfection and so it must follow that anything that is the product of God must also be perfect. To support this, the theory of Natural Law is one that confirms that the world has a set law and order to which it works and that it is our role as human beings to tease this out through reason.

In conclusion, the definition of the word 'perfection' meaning 'perfect for purpose' in that it does the job it needs to do is probably the best way of understanding this problem. We can, therefore, respond to the statement above by observing that it has a very narrow, literal understanding of the word 'perfect' and does not really understand the true nature of what 'perfection' means in a religious sense.

2.4 Environment, both local and worldwide

(a) Explain how religion helps a religious believer understand the role of humanity with regard to the environment.

Christians believe that God made the world (creator) for human beings to 'rule over'. According to the first Genesis story of creation, the environment and all creatures in it were made before humanity and it is part of human responsibility as stewards to look after and care for the world. Genesis 1: 27–28 talks about humans 'ruling over' the world and the animals. What this actually means has led to some debate. Many Christians accept that human beings were given a responsibility from God to look after and care for both the environment and animals and therefore humans are seen as more important. This is often referred to as 'stewardship'. For many Christians their responsibility for the planet means they think they should take action to preserve the environment and not do more damage to it. Christians believe that part of this responsibility is to make others aware of the situation and encourage everyone to try and help. Most Christians accept this role, especially as it is mostly because of human activities that the damage has occurred in the first place. They take their responsibility seriously and believe that they must act now in order to help reverse the damage done. An example of this would be the group Target Earth, which buys up threatened land, for example 8000 acres in Belize, to save vegetation (e.g. mahogany trees) and animals (e.g. the jaguar). It also works with local conservation groups in areas where plants and wildlife are threatened and works to restore areas where land has been devastated by human activity such as quarrying. The Assisi Declarations also back this up by teaching that all Christian Churches should be brought together to talk about what science and technology are hoping to achieve and what they are doing to the planet at present. They state that a moral obligation to look after our planet is more important than scientific and technological advances.

Despite this, the understanding of the word 'ruling' or 'dominion' has led to different interpretations of the role of humans towards animals that are, inevitably, part and parcel of the environment around us. Some Christians believe that animals do not have the same rights as humans but their teaching focuses on the duties that human beings have towards animals. They believe animals should be looked after and cared for properly but that animals are not level with human beings. They therefore would always put human rights above those of animals. In contrast, Quakers believe that they should show consideration for all of God's creatures and one aspect of this could be to stand up for the rights of animals. They would try to balance the rights of human beings with kindness towards animals and attempt to bring about the good of both. Some Christians may feel that they were given the role by God to look after and care for animals and so become vegetarians.

On the other hand while Christians could not possibly advocate torture or cruelty, they would perhaps use this to justify domesticating animals, zoos, and the meat industry. Indeed, it was God who first slaughtered animals (Genesis 3:21) 'The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and for his wife and clothed them'. It was also God who demanded sacrifice throughout the Old Testament, for example a lamb instead of Isaac (Genesis 22:8).

(b) 'Religious teachings are irrelevant and not effective enough to combat threats to the environment today.' Assess this claim.

In support of the above statement, a human-centered approach to the environment is not an advantage but only taints any chance of an objective perspective because everything will be geared towards human beings rather than the environment as a whole. For example, the religious teachings, such as Christian values in regards to animals, are not always respectful. Indeed, Christians teach that humans have souls but animals do not and also religious teachings only suggest perspectives and attitudes and do not insist on action. It is clear that whilst some religious teachings are of value there is a need for other views to be considered.

Despite this, it could be argued that the approach of Christianity promotes tolerance and kindness, promoting stewardship as its central tenet in approaching the environment. In this way the approach of Christianity is holistic in that God created everything and said it was 'good' and so the holistic view implies an inclusive care for all. Although the approach of Christianity is human-centered there are some that see this as a strength because humans do have the potential through reason to respond to environmental issues effectively. Indeed, many religious teachings support the aims of environmental groups.

In conclusion, it is probably unfair to highlight religious teachings as 'not effective enough' when it is clear that the problem is much broader and using religion as a scapegoat is a diversion from the real nature of the world's problems. Instead, we should focus on what is effective no matter what philosophy or world view it originates with.