

RS 1/2 ETH: Introduction to Religion and Ethics (AS)

Topic 1: Aquinas’s Natural Law

**Aim:**

At the end of this topic you should be able to:

* explain the key aspects of Aquinas’s Natural Law
* understand a range of different views and scholarly opinions
* explain the different aspects of the theory
* evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the theory
* examine the theory in relation to examples
* consider the degree to which the theory is compatible with the traditional ethical teaching of a major world religion.

**What is Natural Law?**

Natural Law is an absolutist moral theory, which means that it is based on principles to which there can be no exception under any circumstances. It is also a deontological theory in that it requires people to follow a strict code of rules, duties and obedience.

Natural Law provides a way of looking at life in which what is said to be *‘good’* can be found by looking at the operation of nature. Natural Law supports the view that the way to human happiness, is for people to realize their full potential both as individuals and as human communities, by following the principles of nature and reason. Cicero said:

*‘True law is right reason in agreement with nature. It is applied universally and is unchanging and everlasting... one eternal and unchangeable law will be valid for all nations and all times, and there will be one master and rule, that is God*.’

The starting point for exploring Natural Law is Thomas Aquinas. He took the view that all things have a purpose to which they work and that purpose can be understood through an examination of the natural world and through the Bible, which reveals the purpose for which God has created humanity. Human beings can discover what is morally good through the use of their own reason linked to an understanding of the natural way of things. For Aquinas, the rules for human conduct are laid down within nature itself.

For reflection:

What does ‘Natural Law’ mean?

**The four levels of law**

Aquinas claimed that there were four levels of law which govern and regulate human existence:

* ***eternal law*** - God's will and wisdom, and rational ordering of the universe
* ***divine law*** - given in scripture and through the church, and which guides human beings to happiness in heaven
* ***natural law*** - the source of fulfilment on earth
* ***human law*** - which regulates human behaviour in society, and is exercised through the state, and government.

Aquinas claimed that Natural Law was ‘*nothing else than the rational creature’s participation in the eternal law’.*

For reflection:

What is the relationship between eternal and divine law?

Aquinas believed that Natural Law itself had four characteristics:

* God created the world and established and order, pattern and purpose within it that reflected his will.
* Everything is created for a purpose and human reason reflects that purpose and enables people to judge how to act in order to conform to that purpose.
* An act is not ‘good’ because of its consequences; it is ‘good’ in itself, even if it leads to suffering.
* Natural Law can be worked out by anyone, whether they are religious or not.

For reflection:

How can an act be good in itself?

**The Highest Good**

For Aquinas, the ‘*highest good’* was to rationally understand and follow God’s purpose. He believed that the universe was created by God, so that:

* + everything has a design and a purpose that could be understood through an examination of the natural world and a study of the Bible
  + humanity is given freedom to reason and to choose to follow the good, which is God’s purpose for them.

He called this **Natural Law** – the rational understanding and following of God’s final purpose.

For reflection:

How can we really know the ‘highest good’?

Aquinas believed that Natural Law is available to all, since everyone with some reasoning capacity is able to see that the universe works according to certain patterns and rules that do not change. In the *Summa Theologica,* Aquinas maintains that there is a Natural Law towards which human beings naturally incline that was:

* accessible through the natural order
* universal
* unchanging
* for all time
* relevant to all circumstances
* given by God.

Natural Law comes from the Bible as well as from the common reason of mankind. St Paul believed that the natural moral law of God was found within people themselves and in the natural world:

‘*Ever since the creation of the world, his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made’* (Romans 1:20).

For reflection:

How can a natural disaster be said to be good?

For Aquinas, life needed to advance in accordance with Natural Law as designed by God. He offered these characteristics:

* Every action done by people has a purpose. It may be good or evil, but nothing we do is without a purpose.
* There are ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ aims. We undertake the lower aims in order to fulfil the higher aims – for example, we learn how to use a computer (lower aim) in order to write a book (higher aim).
* The ultimate aim is to fulfil the ‘highest good’.
* There is a difference between ‘efficient causes’ and ‘final causes’. The former is an action with a practical explanation – for instance ‘I fell over and broke my arm.’ The latter is the ultimate meaning and purpose of that event – God’s purpose in making me fall was to teach me the importance of dealing with pain.
* Priority should be given to the highest good of a community, rather than the highest good of an individual.

‘*For even if the good of the community coincides with that of the individual, it is clearly a greater and more perfect thing to achieve and preserve that of a community; for while it is desirable to secure what is good in the case of an individual, to do so in the case of a people or a state is something finer*.’ – Aristotle: ‘*Nichomachean Ethics*’

For reflection:

What is the happiness of the community?

**The Five Primary Precepts**

For Aquinas, there were five primary precepts which were needed in order for a person to develop a right relationship with God, and to enable them to lead a moral life and achieve the ‘highest good’. They are to:

* worship God
* live in an ordered society
* reproduce
* learn/educate
* defend the defenceless/self-preservation

Aquinas said that these precepts were developed in the ‘secondary precepts’, which are the rules which direct people towards actions which uphold these primary purposes and away from actions which undermine them. For example, the need to respect others means that we shall not murder. Aquinas believed that the ‘highest good’, could therefore be found by:

* living a moral life according to human reason
* using reason to discover the highest good we should aim for – by using reason to choose good over evil – the *‘right use of reason*’
* for the religious, using God’s creation of the world to see the highest good in all things – and to see God revealed in his creation.

Aquinas maintained that every person also had a purpose specific to themselves as individuals and that would fulfil the skills and talents given to them by God. He also maintained that God gave humanity the capacity to reason to accomplish these ‘goods’. However, although the Natural Law, given by God, gives humans the opportunity to work towards the good in all things, nevertheless, St Paul recognised that it was not always possible:

*'...since all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.'* – Romans 3:23

*Seminar work*

Does believing in God make it easier or harder to accept the principles of Natural Law? Why/why not?

**The Three Revealed Virtues**

Aquinas believed that God had given *three revealed virtues* – faith, hope and charity, as the most important principles of moral behaviour. These are supported by the *four cardinal virtues* which are the fundamental qualities of a good moral life:

* prudence
* justice
* fortitude
* temperance

These are actions which, although exterior, in the sense of being outward physical actions, nevertheless reflect an inner moral quality in the person themselves. Aquinas also highlighted seven vices which would lead people astray and away from the Natural Law they should know by reason:

* pride
* avarice
* lust
* envy
* gluttony
* anger
* sloth

*Seminar work*

Are these the only qualities needed for a good moral life? Are there any others?

Aquinas believed that humans function best when living in communities where certain people have authority over others. Aquinas argued that political authority – the right to govern a country – is given by God, who is the source of all authority. This has a biblical basis, where St Paul observed:

‘*Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established.’* – Romans 13:1

However, Aquinas puts limits on the duty of obedience – if authority has been gained immorally or is put to immoral use, a Christian is not obliged to obey.

Aquinas went further, claiming that, for Christians, God is the ‘highest good’ and should be the goal and destiny of every human being – and that sin was falling short of what God intended for humanity.

For reflection:

In what sense is God the ‘highest good’?

However, in this, Aquinas made certain assumptions:

* That all people seek to worship God.
* That God created the universe and the moral law within it.
* That every individual has a particular purpose.
* Since moral law comes from God, all humans should obey it.
* Human nature has remained the same since creation.

**The Common Good**

The ‘common good’ is a concept that arises from Natural Law, since if we share the same basic human nature and purpose, then what is good for one is good for all. According to Aquinas, the distribution of goods in society should depend on meeting the needs of human nature. In ‘*Summa Theologica*’ he wrote:

*‘…laws are said to be just, both from their purpose, when they are made to serve the common good… and from their form, when burdens are laid on the subjects* [the ordinary people in the state] *according to equality of proportion and with a view to the common good.’*

Aquinas believed that human law should support the purposes of Natural Law. He argued that the first principle and the last end of human life is bliss or happiness. In that case, the law should seek to promote human happiness. So, for Aquinas, we have laws against murder and stealing, because these acts stop individuals achieving their ultimate purpose in life, which is, according to natural law, to be happy.

For reflection:

Is the notion of the common good a realistic aim?

**Proportionalism**

Sometimes Natural Law requires a person to do a morally correct act, even though it brings bad consequences. For example, telling the truth at all times – so you tell your old aunt that the cake she spent ages baking for you tastes awful and, as a result, you unnecessarily hurt her feelings.

However, does Natural Law allow someone to do a morally bad act that would have good consequences? This is called ‘proportionalism.’ Vardy and Grosch in ‘*The Puzzle of Ethics’* said that:

‘…*there are certain moral rules and it can never be right to go against them, unless there is a proportionate reason which would justify it.’*

For instance, killing a person is morally unacceptable in most cases, but shooting an armed terrorist who is about to detonate a bomb, may be acceptable to save innocent lives.

Aquinas’s teaching does allow for some proportionalism. For example, he claimed that if a man was starving, it would be acceptable to steal, rather than die of hunger.

Seminar work:

Think of examples of how proportionalism may or may not work with Natural Law.

**The strengths of Natural Law**

* Natural Law is a simple, universal guide for judging the moral value of human actions. It is valid for everyone in every situation.
* Natural Law is made accessible by reason, and it makes God’s reason accessible to a believer, because humans and God share the same rationality.
* It enables people to use their understanding of the natural world and the powers of human reason to develop ethical principles.
* Natural Law is about the morality of the act itself, rather than the consequences of it.
* Natural Law shows that morality is more than just a matter of personal or cultural preferences. It offers a universal foundation for ethical decision-making.
* It has become a very long-established basis for ethical thinking and is deeply embedded in the Catholic tradition.

**The weaknesses of Natural Law**

* If we base our ethical decisions on nature, then as we understand more about nature, should we alter our ethical viewpoint?
* Natural Law depends on accepting the view that good is what is found in nature. However, not everything in nature is good – for example, illness.
* Aquinas assumes that all people seek to worship God.
* He assumes that God created the universe and the Natural Law within it.
* Aquinas says that reproduction is a universal aim of humanity. This causes problems for the infertile and homosexuals.
* Does Natural Law mean that those who are medically ill should not be medically treated?
* Aquinas assumes without evidence that every individual has a particular function to fulfil.
* If God did not create the world, then natural law has no basis.
* Aquinas commits the naturalistic fallacy: He maintains that moral law comes from God (a matter of fact in his thinking) and therefore we ought to obey it (a value judgement).
* Aquinas suggests that humanity and human nature have remained the same since creation. This does not allow for evolution, or for divine redemption through Christ.

Written work:

‘Natural Law fails to provide an adequate basis for moral decision-making’.

Assess this claim.

**How far is Natural Law compatible with the traditional ethical teachings of major world religions?**

In order to see how compatible Natural Law is with the traditional ethical teachings of the major world religions, let us first clarify the main aspects of Natural Law. In summary, Natural Law says:

* there is a God-given design and purpose within the natural world
* this design and purpose can be discerned by human reason
* by reason, humans can understand the moral principles within nature
* the goal of moral or ethical action is the ‘highest good’
* in deciding on an appropriate ethical action, a distinction is drawn between an ‘efficient cause’ (an explanation for what happened) and a ‘final cause’ (the ultimate meaning and purpose of the event)
* the principles of Natural Law seek to establish moral principles that are absolute and must be acted upon regardless of the consequences of the act.

Now, let us compare the principles of Natural Law with the ethical teachings of other religions.

**Buddhism**

* Buddhist ethical teaching is centred on the teaching of the Buddha, not God.
* The Buddha did not offer an absolute set of rules to be obeyed.
* He offered ethical and spiritual principles which could be followed if helpful or set aside if not, depending on the circumstances.
* The aim of Buddhism is for humans to achieve spiritual and moral enlightenment.
* Buddhism offers ethical guidelines; with the Buddha as an example.
* It does not offer ethical guidelines based on a God who gives purpose to creation.
* Buddhism emphasizes the connectedness between humans, both to one another and to the natural world – this is part of the purpose of the universe.

Since Buddhism offers ethical guidelines in the context of rebirth, rather than belief in a creator God, it would not subscribe to a Natural Law based on a divine cosmic purpose.

**Christianity**

* Natural Law stems from the teachings of the Catholic theologian Thomas Aquinas.
* Christians believe in a loving God who created the universe for a purpose.
* The Bible contains an absolute ethical code (e.g. the Ten Commandments and the teachings of Jesus).
* Christianity offers absolute ethical rules to enable humans to achieve the ‘highest good’.

Natural Law and the use of reason is a fundamental basis for much Christian morality, especially in the Catholic tradition.

**Hinduism**

* Hindus believe in an eternal cosmic creative force, which takes different forms, for example God or Brahma.
* Humans are not individuals, but part of the cosmic whole and should live in harmony with all things.
* Hinduism emphasizes the need for everyone to fulfil their duties and obligations to others.
* Dharma is a structure of laws that bind together to form an ethical code of behaviour.
* Dharma is mainly concerned with enabling people to achieve purity and the ‘ultimate good’.
* Dharma can be achieved in many different ways, depending on time, situations and personal circumstances.

Although Hinduism speaks of the close link between humanity and the natural world, nevertheless, it would reject Natural Law as an absolutist universal theory, preferring to give to people the element of choice in how they behave.

**Islam**

* God created the universe and ethical behaviour is the way humans submit in a natural way to God’s purpose.
* God’s will was revealed to Muhammad.
* the will and purpose of God is recorded in the Qur’an.
* the ethical teachings of Islam are contained in the teachings of Muhammad.
* these teachings are recorded in the Hadith and Shar’ia Law.
* these are authoritative texts and the ethical teachings are absolute.
* applying these absolute principles requires the use of human reason and reflection.
* Muslims must obey these ethical teachings at all times and in all situations.

Shar’ia Law and the teachings of the Hadith are Natural Law, since they are absolutist and based on the will and purpose of God, who sets out the ethical laws applicable to all Muslims.

**Judaism**

* There is one God, who created the universe with a purpose.
* The Law (Torah) is the absolute and authoritative expression of God’s will.
* It was given by God to humanity, to enable them to achieve the purpose he has set for them.
* Some Jewish groups believe that the Law may be interpreted through reason and can be used in a flexible way, depending on the circumstances.
* For many Orthodox Jews, the Law is absolute and must be obeyed without question, regardless of the outcome.

Judaism is compatible to Natural Law because the Torah comes from God and it contains laws that have an absolute claim on Jews.

**Sikhism**

* There is one God, who created the universe and whose teachings have ultimate authority.
* People must follow the right path to God as directed by the Gurus, who meditate on God’s will and pass it on to the people.
* The teachings of the holy scriptures, including the Guru Granth sahib, are not absolute rules for moral conduct, but guidelines in the search for truth and goodness.
* Sikhs must seek the greater good of the community.
* Sikh ethical teaching does not consist of absolute rules, but principles and guidelines to help in moral decisions, depending on circumstances.

Sikhism is close to Natural Law, because it teaches that those who follow God’s will, shall achieve goodness and will be able to meditate on eternal truths.

**The application of Natural Law to sexual ethics**

* Natural Law regards as immoral all sexual activity that is outside the marriage relationship between man and woman. What does it say about modern sexual ethics?
* Natural Law says that the highest aim of the sexual act is to conceive a child.
* This can only be done by a union of man and woman.
* Therefore, a sexual act that is not aimed at conceiving a child, is immoral.
* Therefore, contraception, adultery and homosexuality are immoral.

For reflection:

Why is the only natural purpose for sex to conceive children?

This is very similar to the Christian point of view:

* Marriage is ordained by God for the union of man and woman (Genesis 2).
* God’s purpose for the sexual act is to conceive children.
* The ‘highest good’ can therefore only be found in marriage.
* Therefore sex outside marriage is morally unacceptable.
* Adultery is harmful to others.
* Jesus said: *‘Do not commit adultery. But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.*’ – Matthew 5:27
* Same-sex relationships cannot produce children and are therefore contrary to the purpose of the universe.
* Therefore, such relationships are ‘unnatural’.

For reflection:

Why is sex within marriage acceptable and sex outside marriage unacceptable?

However, it might be possible to argue that:

* Homosexuality, like heterosexuality, comes from human natural instincts.
* Sexual activity among homosexuals is therefore natural.
* Sexual activity stems from natural human attraction.
* Therefore, sexual activity is acceptable if it seeks to encourage love as the greatest happiness.

However, taken overall, Natural Law, being based on Christian principles, would probably regard all sexual activity outside of the marriage relationship as immoral, as it exploits others and therefore does not serve the highest good.

Written work:

‘Natural Law provides clear ethical teaching on sexual ethics’. Assess this claim.

Topic 2: Situation Ethics: Joseph Fletcher

**Aim**

At the end of this topic you should be able to:

* explain the key aspects of Situation Ethics
* understand a range of different views and scholarly opinions
* explain the different aspects of the theory
* evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the theory
* examine the theory in relation to examples
* consider the degree to which the theory is compatible with the traditional ethical teaching of a major world religion.

**What is Situation Ethics?**

Situation Ethics is a relativistic moral theory in that it has no absolute moral rules that have to be followed in every circumstance. It is also a consequentialist theory, where the end result is held to be of great importance. Finally, it is a teleological theory, claiming that moral truth can be found through nature and purpose.

Joseph Fletcher (1905 – 1991) wrote his famous book ‘*Situation Ethics’* in 1966. In it, he argued against those ethical theories which were based on strict obedience to set rules and legalism. At the same time, he rejected ***antinomianism***– ethical theories that supported a total abandonment of rules and principles to govern human behaviour. Instead, Fletcher sought a middle ground, arguing that there are no ethical standards that can be rigidly and consistently applied in all circumstances, since each situation is unique and ethical theories should be flexible enough to deal with varying circumstances. He wrote:

‘*For the situationist there are no rules – none at all’*

Fletcher’s answer was Situation Ethics – an ethical theory based on a single principle, love. He believed that people should enter every situation armed with the principle of love – **agape** – that the right thing to do in any given situation is the most loving thing to do.

For reflection:

What is the definition of ‘love’?

The essence of Situation Ethics is that:

* there are no absolute moral rules or laws which should be applied in all situations
* there is only one principle – the law of love
* in every situation, the right thing to do is what love demands.

‘*There is only one ultimate and invariable duty, and its formula is, ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself’. How to do this is another question, but this is the whole of moral duty.’* – Archbishop William Temple.

For reflection:

How can we know what love demands?

**The meaning of love**

Fletcher knew that love is very difficult to define, since it is both an emotion and an action and can be understood as a combination of reason, emotion and action. He took the view of love outlined in the Bible by St Paul, who wrote:

‘*Love is patient, love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things*.’ – I Corinthians 13: 4-7

Fletcher defined love in the following way:

* It is always good, and the only norm.
* Love and justice are the same, for love is justice distributed.
* The end result of love justifies the means.
* It makes a decision there and then in each individual situation.

It echoes the words of St Augustine:

‘*We do not ask in what he believes or in what he hopes, but rather, what does he love?’*

For reflection:

Is Fletcher’s definition of love a convincing one?

The basis for Fletcher’s definition of the fundamental principle of love, is the Greek term *‘agape’*, which, in the Bible, refers to God’s love for humanity and reflects the kind of love people should have for their neighbours. Fletcher maintained that the right way to goodness was the application of agape, the love which Jesus commanded:

* ‘*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself’* – Luke 10:27
* *Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends* – John 15:13
* *And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us* – 1 John 3:23
* St Paul wrote that love is the fulfilling of the law: ‘*Love your neighbour as yourself. Love does no harm to its neighbour. Therefore love is the fulfilment of the law.’* – Romans 13:10.

Seminar Work:

Is it a good idea to base ethical codes on the teachings of Jesus? Why/why not?

What is the law of love?

**The Four Working Principles**

Fletcher maintained that love is a principle that can be applied in every situation, and which will enable people to achieve the greatest good. In ‘*The Puzzle of Ethics*’, Vardy and Grosch summarized the four principles of Situation Ethics as:

* ***Pragmatism*** - a proposed course of action, done out of love, should be practical and work in real life. It must be likely that the act will achieve its aims. This is done by setting a goal or target for the act – what Fletcher observed with ‘*does it serve the purposes of love’?*
* ***Relativism*** - rejects such absolutes as 'never' or 'always', since different circumstances always create exceptions. People are not free to do whatever they like, however – they must always act in a way that is consistent with the law of love.
* ***Positivism*** - decisions should always be made using love as the most important consideration of all. For Christians, this means accepting the claim that ‘God is love’ and following biblical teaching accordingly.
* ***Personalism*** *-*people should always be put first. The question to be asked is: ‘*What is the greatest assistance to people?*

*‘Situation Ethics depends on a free decision by individuals to give first place to Christian love – this, therefore, rests on a fundamental value judgement which cannot be rationally proven*.’ – Vardy and Grosch.

For reflection:

Is it always right to put people first?

**The Six Fundamental Principles**:

* Love is the only intrinsic good.
* The ruling norm of decision-making is love.
* Love and justice are the same – justice is love distributed.
* Love requires us to do good to our neighbours.
* Only the end justifies the means.
* Love’s decisions are made according to the individual situation, not according to set rules.

Seminar Work:

How would these principles apply to marriage and divorce?

**Strengths of Situation Ethics**

* It is easy to understand.
* It is flexible and gives people the freedom to act according to the circumstances.
* It enables people to respond emotionally and/or rationally to the situation, rather than act according to prescribed rules.
* It is based on love, which is a key characteristic of every moral system. Individual cases are judged on their own merits, irrespective of what has been done in similar situations in the past.
* Nothing is intrinsically wrong or right, except the principle of love.
* Love always seeks the well-being of others.

**Weaknesses of Situation Ethics**

* The absolute law of love is still a law.
* It is ambiguous, because there is no objective way of ensuring two people will come to the same conclusion as to what the most loving thing to do actually is.
* It breaks down complex moral situations into individual moral decisions – this may not be the best way to resolve the problem.
* It depends too much on an individual’s viewpoint and interpretation of the law of love.
* The theory is teleological, dependent on the calculation of consequences. It is impossible to be always accurate in making such a calculation.
* The theory justifies adultery, murder, and even genocide in the interests of love.
* Does love always justify the suffering of others?
* Are some types of love better than others?
* Love is an abstract quality. How do we measure it?
* How can a group of individuals reach a consensus on what is the most loving thing?
* How far-reaching should consequences of the loving action be? Are we concerned with immediate or ultimate consequences?
* How can people judge the moral value of a consequence when there are so many conflicting factors?

In ‘*The Honest to God Debate’*, Glyn Simon wrote, ‘*A false spirituality of this kind has always haunted the thinking of clever men…’*

Seminar work:

What responses would these principles draw to the following dilemmas?

- Divorce

- Euthanasia

- Abortion

Fletcher’s work was supported by J A T Robinson, whose famous book, ‘*Honest to God’*, laid aside traditional values, arguing that if people operated within the spirit of love, they would no longer perform immoral acts. No rules were therefore necessary, because love would decide then and there in the situation, the best course of action. He wrote:

‘*Dr Fletcher's approach is the only ethic for ‘man to come of age’. To resist his approach in the name of religion will not stop it, it will only ensure the form it takes will be anti-Christian*.’

However, Graham Dunstan in ‘*Does it matter?’* wrote of Fletcher's theory:

*'It is possible, though not easy, to forgive Professor Fletcher for writing this book, for he is a generous and loveable man. It is harder to forgive the SCM Press for publishing it'*.

Written work:

‘The strengths of Situation Ethics as an ethical theory outweigh the weaknesses.’

Assess this view.

**How far is Situation Ethics compatible with the traditional ethical teachings of major world religions?**

In order to see how compatible Situation Ethics is with the traditional ethical teachings of the major world religions, let us first clarify the main aspects of the theory. In summary, Situation Ethics says:

* there are no absolute rules applicable in every situation
* the only rule is the rule of love
* the right thing to do is the most loving thing
* love is intrinsically good
* love and justice are the same
* love is doing the right thing for your neighbour
* the ends justify the means
* decisions are made based on the situation in question.

Now, let us compare the principles of Situation Ethics with the ethical teachings of other religions.

**Buddhism**

* There are no absolute ethical rules that apply to everyone in every situation.
* Buddhism seeks to overcome hate, greed and ignorance and offers a way towards compassion and gentleness.
* Right actions depend on the situation in question.
* Buddhists seek ethical principles that work in everyday life.
* At the centre of Buddhism is compassion.

Buddhism is a path towards compassion and peace and is, therefore, compatible with Situation Ethics.

**Christianity**

* Situation Ethics was based by Fletcher on Christian Ethics.
* Jesus emphasized the importance of loving your neighbour.
* Traditional Christian teaching says that there is a fundamental moral law, based on the Ten Commandments and the teachings of Jesus, which apply to all people in every situation.
* However, in ‘*Why Christianity must change or die*’ Bishop John Spong said that Christians should beware of being bound by *‘…four-thousand-year-old authorities who claim to represent God’s final word on ethics.*’

Christianity is in-line with Situation Ethics, in that the theory is based on Jesus’s teaching about love. Some Christians, however, might say that the Bible offers more absolute rules.

**Hinduism**

* Hinduism stresses the importance of the individual conscience.
* It always seeks to establish the right behaviour in each different situation.
* The only absolute requirement is for each person to fulfil their duty according to their caste and stage in life.
* Hindu ethical teachings are aimed at producing harmony and order.
* The Bhagavad Gita speaks of a truly ethical person as one who is ‘…*without hatred of any creature, friendly and compassionate*.’ – Gita 12:13

Hinduism seeks balance and harmony and is compatible with Situation Ethics.

**Islam**

* There is one God.
* Moral behaviour is the way people submit in a natural way to God’s purpose.
* The will and purpose of God are revealed in the Qur’an and the Hadith, which have complete authority.
* Applying the teaching calls for reason and reflection.
* The ethical teaching of Islam is absolute and binding on Muslims in all circumstances.

Islam speaks of absolute and universal laws that must be obeyed whatever the circumstances. It is largely incompatible with Situation Ethics.

**Judaism**

* There is one God.
* God’s will and purpose is to enable humans to achieve their highest purpose.
* The Law is the ultimate and authoritative will of God.
* The Law is revealed by God and may be interpreted by reason and debate.
* Some Jews believe that Law is absolute and universally applied in all circumstances.
* Others believe the Law should be interpreted in the light of the circumstances.

Jewish Law emphasizes love, but also contains absolute rules. It is linked to Situation Ethics, but not fully-supportive of it.

**Sikhism**

* God is the ultimate authority in the universe.
* The will of God is revealed through the teachings and meditations of the Gurus and the Guru Granth Sahib.
* These teachings are a guide, not a rigid set of instructions.
* Sikhs must seek the greater good of the community.
* Ethical decisions are made in the light of the teachings, as applied in the real-life situation.

Sikhism emphasizes harmony and service to others. It is compatible with Situation Ethics.

**The application of Situation Ethics to sexual ethics**

Situation Ethics regards as immoral all sexual activity that is not part of a loving relationship. What does it say about modern sexual ethics?

The main characteristics of Situation Ethics are:

* a rejection of absolute moral rules that apply in all circumstances
* the only absolute rule is the law of love
* the right thing to do is the most loving thing to do
* the act must be likely to achieve its aims
* people must always come first.

In applying Situation Ethics to sexual ethics, the demands of love are the most important thing.

**Sex before marriage:**

* Situation Ethics would ask whether the motive for this is love or sexual desire.
* Is this a loving relationship or casual sex?
* Is someone outside the relationship being hurt by this?

**Homosexuality:**

* Situation Ethics would ask whether the motive is love or lust.
* Is there a commitment between the two partners?
* Is anyone outside the relationship being hurt by it?

**Adultery and Divorce:**

* Situation Ethics would ask whether the motive was love or sexual desire.
* Is there a mutual commitment?
* Is anyone outside the relationship being hurt by it?
* Is divorce the most loving outcome?

However, taken overall, Sexual Ethics, being based on Christian principles, would probably regard much sexual activity as desire or lust, rather than love, and therefore such sexual activity would not be the most loving thing to do.

*Written work:*

‘Situation Ethics provides clear and practical ethical teaching on sexual ethics’.

Assess this view.

Topic 3: Utilitarianism: Bentham and Mill

**Aim**

At the end of this topic you should be able to:

* explain the key aspects of Utilitarianism
* understand a range of different views and scholarly opinions
* explain the different aspects of the theory
* evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the theory
* examine the theory in relation to examples
* consider the degree to which the theory is compatible with the traditional ethical teaching of a major world religion.

**What is Utilitarianism?**

Utilitarianism is a relativistic moral theory in that it has no absolute moral rules that have to be followed in every circumstance. It is a teleological theory, claiming that moral truth can be found through nature and purpose. Utilitarianism is a consequentialist theory because it judges the right thing to do by the consequence of actions. It comes from the Latin word *‘utilis’*, meaning useful, and is associated with the work of Jeremy BenthamandJohn Stuart Mill.

**The Principle of Utility**

Utilitarianism is based upon the ***principle of utility*,** which suggests that, where a moral choice is to be made, then the right action is the one which produces the greatest happiness (or the least pain) for the most people. It is summarized as:

‘***The* *greatest good for the greatest number.***’

In *‘An Introduction to the Principles of Morals & Legislation*’,Bentham wrote:

*‘By utility is meant that property of any object whereby it tends to produce benefit, advantage, pleasure, good or happiness or to prevent the happening of mischief, pain, evil or unhappiness.’*

For reflection:

What exactly is the ‘principle of utility’?

**Bentham’s Act Utilitarianism**

Jeremy Bentham was a social reformer who advocated what became known as ‘Act Utilitarianism’, whereby he believed that it would be possible to judge the good or evil in a particular action, according to the consequences of the action. Bentham’s theory is one of ***universal ethical hedonism*** – everyone is equal and has an equal right to happiness. If an action brings or increases pleasure, then it is right, and that what is right for society, is that which provides the greatest happiness for the majority.

What exactly are ‘pleasure’ and ‘happiness’?

**The Hedonic Calculus**

Bentham devised the *Hedonic Calculus* to calculate the most pleasurable actions and make a ***quantitative*** assessment – good or bad actions can be worked out according to predicted results. A person can calculate which action is more likely to produce the right result by reaching a happiness score. The aim of the calculus is to measure the moral value of an act by reference to the consequences. It measures by the **quantity** of the pain or happiness, based on the consequences. The Hedonic Calculus offers seven elements that must be taken into consideration:

* Intensity – is the happiness or pain deep or superficial?
* Duration – is it temporary or permanent?
* Certainty – how sure is it that the act will lead to happiness or pain?
* Propinquity (remoteness) – does the act create happiness/pain for people close to us?
* Fecundity (richness) – does the pain/happiness make things better or worse?
* Purity – is the act morally pure?
* Extent of pleasure – does the happiness/pain touch the whole life of a person, or just part?

In ‘*The Puzzle of Ethics*’, Vardy and Grosch criticized the calculus for three reasons:

* it measure happiness in terms of quantity rather than quality
* it is dependent on being able to accurately predict the consequences of any act
* it is difficult to say what counts as happiness or pain.

For reflection:

Are these criticisms fair? Why/why not?

To sum up Bentham’s view of Utilitarianism:

* it is based on utility or usefulness of an action
* the central theme is ‘the greatest happiness for the greatest number’
* happiness can be measured by the hedonic calculus
* the consequence of the action is what matters
* quantity of happiness is preferable to quality of happiness.

Seminar Work:

How would an act utilitarian respond to (i) abortion, and (ii) euthanasia?

**John Stuart Mill’s Rule Utilitarianism**

John Stuart Mill was uneasy with Bentham’s view, because he thought that it justified what he saw as lower pleasures, such as violence, if such actions were carried out by a majority on a minority. He opposed Bentham’s view that it was up to each individual to decide what was good. Instead, Mill believed that it was possible to educate people to seek higher pleasures. He advocated what became known as ‘Rule Utilitarianism’ – which starts by defining what is morally right, by considering the consequences of acting in accordance with particular rules.

He distinguished between ‘higher pleasures’ which are superior in quality and associated with the mind, and ‘lower pleasures’ which are inferior and largely to do with the physical body. He believed that once certain lower pleasures (e.g. food, shelter and warmth) had been satisfied, then people should move on to higher pleasures – intellectual, cultural and spiritual. He wrote in ‘*Utilitarianism: Essays on* *Ethics*’:

*‘Capacity for nobler feelings is, in most natures, a very tender plant, easily killed… people lose their high aspirations as they lose their intellectual tastes, because they have no time or opportunity for indulging them; and they addict themselves to inferior pleasures’.*

For reflection:

What makes ‘lower pleasures’ inferior and ‘higher pleasures’ superior?

**What is a ‘qualitative pleasure’?**

Mill believed that morality should be based on what is good and beneficial – truth, beauty, love and friendship. For Mill, higher pleasures always have greater moral worth. He argued that these could be encouraged through a set of ethical rules based on utilitarian principles, for example, always telling the truth, because nobody benefits from telling lies. There are certain rules that promote happiness – such as keeping promises or not stealing, for example. Rule Utilitarianism suggests that a person should follow established rules and consider the practical consequences of an action before carrying it out.

Mill was talking about ***qualitative***rather than quantitativepleasure. He argued that not all pleasures were equal and that pleasures of the mind should take precedence over physical pleasures. He famously observed:

‘*It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied’.*

**The Harm Principle**

Mill proposed the ‘*harm principle’*. This was the notion that the majority can only put pressure on the minority, if it prevents harm. He said:

‘*That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others.’*

Vardy and Grosch were critical of Mill because:

* it may be very difficult to distinguish between higher and lower pleasures
* it is not possible to rely on one moral principle, namely the greatest happiness for the greatest number, to solve all moral problems.

*‘Life’s ethical dilemmas cannot be reduced to a pre-packaged, predictive calculus that balances outcomes. We experience internal conflicts between what our reason tells us, what duties we feel we ought to perform, and the need, obviously, to bring about the greatest good.’* – Vardy and Grosch

For reflection:

Are these fair criticisms? Why/why not?

Seminar work:

How would you both oppose and defend divorce on the basis of Utilitarianism?

**Recent developments**

In recent times, ethical scholars have developed the notion of ***strong***and ***weak*** rule utilitarianism. The former provides that certain rules have universal value and should always be kept, no matter what the circumstances are, for instance ‘do not murder’. Weak rule utilitarianism, on the other hand, is the view that there will sometimes be circumstances in which it would be better to allow for exceptions to these universal rules. This is a *situationalist* approach and there are no absolutes or intrinsic moral commands.

R M Hare advocated **preference** or **motive** Utilitarianism. Here, the need is to consider what an individual would choose to do in a particular situation and then seek to satisfy, as far as possible, everyone’s preferences within that situation. The decision as to what is the right action, takes into account the preferences or motives of the individuals involved. Thus, the right action is the one that satisfies the preferences or motives of the majority.

For reflection:

Is preference Utilitarianism a convincing and workable theory?

**Strengths of Utilitarianism:**

* Supports the view that human well-being is intrinsically good and actions should be judged according to their effect on this well-being.
* Supports the teaching of Jesus: ‘*Do to others as you would have them do to you.’* (Matthew 7:12).
* A person’s motives may be good or bad, but only consequences have any real effect.
* The principle encourages democracy. The interests of the majority are paramount.
* Circumstances can be judged without reference to previous ones.
* It is an approach that does not rely on controversial or unverifiable religious principles.

**Weaknesses of Utilitarianism**

* The theory requires people to predict the long term consequences of an action. However, there is no guarantee that circumstances will turn out exactly as predicted.
* Not every action done out of good will is going to result in good consequences.
* The concept of happiness changes from one person to another.
* It does not allow for someone doing what they believe to be morally right whatever the consequences.
* The theory cannot be used to decide what is universally good.
* The majority is not always right.
* The theory is too simplistic and can lead to injustice.
* The rights of an individual or group can be ignored if it is not in the interests of the majority – even if their claim is fair and just.
* It makes no allowance for personal relationships.
* People may not be motivated by pleasure and happiness. They may be willing to endure pain, humiliation or self-sacrifice for a cause they believe to be right.

Written work:

*‘The principle of the greatest happiness for the greatest number is no longer valid in the 21st century.’* Assess this view.

**How far is Utilitarianism compatible with the traditional ethical teachings of major world religions?**

In order to see how compatible Utilitarianism is with the traditional ethical teachings of the major world religions, let us first clarify the main aspects of the theory. In summary, Utilitarianism is:

* based on utility or usefulness
* centred on ‘the greatest happiness for the greatest number’
* happiness and pain can be measured by the hedonic calculus
* the consequence of the action is the most important thing.

Now, let us compare the principles of Utilitarianism with the ethical teachings of other religions:

**Buddhism**

* all ethical actions (karma) have consequences for the individual
* the motive and intention behind a person’s action is important for their spiritual and ethical development
* people are responsible for their own actions
* there is a vital connection between people and the natural world and purpose of the universe.

Buddhism is compatible with Utilitarianism because Buddhists believe that all ethically significant actions (karma) have their consequences on the character of the person performing the act.

**Christianity**

* Utilitarianism is close to the ‘Golden Rule’ teaching of Jesus, to do to others what you would want them to do to you
* happiness is an important biblical ethic
* Utilitarianism has been the basis for much social reform
* however, the pursuit of happiness above all else is incompatible with Christian teaching on love and duty
* some Christians believe in the absolute nature of biblical ethical teaching
* some Christians believe that motives behind actions are more important than consequences.

Utilitarianism is only partially compatible because of its emphasis on the highest good. However, Christians believe in the absolute commandments of God and would not support the great emphasis on consequences within Utilitarianism.

**Hinduism**

* Dharma (fulfilling social actions/laws) provides an ethical basis for life and salvation
* Karma stresses the importance of right action, motivation and consequences
* the three goals of the ethics of a householder are dharma, becoming prosperous and experiencing pleasure
* individual choice, action and consequence are paramount.

Hinduism is compatible with Utilitarianism in the sense that Hindus have a duty to act in such a way that right is achieved as a consequence.

**Islam**

* Ethics are the way human beings submit to God’s purpose
* obedience to the scriptures is paramount
* God’s will and commandments are absolute and must be followed.

Utilitarianism is not compatible with Islam because Muslims believe that people must follow the absolute will and purpose of God.

**Judaism**

* God’s will is authoritative and absolute
* The ethical law comes from God
* People must obey God’s will
* Some Jews think that more emphasis should be given to consequences.

Judaism is not compatible with Utilitarianism because, for Jews, obedience to the absolute commandments of God, is of greater importance than seeking happiness or emphasizing the consequences of actions.

**Sikhism**

* God is the ultimate authority
* God’s will is revealed through the scriptures and teachings of the Gurus
* These teachings are not absolute rules, but guidance
* Moral behaviour involves personal choice and must be for the ‘greater good’
* Ethical behaviour may change to suit different situations and consequences are important.

There is some compatibility between Sikhism and Utilitarianism because Sikhs stress the importance of the happiness and oneness of humanity, and teach tolerance and equality for all people.

**The application of Utilitarianism to sexual ethics**

The basis of Utilitarianism is that all people should make moral choices that ensure the greatest happiness for the greatest number. What does it say about modern sexual ethics?

To answer this, a utilitarian must ask whether that sexual activity will have far-reaching consequences or not, and would need to ask the following questions:

* Does the sexual activity lead to the greatest happiness?
* Whose happiness is served?
* Does someone else suffer great pain?
* Does the happiness/pain only affect those directly involved, and does it have a wider impact on the community?
* Is the happiness/pain brief or long-lasting?
* Is the sexual activity beneficial in the long term (higher pleasure) or is it short-term lust (lower pleasure)?

**Sex before marriage**:

* Sex before marriage could be acceptable if it leads to the greatest happiness for those concerned.
* If the sexual activity leads to love and a committed relationship, then the consequences are ethically sound.
* However, sex before marriage could lead to great pain in others, or unwanted children or social hardship. In which cases, the consequences are unethical.

**Homosexuality:**

* Homosexuality may lead to love and the greatest happiness if it is in a loving relationship.
* Adequate precautions must be taken against harmful sexual diseases that could spread to others.
* The balance between the happiness of the individuals involved and the possible pain to those outside the relationship must be weighed up.

**Adultery and Divorce:**

* Adultery is unlikely to produce the greatest happiness for all concerned.
* The consequences of adultery are not likely to produce the greatest good.
* Divorce may be ethical if it produces the greatest happiness.
* The balance between the happiness of the couple and the pain of others must be weighed up.

However, taken overall, Utilitarianism, being based on the consequences of the greatest happiness for the greatest number, would probably regard much sexual activity as desire or lust rather than love, and therefore such sexual activity would not produce the greatest happiness for all concerned.

*Written work:*

‘Utilitarianism provides clear and practical ethical teaching on sexual ethics’.

Assess this view.

Topic 4: Applied Ethics

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**Aim**

At the end of this topic you should be able to:

* understand basic information about the main ethical precepts of six world religions
* explain the way in which ethics are often based in religious traditions
* explain how religious concepts affect moral attitudes
* evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of having absolute principles
* examine the role of conscience and reason in ethical precepts
* consider the diversity of ethical attitudes and behaviour.

**The main ethical precepts of the six major world religions**

Within the different world religions there are ethical principles that are rooted in religious texts, traditions and authorities, and these determine how a member of that faith might develop moral attitudes and respond to ethical dilemmas. In some cases there are absolute rules and principles, in other cases the role of reason and conscience play a significant part.

**Buddhism**

Buddhist ethical principles are based on the example and teaching of the Buddha and are contained in ancient texts, most notably the Pali Canon and a huge body of Sanskrit literature. These contain the teachings of the Buddha (‘Sutta Pitaka’) from which come the Buddhist ethical teachings, known as ‘dharma.’ There are two main Buddhist traditions:

Theravada Buddhism;

* the Buddha is an ethical and spiritual model and inspiration for humanity
* his teaching is unique and the way to enlightenment

Mahayana Buddhism:

* the Buddha is an enlightened being and an example to everyone
* all humans have the potential to become enlightened
* there is a connection between humans and the natural world
* the teachings of the Buddha and his successors can lead to spiritual and ethical enlightenment, if one follows the ‘bodhisattva path.’

**Authority in Buddhism**

The teachings of the Buddha and the teachers who followed him are authoritative in the sense that they are the foundation of Buddhism and the source of Buddhist belief and practice. However, the Buddha said that his teachings were not absolute rules, but a guide for spiritual and ethical development and enlightenment and could be adapted and used in different circumstances.

**Buddhist religious concepts and moral attitudes:**

Buddhist ethics have several key concepts:

**Karma:**

* the link between a person’s actions and intentions and the consequences these may have in their present and future existence.
* the importance of the motivation behind an action
* actions reflect the motivation behind them

**Laksanas:**  the ‘three marks of existence’ which the Buddha said were part of the human condition.

* Dukkha – the absence of happiness
* Aniccalanitya – impermanence; everything changes and nothing is the same forever
* Anattalanatman – the self or soul is changing and impermanent.

**The Five Precepts** - ethical principles offered by the Buddha as goals in spiritual and ethical development:

* do not harm others
* do not steal
* do not misuse the senses
* do not lie
* do not take substances which cloud the mind

**The Four Noble Truths** – the path to ethical and spiritual enlightenment:

* the existence of suffering must be accepted
* suffering is caused by greed and desire
* suffering can be brought to an end
* this is achieved by following the Eightfold Path

**The Eightfold Path** – a set of spiritual and ethical principles which may guide a person to ethical enlightenment:

* Right understanding of the Buddha’s teaching
* Right thoughts and motives
* Right speech
* Right actions
* Right livelihood
* Right effort - the path to enlightenment is hard and requires commitment
* Right mindfulness - being aware of one’s personal motives and actions
* Right concentration – using meditation to understand the truth.

Buddhists must always be aware of the connectedness of humanity to the natural world and ethical decisions should reflect this. This means that people are responsible for their own actions and the consequences. In this respect, reason and conscience play an important part. For Buddhists, ethical behaviour requires compassion, reason and wisdom.

**Christianity**

Christians regard the Bible as the word of God – in particular, the ethical and moral teaching contained in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20: 1-17) and the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). For Christians, there are four main sources of morality:

* The Bible – reveals the will of God
* The Church - whose leaders interpret the scriptures
* The inspiration of the Holy Spirit – who enables people to understand.
* Human reason enables people to discover how the ethical teachings can be used in everyday life

There are three major traditions within Christianity, all of whom acknowledge the authority of the Bible, but vary in how to interpret that authority:

**The Catholic Church**

* The Pope is the Bishop of Rome and earthly head of the Church
* The moral teaching of the Bible is interpreted by the Church
* It is rooted in the concept of Natural Law

**The Orthodox Church:**

* The Bible is the paramount authority in matters of faith and morality.
* The teachings of the seven Ecumenical Councils are guides to interpreting biblical ethics.

**The Protestant Church**

* The Bible is the ultimate authority in matters of faith and morality
* Some Christians say that the teaching of the Bible is the only moral authority
* Other Christians (particularly Anglicans), believe that the Bible, aided by human reason, is the source of morality.
* The Church has an important role in interpreting the meaning of the scriptures.

**Christian religious concepts and moral attitudes**

Christians believe that there is one God, creator of the universe, who designed it to fulfil his purpose. For humans, this can be seen through the application of nature (Natural Law). It also emphasises the importance of the teaching and example of Jesus Christ:

* Jesus was the Son of God and his life and teaching are an example for all Christians to follow.
* Human beings are ‘sinful’, that is, they do wrong and disobey God’s law and fall short of God’s purpose for them.
* It is because of sin that humans act immorally.
* Through the death of Jesus, humans can be freed from the power of sin.
* Christ enables humans to change their ways (repent) and to follow God’s law and purpose for their lives.
* The Holy Spirit works within people to help them to understand the will of God for their lives.

**The importance of love**

The most fundamental Christian ethic is the requirement for people to love one another (‘agape’). Jesus said:

‘*Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. The second is like it: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself*.’ - Matthew 22:37-38

**The Kingdom of God**

Many Christians believe that the main aim of ethical behaviour is to establish the kingdom of God. This was a very important part of Jesus’ moral teaching. It means behaving in a way that people would if the kingdom and rule of God were established on earth – which means being kind, compassionate and loving to others, especially the poor, the sick and those in need.

At the heart of Christian ethical teaching is the challenge to help the oppressed and to create a just and equal society. Christian ethics is not just about individual moral actions, but those of society as well.

**Diversity of views**

Within the Christian Church there are different views on what is the right moral and ethical action:

* some say that the Bible and the teachings of Jesus Christ are absolute and binding on Christians at all times
* some say that the ethical teaching of the Bible consists of general guidelines, to be acted upon in a spirit of love and compassion, according to different circumstances
* some believe that Christian ethics is mainly concerned with social change, not individual.

These views cause problems for the Church today as, in issues such as homosexuality and women priests. There are serious ethical differences between various Christian groups.

**Hinduism**

Hinduism is very diverse and there are a range of authoritative sources on ethical behaviour:

**Ancient Texts:**

* The Vedas – a set of ethical principles said to come from God. Particular emphasis on the importance of truthfulness, kindness and avoiding harm to others.
* The Upanishads – ethical teaching of universal application highlighting importance of self-restraint (‘damyatta’), giving and self-sacrifice (‘datta’) and compassion (‘dayadhvam’).
* The Dharmashastras – the importance of reason and reflection to overcome ethical dilemmas.
* The Bhagavad Gita – highlighting the example of Krishna, the model of an ethical person, described in the Gita as: ‘…*without hatred of any creature, friendly and compassionate without possessiveness and self-pride*.’ – Gita 12:13

**Authority:**

* Hinduism does not have one single source of author in ethical matters.
* For many Hindus, ultimate authority lies with God or Brahma, the supreme creative force.
* Some say that the scriptures are guides, but final authority rests with the individual’s conscience.

**Hindu religious concepts and moral attitudes**

For Hindus, right action is more important than right belief. There are four fundamental ethical concepts:

**Dharma (law, duty, righteousness)**

* the ultimate good is the most desired thing
* the maintenance of balance and harmony is an important aspect of human life
* strong emphasis on the social dimension of ethical behaviour
* there is an eternal cosmic principle which controls the universe but which can respond to different ethical situations
* there are codes of behaviour that cover all aspects of life
* it is the duty of every individual to act in a morally correct way
* there is an ethical framework for behaviour which applies to a person in relation to the situation they are in.

**Varna (the division of society into caste groups)**

* Brahmin (priestly class), Kshatriya (warrior class), Vaishya (merchant class), Shudra (manual workers)
* each caste has a different ethical expectation
* the higher the class, the greater the expectation and sense of duty

**Ashrama (stages of life)**

* different ethical responsibilities depend on a person’s stage of life
* Student – self-discipline
* Householder – fulfil social and moral obligations, become prosperous
* Retired – withdraw from business responsibilities and hand control to next generation
* Ascetic – renounce all possession and seek spiritual liberation (moksha)

**Karma (actions and the effect of their consequences)**

* ethical behaviour in a previous life which has not yet affected present life
* ethical behaviour from a previous life which affects this life
* ethical actions in this life that will affect the future

Hindu ethical teaching is very diverse but depends to a great extent on the performance of one’s social duties and allows flexibility to make ethical decisions based on particular situations.

**Islam**

Islam accepts the Qur’an as the complete and final revelation of the will of God, as given through the prophet Muhammad. It is believed to be eternal and perfect.

**Authority**

* The Qur’an - the main source of Islamic ethical teaching which reveals God’s will and offers moral guidance.
* All Muslims have a duty to follow God’s will and to do what is morally right.
* Muhammad is the highest example for his followers.
* The Hadith is an account of the sayings, actions and practices of Muhammad during the time that he was receiving the revelations from God which were recorded in the Qur’an.
* Shari’ah law is a universal set of ethical rules developed from the Qur’an and Hadith.
* It is regarded as divine law and covers religious, personal and ethical matters.
* God’s will and ethical teachings are eternal and unchanging but may be interpreted in the light of modern situations.

**Islamic religious concepts and moral attitudes**

* God is one – the supreme, perfect being
* He offers human beings a ‘straight path’ to follow
* all human life must be ordered to reflect obedience to God and following the straight path
* the Qur’an reveals the ‘straight path’
* everyone will be judged and become accountable to God
* the ‘straight path’ means living life in a balanced way, between justice and compassion, wealth and poverty
* there should be peace and harmony among all people
* what it is to be a Muslim is summed up by the ‘Five Pillars’ - witness, prayer, charity, pilgrimage and fasting

**Absolute rules**

The Qur’an has absolute authority over ethical behaviour. Shari’ah law, derived from the Qur’an, highlights four categories of ethical behaviour:

* Fard – obligatory duties to others
* Halal – rules governing food and aspects of behaviour
* Haram – forbidden behaviour
* Niyyah – the act and the intention must both be good.

**Reason and Conscience**

When making an ethical decision, Muslims must ask themselves how the absolute demands of Islam can be applied to their lives and conduct. There is room for reason and conscience to reflect the modern world – after all, Shari’ah law was the result of applying human reasoning to the teachings of the Qur’an and Hadith.

**Judaism**

The Hebrew Bible contains the ‘Torah’ which is believed to be the will of God. Jewish ethical teaching centres on worshipping God and obeying his will.

**The Torah and Talmud**

* The Torah is the most important of the Jewish texts, consisting of the first five books of the Hebrew Bible.
* It has ultimate authority for Jews as it represents the revealed will and purpose of God.
* The Torah is God-given and perfect.
* It consists of 613 laws, including the Ten Commandments, covering ritual, social and personal behaviour.
* It can be re-interpreted to reflect the issues of modern life. This gives rabbis considerable authority.
* The Talmud is the second text of Judaism and consists of ten volumes of commentaries by rabbis, interpreting the Torah. The emphasis is on behaviour.

**Traditions in Judaism**

* **Orthodox Jews** – strict obedience to the ultimate authority of the Torah.
* **Non-orthodox Jews** – question traditional attitudes and are prepared to question the Torah in the light of modern life issues. Whilst still regarding the Torah as authoritative and central to Judaism, some are willing to re-interpret the law to suit modern living.

**Jewish religious concepts and moral attitudes**

* God is one and love for God is the most important aspect of Jewish life.
* The covenant between God and humanity requires all Jews to obey God’s law.
* The Torah is the expression of God’s covenant love.
* The Sabbath day must be kept holy. Sabbath laws must be followed.

**Reason and Conscience**

Both of these are important aspects of Jewish ethical behaviour:

* rabbinical interpretation of the Torah uses reason and logic
* in non-orthodox traditions, conscience can be sued when different ethical duties and obligations clash
* there is always scope for compassion and conscience is an important guide to doing the most loving thing

Although there is considerable diversity within Judaism, Jews also have a strong sense of belonging to the Jewish community. All Jews accept that the Torah lies at the heart of the Jewish faith. Most importantly, Jews believe in one loving God who is the source of all goodness.

**Sikhism**

Sikh ethical teachings can be summed up in the words of the Guru Granth Sahib:

‘*Truth is high, but higher still is truthful living.’*

**The Guru Granth Sahib:**

* The sacred scripture of Sikhism, containing the thoughts of the ‘Ten Gurus’, starting with Guru Nanak and ending with Guru Gobind Singh.
* God is the ultimate authority over human ethical conduct.
* The Guru Granth Sahib is a guide, not a set of absolute rules.
* The only absolute rules are quality and human rights.
* The Gurus are holy teachers who pass God’s will on to humanity.
* The ‘Ten Gurus’ have the highest authority of all.
* The local Sikh community (Khalsa) may also make authoritative decisions for the lives of Sikhs in their area.

**Sikh religious concepts and moral attitudes**

* God is one
* all are equal before God
* all people should be treated equally
* humans must follow God’s will and act with truth and goodness
* the Guru Granth Sahib offers guidance to achieve this
* meditation is the key to understanding God’s will and purpose
* sharing with one another is of crucial importance
* Sikhs should avoid the temptation of lust, anger, greed and pride
* Sikhs must commit themselves to strive for right and equality

**Reason and Conscience**

* The Gurus used reason to interpret and understand the scriptures.
* Sikhs may use their conscience in ethical dilemmas, in the light of the teachings of the scriptures.
* There are many different ways to know God.
* Sikhs may use reason to act in an ethical way in modern circumstances.

Sikhism does not offer a set of absolute rules to be obeyed. Rather, the scriptures offer guidelines for reflection to enable Sikhs to discover the correct response to personal circumstances in modern life. Only equality and human rights are absolute ethical principles.

**Sexual Ethics and World Religions**

In this section, we will examine how the world religions would approach ethical issues in relation to sexual relationships, notably:

* marriage, adultery and divorce
* sex before marriage
* homosexuality

**Marriage, adultery and divorce**

**Marriage**

The world religions regard marriage as very important for most believers because

* it is seen as a relationship sealed by God
* some see it a ‘sacrament’ that is, a visible sign of God’s will and a gift to humans.
* marriage is a long-term partnership of love, commitment and companionship
* it is for the procreation of children
* it is a legal relationship between two people
* marriage provides the best context for raising a family
* some faiths also support celibacy among priests and monks (a religious decision not to marry or have sexual relationships

*‘Marriage is the intimate partnership of life and love established by God and governed by his laws*.’ – Catechism of Catholic Church - para. 2364

*‘…they who have one spirit in two bodies can be called husband and wife*.’ – Guru Granth Sahib 788

**Adultery**

Adultery is against the moral code of all the world religions because:

* it denies the sacramental nature of marriage
* it undermines God’s purpose for marriage
* it breaks marriage vows
* it threatens the family set-up
* it is a sign of promiscuity and lust
* it is an abuse of human feelings and senses

‘*Do not commit adultery’* – Exodus 20:14

‘…*everyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.*’ – Matthew 5; 27

**Divorce**

Divorce is the legal ending of a marriage. Most religions recognize that relationships can break down, but may only allow divorce if there is no alternative and the relationship is broken beyond reconciliation. Again, divorce may only be permitted if there are proper arrangements made for the care of children.

‘*Anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress*.’ – Matthew 5:32

‘*Divorce is a grave offence against Natural Law…it does injury to the covenant of salvation, of which sacramental marriage is a sign.’* – Catechism of Catholic Church - para 2394

*‘Divorce is the most detestable in the sight of God of all permitted things*.’ – Hadith; Abu Dawud 2173

**Sex before marriage**

Most religions agree that sex must be in the context of a loving relationship – and this is best shown in the marriage bond. The purpose of sex is seen as:

* the ultimate physical expression of mutual love and affection between a man and a woman
* a sign of commitment
* the means of procreating children
* to enable a man and woman to have mutual pleasure in one another

In particular, religious views oppose sex before marriage because:

* it may be about lust rather than love
* it emphasises physical rather than emotional feelings
* it may lead to unwanted pregnancies
* it may lead to sexually transmitted diseases
* it does not treat other people with respect

**Homosexuality**

Homosexuality is a sexual relationship between two people of the same sex. There is uncertainty as to whether homosexuality is a lifestyle choice or has a biological or genetic origin. It raises a number of ethical issues:

* if the purpose of sexual relationships is to have children, then homosexual relationships could be regarded as unethical
* homosexual relationships may be seen to go against nature
* however, if the purpose of sex if to give a physical expression of love, then same-sex relationships may be ethically acceptable
* if homosexuality has a biological or generic basis, it could be regarded as natural and therefore ethical
* if homosexuality is a personal choice, then it may be seen as unnatural and unethical

**Religious Views:**

* Christianity – homosexuality appears to be contrary to Natural Law and the will of God regarding procreation of children.
* However, a homosexual loving and committed relationship reflects God’s love for humanity and could, therefore, be ethically acceptable.
* Islam and Judaism - against homosexual relationships.
* Buddhism – homosexuality may be unnatural, but should be seen in a loving context.
* Hinduism and Sikhism – no direct teaching, but homosexuality may go against traditional sexual values.

‘*Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable.’* – Leviticus 18:22

*‘Neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers nor male prostitutes, nor homosexual offenders…will inherit the kingdom of God.’ –* I Corinthians 6; 9-10

‘*Homosexual acts …close the sexual act to the gift of life…under no circumstances can they be approved…therefore homosexual persons are called to chastity*.’ – Catechism of Catholic Church - para 2357-8

**Modern Trends**

In the UK in recent years, there has been a more compassionate approach, with the ordination of gay priests and civil partnerships. Surveys also show that, although many religious believers still see homosexuality as wrong, increasing numbers, particularly of young people, are much more accepting of homosexuality. To sum up the views of the world’s religions to sexual ethics:

**Buddhism:**

* Marriage and Adultery – marriage is a commitment and unfaithfulness is a disharmony with the marriage bond.
* Divorce – acceptable if it is the best course of action for those concerned.
* Sex before marriage – wrongful and against ethical precepts.
* Homosexuality – ‘unwise and unnatural’, and urges self-control.

**Christianity:**

* Marriage and Adultery – marriage is a commitment ordained by God for love and procreation. Adultery is immoral.
* Divorce – disapproved of but sometimes acceptable if it is the best course of action for those concerned.
* Sex before marriage – traditionally seen as immoral, but attitudes changing and loving relationships acceptable to many.
* Homosexuality – traditionally immoral, but some easing of restrictions in recent years.

**Hinduism**

* Marriage and Adultery – marriage is a commitment, unfaithfulness is important. Adultery is immoral.
* Divorce – acceptable if it is the best course of action for those concerned.
* Sex before marriage – traditionally seen as wrongful, but attitudes are changing.
* Homosexuality – little said - just urges self-control.

**Islam:**

* Marriage and Adultery – marriage is a commitment and a blessing from God. More than one wife is sometimes allowed. Adultery is wrong.
* Divorce – acceptable if it is the best course of action for those concerned.
* Sex before marriage – always wrongful and against ethical precepts.
* Homosexuality – totally forbidden.

**Judaism**

* Marriage and Adultery – marriage is a commitment and God’s purpose for the procreation of children. Adultery is unacceptable.
* Divorce – acceptable if it is the best course of action for those concerned and both sides agree.
* Sex before marriage – wrongful and against ethical teachings, but attitudes are changing,
* Homosexuality – traditionally disapproved of. Homosexuals urged to exercise self-control.

**Sikhism:**

* Marriage and Adultery – marriage is very important and lifelong commitment is expected. Adultery always wrong.
* Divorce – permissible if both sides agree and is a last resort.
* Sex before marriage – strongly disapproved.
* Homosexuality – little teaching, largely disapproved.

**Applied Ethics – questions.**

* Select one world religion and explain how its teachings may be applied to ethical situations.
* Should the teachings of the Bible provide the main basis for ethical decision-making in the UK today?
* Compare the ethical precepts of a religion that has absolute ethical demands with one that does not. Which religion, in your opinion, is the best equipped for solving ethical problems in the 21st century?
* ‘Ethics are about conscience and not about rules and laws.’ Assess this view.
* ‘Religious teaching on ethics has no relevance today.’ Assess this view.
* ‘All morality must have a religious basis.’ Assess this view.
* ‘Morality is not just about personal behaviour, but is also a commitment to social action.’ Assess this view.
* Which religious views, in your opinion, are the most effective guides to leading a moral life? Explain why.
* Should homosexual marriage be permitted in the UK? Why/ why not?
* ‘Sexual orientation and behaviour are a matter for the individual. Religious teaching should have nothing to do with it.’ Assess this view.