

# VAPS QUICK REFERENCE GUIDE

A Compendium of Philosophical ideas referenced by VCAA

## PROFESSIONAL KNOWLEDGE (AITSL)

This compendium provides a guide to philosophical terms and references included by VCAA in the Ethical Capability Curriculum documents. It is designed as a starting point for developing professional knowledge of the content of the discipline of philosophy known as Ethics, including introducing teachers to canonical texts, noteworthy philosophers, important concepts and key terms. It is provided to support teachers to meet the AITSL standard 2.2 *Participants will acquire the knowledge needed to implement the curriculum, learning activities and assessment tasks that foster the development of the ethical capability.*

We first provide the technical meanings of common philosophical ideas relating to Ethics.

In the following three sections we provide information to support teachers who are “required to introduce students to schools of thought and/or individual thinkers as appropriate.” This includes knowing content such as:

- Schools of thought including utilitarianism, relativism, realism or hedonism that “can be drawn on to strengthen student understanding”,
- Individual thinkers “as appropriate”, such as John Stuart Mill, Peter Singer, John Rawls, Kant and Aristotle, who may be introduced through references, including excerpts from both primary and secondary sources,
- A range of relevant precepts including those from the five most common religions and a secular world view representative of humanism and rationalism.

Finally, we reference the ethical questions found in the VCE Philosophy Study Design. Some familiarity with this content provides teachers with knowledge of the scope of the discipline of ethical inquiry.

# A. ETHICAL IDEAS



## ETHICS

Ethics is the philosophical study of right and wrong in human conduct. Ethics deals with normative concepts (see is-ought) such as right and wrong, duty, rights, virtue, vice, obligation etc. Ethicists attempt to determine the principles that make actions morally obligatory or impermissible, and what grounds this sort of obligation.

## MORAL

The terms 'moral' and 'ethical' (and 'morality' and 'ethics') are generally used interchangeably by philosophers. (Some philosophers do distinguish between the two, but this isn't universally accepted.) The term 'moral,' like 'ethical,' pertains to character and behaviour from the point of view of right or wrong, duty, and obligation.

## ETHICAL CONCEPTS

Concepts are the mental or cognitive tools we use to classify and order our experiences in and of the world. Concepts are abstractions constructed by thinking beings. The meaning of some concepts is contestable, that is, there can be debate over then necessary and sufficient defining features, or criteria used to identify instances. The specific examples of ethical concepts focussed on in the Victorian curriculum are seen in the table below. They are explored in detail in the [Understanding Concepts](#) section of the VAPS Tool-kit.

YEAR LEVEL	ETHICAL CONCEPTS	KNOWLEDGE OF... see section E below
P-2	Right/ Wrong Good/ Bad	
3-4	Fairness Harm	
5-6	Happiness Truth	Cultural norms Religions Worldviews
7-8	Rights Responsibilities Freedom Justice	Cultural norms Religions Worldviews
9-10	Fairness Equality Respect Tolerance	Cultural norms Religions Worldviews

# A.

# ETHICAL IDEAS



## ETHICAL PROBLEMS

### 'What ought I/we to do?'

An ethical problem occurs in situations where there are competing alternatives, which may be supported by claims or arguments about the outcome of the actions to be taken, where the outcome is expressed in terms of good, bad, right, wrong, better or worse. An ethical problem becomes an ethical dilemma when there is a choice between ethical imperatives and choosing one may transgress the other.

According to VCAA these are the three most significant responses to addressing the question: 'What ought I/we to do?': -

- **Consequentialist or teleological** (from the Greek telos end or goal) ethics holds that the rightness or wrongness of actions is determined by the value of their foreseeable consequences.
- **Duty-based ethics or 'deontological ethics'** (from the Greek deon duty; dei one must) holds that certain acts are intrinsically right, that is, to do the right thing is equated with being good.
- **Virtue ethics** emphasises that it is the character or disposition of a person that matters foremost. So while reasoning may lead to a particular conclusion about what is right, without good character, a person may nevertheless make a different choice.

## ETHICAL PRINCIPLES

Fundamental norms or rules that are thought desirable and which are designed to help in determining the rightness or wrongness of actions. They can be used as a framework to analyse ethical problems. Some principles may then become duties or be used to derive duties.

Ethical principles are action-guiding principles (or 'axioms') that state the morally right way to act. These principles are meant to be universal: that is, they tell us how to act not just in a given case, but in all relevantly similar circumstances. Some

are extremely broad e.g. utilitarianism's 'promote the greatest happiness for the greatest number,' while others are more specific e.g. the Ten Commandments' 'honor your father and mother.' Ethical principles are found within philosophical, religious, cultural, and social discourses and practices. While the sources of and proposed justifications for these principles may vary, they all have a similar form, being normative statements about what people should do rather than descriptive statements about how the world is (see is-ought).

While ethical principles are meant to guide action, working out precisely how to apply ethical principles to specific situations requires *practical reasoning* and what Aristotle called *phronesis*, 'practical wisdom.' Examples of moral principles include the greatest happiness principle of utilitarianism, Kant's injunction to treat people as ends rather than means (see means and ends), Mill's Harm Principle, and the Golden Rule.

## THE GOLDEN RULE

The 'Golden Rule' is a name given to an overarching ethical principle that has been articulated in various ways in different times and cultures:

- **What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others.** – Confucius (551-479 BCE)
- **What is hateful to you don't do to another.** – Rabbi Hillel (c. 65 BCE – 9 CE)
- **Whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them; for this is the law and the prophets.** – Jesus of Nazareth (1st century CE)
- **To do unto all men as you would wish to have done unto you, and to reject for others what you would reject for yourself.** – Muhammed (c. 570 – 632 BCE)
- **Do unto others as if you were the others.** – Elbert Hubbard (1856 – 1915)



# ETHICAL IDEAS

## ETHICAL OBLIGATIONS

Like duties, obligations refer to required conduct and the terms are often used interchangeably. Obligations are sometimes distinguished from duties as needing individual consent in order to discharge the obligation, whereas some duties are thought to be binding whether a particular individual agrees with them or not. This can then force consent. These can be distinguished from Legal obligations which are enforced by institutional processes such as policing and trial in court.

## IS AND OUGHT

The ‘is-ought’ distinction is a distinction between two different kinds of statements: statements about how the world *is*, and statements about how the world *ought to be*. Another way to think about this distinction is that is-statements (or descriptive statements) refer to facts, whereas ought-statements (or normative statements) refer to values. Some ought-statements can be phrased as is-statements: “it is wrong to lie” just means “people ought to tell the truth.” Some forms of discourse, such as science, are purely descriptive, whereas ethics is normative. So science can tell you whether human activity *is* causing global warming, for instance, whereas ethics asks whether we *ought* to act on this knowledge or not.

The importance of this distinction is captured in David Hume’s (1711-1776) claim that no ‘is’ implies an ‘ought’: we cannot infer right or wrong simply from how things happen to be. For instance, we can see that our actions are harming somebody, but that doesn’t logically entail we ought to stop. So how to connect the is-statement “I’m causing harm” and the ought-statement “I ought to stop” presents a significant problem. Many philosophers have tried to bridge the is-ought gap in various ways; others maintain it is impossible to do so.

## MEANS AND ENDS

An ‘end’ is the goal of an action or intention, and is valued for its own sake. A ‘means’ is something that has value insofar as it allows us to achieve or acquire an end. For instance, health may be an end, something good in itself, while eating a healthy diet is something we value merely as a means to that end. In other words, a healthy diet has only *instrumental* value while health has *intrinsic* value. In the ethical philosophy of Immanuel Kant, the concept of means and ends plays a central role. For Kant, humans have intrinsic value or dignity just because of the sort of beings we are: autonomous, rational beings who treat our own existence and wellbeing as an end-in-itself, not just as a means to some other end. But if you are an end-in-yourself, then other people must be ends-in-themselves too. So treating people merely as means to get what you want (treating them instrumentally) would be to disregard their value as rational, autonomous beings. Instead we should treat people as intrinsically valuable and respect their dignity and autonomy, not as instruments we can exploit for our own gain.

## NORMATIVE ETHICS

Normativity is the property of specifying how something should or ought to be. Whereas a descriptive statement tells us how things are, a normative statement either tells us how things should be, or compares a given state of affairs to how things should be. That is, it evaluates states of affairs against a norm (a principle or standard) or set of norms. Normativity has various forms depending on the sort of norms involved: aesthetic, social, cultural, political, and ethical. (See also Is and Ought).

# A. ETHICAL IDEAS

## PUBLIC PHILOSOPHY

Public philosophy is the practice of philosophical reasoning in and with the public, in order to develop new understandings about given topics, such as emerging ethical, political or environmental issues, or philosophical questions arising from art, science, and sport. Public philosophy has been contrasted with philosophy communication, which aims to educate the public about philosophy and foster philosophical literacy (as in the practice of science communication). Whereas philosophy communication involves one-way teaching and does not generate new knowledge itself, in public philosophy the reader is implicitly or explicitly treated as part of what John Dewey called the 'Community of Inquiry' with an aim to generating new understandings.



B.

# SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT

referenced in the EC Curriculum



## UTILITARIANISM

Utilitarianism is a type of consequentialism; that is, utilitarians view an action as right or wrong depending on the consequences the action brings about (rather than, say, the motives of the people involved or the type of action it is). In the simplest version of utilitarianism, actions are ethically right if they produce more happiness than suffering, and ethically wrong if they produce more suffering than happiness. Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), the founder of utilitarianism, summed up utilitarianism as the view that “the greatest happiness of the greatest number is the foundation of morals and legislation.” “Happiness” is variously understood by utilitarians to mean pleasure (hedonic utilitarianism) or preference-satisfaction (preference utilitarianism). Major utilitarian thinkers include Bentham, John Stuart Mill, and Peter Singer.

## PRAGMATISM

Originating in America in the late 19th century, pragmatism is a school of thought that holds that the truth or falsity of a proposition is a function of the practical difference it makes – in William James’ memorable phrase, its ‘cash value.’ Pragmatism was developed principally by Charles Sanders Pierce, William James, and John Dewey, while more recent influential pragmatists have included Robert Brandom and Richard Rorty.

Pragmatism sees inquiry as a fundamentally practical activity, rather than a disinterested search for some sort of timeless, objective truth. Pierce summed up the core of pragmatism in what he called the pragmatic maxim: “Consider the practical effects of the objects of your conception. Then, your conception of those effects is the whole of your conception of the object.” In other words, the content of an idea is just the practical effects that idea has. For instance, to say something is ‘hard’ is just to say that it cannot be scratched by other surfaces, that it can scratch other surfaces, and so on. In ethics, pragmatists like Rorty have insisted that ethical principles are true just insofar as they work in achieving human ends, rather than being true because they correspond to a timeless moral reality.

## RELATIVISM

Relativism is the view that beliefs or judgments are not absolutely true or false, but only true or false for certain people at certain times. Relativism has many different forms, e.g. cognitive, epistemological, and moral. Moral relativism claims that moral judgments are not universally true, but are only true from the perspective of particular cultures or discourses. For instance, a moral relativist might say that cannibalism is not intrinsically or universally right or wrong, but right for people who live in cultures that practice cannibalism and wrong for people who live in cultures that condemn it. Moral relativism is thus a sort of moral anti-realism.

## REALISM

Realism is a view that entities of a certain type really do exist. For example, a realist about nations might insist that ‘France’ names a real entity, not just a group of people in a given territory that we call ‘France’ by convention. An anti-realist might insist there’s ultimately no such thing as ‘France,’ just land and people. In ethics, moral realists claim that moral judgments are judgments about real moral facts: “it is wrong to cheat” is a true fact about cheating, and would still be true even in a society where nobody realizes there’s anything wrong with cheating. Moral antirealists, on the other hand, think moral judgments are just expressions of subjective preference or emotion, or are merely matters of convention.

B.

# SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT

*referenced in the EC Curriculum*



## HEDONISM

In ethics, hedonism is the view that ‘the Good,’ a key category in ethical philosophy, is identical with pleasure, and so things have value insofar as they are pleasurable, and disvalue insofar as they are painful. Hedonism was already being debated in ancient Greek philosophy, and continues to be a controversial view today. Jeremy Bentham’s approach to ethics was a hedonistic form of utilitarianism, arguing that the main goal of ethical conduct is to maximize pleasure (and minimize pain). His follower, John Stuart Mill, partially disagreed, claiming that some pleasures are intrinsically better than others, and so “It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied.”

## ETHICAL CONSTRUCTIVISM

“Constructivism” is the claim that moral principles are constructed by an idealised process of reasoning rather than being revealed or discovered.

In the case of Rawls (See below) he begins with a hypothetical situation - behind the veil of ignorance - rather than the real world, to construct Principles of Justice including The Liberty Principle, Fair Equality of opportunity Principle and the Difference Principle.



# INDIVIDUAL THINKERS

referenced in the EC Curriculum



## ARISTOTLE – Character/Virtue Ethics

Aristotle was born in 384 BCE, in Macedonia, Greece, and died in Euboea in 321 BCE. Aristotle was a student of Plato, who in turn had been a student of Socrates. Yet Aristotle's philosophy, and particularly his ethics, was very different from that of his teacher. Whereas Plato located the Good in the realm of eternal, unchanging ideas, for Aristotle the good life was a matter of humans fulfilling their function as reasoning beings and achieving *eudaimonia*, 'happiness' or (better) 'flourishing.'

Aristotle's ethics are built around the notion of *arête*, 'virtue.' A virtue is an excellence distinctive of a particular type of thing, such that having that virtue makes it a fuller version of that thing. So 'speed' is a virtue of a racehorse; the less speed it has, the less it's a racehorse at all, and the less it will flourish accordingly. Aristotle then identifies a number of virtues that are distinctive of humans, such as courage, temperance, generosity, friendliness, and truthfulness.

For Aristotle, each of the virtues falls between two corresponding vices: a vice of deficiency, and a vice of excess. So courage, for example, is a virtuous middle ground – or what Aristotle calls the 'Golden Mean' – between cowardice (vice of deficiency) and rashness (vice of excess). The goal of pursuing the good life for humans thus means acquiring these virtues and avoiding their corresponding vices, while also learning 'practical wisdom' (*phronesis*) to know where the *Golden Mean* lies in any particular situation.

## JOHN DEWEY – Pragmatism

John Dewey, who was born in Vermont in 1859 and died in New York City in 1952, was a key thinker in the development of pragmatism and a leading philosopher of education and advocate of the importance of democracy in inquiry, education, and politics. He was a major public intellectual involved in political and social commentary and public philosophy.

For Dewey, inquiry and education are both inherently social practices, undertaken in a

community of fellow inquirers. As such they should be undertaken in a democratic and interactive way. Knowledge is both generated by such a 'community of inquiry' and taught via active participation, not by one-way transmission of knowledge from a teacher to a passive student. This emphasis on the social and practical nature of inquiry had dramatic implications for how we understand practices like science. As a pragmatist, Dewey saw ethics too as a practical endeavour, aimed not at uncovering a purely theoretical and impersonal truth (say, the will of God or a timeless moral law), but at testing and improving our value judgments by considering the consequences those judgments bring about. In so doing Dewey develops a different understanding of the relationship between means and ends: instead of ends being fixed, means and ends are reciprocally determined in response to the practical problems in which we find ourselves.

## IMMANUEL KANT – Duty Ethics

Immanuel Kant was born 1724, Königsberg, Prussia (now Kaliningrad, Russia) and died there in 1804. Kant is perhaps the most important thinker of the Enlightenment, and had a transformative impact on metaphysics, ethics, political philosophy and aesthetics.

Kant's ethics are built around the concept of the "*categorical imperative*," a principle of right action that holds by virtue of reason alone rather than human inclination or desire. Kant's categorical imperative proposes that one should always respect the humanity in others, and that one should only act in accordance with rules and laws that could hold for everyone. Though Kant offers at least three different formulations of this imperative, he insists that "There is .... Only one categorical imperative." One of these formulations is often simplified by the common question: "What if everybody did it?" Another formulation is that we should treat others as ends in themselves (which is how we mostly treat ourselves), never merely as means to our own ends. (See Means-Ends).

Kant's well-known and quite severe conception of morality requires acting on the motive of

# INDIVIDUAL THINKERS

referenced in the EC Curriculum



duty alone; an action has no moral value if it is performed out of individual preference or desire, but only if it is done because it is a duty. Kant also argued that ethical action requires *belief* in free will, God, and the immortality of the soul. Although we cannot have *knowledge* of these things, reflection on the moral law leads to a justified belief in them.

## JOHN STUART MILL – Utilitarianism

The son of the utilitarian philosopher James Mill, and godson of Jeremy Bentham, Mill was born in London in 1806 and died in France in 1873. An active reformer, writer, and politician, Mill is best known for two powerfully influential works: *On Liberty* (1859) and *Utilitarianism* (1861). *On Liberty* articulates the ‘*harm principle*,’ the principle that adult, mentally healthy humans should be free to do anything that they would like, as long as none of their actions harm anyone else. Other people, and the state, only have a right to interfere in an individual’s actions where these actions cause harm to someone else. So, for instance, the state has no right to stop people smoking if this only harms the smoker herself, but it can prohibit people smoking in public places where second-hand smoke might harm others.

In *Utilitarianism*, Mill develops the utilitarianism originally conceived by Jeremy Bentham, and outlines the “*Greatest Happiness Principle*,” which holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. His book’s goal is to justify this utilitarian principle as the foundation of moral beliefs and practices. Subsequent philosophers have noted serious tensions between Mill’s liberalism and his utilitarianism – what if violating the rights of a small minority would make a large majority overwhelmingly happy, for example? – yet Mill insists he is a liberal because of his utilitarianism, not in spite of it.

## JOHN RAWLS – moral constructivist

The most significant American political philosopher of the twentieth century, John Rawls was born in Baltimore in 1921 and died in Massachusetts in 2002. His book *A Theory of Justice* has dominated both moral and political philosophy ever since it appeared in 1971.

Rawls’ view is a form of ‘moral constructivism.’ He asks us to imagine what sort of principles we would adopt in structuring society in an ‘original position’ in which each of us is behind a ‘veil of ignorance’ – that is, if nobody knew in advance what position or role they would hold in this society. What sort of rules would we adopt for setting up a society if we could turn out to be anyone in that society, not just one of its ‘winners’? From this thought experiment, Rawls derives the “*two principles of Justice as Fairness*.” The first is the *liberty principle*: society must assure each citizen “an equal claim to a fully adequate scheme of equal basic rights and liberties, which scheme is compatible with the same scheme for all.” The second principle has two parts. The first is *fair equality of opportunity*, so that people have a real rather than merely formal opportunity to pursue a good life as they understand it. The second is the “*difference principle*,” that any social and economic inequalities must be to the greatest benefit to the least-advantaged people in that society. If we didn’t know ahead of time whether we would personally be rich or poor, we would, says Rawls, only accept an unequal distribution of goods if this still left the worst-off better off than they would be under an equal distribution.

Each of these principles addresses a different set of primary goods: the First Principle concerns rights and liberties; the principle of Fair Equality of Opportunity concerns opportunities; and the Difference Principle primarily concerns income and wealth.

# INDIVIDUAL THINKERS

referenced in the EC Curriculum



## PETER SINGER – Practical Ethics – Utilitarianism / applied ethics for the humanities and social sciences.

Peter Singer, born in Melbourne in 1946, is arguably the most controversial philosopher living today. His work has been deeply influential in bioethics, the animal rights movement, and discussions of global poverty and the duties of rich nations to help others. He has also been heavily criticised by advocates for the disabled and opponents of euthanasia and abortion.

As an adherent of *preference utilitarianism*, Singer argues that the rightness of an action should be judged in terms of its outcomes, and specifically whether an action increases the ability of any beings affected by the action to satisfy the preferences which they hold (including preferences to avoid pain and experience pleasure). Importantly, Singer thinks that there is nothing about being human as such that gives our experiences and preferences priority over those of other species, and rejects the idea that “human life is sacred just because it is human life” as being “medieval.”

In his book *Animal Liberation*, Singer argues that it is wrong to treat humans and animals differently simply because they belong to different species (a form of discrimination he calls “speciesism”). Rather, what counts is whether they have the kind of lives that are worth living. This opens up new and very different ways of thinking about the relative priority of human and nonhuman animal lives. Some human lives, for example, will have less value than some animal lives in terms of the overall satisfaction and pleasure involved in those lives, while the pleasure of eating meat won’t justify the suffering imposed on animals or the ending of worthwhile animal lives.

## SOCRATES

Born in Athens around 470BCE, Socrates would go on to become one of the most influential thinkers in human history – despite (like Jesus and the Buddha) leaving behind no written works of his own. Our knowledge of Socrates comes from accounts written by his contemporaries Sophocles, Xenophon, and most importantly his student Plato. Plato’s works recount Socrates’ distinctive method of inquiry via a question-and-answer style dialogue with the people he encountered in the public spaces of Athens. His incessant questioning put him in the position of a ‘gadfly’ – a biting fly that stings sluggish animals into action, but is also an unwelcome and persistent irritant – and in 399BCE Socrates was charged with impiety and corrupting the youth and put to death.

In what are sometimes argued to be the ‘early’ Platonic dialogues, Socrates offers relatively little of his own doctrine or ideas. Instead, Socrates employs a method known as *elenchus*, in which he asks others to state their views – say, what they think ‘justice’ or ‘piety’ is. Then, through a process of question and answer, Socrates exposes the contradictions and confusions in their existing view. In this way Socrates views himself as a sort of ‘midwife’ to wisdom, not giving birth to wisdom himself but allowing others to do so in themselves by coming to realise how mistaken their existing ideas had been.

In other dialogues however, Plato has Socrates articulating what is often taken to be Plato’s own view, namely, that ‘ideas’ or ‘forms’ (*eidon*) are the ultimate reality, while the objects we see and touch only participate imperfectly in those forms. For example, we have an idea of equality, but never in fact see two perfectly equal objects. In the *Republic*, Plato has Socrates deliver his famous Allegory of the Cave: our everyday knowledge is not knowledge of ultimate reality (which is the realm of the forms and ultimately the Good) but merely of their shadows; before undergoing philosophical investigation, we are like people watching a shadow puppet play on the wall of a cave and mistaking the shadows for the things they are shadows of.

D.

# COMMON RELIGIOUS & SECULAR WORLD VIEWS



VCAA encourages you to introduce your students to a range of popular religious and secular world views and precepts.

This knowledge:

- enables students to be more informed and engaged at both a local and global level
- supports an understanding of the perspectives of diverse local communities and the beliefs and practices of diverse traditions
- assists students to recognise and appreciate both areas of commonality and difference between diverse faith groups and secular perspectives

## WORLD VIEW

A world view is the overall perspective from which an individual or group engages with the world. This world view may range from an overarching set of assumptions to a set of beliefs to a fully theorised philosophy that informs interpretations of the world and responses to it.

## RELIGION

A system of belief or practices concerned with questions of ultimate meaning and value and the existence and nature of God or divinity. While no comprehensive definition that covers everything regarded as a religion has yet been offered (for example, 'beliefs about God' won't work as a definition of religion given atheist religions such as Theravada Buddhism), religions tend to involve some or all of the following features: belief in higher power, an account of the ultimate purpose of existence, liturgical practices, a community of believers, and an account of salvation or liberation from suffering.

## SECULAR

A system of belief that is not allied with any particular religious institution or practices, and advocates that the state and church be separate. Secularism in its ideal form promotes tolerance with regard to world views and core beliefs as expressed in Section 116 of the Australian Constitution

“The Commonwealth shall not make any law for establishing any religion, or for imposing any religious observance, or for prohibiting the free exercise of any religion, and no religious test shall be required as a qualification for any office or public trust under the Commonwealth.”

## CULTURAL NORM

An expectation of appropriate behaviour derived from a particular system of values that reflects prevailing ideas about how human life should be conducted and regulated. Norms may vary across different settings.

## SIX COMMON WORLD VIEWS

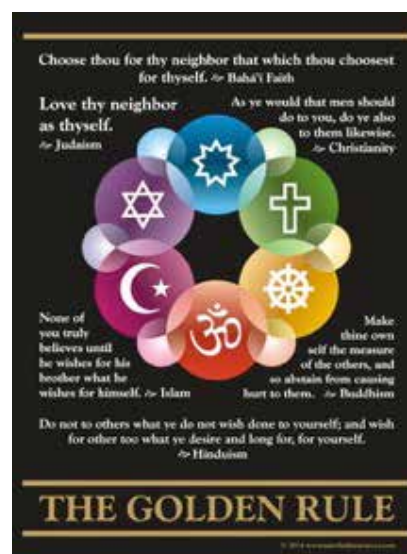
The key premises of 6 common world views are outlined in the VCAA supporting document “Learning about World Views and Religions”

- Buddhism
- Christianity
- Hinduism
- Islam
- Judaism
- Secular Humanism and Rationalism

## ADVICE

VCAA encourages you to contextualise such information into broader learning programs, providing students with opportunity to study at least one non-religious world view and a range of religions.

VCAA encourages you to provide opportunities for critical thinking about the viewpoints.





## E.

# ETHICAL QUESTIONS

*A selection of ethical questions raised in the VCE Philosophy Study Design (2019 - 23)*



For those who are interested in building students' capacities to perform well in VCE Philosophy we provide examples of the kinds of Ethical questions included in the most recent VCE study design. These questions will also provide you with a sense of the kinds of questions that your students may spontaneously raise during your Ethical Community of inquiries. Be prepared! But do not worry, scholarly ignorance and Socratic questioning are the best responses. [VCE Philosophy Study Design \(2019 - 23\)](#)



## ETHICS AND MORAL PHILOSOPHY

What should I do? What is right? On what basis can we choose between different courses of action? These are ongoing fundamental questions.

Students are introduced to key debates in moral philosophy that stretch back thousands of years. The laws of our society reflect a position that murder and theft are wrong, but a philosopher is interested in the justifications for these convictions. Is morality a matter of personal prejudice or can we give good reasons for holding particular moral beliefs? Are there fundamental moral beliefs that should be universally binding, or are they preferences that develop in response to particular cultural contexts?

Students are concerned with discovering if there are basic principles and underlying ideas of morality and assessing ethical viewpoints and arguments according to standards of logic and consistency. Philosophical methods may be used to address everyday dilemmas, as well as issues debated in the media and important moral challenges of our times.

## ON THE FOUNDATIONS OF MORALITY

Questions that may be explored in this theme include:

- Where does morality come from?
- Is morality subjective or objective?
- What is the 'is-ought gap' and can it be bridged?
- What is the relationship between religious belief and morality?
- What is the relationship between nature and morality
- Is it possible to speak of moral progress?
- What is nihilism?
- Do moral principles exist? Are they universal or relative to particular situations?

**Suggested thinkers:**

J.L. Mackie, Bernard Williams, Simon Blackburn

## ON MORAL PSYCHOLOGY

Questions that may be explored in this theme include:

- What is the relationship between reason and action?
- What is 'weakness of will' and what are its causes and moral implications?
- Is it possible to act without a reason? Is it possible to act against your own interests
- Is pure altruism possible or are all acts essentially based on self-interest?
- What role does and should reason, intuitions, emotion, duty and self-interest have in ethical decision-making?



# ETHICAL QUESTIONS

A selection of ethical questions raised in the VCE Philosophy Study Design (2019 - 23)



- Is moral behaviour found only in human beings?
- Should our own pleasure seeking be our primary motivation when making ethical decisions?
- Does it make sense to speak of acting well out of habit?
- Should we focus on cultivating our own character and virtues to ensure sound ethical decision-making?

## Suggested thinkers:

Bernard Williams, Alasdair MacIntyre, Aristotle, A.J. Ayer, Hannah Arendt

## ON RIGHT AND WRONG

Questions that may be explored in this theme include:

- What are the major theories philosophers have offered about what makes an action morally right?
- Does the motive or character of the person performing an action matter to the morality of that action?
- Are acts right or wrong to the extent that they maximise pleasures or minimise suffering? What are the relative merits of various versions of utilitarianism, such as positive, negative, preference, act, rule, ideal or hedonistic?
- Are there certain acts that should be considered right or wrong in themselves independently of their consequences? Why and to what extent?
- Is religious authority a legitimate source of moral principles (for example, principles derived from the Ten Commandments, the Eightfold Path, the Golden Mean, the Five Pillars of Islam)?

## Suggested thinkers:

Immanuel Kant, John Stuart Mill, Michael Sandel, Philippa Foot

## ON RIGHTS AND JUSTICE

Questions that may be explored in this theme include:

- What is the basis and justification of rights?
- If there are human rights, then there are certain acts that should be considered right or wrong, independently of their consequences. What determines the content and extent of human rights?
- To what extent are there and should there be constraints on our rights?
- Can an individual, for example an infant, have a right without knowing about it?
- How are conflicts between rights to be resolved?
- What is the relationship between law and morality?
- How are rights related to responsibilities?
- Are we justified in punishing criminals?
- Is the state justified in enforcing moral norms?
- Do only human beings have rights? Do animals have rights? Do communities, cultures or environments have rights?

## Suggested thinkers:

Mary Wollstonecraft, John Stuart Mill, Karl Marx, Simone Weil, John Rawls

## ON LIBERTY AND ANARCHY

- Is democracy the only justifiable form of polity?
- Is freedom a fundamental human right?
- What are the threats to freedom in the modern world and to what extent should freedom be protected?
- What is the social contract?
- What is the relationship between free markets and free societies?
- What is the distinction between positive and negative liberty?

## Suggested thinkers:

John Locke, Jean Jacques Rousseau, John Stuart Mill, Robert Nozick, Adam Smith, Isaiah Berlin

# ETHICAL CAPABILITIES RESOURCES



Please contact the Hub Coordinator in your region to learn more about the professional development and collegiate networking available in 2018 and beyond, or visit the VAPS website at [www.vaps.vic.edu.au](http://www.vaps.vic.edu.au) for more information. A list of resources supporting the delivery of the Ethical Capability is below and the content is available on-line.

## THE ETHICAL CAPABILITY THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This Framework is written to ensure coherence for the development of the resources created to support the implementation of the Ethical Capability strands of the Victorian Curriculum across Levels Foundation to 10.

## FIVE MODES OF ETHICAL CAPABILITY WORKSHOPS

These training workshops meet AITSL standards for PD requirements for Pre-service, Graduate and Proficient teachers in relation to professional development supporting the implementation of the Ethical Capability across Levels Foundation to 10.

## THE ETHICAL CAPABILITY TOOL-KIT

This Tool-kit is written to support for the implementation of the Ethical Capability strands across Levels Foundation to 10 and includes:



Tools for building a **Community of Inquiry**



Tools for supporting the **Decision Making** strand



Tools for developing each of the concepts named in the **Understanding Concepts** strand



Tools for supporting **Assessment and Reporting**

## GUIDES TO ETHICS TRAILS IN PUBLIC SPACES



Ethics Trails have been developed to familiarise interested teachers with both strands of the Ethical Capability. These Trails are to accompany excursions, including guides for teachers and student workbooks.

- Burrinja Cultural Centre
- Jewish Holocaust Centre
- Melbourne Zoo
- Monash Gallery of Art
- Mornington Peninsula Regional Gallery
- State Library of Victoria

## REFERENCES AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

An extensive reference list has been developed including stimulus material, activities, theoretical works, research articles and policy documents