Philosophy: Transition work

The focus of these notes is to encourage you to read and familiarise yourself with the material that we will cover over the course of the year. What is provided below are notes on POSSIBLE content and hopefully has extra material for you to read if you choose.

Scholar research

1. **Plato**, (born 428/427 BCE, Athens, Greece—died 348/347, Athens), ancient Greek philosopher, student of Socrates (c. 470–399 BCE), teacher of Aristotle (384–322 BCE), and founder of the Academy, best known as the author of philosophical works of unparalleled influence.

2. **Aristotle**, Greek Aristoteles, (born 384 BCE, Stagira, Chalcidice, Greece—died 322, Chalcis, Euboea), ancient Greek philosopher and scientist, one of the greatest intellectual figures of Western history. He was the author of a philosophical and scientific system that became the framework and vehicle for both Christian Scholasticism and medieval Islamic philosophy. Even after the intellectual revolutions of the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Enlightenment, Aristotelian concepts remained embedded in Western thinking.

3. **St. Thomas Aquinas**, (born 1224/25, Roccasecca, near Aquino, Terra di Lavoro, Kingdom of Sicily [Italy]—died March 7, 1274, Fossanova, near Terracina, Latium, Papal States; canonized July 18, 1323; feast day January 28, formerly March 7), Italian Dominican theologian, the foremost medieval Scholastic. He developed his own conclusions from Aristotelian premises, notably in the metaphysics of personality, creation, and Providence. As a theologian, he was responsible in his two masterpieces, the *Summa theologiae* and the *Summa contra gentiles*, for the classical systematization of Latin theology, and, as a poet, he wrote some of the most gravely beautiful eucharistic hymns in the church’s liturgy. His doctrinal system and the explanations and developments made by his followers are known as Thomism. Although many modern Roman Catholic theologians do not find St. Thomas altogether congenial, he is nevertheless recognized by the Roman Catholic Church as its foremost Western philosopher and theologian.

4. **Saint Anselm of Canterbury**, (born 1033/34, Aosta, Lombardy—died April 21, 1109, possibly at Canterbury, Kent, England, feast day April 21), Italian-born theologian and philosopher, known as the father of Scholasticism, a philosophical school of thought that dominated the Middle Ages. He was recognized in modern times as the originator of the ontological argument for the existence of God (based on the idea of an absolutely perfect being, the fact of the idea being in itself a demonstration of existence) and the satisfaction theory of the atonement or redemption (based on the feudal theory of making satisfaction or recompense according to the status of a person against whom an offense has been committed, the infinite God being the offended party and humanity the offender). There is incomplete evidence that he was canonized in 1163, though some scholars contend that he was canonized by Pope Alexander VI in 1494.
5. David Hume, (born May 7 [April 26, Old Style], 1711, Edinburgh, Scotland—died August 25, 1776, Edinburgh), Scottish philosopher, historian, economist, and essayist known especially for his philosophical empiricism and skepticism.


7. John Stuart Mill, (born May 20, 1806, London, England—died May 8, 1873, Avignon, France), English philosopher, economist, and exponent of Utilitarianism. He was prominent as a publicist in the reforming age of the 19th century, and remains of lasting interest as a logician and an ethical theorist.

8. Immanuel Kant, (born April 22, 1724, Kaliningrad, Russia—died February 12, 1804, Königsberg), German philosopher whose comprehensive and systematic work in epistemology (the theory of knowledge), ethics, and aesthetics greatly influenced all subsequent philosophy, especially the various schools of Kantianism and idealism.

9. René Descartes, (born March 31, 1596, La Haye, Touraine, France—died February 11, 1650, Stockholm, Sweden), French mathematician, scientist, and philosopher. Because he was one of the first to abandon Scholastic Aristotelianism, because he formulated the first modern version of mind-body dualism, from which stems the mind-body problem, and because he promoted the development of a new science grounded in observation and experiment, he has been called the father of modern philosophy. Applying an original system of methodical doubt, he dismissed apparent knowledge derived from authority, the senses, and reason and erected new epistemic foundations on the basis of the intuition that, when he is thinking, he exists; this he expressed in the dictum “I think, therefore I am” (best known in its Latin formulation, “Cogito, ergo sum,” though originally written in French, “Je pense, donc je suis”). He developed a metaphysical dualism that distinguishes radically between mind, the essence of which is thinking, and matter, the essence of which is extension in three dimensions. Descartes’s metaphysics is rationalist, based on the postulation of innate ideas of mind, matter, and God, but his physics and physiology, based on sensory experience, are mechanistic and empiricist.

10. Richard Dawkins, in full Clinton Richard Dawkins, (born March 26, 1941, Nairobi, Kenya), British evolutionary biologist, ethologist, and popular-science writer who emphasized the gene as the driving force of evolution and generated significant controversy with his enthusiastic advocacy of atheism.

11. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, (born February 4, 1906, Breslau, Germany [now Wroclaw, Poland]—died April 9, 1945, Flossenbürg, Germany), German Protestant theologian important for his support of ecumenism and his view of Christianity’s role in a secular world. His involvement in a plot to overthrow Adolf Hitler led to his imprisonment and execution. His Letters and Papers from Prison, published posthumously in 1951, is perhaps the most profound document of his convictions.
Arguments for the existence of God and their criticisms

Arguments for the existence of God: first cause

First cause argument (cosmological argument)

St Thomas Aquinas (1225 – 1274) developed the most popular argument as a 'way' (not proof) of showing that there must be a God.

Aquinas argued that everything in the cosmos has a cause. If you track things back through a series of causes, there must have been a 'first cause'. He said that this 'first cause' is God, whom he described as a 'necessary being', eternal and transcendent, existing outside of our space and time but able to act within it, needing no explanation and having no cause.

Strengths of the argument

- Scientific discoveries, eg the Big Bang theory, can be seen to support the first cause argument. If God caused the 'Big Bang', then God is the 'first cause' that brought the cosmos (universe) into existence.
- It confirms to the theist that there is purpose to the cosmos and a place for God as its 'creator'.

Weaknesses of the argument

- If the argument is based on the idea that everything has a cause, then this leaves open the question 'Who or what caused God?' To reply that God needs no explanation is not enough to prove God’s existence.
- The Big Bang was not necessarily caused by God – it could have happened by chance.
- The argument is presented for believers and makes sense to them, but it is not convincing for the atheist or the agnostic.

Arguments for the existence of God: design

Design argument (teleological argument)

St Thomas Aquinas (1225 – 1274) argued that the apparent order and complexity in the world is proof of a designer and that this designer is God.

William Paley (1743 – 1805) argued that the complexity of the world suggests there is a purpose to it. This suggests there must be a designer, which he said is God.

Paley used a watch to illustrate his point. If he came across a mechanical watch on the ground, he would assume that its many complex parts fitted together for a purpose and that it had not come into existence by chance. There must be a watchmaker.

Strengths of the argument
The argument only comes up with probabilities, therefore it can continue to develop as new discoveries in science come along.

The argument fits well with the biblical stories of creation, whether these are understood literally or symbolically.

Some developments of the argument, eg the anthropic principle provide ways for ideas about evolution and belief in the existence of God to work together.

**Weaknesses of the argument**

- Complexity does not necessarily mean design.
- Even if we accept that the world was designed, it cannot be assumed that its designer is God. And if it were designed by God, then the existence of evil and suffering in the world would suggest that the belief that God is all-good is false.
- The theory of natural selection, put forward by Charles Darwin, shows a way of understanding how species develop without reference to a designer God.

**Arguments for the existence of God: religious experience**

**Argument from religious experience**

A religious experience has significance for the person who experiences it. It involves a sense of the holy or numinous. A person may say they had personally 'seen', 'heard' or 'felt' God.

The experience cannot be proved, but the individual will be convinced of the reality of what has happened. It might lead to a radical change in behaviour or outlook on life. Sometimes a person has a conversion experience so that they move from being an atheist or agnostic to being a theist.

**Strengths of the argument**

- The argument supports some things that believers already believe, eg the Bible tells of people who have had an experience of God.
- The Bible gives advice on how to spot whether someone is speaking truly or is deluded, eg in the prophecy of Jeremiah: As for the prophet who prophesies peace, when the word of that prophet comes to pass, then it will be known that the LORD has truly sent the prophet. Jeremiah 28:9
- While some religious experiences may be an illusion, it doesn't follow that they all are.
- Research carried out at the University of Nottingham in the 1990s concluded that more than 60 per cent of people interviewed claimed to have had some sort of significant religious experience. Some people who have made these claims are well respected, eg Martin Luther King Jr.

**Weaknesses of the argument**

- It is impossible to prove that these experiences are real.
- Science might be able at some point to explain these experiences with no reference to God.
Main Philosophical Themes

The main themes that arise in the philosophy of religion have been shaped by issues concerning the relation between human language and thought on the one hand and the nature of the divine on the other. If it is possible neither to think nor to speak about God, then it is obviously impossible to argue philosophically about him. The difficulties can be seen by considering some extreme positions. If language about God or the divine is totally equivocal, then saying that God is good or claiming to know that God is good bears no relation whatever to standards of human goodness. If language about God is wholly anthropomorphic, then God is reduced to human proportions, eliminating any transcendent reference. Yet if God is utterly transcendent, it is doubtful that humans could possess an adequate concept of him or form true propositions about him.

While philosophers have varied a great deal in their accounts of language about God (though all acknowledge the use of metaphors and models in conveying understanding), they have generally recognized that some element of univocity is indispensable if there are to be credible claims to reason about God’s reality. It is sometimes argued that such language is best expressed in negative terms: God is infinite (not finite), timeless (not in time), and so on.

Epistemological issues

The main epistemological question in the philosophy of religion is: Can God be known? This apparently simple question quickly leads to issues of considerable complexity. There are two main areas of debate: (1) whether it is possible to prove the existence of God—and, if not, whether there is nevertheless a sense in which religious belief is reasonable—and (2) whether knowledge of God is obtainable from sources other than human reason and sense experience.

Proofs of the existence of God are usually classified as either a priori or a posteriori—that is, based on the idea of God itself or based on experience. An example of the latter is the cosmological argument, which appeals to the notion of causation to conclude either that there is a first cause or that there is a necessary being from whom all contingent beings derive their existence. Other versions of this approach include the appeal to contingency—to the fact that whatever exists might not have existed and therefore calls for explanation—and the appeal to the principle of sufficient reason, which claims that for anything that exists there must be a sufficient reason why it exists. The arguments by Aquinas known as the Five Ways—the argument from motion, from efficient causation, from contingency, from degrees of perfection, and from final causes or ends in nature—are generally regarded as cosmological. Something must be the first or prime mover, the first efficient cause, the necessary ground of contingent beings, the supreme perfection that imperfect beings approach, and the intelligent guide of natural things toward their ends. This, Aquinas said, is God. The most common criticism of the cosmological argument has been that the phenomenon that God’s existence purportedly accounts for does not in fact need to be explained.

The argument from design also starts from human experience: in this case the perception of order and purpose in the natural world. The argument claims that the universe is
strongly analogous, in its order and regularity, to an artifact such as a watch; because the existence of the watch justifies the presumption of a watchmaker, the existence of the universe justifies the presumption of a divine creator of the universe, or God. Despite the powerful criticisms of the Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711–76)—e.g., that the evidence is compatible with a large number of hypotheses, such as polytheism or a god of limited power, that are as plausible as or more plausible than monotheism—the argument from design continued to be very popular in the 19th century. According to a more recent version of the argument, known as intelligent design, biological organisms display a kind of complexity (“irreducible complexity”) that could not have come about through the gradual adaptation of their parts through natural selection; therefore, the argument concludes, such organisms must have been created in their present form by an intelligent designer. Other modern variants of the argument attempt to ground theistic belief in patterns of reasoning that are characteristic of the natural sciences, appealing to simplicity and economy of explanation of the order and regularity of the universe.

Perhaps the most sophisticated and challenging argument for the existence of God is the ontological argument, propounded by Anselm of Canterbury. According to Anselm, the concept of God as the most perfect being—a being greater than which none can be conceived—entails that God exists, because a being who was otherwise all perfect and who failed to exist would be less great than a being who was all perfect and who did exist. This argument has exercised an abiding fascination for philosophers; some contend that it attempts to “define” God into existence, while others continue to defend it and to develop new versions.

It may be possible (or impossible) to prove the existence of God, but it may be unnecessary to do so in order for belief in God to be reasonable. Perhaps the requirement of a proof is too stringent, and perhaps there are other ways of establishing God’s existence. Chief among these is the appeal to religious experience—a personal, direct acquaintance with God or an experience of God mediated through a religious tradition. Some forms of mysticism appeal to religious tradition to establish the significance and appropriateness of religious experiences. Interpretations of such experiences, however, typically cannot be independently verified.

Religions typically defend their core beliefs by combining evidential, moral, and historical claims as well as those that concern human spirituality. Because these claims together reflect the religion’s conception of what knowledge of God is, they must be taken into account when endeavouring to establish whether any particular belief within the religion is reasonable.

The Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) also appeal to revelation, or to claims that God has spoken through appointed messengers to disclose matters which would otherwise be inaccessible. In Christianity these matters have included the doctrine of creation, the Trinity, and the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. Various attempts have been made to establish the reasonableness of the appeal to revelation through the witness of the church and through signs and miracles, all of which are thought to herald the authentic voice of God. (This is the context in which Hume’s classic critique of the credibility of reported miracles must be understood.) Yet appeals to revelation by the various religions conflict with each other, and the appeal to revelation itself is open to the charge of circularity.
Metaphysical issues

The idea of God

The claim that there is a God raises metaphysical questions about the nature of reality and existence. In general, it can be said that there is not one concept of God but many, even among monotheistic traditions. The Abrahamic religions are theistic; God is both the creator of the world and the one who sustains it. Theism, with its equal stress on divine transcendence of the universe and immanence within it, constitutes a somewhat uneasy conceptual midpoint between deism and pantheism. Deist conceptions of the divine see God as the creator of a universe that continues to exist, without his intervention, under the physical impulses that he first imparted to it. In pantheism, God is identified with the universe as a whole. Theism itself has numerous subvarieties, such as occasionalism, which holds that the only real cause in the universe is God; thus, all other causes are simply signs of coincidence and conjunction between kinds of events occurring within the created order. For example, heat is not what causes the water in a teakettle to boil but is simply what uniformly occurs before the water boils. God himself is the cause of the boiling.

An important object of metaphysical reflection is God’s nature, or the properties of that nature. Is God simple or complex? If omniscience, omnipotence, and beauty are part of the divine perfection, what exactly are these properties? Is timeless eternity part of God’s perfection? Can an omnipotent being will that there be a four-sided triangle or change the past? Does an omniscient being know the future actions of free agents? (If so, how can they be free?) Does an omniscient being who is timelessly eternal know what time it is now?

God and the universe

Whatever may have been the influence of Classical philosophy on the Abrahamic religions, they have not, in general, accepted the Greek idea of the eternity of matter but have stressed the contingency of the universe as the free creation of God. It has been argued, most notably and influentially by Aquinas, that neither the eternity of matter nor the doctrine of creation can be established by reason alone; thus, the belief that the universe is not eternal and was created by God must be derived from revelation. Some, including Augustine, have claimed that God created the universe from a standpoint outside time; others claim that God, like the universe, is in time.

It is at points such as these in the philosophy of religion that philosophical arguments have less to do with establishing the truth of some proposition and more to do with working out a consistent and intelligible account of religious doctrine. At least since Augustine, philosophers in the Abrahamic religions have seen one of their tasks to be the achievement of a greater understanding of their own faith. They have examined the logical consequences of religious doctrines and sought to establish their consistency with the consequences of other beliefs, as illustrated in the remainder of this section.
God and human action

Philosophical reflection on the nature of God has typically assumed that God is the sum of perfection and is omnipotent and omniscient. Questions have arisen not only about the exact meaning of these claims but also about their consistency with widespread beliefs about human beings, chiefly the belief that they usually act freely and responsibly and should be held accountable for their actions. If God, being omniscient, knows the future, then God presumably knows what each person will do in the future. But if these actions are known by God, how can the person be free not to do them? And if the person is not free not to do them, how can he be held accountable for what he does? Even more difficult, perhaps, is the question: If God is omnipotent and exercises providential control over his creation, how can people be other than puppets?

Various strategies have been devised to overcome or to diminish the force of such difficulties. It has been supposed, for example, that God is outside time and so does not, strictly speaking, know anything beforehand. It has also been suggested that God does not know what humans will freely do before they actually do it. Some thinkers have drawn a distinction between the first cause of all that happens, which is God, and secondary causes, including humans and other creatures. And some philosophers of religion have been content with a conception of human freedom that is consistent with causal determinism, the view that all events and choices are determined by previously existing causes. According to them, an action is free if it is voluntary and uncoerced, and an action can be voluntary and uncoerced even though it is causally determined. These issues remain the subject of vigorous debate among contemporary philosophers.

The soul and immortality

The belief in life after death, which is maintained by each of the Abrahamic religions, raises the metaphysical question of how the human person is to be defined. Some form of mind-body dualism, whether Platonic or Cartesian, in which the mind or soul survives the death of the body, has been favoured by many theologians. Others have claimed that some version of physicalism or materialism is most consistent with scriptural ideas about the resurrection of the body. The former group has a tendency to disparage or downplay the importance of embodiment; the latter group, however, faces the problem of giving an account of the continuity of the person across the temporal gap between bodily death and bodily resurrection.

Religion and morality

Another concern of philosophers of religion is whether morality is dependent upon religion or is independent of it. Among those who take the former view, some say that morality depends upon religion in the way in which eating depends upon having an appetite: Religion provides the motivation that makes people behave morally. To prove this, however, it would be necessary to determine whether the behaviour of religious people is generally morally superior to that of nonreligious people. Others hold that morality depends on religion
because the very idea of morality makes sense only if there is a God who sets objective standards or who will reward and punish people in the life to come. Otherwise, it is claimed, morality is a matter either of individual preference or of cultural or social convention.

Many of those who believe that morality is independent of religion have claimed that moral truths can be adequately discerned through reason, conscience, or moral intuition. In this connection it is worth noting that those who believe that religion is the basis of morality face the following dilemma: If the commands issued by God are morally obligatory, then that is because either: (1) they express independently justified moral values, or (2) God’s commands are necessarily morally good. If alternative 1 is true, then morality is independent of religion. If alternative 2 is true, then what is morally good seems to depend implausibly on God’s whim: if God commanded the torture of human infants, then it would be morally good to torture human infants. But this is absurd. This problem was first raised by Plato in his dialogue *Euthyphro*.

According to another perspective, derived from Kant, not only is it not the case that morality depends on religion, but in fact the reverse is true. As discussed above, in the Kantian tradition, the existence of God and the immortality of the soul are “postulates” of practical reason, or rational conditions of willing to bring about the highest good. Alternatively, they are conditions of adhering strictly to the moral law, which demands that one perform morally right acts only because they are right and not for any other reason, such as the goodness or badness of their consequences. Only in an eternal afterlife ordered by God would such perfection be possible.

**The problem of evil**

Perhaps the most difficult issue concerning the relation between morality and belief in God is the problem of evil. If God exists and is omnipotent and perfectly good, why does God allow horrendous evils such as the Holocaust? Why is any evil at all allowed by the divine? The problem is of ancient origins and has long been discussed by philosophers and theologians in the Abrahamic religions in relation to the Fall of Man—the expulsion, whether literal or metaphorical, of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden.

Few (if any) philosophers and theologians have been prepared to claim, with Leibniz, that the existing world is the best of all possible worlds. If it were not, Leibniz argued, what sufficient reason would God have had to create it? Apart from Leibniz’s view, three positive strategies have been developed. One stresses the importance of free will in accounting for moral evil (resulting from free human actions) as opposed to natural evil (resulting from natural events such as earthquakes and plagues); it argues that a world in which people act freely, albeit sometimes in an evil way, is to be preferred to a world of automatons who do only what is right. Another strategy stresses the idea that some evils are a logical precondition for the existence of certain goods. The virtues of compassion, patience, and forgiveness, for example, can be developed only in response to certain needs or weaknesses. A world that contains these goods is better than one in which their exercise and development is impossible. The third approach emphasizes the “cognitive distance” between human understanding and God’s will, noting that humans cannot know in detail what the justification
of God’s permission of evil might be. It is possible, of course, to combine these three positions, or elements of them, in attempting to offer an overall response to the problem of evil.

Some thinkers have approached evil, or certain evils, from the opposite direction. They have argued not that evil presents an overwhelming problem for theism but that it provides an argument for a life after death in which the injustices and inequities of the present life are remedied.

**Ancient Greek Philosophical ideas**

**The Nature Of Western Philosophy**

**The Western tradition**

It would be difficult if not impossible to find two philosophers who would define philosophy in exactly the same way. Throughout its long and varied history in the West, philosophy has meant many different things. Some of these have been a search for wisdom (the meaning closest to the Latin *philosophia*, itself derived from the Greek *philosoph*, “lover of wisdom”); an attempt to understand the universe as a whole; an examination of humankind’s moral responsibilities and social obligations; an effort to fathom the divine intentions and the place of human beings with reference to them; an effort to ground the enterprise of natural science; a rigorous examination of the origin, extent, and validity of human ideas; an exploration of the place of will or consciousness in the universe; an examination of the values of truth, goodness, and beauty; and an effort to codify the rules of human thought in order to promote rationality and the extension of clear thinking. Even these do not exhaust the meanings that have been attached to the philosophical enterprise, but they give some idea of its extreme complexity and many-sidedness.

It is difficult to determine whether any common element can be found within this diversity and whether any core meaning can serve as a universal and all-inclusive definition. But a first attempt in this direction might be to define philosophy either as “a reflection upon the varieties of human experience” or as “the rational, methodical, and systematic consideration of those topics that are of greatest concern to humankind.” Vague and indefinite as such definitions are, they do suggest two important facts about philosophizing: (1) that it is a reflective, or meditative, activity and (2) that it has no explicitly designated subject matter of its own but is a method or type of mental operation (like science or history) that can take any area or subject matter or type of experience as its object. Thus, although there are a few single-term divisions of philosophy of long standing—such as logic, ethics, epistemology, or metaphysics—its divisions are probably best expressed by phrases that contain the preposition *of*—such as philosophy of mind, philosophy of science, philosophy of law, and philosophy of art (aesthetics).

Part of what makes it difficult to find a consensus among philosophers about the definition of their discipline is precisely that they have frequently come to it from different fields, with different interests and concerns, and that they therefore have different areas of experience upon which they find it especially necessary or meaningful to reflect. St. Thomas Aquinas (c. 1224–75), a Dominican friar, George Berkeley (1685–1753), a bishop of the Irish
Church, and Søren Kierkegaard (1813–55), a Danish divinity student, all saw philosophy as a means to assert the truths of religion and to dispel the materialistic or rationalistic errors that, in their opinion, had led to its decline. Pythagoras (c. 580–c. 500 BC) in southern Italy, René Descartes (1596–1650) in France, and Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) in England were primarily mathematicians whose views of the universe and of human knowledge were vastly influenced by the concept of number and by the method of deductive thinking. Some philosophers, such as Plato (c. 428–c. 348 BC), Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) and John Stuart Mill (1806–73), were obsessed by problems of political arrangement and social living, so that whatever they have done in philosophy has been stimulated by a desire to understand and, ultimately, to change the social and political behaviour of human beings. And still others—such as the Milesians (the first philosophers of Greece, from the ancient Anatolian city of Miletus), Francis Bacon (1561–1626), an Elizabethan philosopher, and Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947), an English metaphysician—began with an interest in the physical composition of the natural world, so that their philosophies resemble more closely the generalizations of physical science than those of religion or sociology.

The history of Western philosophy reveals in detail the concentrated activity of a multitude of serious and able thinkers reflecting upon, reasoning about, and considering deeply the nature of their experience. But throughout this diversity certain characteristic oppositions continually recur, such as those between monism, dualism, and pluralism in metaphysics (see pluralism and monism); between materialism and idealism in cosmological theory; between nominalism and realism in the theory of signification; between rationalism and empiricism in epistemology; between utilitarianism and deontological ethics in moral theory; and between partisans of logic and partisans of emotion in the search for a responsible guide to the wisdom of life.

Many of these fundamental oppositions among philosophers will be treated in the article that follows. But if any single opposition is taken as central throughout the history of Western philosophy at every level and in every field, it is probably that between the critical and the speculative impulses. These two divergent motivations tend to express themselves in two divergent methods: analysis and synthesis, respectively. Plato’s Republic is an example of the second; the Principia Ethica (1903) of G.E. Moore (1873–1958), a founder of analytic philosophy, is an example of the first. Beginning with a simple question about justice, the Republic in its discursiveness slowly but progressively brings more and more areas into the discussion: first ethics, then politics, then educational theory, then epistemology, and finally metaphysics. Starting with one specific question, Plato finally managed to make his discussion as broad as the world. Principia Ethica does just the opposite. Beginning with a general question—What is good?—it progressively breaks up this question into a whole series of subordinate questions, analyzing meanings ever more minutely, growing narrower and narrower but always with the utmost modesty and sincerity, striving for increasing simplicity and exactitude.

The analytic, or critical, impulse treats any subject matter or topic by concentrating upon the part, by taking it apart in the service of clarity and precision. It was essentially the method of Aristotle (384–322 BC) and of Peter Abelard (1079–1142), a French Scholastic; of David Hume (1711–76), a Scottish skeptic, and of Rudolf Carnap (1891–1970), a German American
logical positivist; and of Russell and Moore. The synthetic, or speculative, impulse operates by seeking to comprehend the whole, by putting it all together in the service of unity and completeness. It is essentially the method of Parmenides, a Sophist, and of Plato; of Aquinas and of Benedict de Spinoza (1632–77), a Dutch Jewish rationalist; and of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831), a German idealist, and of Whitehead. Throughout philosophy’s history, each of the two traditions has made its insistent claim.

There is one philosophical tradition—that of logical positivism—that sees philosophy as originating in the obscure mists of religion and coming finally to rest in the pure sunshine of scientific clarity. This represents a necessary progress because logical positivism considers it a scandal when philosophers speak in statements that are not in principle “verifiable” (see verifiability principle); it holds that bold and adventurous philosophical speculation is at best mere self-indulgence, a passing state occurring when philosophical problems are raised prematurely—that is, at a time when philosophy does not possess the means to solve them.

Although logical positivism represents a partisan view, it does express indirectly a basic truth—that the philosophical enterprise has always hovered uncertainly between the lure of religious devotion and that of scientific exactitude. In the teachings of the earliest philosophers of Greece, it is impossible to separate ideas of divinity and the human soul from ideas about the mystery of being and the genesis of material change, and in the Middle Ages philosophy was acknowledged to be the “handmaiden of theology.” But the increased secularization of modern culture has largely reversed this trend, and the Enlightenment’s emphasis upon the separation of nature from its divine creator has increasingly placed philosophical resources at the disposal of those interested in creating a philosophy of science.

Yet philosophy’s continuing search for philosophical truth leads it to hope, but at the same time to profoundly doubt, that its problems are objectively solvable. With respect to a total description of Being or a definitive account of the nature of values, only individual solutions now seem possible; and the optimistic hope for objective answers that secure universal agreement must be given up.

In this respect, philosophy seems less like science than like art and philosophers more like artists than like scientists, for their philosophical solutions bear the stamp of their own personalities, and their choice of arguments reveals as much about themselves as their chosen problem. As a work of art is a portion of the world seen through a temperament, so a philosophical system is a vision of the world subjectively assembled. Plato and Descartes, Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), a German idealist, and John Dewey (1859–1952), an American pragmatist, have given to their systems many of the quaint trappings of their own personalities.

But if philosophy is not true in the same sense as science, it is not false in the same sense either; and this gives to the history of philosophy a living significance that the history of science does not enjoy. In science, the present confronts the past as truth confronts error; thus, for science, the past, even when important at all, is important only out of historical interest. In philosophy it is different. Philosophical systems are never definitively proved false; they are simply discarded or put aside for future use. And this means that the history of
philosophy consists not simply of dead museum pieces but of ever-living classics—comprising a permanent repository of ideas, doctrines, and arguments and a continuing source of philosophical inspiration and suggestiveness to those who philosophize in any succeeding age. It is for this reason that any attempt to separate philosophizing from the history of philosophy is both a provincial act and an unnecessary impoverishment of its rich natural resources.

Ancient Greek Philosophical ideas

Socrates

Socrates (c. 470–399 BC) was also widely considered to be a Sophist, though he did not teach for money and his aims were entirely different from theirs. Although there is a late tradition according to which Pythagoras invented the word *philosopher*, it was certainly through Socrates—who insisted that he possessed no wisdom but was striving for it—that the term came into general use and was later applied to all earlier serious thinkers. In fact, all of the records of Socrates’ life and activity left by his numerous adherents and disciples indicate that he never tried to teach anything directly. But he constantly engaged in conversations with everybody—old and young, high and low—trying to bring into the open by his questions the inconsistencies in their opinions and actions. His whole way of life rested on two unshakable premises: (1) the principle never to do wrong nor to participate, even indirectly, in any wrongdoing and (2) the conviction that nobody who really knows what is good and right could act against it. He demonstrated his adherence to the first principle on various occasions and under different regimes. When, after the Battle of Arginusae (406 BC), the majority of the Athenian popular assembly demanded death without trial for the admirals, Socrates, who on that day happened to be president of the assembly (an office changing daily), refused to put the proposal to a vote because he believed it was wrong to condemn anyone without a fair trial. He refused even though the people threatened him, shouting that it would be terrible if the sovereign people could not do as they pleased.

When, after the overthrow of democracy in Athens in 404 BC, the so-called Thirty Tyrants, who tried to involve everybody in their wrongdoing, ordered him to arrest an innocent citizen whose money they coveted, he simply disobeyed. This he did despite the fact that such disobedience was even more dangerous than disobeying the sovereign people had been at the time of unrestricted democracy. Likewise, in the time of the democracy, he pointed out by his questions the inconsistency of allowing oneself to be swayed by the oratory of a good speaker instead of first inquiring into his capability as a statesman, whereas in private life a sensible citizen would not listen to the oratory of a quack but would try to find the best doctor. When, after the overthrow of democracy, the Thirty Tyrants had many people arbitrarily executed, Socrates asked everybody whether a man was a good shepherd who diminished the number of sheep instead of increasing it; and he did not cease his questioning when Critias, the leader of the Thirty Tyrants, warned him to take heed not to diminish the number of sheep by his own—Socrates’—person. But the most fundamental inconsistency that he tried to demonstrate everywhere was that most people by their actions show what they consider good, wonderful, and beautiful in others—such as, for instance, doing
right at great danger to oneself—they do not consider good for themselves, and what they consider good for themselves they despise and condemn in others. Although these stands won him the fervent admiration of many, especially among the youth, they also caused great resentment among leading politicians, whose inconsistencies and failings were exposed. Although Socrates had survived unharmed through the regime of the Thirty Tyrants—partly because it did not last long and partly because he was supported by some close relatives of their leader, Critias—it was under the restored democracy that he was accused of impiety and of corrupting the youth and finally condemned to death, largely also in consequence of his intransigent attitude during the trial.

After Socrates’ death his influence became a dominating one through the greater part of the history of Greek and Roman philosophy down to the end of antiquity, and it has been significant ever since. Many of his adherents—Plato first among them, but also including the historian Xenophon (431–c. 350 BC)—tried to preserve his philosophical method by writing Socratic dialogues. Some founded schools or sects that perpetuated themselves over long periods of time: Euclides of Megara (c. 430–c. 360 BC) emphasized the theoretical aspects of Socrates’ thought (see Megarian school), and Antisthenes (c. 445–c. 365 BC) stressed the independence of the true philosopher from material wants. The latter, through his disciple Diogenes of Sinope (died c. 320 BC), who carried voluntary poverty to the extreme and emphasized freedom from all conventions, became the founder of the sect of the Cynics. Aristippus of Cyrene (c. 435–366 BC), traditional founder of the Cyrenaic school, stressed independence from material goods in a somewhat different way, declaring that there is no reason why a philosopher should not enjoy material goods as long as he is completely indifferent to their loss. Although Aristippus renounced his son because he led a dissolute life, the school that he founded (through his daughter and his grandson) was hedonistic, holding pleasure to be the only good.

**Plato**

By far the most important disciple of Socrates, however, was Plato, a scion of one of the most noble Athenian families, who could trace his ancestry back to the last king of Athens and to Solon (c. 630–c. 560 BC), the great social and political reformer.

**Life**

As a very young man, Plato became a fervent admirer of Socrates in spite of the latter’s plebeian origins. Contrary to his master, however, who always concerned himself with the attitudes of individuals, Plato believed in the importance of political institutions. In his early youth he had observed that the Athenian masses, listening to the glorious projects of ambitious politicians, had engaged in foolhardy adventures of conquest, which led in the end to total defeat in the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BC). When, in consequence of the disaster, democracy was abolished, Plato at first set great hopes in the Thirty Tyrants—especially since their leader, Critias, was a close relative. But he soon discovered that—to use his own words—the despised democracy had been gold in comparison with the new terror.
When the oligarchy was overthrown and the restored democracy, in 399 BC, adopted a new law code—in fact, a kind of written constitution containing safeguards against rash political decisions—Plato again had considerable hope and was even inclined to view the execution of Socrates as an unfortunate incident rather than a logical consequence of the new regime. It was only some years later, when demagogy appeared to raise its head again, that he “despaired and was forced to say that things would not become better in politics unless the philosophers would become rulers or the rulers philosophers.” He wrote a dialogue, the Gorgias, violently denouncing political oratory and propaganda, and then traveled to southern Italy in order to study political conditions there. Again, however, he found the much-vaunted dolce vita of the Greeks there, in which the rich lived in luxury exploiting the poor, much worse than in the democracy at Athens. But at Syracuse he met a young man, Dion (c. 408–354 BC)—brother-in-law of the ruling tyrant, Dionysius I (c. 430–367 BC)—who listened eagerly to his political ideas and promised to work for their realization if any occasion should arise. On his return to Athens, Plato founded the Academy, an institution for the education of philosophers, and in the following years he produced, besides other dialogues, his great work, Republic, in which he drew the outlines of an ideal state. Because it is the passions and desires of human beings that cause all disturbances in society, the state must be ruled by an elite that governs exclusively by reason and is supported by a class of warriors entirely obedient to it. Both ruling classes must have no individual possessions and no families and lead an extremely austere life, receiving the necessities of life from the working population, which alone is permitted to own private property. The elite receives a rigid education to fit it for its task. At the death of Dionysius, Dion induced Plato to come to Syracuse again to try to persuade Dionysius’s successor, Dionysius II (flourished 4th century BC), to renounce his power in favour of a realization of Plato’s ideals. But the attempt failed, and in his later political works, the Statesman and the Laws, Plato tried to show that only a god could be entrusted with the absolute powers of the philosopher-rulers of his republic. Human rulers must be controlled by rigid laws, he held—though all laws are inevitably imperfect because life is too varied to be governed adequately by general rules. But the Laws still placed strict restrictions on the ownership of property.

**Philosophy**

In the field of theoretical philosophy, Plato’s most influential contribution was undoubtedly his theory of Forms, which he derived from Socrates’ method in the following way: Socrates, in trying to bring out the inconsistencies in his interlocutors’ opinions and actions, often asked what it is that makes people say that a certain thing or action is good or beautiful or pious or brave; and he asked what people are looking at when they make such statements. Plato sometimes, in his dialogues, made Socrates ask what is the eidos, or idea—i.e., the image—that a person has before him when he calls something “good.” A definite answer is never given, however, because no abstract definition would be adequate, the purpose being rather to make the interlocutor aware of the fact that he somehow does look at something indefinable when making such statements.

What was at first simply a way of somehow expressing something that is difficult to express developed into a definite theory of Forms when Plato made the discovery that something similar could be observed in the field of mathematics. No two things in the visible world are
perfectly equal, just as there is nothing that is perfectly good or perfectly beautiful. Yet equality is one of the most fundamental concepts not only in mathematics but also in everyday life—the foundation of all measurement. Hence, like the notion of the good and the beautiful, it appears to come from a different world, a world beyond the senses, a world that Plato then called the world of Forms. Further intimations of such a realm beyond the immediate realm of the senses may be found in the fact that, in construing a system of knowledge, people constantly prefer what is more perfect to what is less perfect—i.e., what is formed and thus recognizable to what is not, what is true to what is false, a sound logical conclusion to a logical fallacy, even an elegant scientific demonstration to a clumsy one, without considering the former as good and the latter as bad.

According to Plato, all of the things that people perceive with their senses are but very imperfect copies of the eternal Forms. The most important and fundamental Form is that of the Good. It is “beyond being and knowledge,” yet it is the foundation of both. “Being” in this context does not mean existence, but something specific—a human, a lion, or a house—being recognizable by its quality or shape.

Knowledge begins with a perception of these earthly shapes, but it ascends from there to the higher realm of Forms, which is approachable to the human mind. In the famous myth of the cave in the seventh book of the Republic, Plato likened the ordinary person to a man sitting in a cave looking at a wall on which he sees nothing but the shadows of real things behind his back, and he likened the philosopher to a man who has gotten out into the open and seen the real world of the Forms. Coming back, he may be less able to distinguish the shades because he has been blinded by the light outside; but he is the only one who knows reality, and he conducts his life accordingly.

In his later dialogues, especially the Theaetetus, Plato criticized an empiricist theory of knowledge, anticipating the views of 17th-century English philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679). In the Timaeus, Plato tried to construct a complete system of physics, partly employing Pythagorean ideas.

Aristotle

After Plato’s death, the Academy continued to exist for many centuries under various heads. When Plato’s nephew, Speusippus (died c. 338 BC), was elected as his successor, Plato’s greatest disciple, Aristotle (384–322 BC), left for Assus, a Greek city-state in Anatolia, and then went to the island of Lesbos. But soon thereafter he was called to the Macedonian court at Pella to become the educator of the crown prince, who later became Alexander the Great (356–323 BC). After Alexander became king, Aristotle returned to Athens and opened there a school of his own, the Lyceum, whose members were known as Peripatetics.

Philosophy
Aristotle became a member of the Academy at the age of 17, in the year 367 BC, when the school was under the acting chairmanship of Eudoxus of Cnidus (c. 395–c. 342 BC), a great mathematician and geographer (Plato was away in Sicily at the time). It is a controversial question as to how far Aristotle, during the 20 years of his membership in the Academy, developed a philosophy of his own differing from that of his master. But two things can be considered as certain: (1) that he soon raised certain objections to Plato’s theory of Forms, for one of the objections attributed to him is discussed in Plato’s dialogue *Parmenides*, which Plato must have written soon after his return from Sicily, and (2) that it was during his membership in the Academy that Aristotle began and elaborated his theoretical and formal analysis of the arguments used in various Socratic discussions—an enterprise that, when completed, resulted in the corpus of his works on logic. Aristotle rightly claimed to have invented this discipline; indeed, until rather recent times it was said that he completed it in such a way that hardly anything could be added.

Certainly quite some time before his return to Athens to open a school of his own, Aristotle declared that it is not necessary to assume the existence of a separate realm of transcendent Forms, of which the individual things that human beings perceive with their senses are but imperfect copies; that the world of perceived things is the real world; and that, in order to build up a system of knowledge about certain types or groups of things, it is necessary merely to be able to say that something is generally true of the. Thus, it would be wrong to say that, having abandoned the theory of Forms, Aristotle was left with a completely contingent world. The last chapters of his *Posterior Analytics* show, on the contrary, that he merely replaced Plato’s transcendent Forms with something (*katholou*) corresponding to them that the human mind can grasp in individual things.

Aristotle retained another important element of the theory of Forms in his teleology, or doctrine of purposiveness. According to Plato, individual things are imperfect copies of perfect Forms. Aristotle pointed out, however, that all living beings develop from an imperfect state (from the seed, the semen, through the germinating plant, or embryo, to the child and young adult) to the more perfect state of the fully developed plant or the full-grown mature animal or human—after which they again decay and finally die, having reproduced. But not all individuals reach the same degree of relative perfection. Many of them die before reaching it; others are retarded or crippled or maimed in various ways in the process. It is, therefore, of the utmost importance for human beings to find out what the best conditions are for reaching the most perfect state possible. This is what the gardener tries to do for the plants; but it is even more important for humankind to do in regard to itself. The first question, then, is what kind of perfection a human being, as human, can reach. In answering this question, Aristotle observed that human beings, as social animals par excellence, can reach as individuals only some of the perfections possible for humans as such. Cats are more or less all alike in their functions; thus each can fend for itself. With bees and termites, however, it is different. They are by nature divided into worker bees, drones, and queen bees, or worker termites, soldier termites, and queens. With human beings the differentiation of functions is much more subtle and varied. People can lead satisfactory lives only on the basis of a division of labour and distribution of functions. Some individuals are born with very great talents and inclinations for special kinds of activity. They will be happy and will make their best possible contribution to the life of the community only if they are permitted to follow this inclination. Others are less one-sidedly gifted and more easily adaptable to a variety of functions. These
people can be happy shifting from one activity to another. This fact represents an enormous advantage the human species has over all other animals, because it enables it to adapt to all sorts of circumstances. But the advantage is paid for by the fact that no human individual is able to develop all of the perfections that are possible for the species as a whole.

There is another possible and, in its consequences, real disadvantage to such adaptability: the other animals, tightly confined to the limits set by nature, are crippled almost exclusively by external factors, but humans, in consequence of the freedom of choice granted to them through the variety of their gifts, can and very often do cripple and harm themselves. All human activities are directed toward the end of a good and satisfactory life. But there are many subordinate aims that are sensible ends only as far as they serve a superior end. There is, for example, no sense in producing or acquiring more shoes than can possibly be worn. This is self-evident. With regard to money, however, which has become exchangeable against everything, the illusion arises that it is good to accumulate it without limit. By doing so, humans harm both the community and themselves because, by concentrating on such a narrow aim, they deprive their souls and spirits of larger and more rewarding experiences. Similarly, an individual especially gifted for large-scale planning needs power to give orders to those capable of executing his plans. Used for such purposes, power is good. But coveted for its own sake, it becomes oppressive to those subdued by it and harmful to the oppressor because he thus incurs the hatred of the oppressed. Because of their imperfections, humans are not able to engage in serious and fruitful activities without interruption. They need relaxation and play, or amusement. Because the necessities of life frequently force them to work beyond the limit within which working is pleasant, the illusion arises that a life of constant amusement would be the most pleasant and joyful. In reality nothing would be more tedious.

Aristotle’s teleology seems to be based entirely on empirical observation. It has nothing to do with a belief in divine providence and is not, as some modern critics believe, at variance with the law of causality. It forms the foundation, however, of Aristotle’s ethics and political theory. Aristotle was an avid collector of empirical evidence. He induced his students, for instance, to study the laws and political institutions of all known cities and nations in order to find out how they worked and at what points their initiators had been mistaken regarding the way in which they would work. In later times, Aristotle came to be considered (and by many is still considered) a dogmatic philosopher because the results of his inquiries were accepted as absolutely authoritative. In reality, however, he was one of the greatest empiricists of all times.

Disciples and commentators

After Aristotle’s death his immediate disciples carried on the same kind of work, especially in the historical field: Theophrastus wrote a history of philosophy and works on botany and mineralogy, Eudemus of Rhodes (flourished before 300 BC) wrote histories of mathematics and astronomy, Meno wrote a history of medicine, and Dicaearchus of Messene (flourished c. 320 BC) wrote a history of civilization and a book on types of political constitutions. The next two generations of Peripatetics spread out in two directions: literary history, in the form of histories of poetry, epic, tragedy, and comedy, as well as biographies
of famous writers, and physical science. Straton of Lampsacus (died c. 270 BC) created a new kind of physics based on experiments, and the great astronomer Aristarchus of Samos (c. 310–230 BC) invented the heliocentric system. The school then went for some time into eclipse until, in the 1st century AD, after the rediscovery of Aristotle’s lecture manuscripts, there arose a great school of commentators on his works, which had an enormous influence on medieval philosophy.

Ethics, also called moral philosophy, the discipline concerned with what is morally good and bad and morally right and wrong. The term is also applied to any system or theory of moral values or principles.

How should we live? Shall we aim at happiness or at knowledge, virtue, or the creation of beautiful objects? If we choose happiness, will it be our own or the happiness of all? And what of the more particular questions that face us: is it right to be dishonest in a good cause? Can we justify living in opulence while elsewhere in the world people are starving? Is going to war justified in cases where it is likely that innocent people will be killed? Is it wrong to clone a human being or to destroy human embryos in medical research? What are our obligations, if any, to the generations of humans who will come after us and to the nonhuman animals with whom we share the planet?

Ethics deals with such questions at all levels. Its subject consists of the fundamental issues of practical decision making, and its major concerns include the nature of ultimate value and the standards by which human actions can be judged right or wrong.

The terms ethics and morality are closely related. It is now common to refer to ethical judgments or to ethical principles where it once would have been more accurate to speak of moral judgments or moral principles. These applications are an extension of the meaning of ethics. In earlier usage, the term referred not to morality itself but to the field of study, or branch of inquiry, that has morality as its subject matter. In this sense, ethics is equivalent to moral philosophy.

Although ethics has always been viewed as a branch of philosophy, its all-embracing practical nature links it with many other areas of study, including anthropology, biology, economics, history, politics, sociology, and theology. Yet, ethics remains distinct from such disciplines because it is not a matter of factual knowledge in the way that the sciences and other branches of inquiry are. Rather, it has to do with determining the nature of normative theories and applying these sets of principles to practical moral problems.

This article, then, will deal with ethics as a field of philosophy, especially as it has developed in the West. For coverage of religious conceptions of ethics and the ethical systems associated with world religions, see Buddhism; Christianity; Confucianism; Hinduism; Jainism; Judaism; Sikhism.

The Origins Of Ethics
Introduction of moral codes

When did ethics begin and how did it originate? If one has in mind ethics proper—i.e., the systematic study of what is morally right and wrong—it is clear that ethics could have come into existence only when human beings started to reflect on the best way to live. This reflective stage emerged long after human societies had developed some kind of morality, usually in the form of customary standards of right and wrong conduct. The process of reflection tended to arise from such customs, even if in the end it may have found them wanting. Accordingly, ethics began with the introduction of the first moral codes.

Virtually every human society has some form of myth to explain the origin of morality. In the Louvre in Paris there is a black Babylonian column with a relief showing the sun god Shamash presenting the code of laws to Hammurabi (died c. 1750 BCE), known as the Code of Hammurabi. The Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) account of God’s giving the Ten Commandments to Moses (flourished 14th–13th century BCE) on Mount Sinai might be considered another example. In the dialogue Protagoras by Plato (428/427–348/347 BCE), there is an avowedly mythical account of how Zeus took pity on the hapless humans, who were physically no match for the other beasts. To make up for these deficiencies, Zeus gave humans a moral sense and the capacity for law and justice, so that they could live in larger communities and cooperate with one another.

That morality should be invested with all the mystery and power of divine origin is not surprising. Nothing else could provide such strong reasons for accepting the moral law. By attributing a divine origin to morality, the priesthood became its interpreter and guardian and thereby secured for itself a power that it would not readily relinquish. This link between morality and religion has been so firmly forged that it is still sometimes asserted that there can be no morality without religion. According to this view, ethics is not an independent field of study but rather a branch of theology (see moral theology). There is some difficulty, already known to Plato, with the view that morality was created by a divine power. In his dialogue Euthyphro, Plato considered the suggestion that it is divine approval that makes an action good. Plato pointed out that, if this were the case, one could not say that the gods approve of such actions because they are good. Why then do they approve of them? Is their approval entirely arbitrary? Plato considered this impossible and so held that there must be some standards of right or wrong that are independent of the likes and dislikes of the gods. Modern philosophers have generally accepted Plato’s argument, because the alternative implies that if, for example, the gods had happened to approve of torturing children and to disapprove of helping one’s neighbours, then torture would have been good and neighbourliness bad.

Problems of divine origin

A modern theist (see theism) might say that, since God is good, God could not possibly approve of torturing children nor disapprove of helping neighbours. In saying this, however, the theist would have tacitly admitted that there is a standard of goodness that is independent of God. Without an independent standard, it would be pointless to say that God is good; this could mean only that God is approved of by God. It seems therefore that, even
for those who believe in the existence of God, it is impossible to give a satisfactory account of the origin of morality in terms of divine creation. A different account is needed.

There are other possible connections between religion and morality. It has been said that, even if standards of good and evil exist independently of God or the gods, divine revelation is the only reliable means of finding out what these standards are. An obvious problem with this view is that those who receive divine revelations, or who consider themselves qualified to interpret them, do not always agree on what is good and what is evil. Without an accepted criterion for the authenticity of a revelation or an interpretation, people are no better off, so far as reaching moral agreement is concerned, than they would be if they were to decide on good and evil themselves, with no assistance from religion.

Traditionally, a more important link between religion and ethics was that religious teachings were thought to provide a reason for doing what is right. In its crudest form, the reason was that those who obey the moral law will be rewarded by an eternity of bliss while everyone else roasts in hell. In more sophisticated versions, the motivation provided by religion was more inspirational and less blatantly self-interested. Whether in its crude or its sophisticated version, or something in between, religion does provide an answer to one of the great questions of ethics: “Why should I be moral?” (See below Ethics and reasons for action.) As will be seen in the course of this article, however, the answer provided by religion is not the only one available.

Normative ethics

The debate over consequentialism

Normative ethics seeks to set norms or standards for conduct. The term is commonly used in reference to the discussion of general theories about what one ought to do, a central part of Western ethics since ancient times. Normative ethics continued to occupy the attention of most moral philosophers during the early years of the 20th century, as Moore defended a form of consequentialism and as intuitionists such as W.D. Ross advocated an ethics based on mutually independent duties. The rise of logical positivism and emotivism in the 1930s, however, cast the logical status of normative ethics into doubt: was it not simply a matter of what attitudes one had? Nor was the analysis of language, which dominated philosophy in English-speaking countries during the 1950s, any more congenial to normative ethics. If philosophy could do no more than analyze words and concepts, how could it offer guidance about what one ought to do? The subject was therefore largely neglected until the 1960s, when emotivism and linguistic analysis were both in retreat and moral philosophers once again began to think about how individuals ought to live.

A crucial question of normative ethics is whether actions are to be judged right or wrong solely on the basis of their consequences. Traditionally, theories that judge actions by their consequences were called “teleological,” and theories that judge actions by whether they accord with a certain rule were called “deontological.” Although the latter term continues to be used, the former has been largely replaced by the more straightforward term
“consequentialist.” The debate between consequentialist and deontological theories has led to the development of a number of rival views in both camps.

**Objections to consequentialism**

Although the idea that one should do what can reasonably be expected to have the best consequences is obviously attractive, consequentialism is open to several objections. As mentioned earlier, one difficulty is that some of the implications of consequentialism clash with settled moral convictions. Consequentialists, it is said, disregard the Kantian principle of treating human beings as ends in themselves. It is also claimed that, because consequentialists must always aim at the good, impartially conceived, they cannot place adequate value on—or even enter into—the most basic human relationships, such as love and friendship, because these relationships require that one be partial to certain other people, preferring their interests to those of strangers. Related to this objection is the claim that consequentialism is too demanding, for it seems to insist that people constantly compare their most innocent activities with other actions they might perform, some of which—such as fighting world poverty—might lead to a greater good, impartially considered. Another objection is that the calculations that consequentialism demands are too complicated to make, especially if—as in many but not all versions of consequentialism—they require one to compare the happiness or preferences of many different people.

Consequentialists defended themselves against these objections in various ways. Some resorted to rule-consequentialism or to a two-level view like Hare’s. Others acknowledged that consequentialism is inconsistent with many widely accepted moral convictions but did not regard this fact as a good reason for rejecting the basic position. A hard-line consequentialist, for example, may argue that the inconsistency is less important than it may seem, because the situations in which it would arise are unlikely ever to occur—e.g., the situation in which one may save the lives of several innocent human beings by killing one innocent human being (in order for this example to count against the consequentialist, one must assume that the killing of the innocent person produces no significant negative consequences other than the death itself). As to the objection that consequentialism is too demanding, some consequentialists simply replied that acting morally is not always an easy thing to do. The difficulty of making interpersonal comparisons of utility was generally acknowledged, but it was also noted that the inexact nature of such comparisons does not prevent people from making them every day, as when a group of friends decides which movie they will see together.

**Natural law ethics**

During most of the 20th century, most secular moral philosophers considered natural law ethics to be a lifeless medieval relic, preserved only in Roman Catholic schools of moral theology. In the late 20th century the chief proponents of natural law ethics continued to be Roman Catholic, but they began to defend their position with arguments that made no explicit appeal to religious beliefs. Instead, they started from the claim that there are certain basic human goods that should not be acted against in any circumstances. The list of goods offered
by John Finnis in the aforementioned *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, for example, included life, knowledge, play, aesthetic experience, friendship, practical reasonableness, and religion. The identification of these goods is a matter of reflection, assisted by the findings of anthropologists. Furthermore, each of the basic goods is regarded as equally fundamental; there is no hierarchy among them.

It would, of course, be possible to hold a consequentialist ethics that identified several basic human goods of equal importance and judged actions by their tendency to produce or maintain these goods. Thus, if life is a good, any action that led to a preventable loss of life would, other things being equal, be wrong. Proponents of natural law ethics, however, rejected this consequentialist approach; they insisted that it is impossible to measure the basic goods against each other. Instead of relying on consequentialist calculations, therefore, natural law ethics assumed an absolute prohibition of any action that aims directly against any basic good. The killing of the innocent, for instance, is always wrong, even in a situation where, somehow, killing one innocent person is the only way to save thousands of innocent people. What is not adequately explained in this rejection of consequentialism is why the life of one innocent person cannot be measured against the lives of a thousand innocent people—assuming that nothing is known about any of the people involved except that they are innocent.

Natural law ethics recognizes a special set of circumstances in which the effect of its absolute prohibitions would be mitigated. This is the situation in which the so-called doctrine of double effect would apply. If a pregnant woman, for example, is found to have a cancerous uterus, the doctrine of double effect allows a doctor to remove it, notwithstanding the fact that such action would kill the fetus. This allowance is made not because the life of the woman is regarded as more valuable than the life of the fetus, but because in removing the uterus the doctor is held not to aim directly at the death of the fetus; instead, its death is an unwanted and indirect side effect of the laudable act of removing a diseased organ. In cases where the only way of saving the woman’s life is by directly killing the fetus, the doctrine provides a different answer. Before the development of modern obstetric techniques, for example, the only way of saving a woman whose fetus became lodged during delivery was to crush the fetus’s skull. Such a procedure was prohibited by the doctrine of double effect, for in performing it the doctor would be directly killing the fetus. This position was maintained even in cases where the death of the mother would certainly also bring about the death of the fetus. In these cases, the claim was made that the doctor who killed the fetus directly would be guilty of murder, but the deaths from natural causes of the mother and the fetus would not be his doing. The example is significant, because it indicates the lengths to which proponents of natural law ethics were prepared to go in order to preserve the absolute nature of their prohibitions.

**Applied ethics**

The most striking development in the study of ethics since the mid-1960s was the growth of interest among philosophers in practical, or applied, ethics—i.e., the application of normative ethical theories to practical problems. This is not, admittedly, a totally new departure. From Plato onward, moral philosophers have concerned themselves with practical questions,
including suicide, the exposure of infants, the treatment of women, and the proper behaviour of public officials. Christian philosophers, notably Augustine and Aquinas, examined with great care such matters as when a war is just, whether it is ever right to tell a lie, and whether a Christian woman does wrong by committing suicide to save herself from rape. Hobbes had an eminently practical purpose in writing his *Leviathan*, and Hume wrote about the ethics of suicide. The British utilitarians were very much concerned with practical problems; indeed, they considered social reform to be the aim of their philosophy. Thus, Bentham wrote on electoral and prison reform and animal rights, and Mill discussed the power of the state to interfere with the liberty of its citizens, the status of women, capital punishment, and the right of one state to invade another to prevent it from committing atrocities against its own people.

Nevertheless, during the first six decades of the 20th century, moral philosophers largely neglected applied ethics—something that now seems all but incredible, considering the traumatic events through which most of them lived. The most notable exception, Bertrand Russell (1872–1970), seems to have regarded his writings on ethical topics as largely separate from his philosophical work and did not attempt to develop his ethical views in any systematic or rigorous fashion.

The prevailing view of this period was that moral philosophy is quite separate from “moralizing,” a task best left to preachers. What was not generally considered was whether moral philosophers could, without merely preaching, make an effective contribution to discussions of practical issues involving difficult ethical questions. The value of such work began to be widely recognized only during the 1960s, when first the U.S. civil rights movement and subsequently the Vietnam War and the growth of student political activism started to draw philosophers into discussions of the ethical issues of equality, justice, war, and civil disobedience.

Applied ethics soon became part of the philosophy curriculum of most universities in many different countries. Here it is not possible to do more than briefly mention some of the major areas of applied ethics and point to the issues that they raise.

**Equality**

Since much of the early impetus for the 20th-century revival of applied ethics came from the U.S. civil rights movement, topics such as equality, human rights, and justice were prominent from the beginning. The initial focus, especially in the United States, was on racial and sexual equality. Since there was a consensus that outright discrimination against women and members of racial minority groups (notably African Americans) is wrong, the centre of attention soon shifted to reverse discrimination: is it acceptable to favour women and members of racial minority groups for jobs and enrollment in universities and colleges because they have been discriminated against in the past? (See affirmative action.)

Inequality between the sexes was another early focus of discussion. Does equality here mean ending as far as possible all differences in the sex roles, or could there be equal status for different roles? There was a lively debate—both between feminists and their opponents and,
on a different level, between feminists themselves—about what a society without sexual inequality would be like. Feminist philosophers were also involved in debates about abortion and about new methods of reproduction. These topics will be covered separately below.

Until the late 20th century, most philosophical discussions of justice and equality were limited in scope to a single society. Even Rawls’s theory of justice, for example, had nothing to say about the distribution of wealth between societies, an issue that could have made acceptance of his maximin principle much more difficult. In the 1990s philosophers began to think about the moral implications of the vast inequality in wealth between the leading industrialized countries and the countries of the developing world, some of which were afflicted with widespread famine and disease. What obligations, if any, do the citizens of affluent countries have to those who are starving? In Living High and Letting Die: Our Illusion of Innocence (1996), the American philosopher Peter Unger made a strong case for the view that any person of reasonable means who neglects to send money to organizations that work to reduce global poverty is thereby doing something very seriously wrong. The German-born philosopher Thomas Pogge, in World Poverty and Human Rights: Cosmopolitan Responsibilities and Reforms (2002), argued that affluent countries are responsible for increasing the poverty of developing countries and thus for causing millions of deaths annually. In one of his late works, The Law of Peoples (1999), Rawls himself turned to the relations between societies, though his conclusions were more conservative than those of Unger and Pogge.

**Abortion, euthanasia, and the value of human life**

A number of ethical questions are concerned with the endpoints of the human life span. The question of whether abortion or the use of human embryos as sources of stem cells can be morally justified was exhaustively discussed in popular contexts, where the answer was often taken to depend directly on the answer to the further question: “When does human life begin?” Many philosophers argued that the latter question was the wrong one to ask, since no conclusion of a specifically moral character follows directly from the scientific fact that human life begins at conception or at some other time. A better approach, according to these philosophers, is to ask what it is that makes killing a human being wrong and then to consider whether these characteristics, whatever they might be, apply to the earliest stages of human life. Although there was no generally agreed-upon answer, some philosophers presented surprisingly strong arguments to the effect that not only the embryo and the fetus but even the newborn infant has no right to life. This position was defended by the British philosopher Jonathan Glover in Causing Death and Saving Lives (1977) and in more detail by the Canadian-born philosopher Michael Tooley in Abortion and Infanticide (1983).

Such views were hotly contested, especially by those who claimed that all human life, irrespective of its characteristics, is sacrosanct. The task for those who defended the sanctity of human life was to explain why human life, no matter what its characteristics, is specially worthy of protection. Explanation could no doubt be provided in terms of traditional Christian doctrines such as that all humans are made in the image of God or that all humans have an immortal soul. In the philosophical debate, however, opponents of abortion and embryo
research eschewed religious arguments of this kind, though without finding a convincing secular alternative.

Somewhat similar issues were raised by the practice of euthanasia when it is nonvoluntary, as in the case of severely disabled newborn infants (see below Bioethics). Voluntary euthanasia, on the other hand, could be defended on the distinct ground that the state should not interfere with the free, informed choices of its citizens in matters that do not cause harm to others. (The same argument was often invoked in defense of the pro-choice position in the abortion controversy. But it was much weaker in this case, because it presupposed what it needed to prove: namely, that the fetus does not count as a person—or at least not as a person to the extent that the pregnant woman does.) Critics of voluntary euthanasia emphasized practical matters such as the difficulty of maintaining adequate safeguards; their chief objection was that the practice would lead via a “slippery slope” to nonvoluntary euthanasia and eventually to the compulsory involuntary killing of those the state considers socially undesirable. The open practice of voluntary euthanasia in the Netherlands followed by its subsequent legalization there in 2001 provided an opportunity to test this claim. To date, studies of the rate of euthanasia in that country do not show any evidence of a slippery slope, but the absence of comparable studies in other countries means that the facts remain in dispute.