



# PHI103

# Ethics and Society

## Course Manual

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# Ethics and Society

PHI103



University of Ibadan Distance Learning Centre  
Open and Distance Learning Course Series Development  
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## Vice-Chancellor's Message

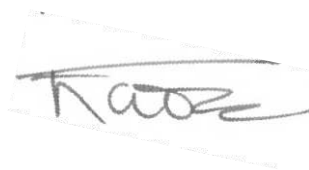
The Distance Learning Centre is building on a solid tradition of over two decades of service in the provision of External Studies Programme and now Distance Learning Education in Nigeria and beyond. The Distance Learning mode to which we are committed is providing access to many deserving Nigerians in having access to higher education especially those who by the nature of their engagement do not have the luxury of full time education. Recently, it is contributing in no small measure to providing places for teeming Nigerian youths who for one reason or the other could not get admission into the conventional universities.

These course materials have been written by writers specially trained in ODL course delivery. The writers have made great efforts to provide up to date information, knowledge and skills in the different disciplines and ensure that the materials are user-friendly.

In addition to provision of course materials in print and e-format, a lot of Information Technology input has also gone into the deployment of course materials. Most of them can be downloaded from the DLC website and are available in audio format which you can also download into your mobile phones, IPod, MP3 among other devices to allow you listen to the audio study sessions. Some of the study session materials have been scripted and are being broadcast on the university's Diamond Radio FM 101.1, while others have been delivered and captured in audio-visual format in a classroom environment for use by our students. Detailed information on availability and access is available on the website. We will continue in our efforts to provide and review course materials for our courses.

However, for you to take advantage of these formats, you will need to improve on your I.T. skills and develop requisite distance learning Culture. It is well known that, for efficient and effective provision of Distance learning education, availability of appropriate and relevant course materials is a *sine qua non*. So also, is the availability of multiple platform for the convenience of our students. It is in fulfillment of this, that series of course materials are being written to enable our students study at their own pace and convenience.

It is our hope that you will put these course materials to the best use.



Prof. Isaac Adewole

Vice-Chancellor

## Foreword

As part of its vision of providing education for “Liberty and Development” for Nigerians and the International Community, the University of Ibadan, Distance Learning Centre has recently embarked on a vigorous repositioning agenda which aimed at embracing a holistic and all encompassing approach to the delivery of its Open Distance Learning (ODL) programmes. Thus we are committed to global best practices in distance learning provision. Apart from providing an efficient administrative and academic support for our students, we are committed to providing educational resource materials for the use of our students. We are convinced that, without an up-to-date, learner-friendly and distance learning compliant course materials, there cannot be any basis to lay claim to being a provider of distance learning education. Indeed, availability of appropriate course materials in multiple formats is the hub of any distance learning provision worldwide.

In view of the above, we are vigorously pursuing as a matter of priority, the provision of credible, learner-friendly and interactive course materials for all our courses. We commissioned the authoring of, and review of course materials to teams of experts and their outputs were subjected to rigorous peer review to ensure standard. The approach not only emphasizes cognitive knowledge, but also skills and humane values which are at the core of education, even in an ICT age.

The development of the materials which is on-going also had input from experienced editors and illustrators who have ensured that they are accurate, current and learner-friendly. They are specially written with distance learners in mind. This is very important because, distance learning involves non-residential students who can often feel isolated from the community of learners.

It is important to note that, for a distance learner to excel there is the need to source and read relevant materials apart from this course material. Therefore, adequate supplementary reading materials as well as other information sources are suggested in the course materials.

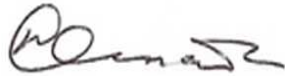
Apart from the responsibility for you to read this course material with others, you are also advised to seek assistance from your course facilitators especially academic advisors during your study even before the interactive session which is by design for revision. Your academic advisors will assist you using convenient technology including Google Hang Out, You Tube, Talk Fusion, etc. but you have to take advantage of these. It is also going to be of immense advantage if you complete assignments as at when due so as to have necessary feedbacks as a guide.

The implication of the above is that, a distance learner has a responsibility to develop requisite distance learning culture which includes diligent and disciplined self-study, seeking available administrative and academic support and acquisition of basic information technology skills. This is why you are encouraged to develop your computer skills by availing yourself the opportunity of training that the Centre’s provide and put these into use.

In conclusion, it is envisaged that the course materials would also be useful for the regular students of tertiary institutions in Nigeria who are faced with a dearth of high quality textbooks. We are therefore, delighted to present these titles to both our distance learning students and the university's regular students. We are confident that the materials will be an invaluable resource to all.

We would like to thank all our authors, reviewers and production staff for the high quality of work.

Best wishes.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Okunade', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Professor Bayo Okunade

Director

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## Table of Contents

<b>About this course manual</b>	<b>1</b>
How this course manual is structured .....	1
<b>CourseOverview</b>	<b>3</b>
Welcome to Ethics and Society PHI103.....	3
Course outcomes.....	3
Timeframe.....	4
How to be successful in this course .....	5
Need help?.....	6
Academic Support.....	6
Activities .....	7
Assessments.....	7
Bibliography.....	7
<b>Getting around this course manual</b>	<b>8</b>
Margin icons.....	8
<b>Study Session 1</b>	<b>9</b>
Human Nature and Society .....	9
Introduction .....	9
1.1 Human Nature .....	9
1.2Need for Social Interaction and the Formation of Society .....	11
Study Session Summary .....	12
Assessment.....	12
<b>Study Session 2</b>	<b>13</b>
Morality and Ethics .....	13
Introduction .....	13
2.1Morality .....	13
2.2 Morality, Law and Convention.....	15
2.3 Ethics .....	16
Study Session Summary .....	18
Assessment.....	18
<b>Study Session 3</b>	<b>20</b>
Ethical Utilitarianism .....	20
Introduction .....	20
3.1 Overview of Ethical Utilitarianism.....	20
3.2 General Objections to Utilitarianism.....	24

Study Session Summary .....	25
Assessment.....	26
<b>Study Session 4</b>	<b>27</b>
Ethical Deontology .....	27
Introduction .....	27
4.1 Ethical Deontology.....	27
4.2 General Problems with Deontology.....	30
Study Session Summary .....	31
Assessment.....	31
<b>Study Session 5</b>	<b>32</b>
Divine Command Theory of Morality .....	32
Introduction .....	32
5.1 Claims of Divine Command Theory of Morality .....	32
5.2 Problems with the Divine Command Theory of Morality .....	33
Study Session Summary .....	36
Assessment.....	36
<b>Study Session 6</b>	<b>37</b>
Natural Law Theory of Morality .....	37
Introduction .....	37
6.1 Natural Law Theory of Morality.....	37
6.2 Problems with the Natural Law Theory of Morality .....	39
Study Session Summary .....	40
Assessment.....	41
<b>Study Session 7</b>	<b>42</b>
Rights and Duties .....	42
Introduction .....	42
7.1 Rights.....	42
7.2 Duties.....	45
Study Session Summary .....	46
Assessment.....	46
<b>Study Session 8</b>	<b>48</b>
Psychological and Moral Egoism .....	48
Introduction .....	48
8.1 Psychological Egoism .....	48
8.2 Ethical Egoism .....	50

Study Session Summary .....	53
Assessment .....	53
Bibliography .....	54
References .....	55
Feedbacks to SAQs .....	57



# About this course manual

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Ethics and Society PHI103 has been produced by University of Ibadan Distance Learning Centre. All course manuals produced by University of Ibadan Distance Learning Centre are structured in the same way, as outlined below.

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## How this course manual is structured

### The course overview

The course overview gives you a general introduction to the course. Information contained in the course overview will help you determine:

- If the course is suitable for you.
- What you will already need to know.
- What you can expect from the course.
- How much time you will need to invest to complete the course.

The overview also provides guidance on:

- Study skills.
- Where to get help.
- Course assignments and assessments.
- Margin icons.

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We strongly recommend that you read the overview *carefully* before starting your study.

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### The course content

The course is broken down into Study Sessions. Each Study Session comprises:

- An introduction to the Study Session content.
- Study Session outcomes.
- Core content of the Study Session with a variety of learning activities.
- A Study Session summary.
- Assignments and/or assessments, as applicable.
- Bibliography

### Your comments

After completing Ethics and Society we would appreciate it if you would take a few moments to give us your feedback on any aspect of this course. Your feedback might include comments on:

- Course content and structure.
- Course reading materials and resources.
- Course assignments.
- Course assessments.
- Course duration.
- Course support (assigned tutors, technical help, etc.)

Your constructive feedback will help us to improve and enhance this course.

# CourseOverview

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## Welcome to Ethics and Society PHI103

This course examines the role of ethics in society. It presents an account of human nature and how this necessitates social interaction between people. It is this social interaction that invariably leads to the emergence of society. It goes further to explain how certain facts about human nature also give meaning to the phenomenon of morality and render it very important as a means of facilitating cordial relationships between people in society as well as provide a viable framework for the effective pursuit of social order, social peace and social development.

Given the centrality of ethical principles to the enterprise of morality and the fulfilment of the fundamental roles of morality in society, we shall in this course, devote some time to the examination of some of the key ethical principles and theories that are operational in society. These include: Utilitarianism, Deontology, Egoism, Divine Command Theory of Morality and the Natural Law Theory of Morality.

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## Course outcomes



Upon completion of Ethics and Society PHI103, you will be able to:

- *point out* the key features that characterised human nature.
- *explain* the notion of morality.
- *justify* the claim that Natural law theory of morality provides an adequate foundation for morality and a suitable guide for determining the moral value of human actions, character and social institutions or practices.
- *discuss* the nature and types of rights.
- *appraise* the claims of theories of ethics.

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## Timeframe



### How long?

This is a 15 week course. It requires a formal study time of 45 hours. The formal study times are scheduled around online discussions / chats with your course facilitator / academic advisor to facilitate your learning. Kindly see course calendar on your course website for scheduled dates. You will still require independent/personal study time particularly in studying your course materials.



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## How to be successful in this course



As an open and distance learner your approach to learning will be different to that from your school days, where you had onsite education. You will now choose what you want to study, you will have professional and/or personal motivation for doing so and you will most likely be fitting your study activities around other professional or domestic responsibilities.

Essentially you will be taking control of your learning environment. As a consequence, you will need to consider performance issues related to time management, goal setting, stress management, etc. Perhaps you will also need to reacquaint yourself in areas such as essay planning, coping with exams and using the web as a learning resource.

We recommend that you take time now—before starting your self-study—to familiarize yourself with these issues. There are a number of excellent resources on the web. A few suggested links are:

- <http://www.dlc.ui.edu.ng/resources/studyskill.pdf>

This is a resource of the UIDLC pilot course module. You will find sections on building study skills, time scheduling, basic concentration techniques, control of the study environment, note taking, how to read essays for analysis and memory skills (“remembering”).

- [http://www.ivywise.com/newsletter\\_march13\\_how\\_to\\_self\\_study.html](http://www.ivywise.com/newsletter_march13_how_to_self_study.html)

This site provides how to master self-studying, with bias to emerging technologies.

- <http://www.howtostudy.org/resources.php>

Another “How to study” web site with useful links to time management, efficient reading, questioning/listening/observing skills, getting the most out of doing (“hands-on” learning), memory building, tips for staying motivated, developing a learning plan.

The above links are our suggestions to start you on your way. At the time of writing these web links were active. If you want to look for more, go to [www.google.com](http://www.google.com) and type “self-study basics”, “self-study tips”, “self-study skills” or similar phrases.

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## Need help?



As earlier noted, this course manual complements and supplements PHI103at UI Mobile Class as an online course.

You may contact any of the following units for information, learning resources and library services.

**Distance Learning Centre (DLC)**

University of Ibadan, Nigeria  
Tel: (+234) 08077593551 – 55  
(Student Support Officers)  
Email: [ssu@dlc.ui.edu.ng](mailto:ssu@dlc.ui.edu.ng)

**Head Office**

Morohundiya Complex, Ibadan-  
Ilorin Expressway, Idi-Ose,  
Ibadan.

**Information Centre**

20 Awolowo Road, Bodija,  
Ibadan.

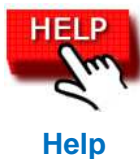
**Lagos Office**

Speedwriting House, No. 16  
Ajanaku Street, Off Salvation  
Bus Stop, Awuse Estate, Opebi,  
Ikeja, Lagos.  
Tel: (+234) 08077593574

For technical issues (computer problems, web access, and etcetera), please send mail to [webmaster@dlc.ui.edu.ng](mailto:webmaster@dlc.ui.edu.ng).

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## Academic Support



A course facilitator is commissioned for this course. You have also been assigned an academic advisor to provide learning support. The contacts of your course facilitator and academic advisor for this course are available at [onlineacademicsupport@dlc.ui.edu.ng](mailto:onlineacademicsupport@dlc.ui.edu.ng)

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## Activities



### Activities

This manual features “Activities,” which may present material that is NOT extensively covered in the Study Sessions. When completing these activities, you will demonstrate your understanding of basic material (by answering questions) before you learn more advanced concepts. You will be provided with answers to every activity question. Therefore, your emphasis when working the activities should be on understanding your answers. It is more important that you understand why every answer is correct.

---

## Assessments



### Assessments

There are two basic forms of self-assessment in this course manual: in-text questions (ITQs) and self assessment questions (SAQs). Feedbacks to the ITQs are placed immediately after the questions, while the feedbacks to SAQs are at the back of manual.

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## Bibliography



### Reading






For those interested in learning more on this subject, we provide you with a list of additional resources at the end of this course manual; these may be books, articles or websites.

# Getting around this course manual

## Margin icons

While working through this course manual you will notice the frequent use of margin icons. These icons serve to “signpost” a particular piece of text, a new task or change in activity; they have been included to help you to find your way around this course manual.

A complete icon set is shown below. We suggest that you familiarize yourself with the icons and their meaning before starting your study.

			
Activity	Assessment	Assignment	Case study
			
Discussion	Group Activity	Help	Outcomes
			
Note	Reflection	Reading	Study skills
			
Summary	Terminology	Time	Tip

# Study Session 1

---

## Human Nature and Society

### Introduction

In this Study Session, we will examine the basic facts about human existence, the essential characteristics of human beings that make up society and how these give rise to social interaction and to the emergence of society.

### Learning Outcomes



#### Outcomes

When you have studied this session, you should be able to:

- 1.1 point out the key features that characterise human nature.
- 1.2 describe how human nature necessitated the formation of society.

### 1.1 Human Nature

**Human nature** What it essentially means to be a human being.

Speculations on **human nature** have been on since antiquity, and scholars across disciplines have always tried to arrive at an adequate understanding of the nature of humanity. There has always been the perennial effort to explain and resolve the apparent mysteries and paradoxes surrounding human nature: humans have always been interested in identifying their essence, place in the universe, position in relation to other beings and the ultimate meaning of their existence.

Speculations and proposals on what human nature is as varied and sometimes as conflicting as the interests and disciplines of the people doing the thinking. A reason for this is located in the fact that the perspective from which the theologian, for instance, examines the nature of the human person is different from that of the psychologist. Likewise, the way the political scientist is interested in human nature is quite different from that of the metaphysician. Even where there is an agreement as far as disciplines and interests are concerned, people still arrive at different or even conflicting viewpoints on the nature of humanity. From the perspective of moral philosophers, for instance, there is a disagreement over whether humans are basically bad, aggressive and destructive, or naturally good, compassionate and cooperative. Within the context of Political Philosophy, philosophers across ages have proposed conflicting views about what our nature is as humans. While some philosophers say that humans are by nature equal, others maintain that nature has made humans unequal. Plato, for instance, is of the opinion that while nature has made some people to be rulers, some are natural soldiers and others artisans, traders or slaves by nature. Thomas Hobbes

is a typical example of a philosopher who construes humans as equal by nature.



Proposals on what human nature is or ought to be are as varied and sometimes as conflicting as the interests and disciplines of the people doing the thinking. While a conception of human nature may have vital implications, directly or otherwise, the question is: does the submission capture a full account of human nature.

For metaphysicians and theologians, the fundamental issue is about the materiality and spirituality of man. While idealists maintain that the human person is essentially spiritual, materialists contend that s/he is primarily material. Dualists, on their own part, argue that humans are dual in nature, having a combination of the material aspect and the spiritual side. While each of the numerous conceptions of human nature has vital implications, directly or otherwise, on practically everything that relates to humankind and society, the fact remains that each of them, on its own, does not offer a comprehensive account of human nature.



Human nature is multi-faceted and quite complex. Thus, questions relating to it do not afford easy answers.

### 1.1.1 Features that Characterize Human Nature

Nonetheless, there are a number of features that humans possess, which determine their interaction in society and also give substance and meaning to morality. Let us discuss each of these features:

#### Rationality

All humans are rational beings. The term, rationality, connotes the ability to reason or to think in a consistent and comprehensive manner and arrive at enlightened conclusions on the basis of available facts, referred to as premises. Thus, describing humans as rational means that they all have the capacity to draw out reasonable conclusions on the basis of available facts in a way that other animals cannot.

However, it must be noted that humans employ this capacity to varying degrees in different circumstances. And at times, people tend to base their conclusions and positions on emotions, prior expectations and biases, and not on any rational consideration. In such cases, we say that people behave irrationally or unreasonably, but this does not imply that they have lost the essential capacity to reason.

#### Freewill and Moral Responsibility

Freewill is a philosophical term that refers to the capacity of rational agents to choose a course of action from among various alternatives. They have the capacity to decide on what to do and what not to do out of available alternatives. This capacity is a corollary of human rationality in the sense that humans are able to make choices simply because they possess the capacity to reason.

Freewill, in turn, gives meaning to the idea of moral responsibility in the sense that it is because humans possess freewill and are capable of rational choices that it is meaningful to hold people to be either praise worthy or blame worthy for their decisions and actions. For example, it is because humans are believed to have the capacity to decide to either lie or tell the truth in a given circumstance that we can reasonably praise an individual for doing what is morally right if s/he tells the truth, or blame a person for doing what is morally wrong if s/he decides to lie.

### **Vulnerability**

Humans differ in terms of their physical strength and mental acumen. But, no matter how physically strong or intelligent specific individuals might be, all humans are equally vulnerable. This is in the sense that all humans are susceptible to various risks in life: they can all fall sick, die and have any kind of accident. Besides, no matter how strong a person might be, all humans have certain needs, ordinarily referred to as basic human needs: need for food, shelter, clothing and other general care that makes life meaningful and pleasant.

These needs are multiple and can be as well complex given the scarcity of resources required to meet them. Resources available in society are such that, at any given point in time, they are never sufficient to satisfy everyone in society at the same time.

### **Lack of Self Sufficiency**

No matter how physically strong, intelligent or gifted a person might be, no one is self sufficient. No human person can survive and have a meaningful and fulfilling existence in isolation of other human beings. This is borne out of the fact that human needs are multiple and complex and can only be effectively met when people interact with one another in diverse forms of social interaction. For instance, there is no way an individual can effectively provide all his food, clothing, shelter and medical and emotional needs all by himself without adequate contribution and assistance from other people.

## **1.2 Need for Social Interaction and the Formation of Society**

The vulnerability of all humans and the fact that none is self sufficient necessitate human interpersonal relations and the formation of society. It is this understanding that generated the idea first presented by Aristotle that human beings are necessarily social animals. This means that they cannot exist and maximize their potentials as human beings unless they live in society where their diverse needs are effectively met through their cooperative efforts.

Society, in this regard, is understood as an organized group of people who share some interests or objectives in common and who enter into cooperative relationships in order to enhance their common interests and achieve their common objectives. It is usually characterized by a common tradition as well as various institutions to ensure that common interests

and objectives are effectively pursued. One of such institutions is the moral institution.

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## Study Session Summary



### Summary

In this Study Session, we focused on the speculations on human nature, which are varied, depending on the perspective from which it is examined and the specific interest of the speculator. However, a number of features are believed to have characterized the nature of humans and also provide the basis for society. These have been identified to include rationality, freewill, vulnerability and insufficiency. Finally, we analyzed the needs for social interaction and the formation of society.

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## Assessment



### Assessment

**SAQ 1.1 (tests Learning Outcome 1.1)**

How can you explain human nature?

**SAQ 1.2 (tests Learning Outcome 1.2)**

Why do we need a society?



## Study Session 2

# Morality and Ethics

## Introduction

Concepts of “morality” and “ethics” are used as synonyms, but within the strict context of Philosophy, the two terms are distinct, though they are tin related. In this Study Session, we will therefore provide a clear understanding of the notions of morality and ethics, and the relationship that exist between them, including their differences.

## Learning Outcomes



### Outcomes

When you have studied this session, you should be able to:

- 2.1 *discuss* the notion of morality.
- 2.2 *describe* the similarities and differences between morality, law and convention.
- 2.3 *define* and use correctly the term “ethics”.

## 2.1 Morality

**Morality** A guide of conduct for human beings as they engage in social interaction.

The word ‘**morality**’ often refers to the normative code of a group of people, that is, the set of principles employed by a people to determine the forms of behaviour that are to be accepted as right or good in opposition to those that are to be rejected as wrong or bad. Some prominent examples of such normative principles are: stealing is bad; honesty is good; promise-keeping is a virtue; it is wrong to murder human beings etc. As an enterprise, morality provides a guide of conduct for human beings as they engage in social interaction by supplying a standard for determining the conducts, the personality traits and even the social institutions or practices that should be accepted as opposed to those that should not be accepted in society. This is why it is acceptable to simply describe morality as a venture committed to the specification of the types of conduct people should embrace, the kind of character traits and social institutions or practices that should be accepted and those that should be avoided in society.

The idea of morality is essentially social. It is only meaningful because humans interact with one another in society. By virtue of social interaction, necessitated by the reality of the scarcity of resources, human vulnerability and lack of self sufficiency, questions about how men ought to relate in society and who should get what at a given time become very important. It is in an attempt to provide plausible answers to these questions that morality came into being.

Indeed, the objective of morality is primarily to order human behavior and their activities in society in a way that would enhance social stability,

enhance the wellbeing of all in society and also provide an adequate context within which all members of society can effectively pursue their interests in ways that would be mutually beneficial. It is in an attempt to achieve the above objective that standards are evolved to specify those actions and character traits that are acceptable as good or bad, right or wrong, justifiable or unjustifiable in society. These standards, in turn, provide the basis for the specific moral judgments we make about specific human conducts. For example, we pass the judgment that an act of stealing is morally wrong simply because of an existing moral standard that specifies that all acts of stealing are morally wrong.

From a perspective, it is very tempting to say that morality can be individual when individuals have their personal moral standards and codes of conduct that are distinct from those of their society. But then, the individuals upholding such moral standards must at least be thinking of other members of society as they determine how they want to relate with others in society and possibly also wish that others in society would adopt their personal codes of conduct. To the extent that the people upholding such “personal moral standards” take others into consideration, we can reasonably contend that these personal moral standards have sufficient social contents. Indeed, the life of society is the normal atmosphere and training ground of morality. Moral ideas normally develop and are constantly criticized and modified as people engage in social interaction.

### **2.1.1 What Makes an Issue a Moral Issue?**

Obviously, moral issues are about human actions. Non-human actions are usually not appraised from a moral perspective. For instance, it would not make much sense to say of the flood or hurricane that ravage cities, killing multitudes and destroying vast infrastructural facilities that it has done something immoral. Neither do we normally evaluate the behavior of animals from the moral perspective. The dog that bit a child could not be said to have carried out an immoral thing. Even when we say that the dog has done something bad, we definitely are not using the word “bad” in a moral sense.

We need to appreciate the fact that terms such as, good, bad, right and wrong, employed to denote the moral value of human actions, apart from having their usual moral connotations also have non-moral meanings. For instance, when we say that a knife or a car is good, the term ‘good’ is not used in a moral but a non-moral sense. In the latter sense ‘good’ is used, for instance, to show that the knife or car is effective in achieving the purpose for which it was made.

We must also understand that it is not every human action that is susceptible to moral evaluation. Some are morally neutral and are called amoral human actions. This category of actions is not morally relevant as it would not be meaningful to say that they are morally good or bad, right or wrong. For instance, no one could reasonably say that my decision to wear a pair of black shoes and not a brown one, or perhaps eating bread and sausage for breakfast, rather than pancakes, is a moral decision. Hence, it is important that we are able to distinguish between those

human actions that are morally relevant and the ones that are morally irrelevant.

The important question to ask now is: what makes an issue a moral issue? Essentially, moral issues are defined by their relevance to the well being of people in society. For an issue to be moral, it must affect the well being of people in society either by increasing or decreasing the harm or benefit that would accrue to them. However, there is a debate over whether or not an issue is a moral issue when only the wellbeing of the agent is at stake.

Apart from the fact that a moral issue is essentially related to human actions and borders on their wellbeing, it must also be a product of free choice. This suggests that for a human action to be subject to moral evaluation it must have been an action carried out by the individual as a free agent. It must not be an action carried out under any form of compulsion.

### **Essential Features of Morality**

The following are the distinctive features of morality:

1. The making of normative statements or judgments about specific human actions to the effect that they are either good or bad, right or wrong, just or unjust. Examples are:
  - a) John did something wrong by lying.
  - b) It was right for Sarah to have told the truth.
  - c) It is morally bad for Steven to have stolen the money.
2. The possibility of a demand for the reasons or justifications for the normative statements made.
3. The reliance on some normative principles, rules or ideals to provide justification for the moral judgments made. For instance:
  - a) Lying is wrong.
  - b) Honesty is a virtue.
  - c) Stealing is bad.
4. Some emotional states of approval or disapproval attached to the judgments made and the rules and principles relevant to them. There would also be the desire to communicate such emotional states to others.
5. The existence of some sanctions or incentives, which is usually verbal, in the form of either blame or praise.

## **2.2 Morality, Law and Convention**

When considered as a social system for regulating human conduct, morality has very close affinity to **law** (the legal system) on one hand and **convention** on the other. They are all concerned with the regulation of human behaviour in order to facilitate cordial and mutually beneficial social relationships, social stability, peace and social development. The three are concerned with the determination of what ought to be done and how people ought to behave in society.

However, convention differs from law and morality in that it is basically about what is socially convenient and is largely a matter of appearance and taste. It is simply about the way a people traditionally behave reinforced by the assumption that they should, for this reason, continue to behave the same way. It is the way a people traditionally conducts its affairs. Examples of conventions include traditional modes of greetings and weddings. Convention does not deal with matters that are socially crucial in the way that morality and law do. This is in the sense that while matters of convention may not have any serious and direct implication on the prospects of human wellbeing, issues of morality and law do. Both, for examples, forbid such acts as murder and stealing and encourage honesty and respect for human dignity.

One important similarity between convention and morality, and which distinguishes them from law is that the former are not created or changeable by a deliberate legislative, executive or judicial act, the latter can be so created or changed. Another important similarity between morality and convention, which separates them from law, is that the former do not have any sanction beyond praise and blame and other verbal expressions of approval or disapproval, favour or disfavour. Legal sanctions, however, extend beyond expressions of approval or disapproval or the apportioning of praise or blame to include physical force or at the least, a threat of its use.

## 2.3 Ethics

Ethics is defined simply as the philosophy of morality. This suggests that the subject matter of ethics is morality. Thus, ethics may be rightly understood as the critical examination of morality. Given the understanding of morality as being concerned with the setting of normative standards for evaluating human actions and character with a view to determining which ones are right or wrong, good or bad, just or unjust, ethics as the philosophy of morality can be rightly described as a critical examination of the normative standards employed by individuals, groups and societies to determine the moral status of human actions, character and in some situations, social institutions or practices. Such critical examination would also include:

1. The analysis of ethical concepts such as good, bad, right, wrong, just, unjust, duty, rights, etc. The objective of this analysis is to clarify what these ethical concepts stand for as well as their implications.
2. The scrutiny of moral judgments so as to ascertain their actual meaning and implications. Effort is also made to justify moral judgments by appealing to appropriate moral principles or general rules
3. The clarification and justification of the moral principles normally appealed to for the justification of moral judgments.

From the foregoing, it is instructive to note that while the major concern of morality is to evaluate human conducts, personality traits and social institutions or practices and arrive at normative judgments about them to the effect that they are good or bad, just or unjust, right or wrong, etc,

ethics critically examines these judgments and attempts to determine the extent to which they are or can be justified. But, to do this effectively, it is important that the core concepts featured in these judgments are clarified, and the principles on the basis of which they are arrived at are also clarified and justified.



While morality refers to social conventions about right or wrong conduct, ethics involves defining, analyzing, evaluating and resolving moral problems and developing moral criteria to guide human behaviour.

It is relatively common to identify three sub-divisions of ethics: descriptive ethics; normative ethics and meta-ethics. Let us now examine each of these in turn.

### 2.3.1 Descriptive Ethics

The basic concern of descriptive ethics is to describe the moral positions subscribed to by individuals, groups or societies. For instance, the claim that ‘Maxwell believes that abortion is morally acceptable’ or that ‘stealing is construed as morally good in ancient Greece’ falls within the domain of descriptive ethics. These claims merely give a report that can be verified, about the moral conviction of Maxwell or the people of ancient Greece. This is the kind of report presented by sociologists and anthropologists and is denied of being truly philosophical.

### 2.3.2 Normative Ethics

Normative ethics is the arena where moral judgments and principles are made. It is often described as the arena of morality proper. Statements such as, ‘John did something wrong by lying’; ‘it was right for Sarah to have told the truth’; ‘it is morally bad for Steven to have stolen the money’ are the kind of normative statements that are made in normative ethics. Examples of moral principles that are arrived at in this arena include ‘stealing is wrong’; ‘Honesty is good; and ‘kindness is a virtue’. Such claims are made by practically every person in our daily existence. They are usually arrived at by assessing the actual behaviours of individuals.

An important distinction between normative judgments and normative principles is that while the former are about specific human actions or character, the latter is concerned with kinds of actions or character. Besides, the relationship between moral judgments and principles is that the latter is usually appealed to in the making of the latter.

### 2.3.3 Meta-Ethics

In meta-ethics, the major interest is to subject moral statements, moral principles and their constituent moral terms to critical examination in order to determine their actual connotations and implications.

Philosophers of the analytic school are of the opinion that this is the basic interest of philosophers and what should be their primary concern in ethics. The reality, however, is that, the analysis of ethical concepts as

well as the evaluation of moral judgments and principles would not even take off until moral concepts that are employed to construct moral judgments and principles have been analysed and clarified. Thus, the three sub-divisions of Ethics, discussed above appear to be to be integrally related.

## Study Session Summary



### Summary

In this Study Session, we focused on the clarification of morality and ethics. While morality is primarily about the setting up of normative standards for assessing human actions, personality traits and social institutions or practices as acceptable or unacceptable, the concern of ethics is basically to critically evaluate these outputs of morality in order to clarify and justify them. Three major subdivisions of ethics were also identified and briefly examined, these are: normative ethics, descriptive ethics and meta-ethics.

## Assessment



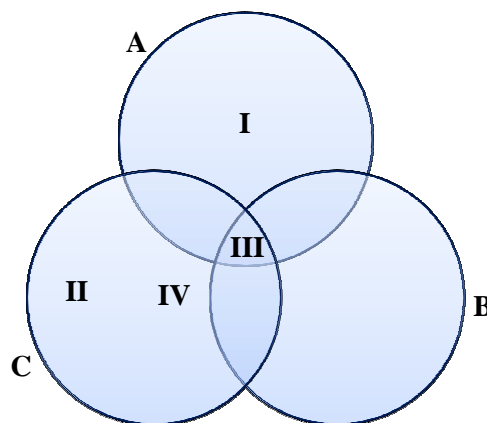
### Assessment

#### SAQ 2.1 (tests Learning Outcome 2.1)

How will you ascertain that an issue is moral?

#### SAQ 2.2 (tests Learning Outcome 2.2)

When considered as a social system for regulating human conduct, morality, law and convention all has very close affinity as they are all concerned with the determination of what ought to be done and how people ought to behave in society. The following figure captures the similarities and differences between these concepts.



- I. Basically about what is socially convenient, largely a matter of appearance and tradition.
- II. Created or changeable by a deliberate legislative, executive or judicial act.
- III. Sanctions include praise or blame, and favour or disfavour.

IV. Sanctions include physical force or at the least, a threat of its use.

Use the information above to fill the blank spaces below:

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

C. \_\_\_\_\_

**SAQ 2.3 (measures Learning Outcome 2.3)**

Label the following statements into appropriate sub-division of ethics (meta-ethics, descriptive ethics, and normative ethics):

- I. What does "good" and "right" mean?
- II. Virgin brides are celebrated in Yoruba land.
- III. Are moral values objective?
- IV. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.
- V. The right action is the action that produces the greatest happiness for the greatest number.

## Study Session 3

# Ethical Utilitarianism

## Introduction

In this Study Session we will discuss the theory of ethical utilitarianism. We will also examine criticisms that have been levelled against this theory.

## Learning Outcomes



### Outcomes

When you have studied this session, you should be able to:

- 3.1 *explain* the main claims of ethical utilitarianism.
- 3.2 *highlight* some of the criticism levelled against utilitarianism.

## 3.1 Overview of Ethical Utilitarianism

**Ethical utilitarianism** as a moral theory maintains that the ultimate standard for determining the moral value or status of human conducts, human character, social institutions or social practices is the principle of utility. This, in the strict sense, maintains that the moral end we should seek in all that we do is the attainment of the greatest possible balance of good over evil or the least balance of evil over good. In this context, “good” and “evil” are used in the non-moral sense and are interpreted differently by different utilitarians: Good could be interpreted or defined in terms of pleasure, happiness, social security, economic wellbeing or social stability. Likewise, evil could connote displeasure, pain, social crisis or poverty.

Essentially, utilitarians believe that the moral value of an action, for instance, is to be determined by a consideration of its utility, consequence or product, measured in terms of happiness, pleasure, social wellbeing or any other consideration that can be quantified. Thus, an action that is morally good or right for a utilitarian would be one that has a desirable consequence or at least a greater balance of desirable consequences over the undesirable consequences, and it is by virtue of the emphasis on the consequence of actions in determining their moral worth that Utilitarianism is also called Consequentialism.

Utilitarians differ on who should be the focus in the effort to determine the moral status of actions. While some utilitarians maintain that attention should be paid primarily to the utility accruing to the actual agent, others contend that focus should be on other people affected by the action in addition to the agent himself/herself. The former position is called egoistic-utilitarianism and the latter communal or social-Utilitarianism.



For now, it is sufficient to note that egoistic-utilitarianism is not as popular as the communal or social utilitarianism.

For utilitarians, nothing is morally good or bad, right or wrong in itself. Rather, these moral values are merely imputed to human actions by virtue of the kind of utility or consequence they have. To determine the actual moral value of an action, utilitarians differ on what should be their focus: while some argue that focus should be on the actual conduct we are interested in determining its moral value, others contend that primary attention should be paid to the rules guiding the action in question. It is this difference in the camp of the utilitarians that led to the distinction between act-utilitarianism and rule-utilitarianism. Let us briefly examine each of these in turn.

### 3.1.1 Act-Utilitarianism

To determine the moral status of human actions, act-utilitarians focus directly on specific actions and their consequences. An action would be considered to be morally right or good if it has a greater balance of positive results (such as happiness, pleasure and social stability) over the negative ones (unhappiness, pain or social disorder). Usually, act-utilitarians do not appeal to any general moral principle or rule. Rather, they advocate that each specific case should be treated on its own merit, with direct consideration given to its consequences or utility for both the agent and other people that would be affected by the action in question.

For example, in an attempt to determine the moral value of a given action, say the theft of ten thousand naira by Mr. Joseph, an act-utilitarian would not appeal to any general moral standpoint or principle regarding stealing generally. Instead, attention would be given to the direct consequences of the specific theft of ten thousand naira by Mr. Joseph. If the given act of theft is found to produce a greater balance of happiness over unhappiness or pleasure over pain for those affected by the action, then it is said to be a morally right action. However, if it has a greater balance of pain or unhappiness over pleasure or happiness, it is said to be morally wrong.

#### Problems with Act-Utilitarianism

There are several problems with act-utilitarianism. One is that it can have the absurd result that two similar acts are ascribed with conflicting moral values. An example would make the point we are making clearer. Let us consider two cases:



#### Case Study A

Shina stole the sum of ten thousand naira from his mother, who intended to purchase a make-up kit with it, and gave it out to charity for the feeding of five motherless children for a period of two weeks.

**Remarks:** Here, an act-utilitarian would say that Harry's act of theft is morally right as it is more productive of happiness than if the money was spent by the mother.



### Case Study B

Jezzy stole a sum of ten thousand naira from her mother who had the intention to give the money to assist seven accident victims in a local hospital. Helen spent the money on a night out with her boyfriend.

**Remarks:** Here, as an act-utilitarian, we would say that Jezzy's action is morally wrong because it is productive of a greater balance of unhappiness than happiness. More happiness would be generated had she not stolen the money and it is given to help the seven accident victim..

From the above cases, it is seen that two similar acts of stealing are ascribed with opposing moral values, case A is said to be morally right and case B is considered to be morally wrong. Ordinarily, we say of the same kinds of actions that they have the same moral values, and not that some are good and some others are bad. This is suggestive of inconsistency.

Another problem with act-utilitarianism relates to the problem of how to actually calculate all the possible consequences of an action before it is embarked upon. In a very fundamental sense, we morally assess human actions even before they are actually carried out so as to decide which of the available options is morally right and which one is wrong from the moral perspective. Going by the thesis of act-utilitarianism, such an assessment must be based on an analysis of all the consequences of the action, which unfortunately cannot all be determined a priori.

We are usually unable to predict all the consequences of human actions before they are actually carried out, and this renders act-utilitarianism an inadequate moral standard. This is in the sense that it cannot be relied on to provide a reliable moral guide for determining which actions to carry out and which ones to refrain from. Besides, situations in which we are required to make moral decisions are usually such that we do not have the time to analyse all the possible consequences of all the available options in order to identify the option with the greater balance of utility.

A third problem with act-utilitarianism is that if it is followed to its logical conclusion, it requires too much of a sacrifice from people as the morally right course of action would be the option that produces the greatest utility out of all available options. An example would help to make the problem clearer. Suppose you have three options before you:

- (A) Spend the night leisurely watching T.V at home after a long hard day.
- (B) Work as a volunteer in a hospital's emergency section overnight.
- (C) Teach a group of adult students in an evening class for free.

Of the three available options, B and C would almost certainly produce a greater balance of utility, measured perhaps in terms of happiness, than would be produced if you stay back at home to watch T.V. Hence, it would be morally wrong for you to stay back at home to rest and watch T.V because you would not be choosing the alternative action with the greater utility.

Another illustration of the fact that act-utilitarianism demands for too much sacrifices from people is indicated in the fact that it suggests that it would be morally wrong for me to give one thousand naira to charity when I could have given two thousand naira.

A further problem with act-utilitarianism that is closely related to the above is that it focuses on the total amount of utility produced by an action without considering the actual distribution of the utility produced. Let us suppose that we have two actions C and D with an equal amount of utility, the case of C is such that the utility would benefit only two people while three other people would be put at a disadvantage. D, however, is such that the benefit of the utility of the action in question would equally accrue to the five people. An act utilitarian would say that actions C and D are equally morally right because they have an equal amount of utility notwithstanding the fact that D has a better distribution of benefits than C. Ordinarily, we would want to say that D is the morally right course of action or at least that it is more acceptable from the moral perspective than C.

### 3.1.2 Rule-Utilitarianism

Rule-utilitarianism emerged in response to the problems with act-utilitarianism. An assumption of this ethical theory is that moral actions are rule governed in the sense that they all have certain moral rules or principles underlying them. It maintains that we should base our actions on only those moral rules that produce more utility if people conform to them than if they do not. For rule-utilitarians, our determination of the moral value of human actions or character should not be based on any consideration of the actual utility of specific actions. Rather, we should focus on the moral rules underlying specific actions and base our evaluation of the moral value of actions on the consequences of following these rules. If following a particular moral rule is generally productive of happiness or pleasure, for example, then whatever action that is based on such a rule is considered to be morally good or right. Conversely, if a rule is known to generate more unhappiness or pain than happiness or pleasure in society, then whatever action is based on it is deemed by the rule-utilitarians to be morally wrong or bad. Examples of moral rules generally considered to be productive of a greater balance of good over evil include: lying is wrong; honesty is good; it is good to be kind to fellow human beings; murder is morally wrong.

Let us consider an example: A young man, James, is confronted with the need to make a choice between falsifying his birth records and getting a lucrative job and telling the truth about his age and become unqualified for the job as his age is above the age limit set for the job. In this case, rule-utilitarians would reason along the following lines:

Falsifying your birth records amount to lying about your age.

Lying is always morally wrong.

Therefore, it would be morally wrong for James to falsify his birth records.



The conclusion that it would be morally wrong for James to falsify his birth records is ultimately based on the moral rule that lying is wrong coupled with the fact that the falsification of birth records is an instance of lying.

For rule-utilitarians, our determination of the moral value of human actions or character should not be based on any consideration of the actual utility of specific actions. Rather, we should focus on the moral rules underlying specific actions and base our evaluation of the moral value of actions on the consequences of following these rules.

Indeed, in actual life, most people rely on rules or general principles to guide their decisions and conducts. These rules and principles are also employed to appraise the conducts of others. Rule-utilitarians recognise the importance of identifying the correct moral rules and principles that should be employed and also of providing justification for such rules. Their position is that a moral rule is correct if it would produce more utility when people conform to it than if they do not.

### Objections to Rule-Utilitarianism

One of the problems with rule-utilitarianism is that, in practical life, there are occasions when we are unable to state explicitly the actual moral rules that underlie our actions. Several rules might appear relevant and a third party trying to evaluate an action might be at a loss as to which of the relevant rules the agent was actually responding to. In such cases, it would be difficult to evaluate our actions and determine its actual moral status.

There is also the problem of exceptional cases. A rule which is generally productive of more utility followed might in a given case yield lowers utility. Hence, the fact that following a particular moral rule usually produces higher utility does not guarantee that it would always do so. And if in a given case it fails to generate higher result, the action in question cannot be said to be the morally right option, going by the general thesis of utilitarianism which maintains that the morally right options are those that are productive, directly or indirectly, of higher utility.

## 3.2 General Objections to Utilitarianism

Critics of utilitarianism are quick to point out that an action or rule may maximise the sum of good in society and yet be unjust in how the total good is distributed in society. It is possible for the total amount of good generated by an action or rule that utilitarians would say is the morally right option because it is productive of the most good to be considered as wrong and perhaps unjust if it, for example, violates the basic rights of minorities. Alternatively, such action or rule might concentrate the goods generated in the hands of very few people in society while majority of those affected by it are disadvantaged.

Besides, the fact that an action or the rule upon which it is based is productive of better utility in society than other alternatives does not necessarily imply that it would be the morally right option to adopt. We

might want to reject such action as morally wrong by a consideration of the very nature of the action or the rule itself. This objection to utilitarianism thrives on the fact that it is not only considerations of utility that determines the actual moral status of human actions. It is also important that we consider the action in itself because it is possible for an action, by its very essence, to be very wrong or unjust. A good example would be when it violates the fundamental of some people, even if these are in the minority.

The case of the legendary Robin Hood might be a good example here. He was reputed to specialize in robbing the wealthy in society and give the proceeds to the poor who were in a more dire need of the stolen items than the original owners. Given the fact that there would have been more of the poor than the wealthy in society, Robin Hood's actions would have generated a greater balance of good (measured in terms of the overall happiness, comfort and wellbeing) in society. However, his actions amount to stealing, which by its nature can be and is commonly rejected as morally wrong irrespective of the utility it might have for anyone. It is also grossly unjust as it violates the rights of the wealthy to enjoy their legitimately acquired wealth and dispose the same in any way they desire so long as they do not violate the rights of others in the process.

Another problem with utilitarianism derives from its dependence on the possibility of measuring and comparing the various utility that would be generated by the different options of actions before us. For utilitarianism to be practicable at all, it must be possible to measure the various consequences of alternative line of actions as this is requisite for the determination of their actual moral status. The difficulty, however, is that it is not always possible to measure and compare the consequences of actions a priori. Very often, there are unforeseen consequences of actions that come up after the actions have been carried out. In effect, utilitarianism is flawed as a guide for determining what actions are morally right before they are embarked upon.

Also, when actions have been carried out, there is also the difficulty of how to measure their consequences. How do we, for instance, determine the intensity and perhaps the duration of happiness or pain as well as the degree of change in either as a result of an action?

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## Study Session Summary



### Summary

In this Study Session, we examined the theory of ethical utilitarianism. The distinction between act and rule distinction was made. Act-utilitarianism focuses on the consequences or utility of specific actions while rule-utilitarianism concentrates on the rule underlying specific actions in the determination of the moral value of actions. We also considered the problems with each of the variants of utilitarianism in view of which it is clear that the theory is not entirely reliable to determine which actions are morally right or wrong, good or bad, acceptable or unacceptable.

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## Assessment



### Assessment

#### SAQ 3.1 (tests Learning Outcomes 3.1 and 3.2)

What is the status of each of the following statements (*true /false*)? In each case, give explanation to your answer.

- I. For an act-utilitarianism, an action would be considered to be morally right or good if it has a greater balance of positive results over the negative ones.
- II. Act-utilitarians advocate that all acts should have a standard of judgement.
- III. An assumption of rule-utilitarianism is that moral actions are rule governed.
- IV. If a rule is known to generate more unhappiness or pain than happiness or pleasure in society, then whatever action is based on it is deemed by the rule-utilitarians to be morally right or good.
- V. The fact that following a particular moral rule usually produces higher utility does not guarantee that it would always be so.

## Study Session 4

# Ethical Deontology

## Introduction

In this Study Session, we will examine what ethical deontology stands for and the extent to which it offers a viable standard for determining the moral value of human actions.

## Learning Outcomes



### Outcomes

When you have studied this session, you should be able to:

- 4.1 *explain* the main claims of ethical deontology.
- 4.2 *discuss* the general problem of deontology.

## 4.1 Ethical Deontology

Ethical deontology refers to the ethical theories that deny all forms of consequentialism. The position is also known as non-consequentialism. It denies that whether an action is morally right or wrong is to be determined by an evaluation of the consequence or utility of actions. Speaking broadly, deontologists contend that the moral value of an action is to be determined by a consideration of its inherent nature or the motive behind it. In the opinion of deontologists, at least some acts are morally wrong in themselves (e.g., lying, breaking a promise, punishing the innocent, murder) irrespective of their consequence or utility for the agent or the people affected by them. Perhaps the most prominent advocate of ethical deontology is Immanuel Kant. Others include W.D. Ross and H.A. Pritchard.



### Tip

Ethical deontology contends that an action is not to be determined morally right or wrong by an evaluation of the consequence or utility of actions. Rather, the moral value of an action is to be determined by a consideration of its inherent nature or the motive behind it.

For a deontologist, whether an action is right or wrong is determined by a careful scrutiny of its inherent nature or underlying motive without any appeal to its utility or consequence. You are to carefully examine the essential nature of the action and all the relevant facts relating to the nature of the action and simply decide or intuit whether the action is morally right or wrong. There are two variants of the deontological theories, namely the act and the rule versions. We will now discuss each of these in turn.



### 4.1.1 Act-Deontology

The extreme version of act-deontology claims that we are to identify what is the morally good, right or obligatory thing to do in each given situation without appealing to any rule or what would bring about a greater balance of good over evil for oneself or society as a whole. While some act-deontologists contend that we are to decide on the moral value of a specific action after a careful consideration of the very nature of the action, without any consideration for utility or consequence, others affirm that we are to arrive at a determination of what is morally right or wrong, good or bad by intuition.

A less extreme version of act-deontology allows that some general rules can be built up from particular decisions or intuitions on the moral status of actions and these may be useful in determining what should be done in other similar cases in which we need to determine the moral status of actions. However, this position does not allow that a general rule may ever supersede a well taken particular judgment as to what should be the morally right option in a given situation.

#### Problems with Act-Deontology

A major flaw of act-deontology is that, in real terms, it does not offer us any precise standard for determining what is right or wrong in particular cases. Particular judgments are seen as basic and general rules, if they are to exist at all, are to be derived from particular judgments. The position of the theory is that after being clear about the facts of a case, we form a judgment about what should be done either by some kind of intuition or decision.

With regards to intuition, a problem is that anthropological, psychological and daily empirical evidences do not support the existence of a faculty of intuition. Likewise, the act-deontologists who emphasize 'decision' fail to specify any principle or consideration to actually guide our moral decisions in given situations. All that is said is that we must carefully examine the facts of the case, without any consideration for utility or consequence, and then decide on the right course of action. Beyond this, act-deontologists insist there is nothing else to appeal to. We simply intuit, choose or decide on what to do.

Act-deontologists argue that each moral situation is unique and different in such a way that no general rule could be of any significant help in identifying what should be done, except as mere rules of the thumb. However, what they ignore is the fact that even though it might be true that each situation is unique, it is not true that it is unique in all respects or that it cannot be like other situations in morally relevant respects. Indeed, events and situations are often very similar in relevant respects that justify us to apply the same general rule to them.

Another problem with act-deontology is that it is practically impossible to live without rules because we cannot always put in the time and effort required to judge each situation anew. Also, moral rules are needed in the process of moral education. For example, children are taught to discern between the morally good and the morally bad actions through the application of moral rules.



In response to this criticism, an act-deontologist, especially one of the less extreme versions, might reply that the rules that might be appealed to are those arrived at by induction on the basis of past intuitions or decisions. And, such generalizations can always be questioned and should never supersede any well taken decision on any moral issue.

Critics of act-deontology also contend that particular moral judgments are not purely particular but sufficiently general to warrant the application of similar rules. Going by the position of act-deontologists, the claim that “this is what X ought to do in situation Y” does not entail what X or anyone else should do in similar situations. However, this position amounts to an inconsistency or the use of a double standard because, ordinarily, if we say that “X should do Y in situation Z” we should be ready to say the same for other people in other sufficiently similar situation.

What act-deontologists ignore is that moral and value predicates such as good, bad, right and wrong are such that if they belong to an action or object, they would also belong to any other action or object with similar properties. For instance, to say that “I ought not to steal” implies that everyone ought not to steal”. If you judge that “X is right” then one is committed to judging that anything exactly like or sufficiently like X in relevant respects is also right.

### **4.1.2 Rule-Deontology**

Rule-deontologists maintain that the standard of right and wrong consists of one or more rules. They, however, insist that these rules are valid independently of their utility or consequence. Contrary to the viewpoint of the act-deontologists, rule-deontologists affirm that these rules are basic and not derived by induction from particular judgments. Rather, judgments about what to do in specific cases are to be determined in the light of rules, with each rule stating that we ought to act or refrain from acting in a certain way in a given kind of situation.

Two prominent examples of theories that fall under the rubric of rule-deontology are the Divine Command theory of morality and Kant’s moral theory. These are to be discussed in details in subsequent lectures. But for now, it is sufficient to note that the rules advocated as the standard for determining the moral value of actions by the divine command theorists are those commanded by God while for Kant, they are derived from reason.

### **Problems with Rule-Deontology**

An objection that is quite common against rule-deontology is that there is no rule which does not admit of exceptions. Let us consider, for instance, the moral rule which specifies that it is morally wrong to lie. Ordinarily, this rule is generally subscribed to, but there are some instances in which one might be willing to make an exception to the rule and affirm that in such cases, it would be morally wrong not to lie. For example, it might not be morally wrong to lie to a friend you know to be mentally deranged when he requests that you should lend him your rifle that you no longer have it. The lie might be justified on the ground that the deranged friend in question is likely to commit murder with the rifle.

However, deontologists such as W.D. Ross contend that no moral rule allows for exception. Moral rules appear to have exceptions only when two moral rules conflict and one seems to be more important than the other and the less important one has to give way to the more important one. In an attempt to resolve the problem of conflicting moral rules, Ross came up with the dichotomy between prima facie duties and actual duties.

Prima facie duties are the duties one has everything be equal, that is, if other moral considerations do not intervene. Prima facie duties, in some situations, may be outweighed by other more important obligations or higher rules of prima facie duty. Actual duties are the duties one has in spite of all other moral considerations that might be at play.

As an example, the moral rule that 'it is good to always tell the truth' and the one that says that 'it is morally right to always do all we can to save an innocent life' may be in conflict. Let us imagine that a man being chased by hired assassins runs into your compound and quickly hides away in a dry well. On getting to your compound five minutes later, the assassins not sure of their preys where-about, ask if you have seen anyone run in. Now, you have to make a moral choice between obeying the rule that you should tell the truth and the one that says you should save an innocent life. Going by Ross's distinction, one of these rules would represent prima facie duty and the other actual duty.

A means of identifying which of the conflicting rules represents the actual duty is to rank them and identify which one is more important or prior. However, as deontologists, such ranking must not involve any consideration of utility. Rather, it might be determined by intuitively or arbitrarily identifying which is more basic than the conflicting counterpart. According to Ross, basic moral rules are self evident and do not require the criterion of utility or any other criterion, for that matter, for their identification.

## 4.2 General Problems with Deontology

The deontological position in ethics affirms that it is possible to determine the moral value of an action without any recourse to the utility of the action in question. This is to be established by a direct consideration of the relevant action or the rule underlying it. However, in practical terms, we normally take into account the utility of actions in the effort to determine their moral worth. Usually, the effects of a given action on the agent and other relevant stakeholders is crucial in the determination of whether an action is good or bad, right or wrong.

Besides, the deontological standard might result in actions that would be described as inherently good while it has very heinous social effects. And, given the fact that morality is essentially a social enterprise that is designed to achieve a number of social ends, it is arguable that any principle that would be employed as a moral standard should have a positive social impact. In view of this, it is arguable that it does not make much sense to maintain that an action is inherently good without any consideration for its social effect.

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## Study Session Summary



### Summary

In this Study Session, we focused on the ethical deontology, which affirms that the moral value of actions should be determined without any consideration of the utility of the actions. We also considered the distinction between act and rule deontology. Act-deontology focuses on the inherent features of specific actions and on the basis this intuitively or decides on their moral value. Rule-deontology concentrates on the rule underlying specific actions in the determination of the moral value of actions. Some of the problems with each of the variants of deontology have also been examined.

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## Assessment



### Assessment

#### SAQ 4.1 (tests Learning Outcomes 4.1 and 4.2)

Which of the following statements is *false*? In each case explain why it is incorrect.

- I. Ethical deontology refers to the ethical theories that support all forms of consequentialism.
- II. Ethical deontology contends that the moral value of an action is to be determined by a consideration of its inherent nature or the motive behind it.
- III. Act-deontology consists of precise standards for ascertaining what is just in specific cases.
- IV. Rule-deontologists maintain that the standard of right and wrong consists of rules, which are valid independently of their utility or consequence.

## Study Session 5

# Divine Command Theory of Morality

## Introduction

Attempts by many people in society, to justify a moral position by appealing to some religious tenets, aligns with divine Command theory of morality. Thus, this Study Session, we will appraise the main claims of the theory.

## Learning Outcomes



### Outcomes

When you have studied this session, you should be able to:

5.1 *explain* the main claim of the divine command theory of morality.

5.2 *critically* discuss the problems emanating from the theory.

## 5.1 Claims of Divine Command Theory of Morality

The basic claim of the Divine Command theory of morality is that the ultimate and only valid standard for determining what is right or wrong, good or bad is God's laws or commandments as we have them in the various religious traditions of the world. Thus, going by the theory, an action is morally bad or wrong if only it is forbidden by God and it is morally good or right if it is either permitted or required by God. For the Divine Command theorists, nothing is good or bad in itself. Rather, it is what God says about actions that determine whether they are good or not. This is the same way a legislative pronouncement determines what is legal or illegal. Hence, were it to be that God says that killing of human beings is required or permitted, then it would be morally wrong not to kill human beings. Should God say that promise keeping is prohibited, it would then be morally wrong to keep one's promise.



### Tip

In divine command theory of morality, an action is morally bad or wrong if only it is forbidden by God; and it is morally good or right if it is either permitted or required by God.

Some of the Divine Command theorists of morality contend that divine prescriptions are morally binding on all persons simply because God has the power to reward the obedient and punish the offenders. Many religions hold a belief in the idea of divine punishment, both in life and also in the afterlife and it is held by Divine Command theorists that it is the fear of such punishments that motivates people to obey divine commands that are morally binding. In the alternative, others might be

motivated to obey divine commandments because of the desire to be rewarded with certain earthly and eternal benefits.

Another consideration that might be presented for the acceptance of God's command as authoritative in moral matters is that we owe Him a duty of gratitude that necessitates that we obey Him. This duty is borne out of the fact that He created us and has given us different kinds of benefits and blessings according to His divine grace.

In addition, advocates of the Divine Command theory of morality contend that we should abide by the dictates of God because given his attribute as an all good being; He would only command those things that are good. Given His character, He would not require us to do anything evil, wrong or injurious.

## **5.2 Problems with the Divine Command Theory of Morality**

### **5.2.1 The Question of the Existence of God**

The Divine Command theory of morality rests on the assumptions that God exists and that all humans accept that He exists. The truth, however, is that not everyone accepts that God exists and skepticism about the existence of God seriously undermines the theory. This is because we can only accept and appeal to God's laws or commands as the foundation of morality and the ideal standard for determining what is right or wrong in society if we believe that He exists and is interested in how we order our affairs as humans.

Three categories of people are identifiable in society: the theists, who believe that God exists; the atheist, who deny that God exists and; the agnostics, who are not sure if God exists or not. From the above, it is clear that atheists cannot accept the Divine Command theory of morality. Likewise, the agnostics will not accept the theory as they are not convinced that God exists. The peculiar problem confronting the theists is that because not everyone believes in the existence of God, S/he will not be able to convince atheists and agnostics to accept the Divine Command theory of morality. Apart from using accepted moral principles to guide our actions, we also engage in moral debates designed to convince others about the rectitude of our moral positions, justify our moral actions and also to effect a change in their moral dispositions. All of these would not be possible for a Divine Command theorist of morality unless people first accept the basic assumption that God exists.

### **5.2.2 The Epistemological Problem with God's Laws and Commandments**

The Divine Command theory of morality is confronted with the problem of how to know what God actually commanded or prohibited. There is the general assumption that we can get to know what God prescribes or prohibits through a study of the Holy Scriptures. However, the difficulty here is that between religions, for instance Islam and Christianity, there are some conflicts in their accounts of what God has commanded and what He has prohibited. While many Christians interpret the Bible as

saying that polygamy is unacceptable, Muslims generally subscribe to the view that, going by the Koran, polygamy is acceptable.

Besides, even within the same religion, there are debates over how certain scriptures should be interpreted and what precisely God is saying by them. For instance, “thou shall not kill” (Exodus 20:13) and “concerning the works of my hand command ye me” (Isaiah 45:11) have been interpreted differently by Christians. For some, the first scripture means that you should not kill at all while for others it means that one should not commit murder while some other forms of killing might be acceptable. With regards to the second scripture some Christians have interpreted this to imply that God is calling on His people to command Him concerning the works of His hands while others interpret it to mean that God is asking if people have a right to give Him instructions or query Him about what He does.

From another perspective, it is extremely difficult to know what God is saying about some important moral issues because there are no clear cut scriptural references to them. Examples of such issues include euthanasia, suicide, and environmental pollution, equality of opportunity, affirmative action and racism.

Most sacred writings were recorded by human beings occupying specific religious positions such as priests and prophets. The problem here is that it becomes extremely difficult to distinguish what God is saying from what the writer of the sacred writing has added. For instance, there is an opinion that the Ten Commandments presented by Moses to the children of Israel in the wilderness were actually compiled by Moses himself after a careful consideration of the social and moral problems prevailing in the camp of the Israelites at that time. One factor that is alluded to in an attempt to justify this view is that the Ten Commandments were actually very similar to the rules and regulation found among other tribes at that time.

It might be contested further that knowing the nature of the of the crop of people that Moses led out of Egypt as particularly difficult to lead, Moses deliberated presented the Ten Commandments to have originated from God so that they would be more readily accepted by the people. If he had told them that the Commandments were arrived at after a careful assessment of the prevailing social conditions in the camp of the Israelites, the people would, probably, not have accepted them.

### **5.2.3The Problem of Arbitrariness of Morality**

Going by the Divine Command theory of morality, it is whatever God says that determines what is right or wrong. If God requires or permits something, it is right irrespective of the nature of what is actually required or permitted. If God prohibits honesty, then honesty becomes morally wrong and if God requires stealing, it becomes morally good to steal and bad not to.

A problem with the position of the Divine Command theorists of morality is that it does not offer any cogent reason why certain things are prescribed and some others are prohibited by God beyond the claim that He does. The highest justification that is available would be to simply say

that it is either prescribed or prohibited by God. There is no notion of right or wrong outside what God commands and what He prohibits. The implication of this is that morality is completely dependent on whatever God says and this renders morality quite arbitrary and without any substantial justification. The problem becomes more intensified if we consider the problems we discussed earlier with regards to how to determine what God is saying in the holy writings and the conflicting accounts of God's commands within given religions and also across several religions.

Another theistic position that is quite different from that of the Divine Command theorists maintain that God actually commands things because He recognizes that they are good and prohibits other things because He sees that they are wrong. This suggests that what actually determines what is right or wrong is outside God. And by His divine nature, He would always command those things that are good because they are good and also prohibit those things that are bad because they are bad. God would never arbitrarily select some actions to prohibit and some others to recommend. Instead, He always has reasons for His commands and prohibitions.

From the above understanding that morality is not dependent on God's will, some theists might contend that given God's nature as omniscient and infallible, He is always able to identify those actions that are actually right or wrong. In addition, we must understand that actions such as murder, rape and stealing would still be considered to be wrong by people even if they were commanded by God. Consequently, for the theists who are not Divine Command theorists of morality, God's command should be obeyed, not because they have been commanded by God, but simple because He would always command only those things that are morally right and prohibit those things that are morally wrong.

### **5.2.4 The Fallacy of Appealing to Authority**

Appealing to the commandments and prohibitions of God as the standard for morality and the final determinant of right and wrong constitutes the fallacy of appeal to authority. To say that an action is right or wrong simply because it is commanded or recommended by God without offering any independent reason to show that the action is actually good or bad is unacceptable. Besides, if we allude to the theistic position that maintains that God commands certain actions because He recognizes that they are actually good, then it follows that humans could come to recognize the actual moral status of actions without any reference to the existence God or any divine commandments of God. It might be possible to use the human faculty of reason or intuition to discern the moral value of actions.



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## Study Session Summary



### Summary

In this Study Session, we examined the claims of the divine command theory of morality. It is obvious that the position of the Divine Command theorists is fraught with many difficulties that impinge upon its plausibility. Besides, one tacit implication of the theory is that if it is true, atheists and agnostics would not be able to practice morality. But the truth is that these categories of people effectively practice morality without any allusion to God and this goes to suggest that morality, contrary to the position of the Divine Command theory, is not dependent on God's command.

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## Assessment



### Assessment

#### SAQ 5.1 (tests Learning Outcome 5.1)

Write a scenario of a monk who preaches that sin is evil? What is the premise of his statement?

#### SAQ 5.2 (tests Learning Outcome 5.2)

Which of the following statement is not a problem with divine command theory of morality?

- a) Skepticism about the existence of God seriously undermines the theory
- b) It does not offer cogent reason why certain things are prescribed and some others are prohibited by God beyond the claim that He does.
- c) Certainty of what God actually prescribes.
- d) No independent reason to show that the action is actually good or bad is unacceptable.



## Study Session 6

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# Natural Law Theory of Morality

## Introduction

In this Study Session, we will explore natural law theory of morality. We will examine the extent to which it provides an adequate standard for morality and a guide for determining the moral worth of human actions, personality traits and social institutions practices; and the problems inherent in it.

## Learning Outcomes



### Outcomes

When you have studied this session, you should be able to:

6.1 present the main claims of the natural law theory of morality.

6.2 discuss the problems emanating from the theory.

## 6.1 Natural Law Theory of Morality

An ideal starting point for a discourse on the Natural Law theory of morality is to begin with an analysis of the term ‘natural’. Affirming that a quality, tendency or predisposition is natural to a being suggests that it is part of the essential constituent of the being that makes it what it is. This is the sense in which we employ the term natural in the statements “it is natural for dogs to bark as a sign of aggression” and “it is natural for goats to eat grass”. This usage of the word, natural, connotes what is normal such that when we say of an attribute that it is natural to a being, we mean that it is normal. Hence, saying that it is natural for humans to desire companionship means that it is normal and not out of place. The above suggests that what is unnatural would then be what is abnormal.

It is also of interest to note that what is natural might vary from being to being such that while it is natural for dogs to bark, this is definitely unnatural for goats. Be that as it may, all animals and humans have a number of natural qualities natural in common. For instance, they all by nature have a need for food and also a drive for sex.

However, there is another sense in which the term “natural” might be understood. Here, when we speak of the nature of a thing, we may mean its ideal nature. In this sense, a gap is identified between the ideal nature of a thing and its actual manifestation. For instance, rationality is identified as constituting a natural quality of man but this might be construed as an ideal nature because it is evident that quite a lot of people behave in ways that are irrational. Thus, the term “natural” in this context may not refer to the actual ways a being manifests its character, but the

ways it should given a variety of facts about it. The question now is, in which of these two senses do the natural law theorists of morality employ the word “natural”. When they maintain that moral laws are natural laws that enable humans to attain their ideal nature and ideal natural relationships between one another in society, what exactly do they mean?

In order to discern the actual sense in which the natural law theorists employ the expression “laws of nature”, we must first understand that it is ambiguous, having a descriptive and also a prescriptive connotation. Used descriptively, a law of nature is a universal generalization describing regularities that have been discovered in nature. This is the sense in which the expression is used in the sciences. In this sense, it is the same as physical or scientific laws. In its prescriptive sense, natural laws are prescriptions of nature that are meant to guide human conducts and relationships. They are universal precepts or commands intended by nature to regulate human behaviour.

Hence, for the natural law theorists, natural laws are universal prescriptive principles set in place by nature to regulate human behaviour and they basically enjoin people to do good and refrain from evil. Advocates of the natural law regard it as the primordial and fundamental law which provides a suitable foundation for all other laws. It is seen as the ideal law and the ultimate source of all laws. For them, it is the source from which all laws derive their legal features and obligatory force, having in itself, both legal and moral features.



Natural laws are universal prescriptive principles set in place by nature to regulate human behaviour.

Virtually all natural law theorists maintain that the law of nature is a law of reason in the sense that it accords with the rule of reason and is also discoverable by reason. Its primary principles are said to be self evident to reason while other secondary principles are derivable from the primary one. The most basic of the principles of the natural law is that good should be done while evil should be avoided.

In any discourse on the natural law, emphasis may be either laid on the obligation or the prohibitions that are imposed on people or the rights it confers on them. For instance, in the ancient and medieval era, emphasis was on the obligations and prohibitions of the natural law. In contemporary times however, emphasis has shifted to rights.

### **ITQ**

Moral laws of nature are descriptive in nature. True / false?

### **ITA**

False. In fact, moral laws of nature are prescriptive.

### **Moral Laws of Nature**

For the natural law theorists, moral laws of nature that are applicable to human beings are based on the inherent nature of humans: that is, the way of life and the tendencies to behave in certain ways characteristic of humans. According to the natural law theorists such as St. Thomas Aquinas and Aristotle, each kind of thing or being has its own nature that specifies the conditions for its survival and flourishing as well as the way of life or mode of existence appropriate for it. It is in this regard that it is said that human nature determines the correct moral laws of nature that human beings should obey.

Aristotle was of the opinion that the clue to the way of life appropriate for members of a species is whatever makes members of that species different from members of other species. Thus, the key to the way of life appropriate for humans is to be found in what distinguishes humans from other beings. Aristotle identified rationality as the feature that distinguishes humans from other creatures and infers that the way of life that is appropriate for a human being must be closely related to the capacity for reasoning. He affirms that a contemplative life, dedicated to the acquisition of knowledge and understanding is essential for human flourishing.

Aquinas agrees with Aristotle that reason defines humanity and separates humans from other creatures. As such, he maintains that every will that is at variance with reason would always be evil and that the rule and measure of human acts should always be reason. He says further that all the things that humans have a natural inclination towards are usually apprehended by reason to be good and things to be pursued. On the contrary, those things that humans are averse to are considered by reason to be evil and things we should avoid. Perhaps the most basic human inclination is for self preservation and it is for this reason that Aquinas, for example, says of the law of nature that it prescribes that human beings should always act in ways that would enhance their self preservation. As such, suicide, for instance, is deemed to be immoral because it negates the natural inclination for self preservation.

## **6.2 Problems with the Natural Law Theory of Morality**

Natural law theorists presuppose that it is morally right for humans to act in accordance with their inherent nature and morally wrong to act contrary to this. A problem with this assumption, however, is that it is not every action that accords with human nature that is morally good. Neither is it always the case that every action that is contrary to human nature is morally bad. For instance, there is the opinion expressed by such scholars as Friedrich Nietzsche and John Ruskin that human, and more especially the male gender, are naturally aggressive and predisposed to violence. This position appears validated by the fact that war and violence appear to be a universal feature of humans in all historical epochs.

The question we should attempt to answer in the light of the above is: should humans act in accordance with this natural predisposition towards aggression and violence? Going by the thesis of the natural law theorists, it would be morally right for humans to behave violently and aggressively and wrong for them to behave in a contrary manner. This position is obviously absurd and contrary to our ordinary sense of morality, thereby suggesting that the position of the natural law theorist is untenable.

Usually morality requires, not that we act in accordance with our inherent nature or natural inclination as humans, but that we tame and transcend this in order to engage in actions considered to be morally right. Indeed, the purpose of moral education and socialization is to teach and encourage people to undermine certain natural inclinations so as to carry out morally acceptable actions.

Another problem with the position of the natural law theorists relates to the claim that the primary principles of the natural law are self-evident to reason while other secondary principles are derivable from the primary one. Thomas Aquinas, for example, maintains that such acts as homosexuality and adultery are contrary to reason because they violate certain self-evident moral principles, discovered by reason, which prohibit them.

However, when we say of a principle or perhaps a statement that it is self-evidently true, what we ordinarily mean is that it is necessarily true and its negation is self-contradictory and cannot possibly be true. For instance, the statement “a bachelor is an unmarried man” is self-evidently true. It cannot possibly be true that “it is not the case that a bachelor is an unmarried man”. With the above understanding of self-evident truths, many philosophers have argued that moral principles are not self-evident. For instance, the moral principles prohibiting theft and the killing of innocent people are not self-evidently true because their negations do not involve any logical contradiction. The negation of the moral principle “killing innocent people is morally prohibited” is “killing of innocent people is (permitted) not morally prohibited” and it is not a logical contradiction.

Given the above, it is either advocates of the natural law theory give up the idea that there are self-evident moral principles or provide a plausible idea of self-evidence that would support their position that there are self-evident moral principles.

Advocates of the natural law theory of morality affirm that basic moral principles are prescriptions of reason, and they seem to assume that reason would always prescribe the same moral principles for all peoples at all times. However, the truth is that people differ on their conceptions of those things that are good and those that are bad. For instance, while some people maintain that homosexuality is morally reprehensible, many other people see nothing wrong with it, and to be sure both parties could plausibly claim to have arrived at their conclusions on the basis of reason. Thus, on the basis of available facts, the faculty of reason could lead us to different conclusions on moral matters.

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## Study Session Summary



### Summary

In this Study Session, we examined the natural law theory of morality. It defines moral goodness or rightness in terms of acting in accordance with human nature or the inherent nature of man. This theory affirms that the morally good action is the one that is prescribed by reason and goes on to specify that reason would always prescribe only to those actions that

accord with human natural inclinations as morally good or right. In addition, the theory considers the moral prescriptions of reason to be self evident. We also discussed some of the major problems with the natural law theory. These relates to the ideas that human natural inclinations constitute the basis for morally good actions and that the moral prescription of reason are self evident.

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## Assessment



### Assessment

#### **SAQ 6.1 (tests Learning Outcome 6.1)**

Identify two main elements of moral laws of nature?

#### **SAQ 6.2 (tests Learning Outcome 6.2)**

What is the problem with the presupposition that it is morally right for humans to act in accordance with their inherent nature and morally wrong to act contrary to this.

## Study Session 7

# Rights and Duties

## Introduction

In this Study Session, we will discuss the concepts of rights and duties, as they are employed in moral discourse, with a view to clarify their precise meanings and types.

## Learning Outcomes



### Outcomes

When you have studied this session, you should be able to:

- 7.1 discuss the nature and types of rights
- 7.2 explain the nature and types of duties.

## 7.1 Rights

### 7.1.1 Nature of Rights

When we say that a person has a right to something, we mean that he is entitled to or has justifiable (or sufficient) claim to do or to have something. It might also imply that other persons have a duty to let the right owner do or have what he has a right to. For instance, to say that X has a right to a book, for instance, means that X has a justifiable claim to the book. It might also imply that other people have a duty to let him possess or do whatever he likes with the book without any interference. The kinds of things people normally lay claims of rights to include material goods, landed properties, education, fulfilment of agreements and things considered to be essential to life. There is the opinion that rights are effectively explained in terms of the duties they impose. This is because of the opinion that every right has a corresponding duty in the sense that the right an individual has imposes a corresponding duty on some other persons. For instance the right that a person has to life imposes the negative duty on all others not to harm his/her life in any way or to do anything that would hinder the exercise of the right. It is also supposed that the right to life of an individual imposes a positive duty on others to save his/her life when the cost is minimal.

Rights are normally ascribed to persons on the basis of their humanity, legal status or history and past actions. The rights which people can lay claim to by virtue of their humanity are often referred to as moral or natural rights. They are believed to be fundamental, inalienable and inviolable. Examples of these include right to life, right to free expression and right to make a livelihood. Moral rights are not conferred or created on persons by any legal system or provision. Rather, they are

derived from a system of moral principles. Quite a number of moral rights are given recognition in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. These are broadly categorised into four:

- 1) Right to life.
- 2) Right to political participation.
- 3) Freedom rights.
- 4) Subsistence rights.

The right to life is generally considered as the most fundamental moral right. This is a right generally ascribed to persons by virtue of their humanity while many would deny that non-humans possess this right. Immanuel Kant, for instance, emphasised that human beings as rational creatures have an inherent worth, and consequently a right to life, by virtue of their capacity for consciousness, self awareness and reason. By this right, it is maintained that people should not be destroyed but positive steps must be taken to preserve their lives. They should not be allowed to perish when this is preventable at a relatively low cost.

According to the United Nations, persons have a moral right to participate in their government. This suggests a democratic form of government. This moral right includes the right to vote and be voted for. One justification for the right to participate in political decision making is the fact that government's decisions affect practically every sphere of the lives of the people living in its area of jurisdiction. Hence, if people do not have any say or role in the government decision making process, it becomes easy for government to ignore their needs and interests, and rather focus on protecting and satisfying only the needs of those with political power. In addition, not allowing people to participate in the process of political decision making undermines their basic status as rational agents and autonomous beings with inherent dignity and worth. Excluding people from political decision making violates Kant's prescription that people should always be treated with respect.

A number of freedoms are construed to be basic moral rights. These include freedom from enslavement, arbitrary invasions of privacy, interference with movement and choice of residence. Others include freedom from the arbitrary deprivation of property and from coercion with regards to beliefs and public expression of beliefs. The deprivation of these freedoms would greatly hinder human well being because without them people become totally defenceless. Besides, to live a happy and fulfilled life, each person requires freedom to live life according to his/her own beliefs, desires and conception of a good life so long as these do not violate the rights of other people in society. Forcing an individual to live according to the standard of another, either in action or thought, violates a person's individuality, as well as undermines a person's inherent dignity as an individual human person.

However, scholars such as J.S Mill have noted that freedom rights are not absolute. People should not be free in an absolute sense to do whatever they want. For example, people are definitely not free to kill, assault, torture, rape or rob others of their possessions.

Subsistence rights are the rights a person has to goods and services that are essential for human survival or subsistence. These essentials include

food, shelter, clothing, medical care and education. These rights protect people from serious threats to their lives and well being the same way that freedom rights protect people against grievous threat to their autonomy.

One of the major objections to subsistence rights is that it requires too much sacrifice on others to provide those who are in need with life's basic necessities. For instance, Libertarians contend that subsistence rights conflict with freedom rights if, for instance, people are coerced into making contributions towards the maintenance of others in society on the ground that they have subsistence rights. However, advocates of these rights argue that their demands are not prohibitive if they are restricted to only the basic necessities of life and if society collectively takes up the responsibility.

## **7.1.2 Types of Right**

### **Legal Rights**

However, some rights are also accorded to specific individuals by virtue of their legal status in society. These rights are dependent on the legal system operational in society. As such, they are called legal rights. Often, legal rights are associated with some offices and positions in society. For example, the right which a policeman has to arrest suspected criminals, the rights which a husband has to make certain demands on his wife and the right to demand that a party to an agreement honours an agreement freely entered into. A third kind of rights are those accorded to people by virtue of their past actions. For example, past transactions and purchases can bestow certain rights on people: the purchase of a plot of land or a vehicle bestows some rights on the person in question to the exclusion of others.

### **Positive and Ideal Rights**

We may also make a distinction between positive rights and ideal rights. Positive rights are those rights that are socially recognised, actually respected and preserved in society. An individual has a positive right when people in situations similar to his own are acknowledged as having such rights. Ideal rights, on the other hand, need not to be socially recognized. They are rights which people ought to have, but which in actual fact are not recognized or pursued in society. What is often described, as moral or natural rights constitute the most familiar examples of ideal rights? The natural rights of freedom of expression and the right to life, for instance, are conceived of as rights simply because of the moral value attached to being able to speak freely and to the human life. They become positive rights only when they are socially recognised and actually preserved.

Two problems may be identified with respect to the existence of positive rights. First, people often pay lip service to them without actually respecting these rights. Second, there may be problems with the social consensus underlying the social recognition constituting the essence of positive rights. For instance, in some cases, only a section of society acknowledges a right while other sections do not. In such a situation, it is



the divide of society to which you belong that will determine what you're positive rights are.

## 7.2 Duties

### 7.2.1 Nature of Moral Duties

**Duty** What you ought to do, your obligation or the responsibility you have either to yourself or to others in society

The term, duty, refers to what you ought to do, your obligation or the responsibility you have either to yourself or to others in society. Moral duties derive from a system of moral rules and principles. For Immanuel Kant, moral duties are derived from human reason and never imposed by any external authority. He maintains that a person's reason recognises some principles of behaviour as ideal and prescribes that the human will should act in accordance with such principles. It is for this reason that he affirms that the constraint of duty is always a self constraint. For Kant, the most fundamental moral duty that all humans have is to conform our conducts to the Categorical Imperative which stipulates that we should *act only on the maxim that we can consistently will to be universal law and to treat all people with respect*. Other moral duties derived from the Kantian Categorical Imperative include the duty to preserve life, duty to be kind when we can and the duty to keep promises.

Kant identified two basic categories of moral duties. First is the duty to self, which involves the duty to self preservation, to fulfilment and to cultivate ones capacities to the highest possible level (this is often described as the duty to self perfection). The second category of duty is the general duty to promote the happiness of others. This involves the general duty of beneficence and non-maleficence. W. D Ross explains that there are at least two categories of duties that people have towards others. First are the duties that are based on previous act: these include duty of fidelity, duty of reparation and duty of gratitude. The second are the duties that are not based on previous acts but on the humanity of persons: duty of beneficence, duty of non-maleficence and the duty of justice.

Ross also identified a category of duties called *prima facie duties*. These are the duties that we have if there are no other (contrary) important moral considerations pulling in the opposite direction. This suggests that *prima facie* duties are those that allow for exceptions. There are also *actual duties* that are determined by a careful examination of all the *prima facie* duties that apply in a given situation. Actual duties are the duties a person has everything considered. A problem with the identification of actual duties out of the contesting *prima facie* duties is that there appear to be no objective means of identifying them.

However, we might find a solution to this difficulty by appealing to the utilitarian conception of duty, which is that one has a duty to do that which would increase utility the most in any given situation. It must be noted, nonetheless, that the utilitarian idea of duty has its own problems. One is that adopting an option that would enhance utility the most might be at too great a cost on the agent concerned. For example, giving out my entire monthly salary to charity may indeed maximize utility, but it would be at too great a sacrifice on my person.

## 7.2.2 Types of Duties

### Positive and Negative Duties

Positive duties are the obligations people have to do some things while negative duties are those obligations people have to refrain from some actions. An example of a positive duty is the duty to keep a promise while a negative duty is the duty not to harm anyone. Parents, for instance, have a positive duty to provide for the care of their children and a negative duty not to molest them. A doctor has a positive duty to tell a patient the truth and a negative duty not to lie. This is a typical example of a duty that is both negative and positive.

### Legal Duty

A legal duty is derived from the legal system, which is a creation of the people with the authority to make them. Legal duties vary from society to society, and may be independent of morality. Thus, it is possible to have a legal duty that people might consider to be immoral just as we can also have moral duties that would be illegal. For example, in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century in the USA, there was a legal duty to apprehend escaped slaves and return them back to their owners. This legal obligation is considered today to be immoral given the prevalent presupposition that slavery is immoral.

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## Study Session Summary



### Summary

In this Study Session, we examined the notions of rights and duties. For rights, a distinction has been made between moral and legal rights and also between positive and ideal rights. We have also made a distinction between three basic categories of rights: rights to life, subsistence, freedom and political participation. Similarly, duty has been categorized into two, moral and legal, apart from the distinction made between positive and negative duties. The notions of rights and duties are central in social discourse as they form the basis of social interaction as well as an ideal framework for establishing cordial interpersonal relations, as well as a peaceful, stable and just society.

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## Assessment



### Assessment

#### SAQ 7.1 (tests Learning Outcome 7.1)

Which of the following statement is true / false? Give reasons for your answer.

- I. There is the opinion that rights are effectively explained in terms of the duties they impose.
- II. Moral rights are created on persons by legal provision.
- III. Rights could be accorded to specific individuals by virtue of their legal status in society.
- IV. The distinction between positive and ideal rights is a function of social

recognition.

**SAQ 7.2**

Positive duties are legal duties. Discuss.

## Study Session 8

# Psychological and Moral Egoism

## Introduction

In this Study session, we will discuss the claims of psychological and moral egoism in relation to the basic objectives of morality as a social enterprise.

## Learning Outcomes



### Outcomes

When you have studied this session, you should be able to:

- 8.1 *highlight* the main claims of psychological egoism and moral egoism.
- 8.2 *discuss* the plausibility of both variants of egoism in relation to the basic objectives of morality as a social enterprise.

## 8.1 Psychological Egoism

### Psychological egoism

The thesis that we are always deep down motivated by what we perceive to be in our own self-interest.

**Psychological egoism** maintains that human beings are constituted by nature such that they are always motivated to act on the basis of only self interest. In all human actions, people aim to benefit themselves, to gain something they consider good for themselves. The position of the psychological egoist is that people naturally care first for themselves and care about other people only if and to the extent that this would eventually be in their own interest. One of the advocates of psychological egoism is Thomas Hobbes. He affirms that all voluntary human actions tend to the benefit or good of the agent.

For the psychological egoists, whenever there are conflicts of interests, people would always sacrifice the interests of others in order to enhance their own self interests or well being, or at least to protect their own interest or well being. People behave egoistically when they act with the objective of benefitting their own interests at the expense of the interests or the well being of other people. Hence, it is important to note that people behave egoistically only when in pursuing their own self interest, they sacrifice the interests of others.

**Altruism** The principle or practice of concern for the welfare of others.

**Altruism** is the opposite of **egoism**. People behave altruistically when they act contrary to their self interest in order to benefit or protect the interests of others. An example of an altruistic act is the coastal guard who risks his life in order to save the life of a drowning child. There is a natural tension between psychological egoism and altruism since both cannot be true together. If people behave altruistically then psychological egoism cannot be true and vice-versa. If people are by nature purely motivated to act on the basis of self interest, then it becomes impossible

**Egoism** The theory that one's self is, or should be, the motivation and the goal

of one's own action.

to sacrifice their self interest in order to benefit or protect the interest of other people. That is, people by their nature cannot do what they believe is not in their self interest and also cannot refrain from what is seen to be in their own interest.



In philosophy, egoism is the theory that one's self is, or should be, the motivation and the goal of one's own action. Egoism has two variants, descriptive or normative. The descriptive (or positive) variant conceives egoism as a factual description of human affairs. That is, people are motivated by their own interests and desires, and they cannot be described otherwise. The normative variant proposes that people should be so motivated, regardless of what presently motivates their behaviour.

### 8.1.1 Critical Examination of Psychological Egoism

Psychological egoists contend that those cases of apparent self sacrifice are ultimately motivated by self interest. They argue that people act in order to satisfy their desires and derive some measure of pleasure, and what appear to be altruistic actions are really embarked upon in order to satisfy the desire of the agent. For instance, a coastal life guard that gets into the stormy waters in order to save a drowning child does so primarily because of the desire to save the child and the expectation that he will derive some measure of pleasure from the act. For psychological egoists, saving the child is not an end in itself, but rather a means to the self interested aim of getting pleasure or happiness.

At this point, there are two problems with the position of the psychological egoist. First, it is doubtful that everyone's ultimate reason for acting is always the purely self interested reason of deriving pleasure or happiness. If this were to be true, people would always do what would make them most happy, but the reality is that this is not always the case. For instance, a young man, Richard, might actually prefer to watch the final match of the world cup football competition than visit his sick granddad. Watching the match would give him more pleasure than sitting in a smelly room with a sick person for 90 minutes. He believes that the experience would be boring and depressing to him. However, Richard also knows that the grand-dad would be very disappointed if he did not go for the visit, and for this reason decides to sacrifice the football match for the visit to his grandparent. Definitely, contrary to the position of the psychological egoists, this would not bring more happiness to Richard.

Second, if it is true as psychological egoists maintain that people are always motivated by their self interest and always concerned with their own desires and happiness, then it is not clear how they can consistently maintain that people could have desires to benefit others and derive happiness and satisfaction from benefitting others. If we desire to benefit or protect the interests of others, and also derive some measure of happiness from this, then we are not motivated exclusively by self interest. Critics of psychological egoism maintain that experience shows that people can and actually do have desires to protect and benefit others, and also derive happiness and satisfaction from satisfying such desires. And, often, these desires are satisfied by sacrificing certain aspects of their own self interest. People are not compelled by human nature to do

what is in their self interest if the effect of such actions would be harmful to others.

### 8.1.2 Denial of Psychological Egoism

In contemporary times, philosophers are more interested in ethical egoism than psychological egoism. This is because of the obvious problems with psychological egoism. For one, if psychological egoism is true, we cannot but always act in our self interests. This implies that the question of whether or not we ought to act in self interest will simply not arise since we have been conditioned by nature such that we cannot do otherwise. However, the reality is that this question often meaningfully arises and this indicates that the claim of psychological egoism is erroneous.

Another problem with psychological egoism is that it entails the vacuity of the entire enterprise of morality. Morality presupposes our capacity to choose between alternative courses of actions and this is precisely what psychological egoism denies: it claims that given our nature, we are incapable of making any choice between acting in self interest and acting altruistically. Facts, however, abound suggesting that people often do things that are contrary to their self interests. Quite a number of people consume dangerous substances that are known to be injurious to health and life even when it is evident that they are aware that this practice is not in their best interests. Besides, people in certain professions, such as the army, police force and fire service, usually perform tasks that threaten their well being and put their lives at great risk. Many of these tasks are carried out in the interest of other people. This indicates that people, contrary to the claims of psychological egoists, can and actually do act contrary to their self interests in order to protect or enhance the interests of other people.

Joseph Butler, in his effort to refute psychological egoism contends that self interest is only one of the several possible motives for human action. Other motives of action, according to Butler, include friendship, compassion, gratitude, and a desire to do the right thing. Any action based on any of these considerations is not in the interest of the agent and it is a fact that people are often motivated to act on the basis of these motives. Many people, as a matter of fact, do care about other people, apart from themselves.

## 8.2 Ethical Egoism

### Ethical egoism

The normative theory that the promotion of one's own good is in accordance with morality.

While psychological egoism is a theory about human nature, **ethical egoism** is a theory about morality. Ethical egoism maintains that each person ought to pursue his/ her own self interest in preference to the interest of anyone else. For the ethical egoist, it is always morally acceptable for each person to do what is believed to be in one's self interest. The position denies that people have any moral responsibility to any other person besides oneself: morality does not require people to sacrifice their self-interest to help or to avoid harming other people.

One interesting relationship between psychological egoism and ethical egoism is that if the former is true, the latter becomes completely vacuous. If it is true that human beings are naturally constituted such that they cannot but always act on the basis of self-interest, the claim of ethical egoism that people should act on the basis of self interest always becomes superfluous. This is because, by nature, they cannot but act on the basis self-interest. Thus, it makes no meaning to say that they ought to act on the basis of self interest when as a matter of natural necessity, they cannot even do otherwise.

### **8.2.1 Universal Ethical Egoism and Individual Ethical Egoism**

Brian Medlin identifies two variants of ethical egoism: universal ethical egoism and individual ethical egoism. The former can be expressed as “everyone ought to pursue only his own self interest and disregard the interest of others” while the latter can be expressed as “I ought to pursue only myself interest and disregard the interest of all others. The distinction which Medlin intends to make is between the egoist who is advocating that all persons ought to do as he (the egoists) does and the egoist who merely wants to behave egoistically while hoping that others would not do the same.

Universal ethical egoism may be criticized on several grounds. One is that it does not express a coherent set of ends, but rather contrary ends and as such cannot be a plausible principle of ethics. It tells us to do each of several incompatible actions and as such does not tell us to do anything. An example would make the point being made clearer: Consider a universal egoist, Jide, a philosophy student with the interest of having the best result in his class. His position, as an egoist, can be expressed as follows: “I want to have the best result in my class and I don’t care about any other member of the class.” Now, If it is the case that each of the other members of the class have the same interest of having the best result, for Jide to remain a consistent universal ethical egoist, he would have to maintain for each of the member of the class that “I want X to have the best result and I don’t care about any other person, including myself. The inconsistency inherent in the position of the universal ethical egoist stems from the fact that there is a clash of interest. Such inconsistency would not arise in a world wherein interests do not clash.

However, advocates of universal ethical egoism attempt to defend their position by contending that it expresses a consistent set of desires. For instance, Jesse Kalin argues that the fact that a universal egoist maintains that “A ought to do Y” does not necessarily commit him to actually “wanting A to do Y”. The example of a football game illustrates this point quite well. In a typical football match, team A ordinarily believes that its opponent, team B, should do all that it could to win the match, but yet does not want team B to actually win the match. Likewise, the universal egoist can consistently hold that everyone ought to act in self-interest without really wanting them to actually do so.



However, a close examination of the above position reveals that the universal ethical egoist actually wants two different states of affairs: one for himself and the second for others. While the egoist believes that s/he should adopt the egoistic principle and make success of it, he does not want all others to adopt the egoistic principle nor make any success of it. Thus, what is regarded as the universal form of ethical egoism is not really universal. To be truly universal, it would, of a necessity, express an incoherent set of beliefs.

The internal problems with universal ethical egoism lead us to the other formulation of egoism which is individual ethical egoism. This position may be expressed thus: "I ought to pursue my self-interest and totally disregard the interest of all others". This version of ethical egoism is concerned with the question "what should I do?" as against the question "what should people do?" The individual ethical egoist merely wants to behave egoistically while hoping that others would not do the same.

One problem with individual ethical egoism and on the basis of which it might be denied the status of a genuine moral theory is that it is not universalisable. An individual ethical egoist cannot accept that all everyone should adopt his principle of action because their doing so would inhibit the achievement of his own self-interest. The individual ethical egoist would rather that he adopts the principle while others adopt other altruistic principles.

In addition, society thrives on a cordial interpersonal relationship that is essentially characterized by mutual giving and taking, cooperation and caring for the interests of one another. It also thrives on the basis of the general understanding that individual interests can only be effectively promoted to the extent that there is a modicum of order and stability in society. Hence, in reality, no individual interest could truly be protected or promoted without due consideration being given to the interests of others in society. A society in which its members operate on the basis of the egoistic principle would end up being anarchic and human lives would end up being very insecure in it.

Finally, morality is essentially a social enterprise designed to order human relationship in society in ways that would facilitate social order, social peace, and also enhance human wellbeing. It is, however, not clear how ethical egoism, in both its universal and individual variants can achieve these basic objectives of morality. As we have discussed in this lecture, the basic claim of ethical egoism is that each individual ought to pursue his/her self interest always without any consideration for the interest of all others in society. It maintains that no one has any moral obligation to sacrifice his/her self interest in order to protect or enhance the interest of any other person whenever there is a conflict of interest. And, to the extent that the theory advocates a disregard for the interest of other people apart from that of the agent, it cannot be regarded as a genuine moral theory. Morality essentially requires that people give due regard to the interests of one another in society so that the wellbeing of all is enhanced in the final analysis



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## Study Session Summary



### Summary

In this Study Session, we focused on psychological and ethical egoism. Psychological egoism has been described as a theory claiming that humans are constituted by nature in a way that they can only act on self interest. We also examined its two variants, namely universal and the individual ethical egoism. One difficulty that is common to the two variants of ethical egoism relates to the claim that the only moral obligation that people have is to enhance their self interest and that no one has any moral obligation to sacrifice self interest for the benefit of any other person in society. This position, as we have discussed, would not facilitate the attainment of the basic objectives of morality as a social enterprise, which includes the attainment of the wellbeing of all in society as well as the establishment of a stable and well ordered society.

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## Assessment



### Assessment

#### **SAQ 8.1 (tests Learning Outcomes 8.1 and 8.2)**

Soji saves Nike from a burning office building. What ultimately motivated him to do this?

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# Feedbacks to SAQs

## SAQ 1.1

No doubt that speculations and proposals on what human nature is or ought to be are as varied and sometimes as conflicting as the interests and disciplines of the people doing the thinking.

Nonetheless, your description of human nature should take the following into considerations:

- Rationality
- Freewill and Moral Responsibility
- Vulnerability
- Lack of Self Sufficiency

While your conception of human nature may have vital implications, directly or otherwise, the reflection here is that: does your submission offer a comprehensive account of human nature.

## SAQ 1.2

We do not know what your reasons are. However, the core need for a society lies in the fact that no human being is self sufficient. Thus, the want for sufficiency and need for survival necessitate human interpersonal relations and the formation of society

## SAQ 2.1

The following are the distinctive features of morality:

1. The making of normative statements about specific human actions to the effect that they are either just or unjust.
2. The possibility of a demand for justifications for the presented normative statements.
3. The reliance on some normative principles, rules or ideals to provide justification for the moral judgments made.
4. Some emotional states of approval or disapproval attached to the judgments made and the rules and principles relevant to them; and the desire to communicate such emotional states to others.
5. The existence of some sanctions or incentives, which is usually verbal, in the form of either blame or praise.

## SAQ 2.2

- A. Convention
- B. Morality
- C. Law

## SAQ 2.3

I and III are meta-ethics. Meta-ethics investigates of the nature of ethical statements.

II is descriptive ethics. Descriptive ethics describe the moral positions subscribed to by individuals, groups or societies.

IV and V are actually normative ethics. Normative ethics attempts to arrive at practical moral standards that tell us right from wrong, and how to live moral lives.

### **SAQ 3.1**

Here are the statuses of the statements in SAQ 3.1:

- I. True, act-utilitarians focus directly on specific actions and their consequences to determine the moral status of human actions.
- II. False, act-utilitarians advocate that each specific case should be treated on its own merit, with direct consideration given to its consequences or utility for both the agent and other people that would be affected by the action in question.
- III. True, rule-utilitarianism maintains that we should base our actions on only those moral rules that produce more utility if people conform to them than if they do not.
- IV. False, in fact, if following a particular moral rule is generally productive of happiness or pleasure, then whatever action that is based on such a rule is considered to be morally good or right.
- V. True, a rule which is generally productive of more utility might in a given case yield lowers utility. This is a problem of exceptional case torule-utilitarianism.

### **SAQ 4.1**

- I. False. In fact ethical deontologism supports non-consequentialism. It denies that whether an action is morally right or wrong is to be determined by an evaluation of the consequence or utility of actions.
- III. False. A major flaw of act-deontologism is that, in real terms, it does not offer us any precise standard for determining what is right or wrong in particular cases. Particular judgments are seen as basic and general rules, if they are to exist at all, are to be derived from particular judgments. The position of the theory is that after being clear about the facts of a case, we form a judgment about what should be done either by some kind of intuition or decision. The question here is: does the faculty of intuition exist?

### **SAQ 5.1**

We don't know the scenario you have created. However the premises of religion on morality is the basic claim of the divine Command theory of morality, which is: the valid standard for determining what is right or wrong, good or bad is God's commandments.

### **SAQ 5.2**

Option C is actually not a valid statement. Although there is the general assumption that we can get to know what God prescribes or prohibits through a study of the Holy Scriptures. However, the difficulty here is that between religions, there are some conflicts in their accounts of what God has commanded and what He has prohibited. Besides, even within

the same religion, there are debates over how certain scriptures should be interpreted and what precisely God is saying by them.

### SAQ 6.1

We don't know exactly what you suggested, but you probably thought of at least two of the following:

- Natural laws are universal prescriptive principles set in place by nature to regulate human behaviour.
- The law of nature is a law of reason.
- Obligation or the prohibitions that are imposed on people or the rights it confers on them.

### SAQ 6.2

A problem with this assumption is that it is not every action that accords with human nature that is morally good. Neither is it always the case that every action that is contrary to human nature is morally bad.

Another problem is that people differ on their conceptions of those things that are good and those that are bad as the faculty of reason could lead us to different conclusions on moral matters.

### SAQ 7.1

- I. True. This is because of the opinion that every right has a corresponding duty in the sense that the right an individual has imposes a corresponding duty on some other persons.
- II. False. In fact, moral rights are derived from a system of moral principles.
- III. True. These rights are dependent on the legal system operational in society, and as such, they are called legal rights.
- IV. True. Positive rights are those rights that are socially recognised, actually respected and preserved in society, while ideal rights are rights which people ought to have, but which in actual fact are not recognized or pursued in society.

### SAQ 7.2

Positive duties are the obligations people have to do some things. Such a duty may be based on convention. An example of a positive duty is the duty to keep a promise. Parents, for instance, have a positive duty to provide for the care of their children. A legal duty is derived from the legal system. From the foregoing, positive duties are not necessarily legal duties except they are compelled by law.

### SAQ 8.1

It would be odd to suggest that it's ultimately his own benefit that Soji is seeking. After all, he's risking his own life in the process. This action therefore aligns with psychological altruism. Psychological altruism is the view that sometimes we can have ultimately altruistic motives.

However, it is not impossible that Soji's apparently altruistic act is *ultimately* motivated by the goal to benefit himself. Soji might have wanted to gain a good feeling from being a hero, or to avoid social

reprimand that would follow had he not helped Nike, or something along these lines.

**SAQ 8.2**

**Psychological egoism** is the view that humans are always motivated by self-interest, even in what seem to be acts of altruism.