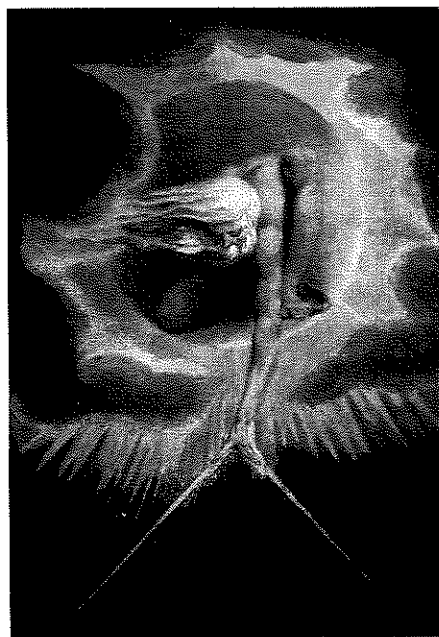


Religious Studies

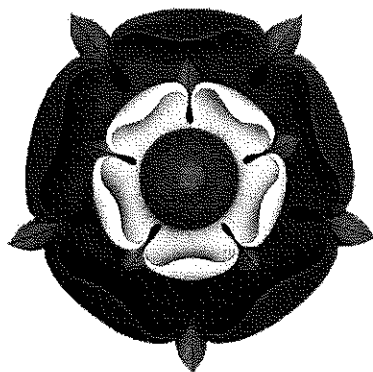
A Level Bridging Work



Please read the attached 2 documents:

- a) 'The Principles of Philosophical Proof' and complete the questions that follow and
- b) 'Ethical Arguments' and complete Questions 1 and 2 for that one.

Bring your work to your first Religious Studies lesson in September.



Sutton Coldfield Grammar School for Girls

The principles of philosophical proof

Arguments and proofs

Arguments for the existence of God should always be thought of in terms of proofs. A proof is 'an argument which starts from one or more premises, which are propositions taken for granted for the purpose of the argument, and argues to a conclusion' (Richard Swinburne). A proof can be represented as: Premise + Premise = Conclusion ($P + P = C$), though it may consist of any number of premises.

An **analytic** or **deductive proof** is a statement which cannot be false, e.g. $4 + 4 = 8$. Such a proof is therefore logically necessary — it would be absurd to suggest alternative solutions. A logically necessary statement consists of a set of premises and a conclusion which cannot be disputed. These may include mathematical statements or tautologies, e.g. 'a circle is round'.

Inductive or **synthetic proofs**, however, are only proofs in so far as they lead to conclusions that are possible or probable. Evidence points towards a certain conclusion, perhaps based on prior experience, or on similar instances, but it is still possible to reach a different conclusion. For example:

- P1: The sun rose today.
- P2: The sun rose yesterday.
- C: The sun will rise tomorrow.

It is possible, even likely, that the sun will rise tomorrow but there is always the chance, however remote, that it may not.

Proofs of this kind often work from a generalisation to a more specific conclusion. For example:

- P1: One swan is white.
- P2: One hundred swans are white.
- C: All swans are white.

The more white swans that are observed, the greater the likelihood of the conclusion being correct. Even if we did not know that black swans exist, we would have to allow for the likelihood of not all swans being white.

Probability measures the relative frequency or likelihood of an event taking place, or of circumstances unfolding in a particular way. It demands that we make judgements. If A and B are the case, how likely is it that C will follow? We consider the evidence available to us and judge, or evaluate, whether the evidence points to a particular conclusion. All the evidence has to be taken into consideration if we want to be as certain as it is possible to be that in such a case our conclusion is the most likely, because the connection or association between events points to it.

Proofs may fall into one of two categories. They may be **a posteriori**, synthetic and inductive or **a priori**, analytic and deductive.

A posteriori, synthetic and inductive proofs are based on premises argued or drawn from experience, which do not contain the conclusion but which argue to a conclusion that is not logically necessary. The more evidence-stating factors we employ, the greater the likelihood may be of the conclusion being correct, but it can always be disproved. We cannot conclusively prove it to be the case.

A priori, analytic and deductive proofs are based on premises which are not drawn from or dependent upon experience, but which contain

a logically necessary conclusion. We learn no more from the conclusion than we already knew from the premises, and the use of analytic terms means we are using terms which cannot be misinterpreted. They have a clear and distinct meaning.

Proving God's existence

Arguments for the existence of God effectively proceed in the same way — from premises to conclusion, using inductive or deductive reasoning.

Proving God deductively

P1: God is that than which nothing greater can be conceived.

P2: That than which nothing greater can be conceived must exist.

C: God must exist.

This is known as the Ontological Proof. The Ontological Proof demands that if we accept the definition of God as 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived', then we must accept that he possesses, analytically, existence, since that than which nothing greater can be conceived must necessarily possess all perfections, and existence, according to the Ontological Proof, is a perfection.

Proving God inductively

P1: All events require a cause.

P2: The universe is an event.

C: God is the cause of the universe.

This proof is the basis of the Cosmological Argument. The proof leads only to a probable conclusion because there is no analytic, logically necessary, *a priori* reason why God should be the cause of the universe and not anything else. Neither are the premises themselves logically necessary — there is no compelling reason to agree

conclusively that 'all events require a cause'. It is only on the basis of our regular experience that we assert that all events have a cause, and experience can be:

- deceptive
- limited
- open to many interpretations

Both types of reasoning have strengths and weaknesses.

Inductive reasoning is strong because it:

- relies on experience which may be universal, or at least may be testable
- is flexible — there is more than one possible conclusion
- does not demand that we accept definitions as fixed

But it may be weak because:

- it relies on accepting the nature of the evidence
- it demands overwhelmingly good reasons for accepting that the conclusion is the most likely
- alternative conclusions may be just as convincing

Deductive reasoning may be strong because:

- it does not depend on variable or misunderstood experience
- it accepts that words and definitions have fixed and agreed meanings
- there are no alternative conclusions

But it may be considered weak because it:

- leads to apparently logically necessary conclusions
- depends on whether we accept the premises are analytically true
- can only say that if there is a God we might be able to make certain claims about him

Arguments for the existence of God are therefore strong or weak in terms of their form, even before you consider their content. For example, if you consider that an inductive argument is relatively stronger than a deductive argument, because it is based on evidence, then it may be thought to be more secure even before the content of the proof is evaluated.

Why have scholars offered proofs for the existence of God?

- An explanation is needed for certain phenomena within the universe which are not self-explanatory and which require an external explanation.
- They appeal to reason and logic.
- They may interpret evidence in terms of God rather than something else.

However:

- The experience we access to reach conclusions about God is limited and the reasoning powers we use to draw conclusions on the basis of that evidence are limited because they are human.
- Atheists may argue that since believers do not allow anything to count against their belief in God, then all arguments are flawed because the criticisms raised against them will not be allowed to carry any real weight.
- Atheists may claim that their conclusions are just as valid as theists' conclusions and that there is no way of verifying or falsifying either of them.

Faith and proof

Religious faith can be divided into two types:

- **Propositional faith** — the belief that there is an objective reality to which we ascribe the term 'God', and that we can make claims about him which themselves are objectively true.
- **Non-propositional faith** — a trust in God which may be held even when evidence or experience would seem to point against it. This kind of faith must be based on some personal knowledge of God, and not simply on accepting facts about him.

Basil Mitchell used the parable of the partisan and the stranger to illustrate the nature of non-propositional faith:

In times of war a partisan meets a stranger who claims to be the leader of the resistance. He urges the partisan to have faith in him whatever the circumstances, even if he sees the stranger acting in ways that appear to contradict this claim. The partisan is committed to his belief in the stranger's integrity even when his friends think he is a fool to do so. When the stranger appears to be withholding help, or even acting contrary to the partisan's interests, he still believes that he is on his side, and has overwhelming reasons for doing so. The original encounter between the partisan and the stranger gave him sufficient confidence to hold on to his faith in the stranger even when the evidence counted against it.

Basil Mitchell (ed.) (1971) *The Philosophy of Religion*, Oxford University Press

1 Explain the meaning of the following terms which have been emboldened in the text:

- a deductive proof
- b inductive proof
- c probability
- d *a posteriori*
- e *a priori*
- f propositional faith
- g non-propositional faith

The principles of philosophical proof

QUESTIONS

2 Work out what kind of proofs are being used in examples (a)–(d):

P1: The sun is shining today. P2: The sun shines in July. C: It is July.

P1: Jane is a spinster. P2: A spinster is an unmarried female. C: Jane is an unmarried female.

P1: Mr Brown had the opportunity to murder Mr Green. P2: Mr Brown had the motive to murder Mr Green.

C: Mr Brown killed Mr Green.

3 Construct four sets of premises and conclusions of your own, explaining why they are inductive, deductive, *a posteriori* or *a priori*.

4 Express the following arguments in terms of premises and a conclusion:
a the Design or Teleological Argument

b the Moral Argument

c the Argument from Religious Experience

P1: Queens are female monarchs. P2: Elizabeth is a female monarch. C: Elizabeth is queen.

7 Comment on the following claims:

a *'Arguments for the existence of God only confirm what the believer has already decided is true.'*

b *'Atheists can use proof and argument no more successfully than theists.'*

c *'An argument for the existence of God can never amount to anything more than a probability.'*

fundamental questions about the nature and purpose of human life. But equally, views about life, whether they arise within philosophy or religion, will have an impact on human conduct, and therefore on ethics.

Ethics is not simply concerned with average standards of behaviour. Rather, it is about the quest to find what is right and good and the best way to live. Of course, that is not to take a narrow moral view, in the sense of condemning all who disagree with a particular code, but to emphasise that we want to find a basis of value by which to live, on the assumption that justice and happiness will follow.

In doing this, of course, we often have to concentrate on what is worst in human nature. It is in contemplating acts of cruelty that we most easily start to perceive what is essential about kindness, in acts of selfishness that we intuit what it would be to act selflessly.

One of the questions with which every student of ethics in the West has to struggle is whether ethics can be considered 'objective':

- Are there any facts to decide moral questions?
- Is there any such thing as goodness, over and above the label 'good' that we give those things of which we approve?
- Can anything be said with a conviction that it is a final or absolute statement about human rights or wrongs?
- Is everything simply a matter of personal choice and taste?

There was a time – about the mid 1960s – when it could reasonably be assumed that any quest for the nature of 'goodness' or 'virtue' was doomed. Ethics had become more like a linguistic game, in which people sought to justify the language of morality in terms that any empiricist could understand. There was no more striving for a 'Good' at the heart of reality, merely expressing the desires, intentions or preferences of individuals.

All that has now changed. Within a couple of decades, ethics was being dominated by the great questions of applied ethics. Suddenly the world had set an agenda, and expected ethics to come up with some guidelines.

Ethical positions are not always explicit, and often confused. Pick up any newspaper and you will find a mixture of facts, values and arguments (along with a fair measure of fantasy and speculation, depending on which paper you choose!). The challenge of ethics is to cut through the confusions, to separate out facts, values and arguments, to make clear the bases upon which comments are being made, and to examine them to see if they are logically sound, and if they genuinely express deeply-held beliefs or emotional responses.

2 Ethical Arguments

KEYWORDS

non-cognitive – the view that ethical statements make no objective claims

relativist – the view that there are no universal moral norms

absolutist – the view that it is possible to establish one or more universal moral norm(s)

This chapter sets out what is needed in order to present a sound ethical argument, the three basic approaches taken to ethics, the issue of how you relate particular situations to general ethical principles, and the social context of ethics in terms of rights and responsibilities.

1 Presenting an ethical argument

You need to be aware of three distinct elements in any good ethical argument: facts, values and the logic of the argument itself. In other words:

- (a) You should know the facts about the situation you are to consider.
 - What does the law say about this situation?
 - If you, the presenter of the argument, or the person whose moral dilemma you are describing, is religious, you will want to know what the relevant religion has to say about it.
 - You should also know the actual facts about what is happening, the motives of those concerned and the predicted outcome of what is being done (that is, if any outcome can be predicted).
 - You also need to know if there are any particular circumstances that make this action unique. (Of course, you could argue that every action is unique – after all, no two people are the same. But this means something rather more than that, for there are some situations where someone is in such a special set of circumstances that the normal rules of behaviour that they would follow no longer seem to apply. So, for example, there are things you might do if your life depended on it which you would not choose to do otherwise.)
- (b) You should consider carefully the norms and values by which that action is to be evaluated.
 - If you are arguing that something is right or wrong, you must be clear about the grounds upon which you are making that claim, and the values that are implied by it. If not, then you may fail to appreciate why it is that someone else, faced with the same facts, comes to quite a different

conclusion about the rights and wrongs of the matter. What may seem a trivial matter to one person may be important to another.

(c) You should also be aware of the nature of the claim you are making, and of any possible challenge that could be made to that claim.

- In other words, it could be that someone wants to argue that all moral claims are really no more than expressing a personal preference (I say it is right because that is what I want to see happen). If you want to argue against this, you should think carefully about the logical basis upon which you can do so. If you don't, then you will be accused of doing no more than expressing a personal preference – which is exactly what the other person is arguing.

Like most philosophical arguments, ethical claims move from *premises* to *conclusions*. The premises will include both the facts of the situation and also the norms of behaviour used by yourself or those involved. The conclusion may be challenged on two grounds:

- That you did not argue logically from the premises to the conclusion. In other words, even given those circumstances, and given those moral values, it does not follow that this or that action is therefore wrong. There might be another way of seeing the whole situation.
- More likely, however, is the challenge that you are wrong about the premises. Thus someone will say 'I disagree with you because I don't think [for example] that you have to preserve human life at all costs, because I feel that the quality of life ... etc.' Here the debate is about norms. Equally, however, there could be a straight disagreement about the facts. So, for example, in a court of law there may be considerable debate about whether a person committed some act while the balance of his or her mind was disturbed. If disturbed, that constitutes an important premise to take into account, and the person will not be blamed in the same way as a person who did the same thing while fully aware of his or her actions.

2 Three basic views

When it comes to ethical theories, there are three different basic views to be taken:

a) Non-cognitive

One approach is to say that moral language is not really saying anything objective. It is simply a covert way of expressing one's feelings or recommending a course of action. These approaches are termed **non-cognitive**, since they do not allow that ethical language gives knowledge of anything other than the feelings and preferences

of the person using it. In effect: if I like something, I call it 'good', if I dislike it, I call it 'bad', and there's an end to the matter.

On that basis, there is really nothing to discuss. We are not talking about values or principles. We are not seeking any objective way of saying whether something is right or wrong, we are simply talking personal wishes.

b) Relativist

A **relativist** approach says, in effect, that no two situations are exactly the same. A person's choices will be related to a quite unique set of circumstances, and it makes no sense to generalise or try to say that one view is right and another wrong. Decisions are not related to anything absolute, and it therefore makes no sense to try and discover any moral rules.

c) Absolutist

Finally, there is the attempt to find a framework of ideas that enables us to argue that some things are always right and others always wrong. This is sometimes referred to as an **absolutist** approach, but this does not mean that it claims that there are fixed moral rules (although, of course, some people will argue just that), but that moral decisions are related to principles that can be applied universally.

Naturally enough, a book on ethical theory is going to be concerned particularly with the bases upon which people have taken this third approach. Within it you have some arguments to the effect that there are absolute moral principles that can be known by pure reason (**rationalist ethics**) or are commanded by God, others examine virtues and the qualities that make for the good life and what moral positions will promote them (**virtue ethics**), and a third group looks at the results of an action and weighs up whether it is good or bad on that basis (**consequentialist ethics**, including **utilitarianism**). Others approach ethics from the standpoint of the implied contract that exists between people who live together in a society, part of which may be expressed in terms of laws, and part in terms of the rights and responsibilities that can be expected of members of society.

3 Theory and practice

KEY ISSUE Relating individual situations to general moral principles.

This book is specifically about ethical theory. In other words, it looks at the claims that are made about right and wrong, the arguments used and the meaning of the ethical language.

In the course of the book, we shall be looking at a whole variety of situations. We could not study ethics without doing so, except in the most abstract and dry way. But particularly for those readers who are looking at this book as preparation for an examination course in ethics, you should be aware that the examples given here are only brought in to illustrate how the theory works. When it comes to examination questions, it will be necessary to have a good working knowledge of the actual moral situation within which people stand. In other words, if you are looking at moral arguments within medicine, it is important to know what the law has to say and what medical options are possible in the situation you are considering. Ethics is not limited to facts, but it is based on them. An ethical argument without a factual base is most unsatisfactory, because moral decisions are always made in particular situations and under the influence of a number of different factors; leave them out of account and you are hardly going to understand the real moral dilemma involved.

For this reason, there is a range of books in this *Access to Philosophy* series which give information on particular moral issues – whether life and death, sexuality and family relations or the environment. Once you start to work on particular ethical issues you will need to use one or more of them, or other factually-based introductions to moral issues, for the context within which the various ethical theories may be evaluated. In addition to books on applied ethics, the daily papers are a valuable resource for they describe a wide range of issues, many of which attract comments about what is right or wrong with little thought as to the norms of conduct which such comments reflect, nor the logic by which the conclusions may be drawn from such norms.

a) General arguments and particular situations

When you start to examine the moral choices that people make, you can become bogged down in the whole variety of particular situations. Some of these present clear-cut choices, and the dilemmas involved are straightforward, even if the act of choosing what to do is difficult because the choices are almost equally attractive or disagreeable. However, you then find that there are other situations where additional factors come into play, and matters are not so easily resolved. *In fact, no two situations are identical, and it is therefore difficult to frame a rule by which all possible situations can be assessed fairly.*

To do ethics, one therefore needs to stand back from the many particular situations and seek the underlying principles that should govern action. But why use 'should' here? By what right does any one

person say what another 'should' do? You may adopt a set of rules, and may try to impose them on others, but nevertheless someone with a different set of rules may challenge you at any time.

Let us therefore take this step by step:

- You start with particular situations – they present a variety of choices and responses.
- You then examine the rules that people actually apply to the process of moral choice.
- You compare such rules with those that you yourself would choose to adopt, and assess to what extent any differences between your rules and those that seem to be applied by others are due to different circumstances.
- In other words, if the rules appear to differ, can such difference be explained in terms of particulars that do not detract from the value of the original rule?
- You then examine the norms and values that are expressed in those rules.

Looking at what people actually do in various situations, and also at the sort of language they use to justify what they do, leads inevitably to questions about the basis of any such justification. So, by asking what is right or wrong and how people should act, you are really asking about the grounds upon which something may be considered right or wrong. In other words, you are asking about *the norms of human behaviour*.

Example

Let us take what we may, for the purpose of this book, consider an entirely hypothetical situation. The President of the United States is accused of having a sexual relationship with a woman other than his wife. He first denies this publicly, but is eventually forced by weight of evidence to admit that he had acted inappropriately, whilst raising questions about what should or should not be considered 'sexual relations'.

There are various arguments to be considered and positions that may be taken:

- Sexual activity between consenting adults should remain a private matter, and should not become the subject of public debate or censure.
- All those who hold high office should accept the moral norms of the society they represent.
- The sex may remain a private matter, but the President should not have lied about it, since truthfulness and integrity are required of someone holding his office.
- Personal matters are irrelevant as long as they do not interfere with a person's job. If the President is still functioning well as President, what does it matter?

- Other Presidents in the past have had affairs, so why should this be any different?

As you unpack these and other responses, some fundamental ethical issues emerge:

- The right to individual privacy.
- The moral status of extra-marital sex.
- The value of honesty.

And beneath these there are more general questions about:

- The function of those who hold positions of public responsibility. By accepting such positions, do they thereby set aside their normal right to privacy in all matters that might affect their public role?
- The position of marriage and the family in society.
- The value of absolute honesty as opposed to political expediency.

At this level, although initiated by a discussion of a particular situation – one that involves a person in a unique position in society – the ethical debate has shifted onto the norms by which that action is judged. Once that happens, it is largely irrelevant to give a list of former Presidents who have acted similarly, for when it comes to normative ethics, the fact that other people do something does not therefore make it either right or wrong. At best, the historical parallels are a matter of ‘descriptive’ ethics.

This example illustrates what we will be concerned with in this book:

- We shall need to look at what makes morality possible. Are we free to choose what to do? Should we be blamed for things over which we had no control? When is ‘I couldn’t help it’ a valid excuse?
- But once we are satisfied about situations where a free choice is made, we have to ask about whether there are any absolute rules that can be applied, or whether all situations have to be judged individually.
- Then there comes the fundamental question about whether there are fundamental principles that should underpin all morality, principles that arise because we are human beings, and that can be applied to all of us. Or should moral choices be made on the basis of the expected results of an action? Do we, in other words, act for a purpose, and therefore judge all action to be right or wrong to the extent that it fulfils or fails to fulfil that purpose?
- We shall then need to ask about the way in which the values that apply to moral choices, and which are therefore used to underpin ethical debate, relate to other fundamental values that people hold. In particular, how these relate to the absolutely fundamental ideas about the purpose of life which are expressed through religion.
- Finally, we shall have to face various challenges to morality from those who might claim that neither religion nor morality has any factual basis, and that it is all either voluntarily accepted illusion, or else imposed for

reasons of social or political control. In other words, we shall have to ask if we are really just conning ourselves when we try to act morally, or whether we are being conned by our conditioning when we try to act morally.

b) Every act is global in its implications

Whatever approach you take to ethics – whether based on absolute rules or on the expected results of an action – the implications of moral choice spread outwards until eventually they become global. The issues raised become such that they can be applied in different ways to all situations. It is this flowing to and fro between the individual, the society of which he or she is a part and the nature of life as a whole, that makes ethics so fascinating – for nothing is ultimately insignificant, everything reflects a greater whole of which it is but a tiny part.

Ethical arguments do not exist on their own, but are based on beliefs and values that exist prior to the moral dilemma that is being considered – indeed, if there were no beliefs and values, the whole idea of moral choice would become meaningless, because there would be no basis for calling any action good or bad.

It works both ways: ethics is informed by fundamental beliefs and values. But also, fundamental beliefs and values may not be examined or appreciated until a moral choice is made that highlights them. Thus, if you want to know a person’s values, look at their ethical choices.

4 Rights and responsibilities

KEY ISSUE In this chapter, we have concentrated on the choices that individuals make and the criteria that they use to decide whether these are right or wrong. In other words, we have been looking at individuals and the theories that link their actions to some overall sense of value or purpose. But that is not the only way in which ethics can be approached. Most moral situations arise within a social context, and concern the way in which individuals treat one another.

It is quite possible therefore to start with society, rather than with the individual, and look at individual actions in the light of what society needs. There has been a long tradition of this, as we shall see, from Plato’s arguments about the right relationship between three different classes of people in the state, through Hobbes or Locke in looking at the contractual basis of social behaviour, to thinkers like Hegel and

Marx who see moral norms as arising out of a changing social and political situation. Here ethics overlaps with social and political theories, but its specific contribution lies in an examination of the rights that individuals are deemed to have as members of a society and the responsibilities that such membership entails.

Of course, consideration of society and its rules brings in another problem for ethics. For a person may do what is considered 'right' not out of conviction or conscious choice, but only because it is what society expects and is the result of social training. In such cases, is the action genuinely moral? Does its moral validity depend on the individual who performs it, or the society that has developed and inculcated that social norm? And here we are back to the question of relativism, for we noted above that different societies have different ethical norms. What is accepted as good and right in one society is outlawed in another. There is therefore yet another layer of argument to be added – a layer which considers the rights and responsibilities that actually hold within this society, and we must ask if they can be justified rationally. In other words, is there a deeper reasoning that can assess what society is and how it is formed? This was indeed the concern of thinkers like Plato, Hobbess, Locke and, in modern times, Rawls. *It is concerned with a sense of justice and the way in which it may be embodied in the contracts – written or otherwise – that bind people together in a social or political unit.*

Summary List

- Ethical arguments need to distinguish between facts and values.
- There are three fundamental views on ethics: non-cognitive, relativist and absolutist.
- In practice, individual situations are generally examined in the light of the underlying moral principles. Equally, particular situations have implications for the framing of universal principles.
- Ethics may start either with situations of individual moral choice, or with the perceived needs of society as a whole.

Answering Structured and Essay Questions

1. What elements need to be included if you are to present a sound ethical argument? Which of them, if any, do you think should take priority? Give your reasons.

For this question, make sure you distinguish carefully between facts and values, both of which are needed, along with an idea of exactly what you are claiming – an absolute rule, an expression of a preference etc. Whichever you choose to see as taking priority, the other two can be shown to relate to it.

2. 'Every situation is unique.' Do you agree with this statement? Does it invalidate any use of universal moral principles? How would you know the right thing to do in a situation that really is unique?

It is important to show that you appreciate the problems of applying absolute rules to a variety of particular situations. It is equally important to recognise that, however important the particular situation being considered, all moral language presupposes a shared understanding and shared meaning. It could be argued that, however unique a situation, we can only understand it in relationship to others.

General essay questions on the same two issues:

3. The presentation of facts alone does not constitute an ethical argument. Discuss.
4. Ethics requires a balance between particular situations and universal principles. Discuss.

Note:

Most questions on ethics either start with, or should be illustrated by, particular moral dilemmas. To present a sound ethical argument, you should be aware of the relevant facts, but also know how to evaluate them in the light of the various ethical theories, and the values that are implied in the moral choices to be made. In this book, however, we are dealing with ethical theory. The questions are therefore of a more general nature, although you should try to illustrate your answers with reference to one or more of the issues you are studying.