

A Level Prep Work PART 2: Ethics

1. Make as detailed notes as possible – include questions and thoughts as it will help you get your head round things
2. Expect to have to read things more than once before they go in – this is the life of a philosopher! Reading philosophy is NOT the same as reading a revision guide, or work of fiction.
3. Spend time trying to answer any questions – look through your notes if you need to.

These tasks focus primarily on “ethics”. Ethics is a branch of philosophy, but in your A Level, you will study it as its own subject. Ethics comes from the Greek word “ethos” which means “character” (we still use the word “ethos” to describe a person’s or community’s general beliefs, preferences and things they care about). Greeks were obsessed with “having good character”, and they spent a lot of time debating and writing how a person should behave, what their duties and roles should be, and how they should go about making sure they did the right thing every time.

The study of ethics looks at questions about what is right, and what is wrong but also how we *decide* what is right and wrong. It also looks at how we *know* what is right and wrong – where do these beliefs come from?! Why do some of us think abortion is right, and some of us think it is wrong even if we grew up in the same society and same kinds of families.

Really hardcore ethicists even question what words like “right” and “good” actually mean. When we say something is “good”, how do we know? What does it mean to say that?

These tasks are designed to introduce you to the biggest ethical questions, how certain famous philosophers have historically answered them, and the tools ethicists use to do ethics.

Task 1: Find **Graphic Guide to Ethics**

1.1 Read pages 1-5 and answer the following questions:

- Q1 What kinds of questions is ethics concerned with?
- Q2 Where do we get our personal opinions about ethical issues from?
- Q3 What do you think Aristotle means by “a shared code of ethics”?
- Q4 What Socrates believe our duty is?
- Q5 Are the **the law** and **morality** the same thing? Why?
- Q6 Can you think of any examples where the law might contradict a person’s morality?
- Q7 What do individualist and communitarian philosophers believe?
- Q8 Give x3 examples of the central questions ethicists ask

1.2 Have a think about the questions below and jot down some ideas:

1. Do you think human beings are more selfish, or more generous in general? Why? Try to give examples to back up your answer
2. What is the best way to teach children to grow up to behave morally? Explain your ideas
3. Why do *you* think we should be “good people”? Or maybe you don’t....explain why!
4. When someone says something like “I know murder is wrong” do you think they really *know*, or is it just a *strong belief*? Explain your answer

Task 2: Read the first page of **How Ethics Works P1** and answer the following questions:

- Q1 What does Aristotle mean by exercising “right reason”?
- Q2 What does Kant mean by “categorical imperatives”?
- Q3 What do you think Kant means by “rational thought”? Why do you think he thinks it is important?
- Q4 What rule does Jeremy Bentham use to decide what is right?
- Q5 What does David Hume think you mean when you say “lying is wrong”?
- Q6 What does it mean to say “morals are a matter of choice”?
- Q7 What is the difference between first order ethics and second order ethics?

Task 3: Think about the questions below and jot your answers down:

You have just read about four different philosophers who have different ways of understanding what is right and wrong – who do you agree with the most and why? Who do you agree with the least and why?

Task 4: Read the first page of *How Ethics Works P1* and answer the following questions:

- Q1 What is the Golden Rule? Why is it so helpful?
- Q2 What is moral particularism?
- Q3 What is moral generalism?
- Q4 What is a moral dilemma? How might ethics help you decide what to do?

Task 5: Think about the questions below and jot your answers down:

Can you think of a moral dilemma you have faced – how did you decide what to do? Was your response based on: moral rules, emotions, loyalty or all three? Which of the three do you think are most important when making an ethical decision?

Task 6: Find *Graphic Guide to Ethics*

6.1 Read pages 6-15 and answer the following questions:

- Q1 Where have human beings generally said their moral rules come from? Why might this be?
- Q2 What is the “reciprocity rule”? (what else is it called?)
- Q3 Why does the fact that each religion has different moral rules a problem for religions?
- Q4 What does it mean that Christianity has a “programmed” view of human nature?
- Q5 What is the “romantic” view of human nature?
- Q6 What do geneticists mean by “the selfish gene” and the “altruistic gene”?
- Q7 What do you understand by the “nature vs nurture” (genes vs society) debate?

6.2 Think about the questions below and jot your answers down:

What is your opinion on the nature vs nurture debate? Are we programmed by our DNA to act a certain way? Or does our upbringing determine what we are like? OR is it a combination of both?

Do you think you are able to make free, moral decisions or are your actions programmed? If they ARE programmed, can you really be blamed for anything you do?! (Get ready for your brain to hurt....)

6.3 Read pages 16 –

- Q1 What is “moral relativism”?
- Q2 What is “ethical absolutism”?
- Q3 What are some of the other names given to moral absolutists?
- Q4 Why might someone support absolutism? (what are some of the benefits?)
- Q5 Why might someone support relativism?
- Q6 What do absolutists accuse moral relativists of?
- Q7 What kinds of problems do both absolutists and relativists face?

6.4 Think about the questions below and jot your answers down:

Would you consider yourself a relativist or an absolutist? Why? Do you think there is another way of doing ethics? Explain your ideas.