



Glossary

Absolute ethics

An ethical theory such as Kantianism which argues that x should always be done, regardless of circumstance.

Act Utilitarianism:

Argues that one should always perform that individual act which will lead to the greatest balance of good over evil. Its main supporter was Jeremy Bentham.

Analogy:

Likening something to something else in order to bring out the meaning of the original. Aquinas believes that religious language is always analogical. When we say 'God is good', it is an analogy for the transcendent and overwhelming goodness of God, which we cannot properly comprehend.

Apophatic Way:

Also known as *via negativa*, argues that as human language is wholly inadequate to describe God, we can speak of him only in terms of what he is not. Associated with Proclus, John Scotus Eriugena and Moses Maimonides, among others.

A Posteriori:

That which can be known to be true only through sense experience. 'There is a cat in this room' can only be determined to be true by observation, directly or indirectly.

A Priori:

That which is knowable without reference to sense experience. The truth of 'A square has four sides' or ' $2 + 2 = 4$ ', follows from the definition of the terms, not from knowledge of things in the world. *A priori* does not mean 'innate'.

Aretaic Ethics:

Another name for virtue ethics (q.v.), from the Greek, *arête*.

Big Bang Theory:

The theory that the universe was the result of an initial explosion from a singularity. Red shift gives evidence for this initial explosion. It should not be confused with evolutionary theory.

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Body/Soul Distinction:

The notion that body and soul are ontologically and qualitatively different.

Categorical Imperative:

Kant's guide to duty which is morally obligatory, hence categorical. q.v. Principle of Universalisation.

Cataphatic Way:

Also known as *via positiva*, which believes that despite the obvious limitations of human language, something positive can be said about God and his nature. St. Thomas Aquinas supports this view.

Cognitive Language:

Language about which it is appropriate to ask whether it is true or false. 'Cognitive' is not a synonym for 'true'. 'Paris is the capital of Vietnam' is cognitive but false.

Conscience:

The faculty said to enable us to make moral decisions, and to judge our own and the actions by others. Some have described this as the voice of God, or otherwise innate, but for Aquinas it is a species of practical reason.

Contingent Existence:

Existence which occurs as a result of dependence on some other entity, such as human existence being dependent on prior existence of parents.

Conversion Experience:

Normally, but not necessarily, religious, involving an experience which leads to complete redirection of a person's life, as with St. Paul. The experience may be sudden and dramatic or more gradual.

Corporate Religious Experience:

Experience affecting a group of people rather than just a single individual. The Toronto Blessing is a documented though controversial example.

Cosmological Argument:

Any argument which argues to the existence of God from elements of the world, such as causation and dependency. The first three of Aquinas' Five Ways are often described as his Cosmological Argument.





Creatio ex Nihilo:

'Creation from nothing'. The view that God created the universe by an act of will from no pre-existing materials.

Darwinism:

The argument, developed principally by Charles Darwin, that living beings evolve (randomly) through adaptation and natural selection.

Deontological Ethics:

Any ethical theory which argues that the rightness of an act lies in doing the right thing because it is the right thing in itself – regardless of any consequences.

Determinism:

Any theory which holds that events are the direct effects of previous causes without intervention of free choice.

Disembodied Existence:

Purely spiritual existence, usually post-mortem.

Divine Command Theory:

The theory that something is right simply because God commands it. Often contrasted with the belief that God commands what is right, Divine Command theory was rejected by Aquinas, Luther and many others.

Doctrine of the Mean:

Aristotle's belief that the virtuous way depended on determining the correct way between opposing vices, as courage is a sort of mean between foolhardiness and cowardice. The mean is not arithmetical but always relative to the agent and her circumstances.

Efficient Cause:

In Aristotle's cosmology, that which brings something about. The sculptor is the efficient cause in the making of a statue.





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Emotivism:

The theory advanced principally by Logical Positivists that ethical sentences merely evince emotions and cannot be justified. Named the 'Killing – boo!' theory by Winston Barnes. The emotion need not be felt by the one making the statement.

Ethical Naturalism:

A meta-ethical theory which holds that 'good' is a synonym for a purely natural quality, such as pleasure.

Ethics of Duty:

The belief that right living means always performing one's rationally determined duty. The term is often used to describe Kantian ethics.

Eudaimonia:

There is no exact translation of this Greek term, the goal of Aristotle's virtues ethics. It is commonly translated as 'flourishing' or 'happiness' and has elements of both.

Falsification:

Devised by Karl Popper as a criterion of demarcation between the scientific and non-scientific. It argues that science advances by proving theories false and devising better ones.

Final Cause:

Aristotle's concept of purpose – that for which a thing exists. For Aristotle, the universe is entirely purposive.

Formal Cause:

For Aristotle, that which gives things its structure – this material is a table because it has the form (shape and characteristics) of a table.

Forms:

Plato's theory that everything on earth is an inferior copy of Ideal Forms in a permanent spiritual reality. Thus there are forms not only of objects such as tables and chairs, but also of concepts such as number or beauty. The highest form is the Form of the Good.

Free Will:

The ability to decide choices freely without that choice being predetermined. Involves responsibility for those choices.

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Hard Determinism:

The view that every human action is wholly predetermined by factors such as genetics and heredity. Denies any element of freedom of choice.

Hedonic Calculus:

Bentham's attempt to construct a system which would determine, on strict utilitarian principles, precisely the right action to take in any circumstance that might arise. The experiment failed.

Hermeneutics:

The science and art of textual interpretation.

Hypothetical Imperative:

Kant contrasts this with the Categorical Imperative. The latter is obligatory, the hypothetical is not. If I wish to go to university, there are steps I must take, but there is no obligation to go to university.

Intelligent Design:

A modern theory which argues that certain features of living things are best explained by the conscious design of an intelligent being and not by random processes such as natural selection. Michael Behe is perhaps the best-known advocate.

Intuitionism:

The ethical theory, associated with G.E. Moore, that one simply intuits the good. It is a category of mind.

Irreducible Complexity:

The argument of supporters of Intelligent Design that some biological phenomena have a structure which cannot be explained by any evolutionary cause.

Libertarianism:

The notion, strictly opposed to Determinism, that our choices are absolutely free and unconstrained. More radical in its freedom than Soft Determinism (q.v.). Jean-Paul Sartre is a famous supporter of this radical freedom.

Material Cause:

For Aristotle, the stuff or substance necessary for something to be. This is a table because the stuff of the table exists.





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Materialism:

The belief that the only existents are physical beings.

Meta ethics:

Considers the meaning and justification of ethics. Normative Ethics (q.v.) attempts to show how we should live, while meta ethics considers the meaning of terms such as 'good' and 'right'.

Miracle:

An unexpected event demonstrating the specific power of God. For Hume this always entails a breach of the natural laws of physics, but Aquinas and others emphasise the religious meaning of such events saying that there is no requirement for natural laws to be broken.

Monism:

The belief that there is no body/soul distinction and the two are one entity.

Moral Evil:

Evil brought about, directly or indirectly, as a result of human choices.

Moral Responsibility:

The idea that persons are responsible for their actions, except in cases of immaturity or mental illness etc., and thus are open to praise or blame.

Myth:

A presentation of deeper truth through the medium of story.

Natural Evil:

Evil found in nature, such as plagues, earthquakes, hurricanes etc. Sometimes referred to as suffering, this is evil which is not the consequence of specific human action.

Natural Law:

'Right reason in accordance with nature'. This believes that by reason alone we can determine which actions are good or bad for human flourishing.

Necessary Existence:

This idea, sometimes referred to as 'aseity', refers to a being whose existence depends on no other being.





Negative Utilitarianism:

Instead of seeking to maximise pleasure, this seeks to minimise suffering. Peter Singer is a major advocate.

Non-Cognitive Language:

Language about which it is inappropriate to ask whether it is true or false. This includes, for instance, such things as prayers, curses, poetry etc.

Non-propositional faith and revelation:

Often described as 'faith in'. This is the faith of personal encounter, as when one says 'I believe *in* him.' In religious terms this means that God reveals himself, with faith trust in that self-revelation.

Normative Ethics:

Ethical theories which inform people how they should act.

'Numinous' Experience:

According to Rudolf Otto, an experience which reveals the 'Wholly Other.' This presents itself as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*.

Omnipotence:

All-powerful. This is normally understood in relation to God, meaning that he can do anything logically possible. To say that God could not make square circles would be logically impossible, and thus would not limit God.

Omnipresence:

The belief that God is everywhere, and all times, and everything is present to God.

Omniscience:

'All-knowing'. The belief that God knows everything including the truth of every possible true proposition.

Ontological Argument:

An argument for the existence of God which draws on no sense experience but which attempts to argue his existence from reflection on his definition alone. Famous examples were developed by St. Anselm, Descartes and several modern philosophers.



**Phenomenon:**

That which is presented to us in sense experience. Kant, the most significant Phenomenalist, argues that we can never know the world as it is, only as it is presented to us in sense experience.

Predestination:

The belief that as God is omniscient, he knows our choices from all eternity and therefore has already determined our eternal destiny. The belief is associated most commonly with Calvinism.

Preference Utilitarianism:

Adopted by John Stuart Mill and Peter Singer, argues that we should seek always the good we would rationally prefer rather than simply our selfish desires.

Prescriptivism:

Developed by R.M. Hare, argues that ethical norms should be seen not as verifiable propositions but prescriptions for behaviour. They are thus open to logical analysis for their consistency with other prescriptions.

Prime Mover:

In Aristotle's cosmology, the Final Cause of the Universe, drawing everything towards himself by attraction. He is indifferent to the universe and not a creator in the sense of maker of things.

Principle of Universalisation:

Otherwise known as the First Form of the Categorical Imperative (Kant). It argues that we should act only on that maxim which we can at the same time will to be universal law.

Principle of Utility:

Holds that we should so act as to seek the greatest balance of good over evil. This should be the sole guide to action. Jeremy Bentham modified the principle as 'the greatest good of the greatest number' but other utilitarian thinkers rejected the modification, not least because it smuggles in a controversial second principle of justice.

Propositional faith and revelation:

In this view, faith is seen as acceptance of truths revealed by God, as propositions to be accepted. Such truths might be the words of scripture, the Creeds, church doctrines or the Confessions of the Reformers. Sometimes referred to as 'Belief that ... (x is a true proposition).'



**Reincarnation:**

The soul moves on death into a new and different body.

Relativist Ethics:

This holds that there are no moral absolutes and every judgement is relative to such things as culture and circumstance. This should not be confused with Situation Ethics, which does believe in the moral absolute of always doing the loving thing (Fletcher) or requires that one must in every circumstance will what is right (Temple), while being situational in application.

Resurrection:

The belief that after death we are raised body and soul to new life. This is the belief of mainstream Christianity.

Revelation:

God's showing of himself to humankind. This may be propositional or non-propositions. (q.v)

Rule Utilitarianism:

Argues that we should always follow the rule general adherence to which will lead to the greatest balance of good over evil. John Stuart Mill supported this, especially in *On Liberty*.

Soft Determinism:

Accepts that every event has a cause but recognises human free will as itself an internal cause.

Substance Dualism:

The idea that body and soul(psyche) are wholly different substances, of different nature. The view is found most strongly in Descartes, but rejected by Anscombe, Geach and Ryle, among others.

Subjectivism:

The ethical view that the right-making feature of an ethical utterance is that I have chosen it. There is no other criterion. The view is found especially in the views of existentialists, notably Jean-Paul Sartre.

Teleological Argument:

Often known as the Design Argument, argues that the universe fits together so well that it must have had a Designer. Paley is the most famous advocate. Aquinas argues differently, from the purpose discerned in the universe, while Richard Swinburne argues from the underlying simplicity of the physical laws of the universe.





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Teleological Ethics:

Any ethical theory – such as Utilitarianism – which argues the goodness or badness of an action according to its consequences. (q.v. Deontological Ethics)

Theological Determinism:

The belief that all events occur wholly by the pre-existing choices of God without any human will.

Summum Bonum:

Term used by Kant to indicate a (post-mortem) state combining the highest virtue with the highest happiness.

Symbol:

Something which represents something else. For Paul Tillich, religious language consists of symbols (including the words we use), which do not merely represent God but participate in his reality.

Theodicy:

Any attempt to justify the goodness of God in the face of the problem of evil.

Utilitarianism:

A teleological (consequentialist) ethical philosophy which attempts to resolve the issue of dilemma in choices by offering the single principle that we should seek always the greatest balance of good over evil.

Verification:

Devised by the Vienna Circle, argues that any proposition which is not a tautology or not empirically verifiable is meaningless. The strong verification principle demanded conclusive verification, but as this ruled out all science (as no sense experience can ever be conclusively proven), later verificationists, notably A.J. Ayer, substituted weak verification, which demands only that one needed to state what experience would make the truth of the proposition probable.

Via Negativa:

Also known as the apophatic way, argues that as human language is wholly inadequate to describe God, we can speak of him only in terms of what he is not.





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Via Positiva:

Also known as the cataphatic way (q.v), believes that it is possible to speak in positive ways about God, despite the limitations of human languages.

Virtue Ethics:

Also known as Aretaic ethics, emphasises the importance of being a good person, going beyond merely performing good acts. Disposition and character matter is assessing the goodness of a person. Aristotle is perhaps the most famous example, together with St. Thomas Aquinas. Modern advocates include Alisdair MacIntyre, Robert C. Solomon, Elizabeth Anscombe and Martha Nussbaum



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