Philosophy and Ethics year 12 → 13 Bridging work Summer 2021

Dear Year 12 Philosophers, Ethicists and Theologians,

During these ever challenging and difficult times, you have continued to impress us with your dedication to learning and your thirst for education. This past year has led to us all finding a ‘new normal’ and you have all risen to the challenge with aplomb.

We are at a good starting point for Year 13. However, six weeks is a long time to go without any formal education. Thus, you are being asked to complete the tasks outlined in this work pack so that you are fully prepared for whatever September brings.

The tasks are divided into the three components:

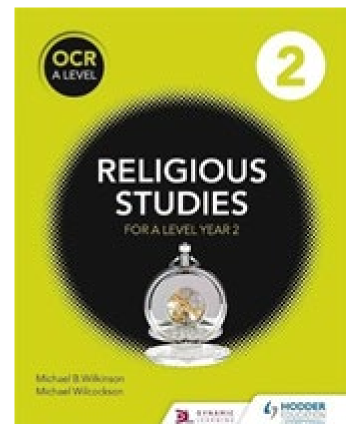
1. **Philosophy of Religion**
2. **Religion and Ethics**
3. **Developments in Christian Thought.**

You will notice from the tasks that they have two main purposes: to recap over prior learning, and preparation for future learning.

Please complete your work on paper or directly on your computer and save to Teams in the ‘bridging work’ folder. As always, if you have any questions, send us a message via Teams or Email ensuring that you copy the other teacher in so that you receive a response as swiftly as possible.

In addition to the tasks, we would like you to purchase the Year 2 textbook so that you have it ready for your first lesson in September.

- OCR Religious Studies A Level Year 2
- **ISBN-10:** 1471866742



Well done for all your efforts this year. It has been our sincere pleasure to teach you and we hope to see you all safe and well at the beginning of the next academic year.

Ms Shah and Ms Barker

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Philosophy of Religion

1. Prior learning and revision:
    - Revisit all year 1 knowledge organisers and add additional points.

2. Chapter on **Attributes of God**
    - Green book – six sides of notes
    - Blue book – apply your knowledge tasks

Religion and Ethics

3. Prior learning and revision:
    - Revisit all year 1 knowledge organisers and add additional points.

4. Chapter on **Conscience**
    - Green book – six sides of notes
    - Blue book – apply your knowledge tasks

Developments in Christian Thought

5. Prior learning and revision:
    - Revisit all year 1 knowledge organisers and add additional points.
    - Complete knowledge organisers for units:
        - Augustine
        - Death and the afterlife
        - Knowledge of God's existence

6. Chapter on **Liberation theology**
    - Green book – six sides of notes
    - Blue book – apply your knowledge tasks

Chapter 1

The nature or attributes of God

1 Introduction

Chapter checklist

The chapter begins by considering some of the theological and religious issues of defining the qualities of God. It then looks specifically at the issues entailed in ideas of omnipotence, omniscience, benevolence and eternity. Discussion of how these issues and ideas interconnect, and their implications for free will, is the subject of the next chapter, although some preliminary points are made here. Throughout the chapter, there is reference to the historical development of ideas, with reference to key figures such as Aquinas. Issues about the language used in defining terms are also discussed, providing a link to later chapters on religious language. Revision pointers, study advice and guidance on possible essay questions may be found at the end of the chapter.

Key term

Attribute A quality or characteristic. God is believed to have attributes such as omnipotence, mercy and justice.

It is natural for someone who believes in God to think about the nature of that God. Believers ask themselves, 'what is God like?' or 'what **attributes** does God have?' But any connection with God is a connection with a reality that is not a 'being among beings' and is utterly unlike anything in our experience. In his inmost nature, God is, as Jewish, Muslim and Christian scriptures all attest, a reality that passes all understanding. These scriptures would also consider it blasphemous to say we know the mind of God.

The Book of Job makes direct reference to the gap between God and humankind:

How then can a mortal be righteous before God?
How can one born of woman be pure?
If even the moon is not bright
and the stars are not pure in his sight,
how much less a mortal, who is a maggot,
and a human being who is a worm!

Job 25:4–6

It also refers to the way the heavens and the earth are in awe of God.

These are indeed but the outskirts of his ways;
and how small a whisper do we hear of him!
But the thunder of his power who can understand?

Job 26:14

Such poetic references – to God's infinite might coupled with his unknowability – recur throughout scripture.

And yet there is a human curiosity about what God is. In the centuries before Christ, Jewish writers emphasised the universality and singularity of their God compared with the many local deities of other faiths. To them, the idea of one God (monotheism) was superior, in that God had a greatness to which nothing else could compare. However, while these writers asserted God's greatness, they didn't consider what that greatness entailed. It was in subsequent discussions that ideas about omnipotence and omniscience arose. Neither term occurs in scripture. In the earliest formulations of faith, such as the creeds, God is described as 'Almighty' and the 'creator of all', but there was no clear formulation of what precisely the terms meant. Even the Council of Trent (1545–63), which is known for its careful definitions, drew back from exactness, reminding priests in its catechism that in the Creed:

... great mysteries lie concealed under almost every word...

Catechism of the Council of Trent for Parish Priests, Part I, Article 1

None of this has prevented earnest philosophical debate about what the term 'almighty' means when speaking of God.

The particular problem – as we shall see – is that we are attempting to understand the terms used about God with our own very limited intellectual apparatus. None of us has seen the 'fullness of God', and most people have only glimpses of things in the world that they interpret as giving them an insight into the nature of God, and even then they might have misinterpreted the phenomenon incorrectly.

2 Divine attributes

Over the centuries of monotheistic belief, philosophers and theologians, in their conversations about God, have thought about the divine nature and its qualities, even though the same theologians have always recognised the limitations of human language in attempting to define those attributes. At different times in history, believers have seen God in different ways. For example, many, perhaps most, modern Christian believers talk of having a personal relationship with God, yet, in 1645, John Biddle was imprisoned for the alleged blasphemy of treating God in such personal terms. At different times, different aspects of God have been treated as most prominent, and different thinkers have drawn attention to various qualities. Many disputes between religious thinkers have been about what aspects of God should be considered most important, and people accuse each other of overlooking key features, perhaps emphasising God's justice and law at the expense of his mercy, or his greatness at the expense of his love and concern for each individual.

The Catholic Encyclopedia, published in 1907, listed God's attributes as follows:

- Simplicity
- Infinity
- Immutability
- Unity
- Truth
- Goodness
- Beauty
- Omnipotence
- Omnipresence
- Intellect
- Will
- Personality
- All-wise
- Self-existent
- Justice
- Love.

But even in this listing, as the *Encyclopedia* points out, there is argument, and no effort is made to claim that this list is complete. Even if it were a complete list, there would still be problems in determining what exactly these mean in relation to God.

Any attempt to consider each of these characteristics, and to consider whether they are appropriate or comprehensive, would be a task to fill a library of books, and even then, to spend many of those pages explaining why our understandings, when applied to God, would be incomplete. The very idea of attributes is two-edged. When I see something or someone as beautiful, for example, I do not merely say that she has beauty, but that I perceive that person *as* beautiful. I attribute to her the quality of beauty.

Attributing qualities is fraught with difficulties. For example, I may, for example, be wholly wrong in my attribution. I may say somebody is honest only to discover that he is an accomplished conman and serial liar. In this case, I have *misattributed* the quality.

It's also very difficult to agree criteria for attributes. A person can find beauty in a painting which another person strongly dislikes, and it is difficult, perhaps impossible, to settle the argument conclusively. That is to say, there are no objective criteria which set out what beauty is and isn't. There is also a linguistic question here, whether the language we use is sufficient to capture the essence of beauty, or whether it falls short. What does it mean to say something is beautiful?

Key question

How can we know whether we are correct in attributing a quality to God?

Three qualities will be discussed in this chapter in turn – omnipotence, omniscience and benevolence. As we shall see, none is without its problems, even when considered singly, as we do here. Questions about what each attribute means are as important as whether it is correct to make the attribution in the first place.

(a) Omnipotence

Key term

Omnipotence The ability to perform any act. In relation to God, Aquinas argues that omnipotence is the ability to perform any act which is logically possible.

The literal meaning of **omnipotence** is 'all-powerful' – the idea that God can do anything. The difficulty lies in determining what that 'anything' might be.

Descartes argued that omnipotence meant that God could do absolutely anything. This was different from the view of St Thomas Aquinas, who thought that it meant that God could do anything that was logically possible.

Consider the question of whether God could create a square circle. For St Thomas, this would be an absurd question, because the concept of a square circle makes no sense. According to the rules of logic, it is a contradiction in terms – the phrase 'square circle' is meaningless nonsense words. For Aquinas, it makes no sense to accuse God of being less than omnipotent because he cannot do the logically impossible. He argues:

> *As the principles of sciences such as logic, geometry or arithmetic are taken from the formal principles of things which are essential to their natures, it follows that God could not make things that go against these principles. For example ... it would be impossible to have a circle in which the lines drawn from the centre to the circumference were not equal or for a triangle not to have three angles equal to two right angles.*
>
> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Book II, Section 25

Key persons

St Thomas Aquinas (1224/5–74): Dominican friar, and perhaps the greatest medieval philosopher. Aquinas was at the forefront of attempts to rethink existing philosophical and theological thought in the light of the Aristotelian revival. Best known for his *Summa Theologica*, *Summa Contra Gentiles* and dozens of other works.

René Descartes (1596–1650): French philosopher and mathematician, best known for his *Meditations on First Philosophy* and *Meditations*. A rationalist, he used systematic doubt of sense experience as the basis of his system, seeking a basis for knowledge on his *cogito, ergo sum*. He is often referred to as the father of modern philosophy.

Descartes' view was different: he argued that God's existence is prior to the laws of logic, so God is not bound by those laws. It is difficult to see how this can be, as we can have no conception of logical impossibilities and can give no coherent definition of the qualities of a square circle.

It seems that Aquinas has given us a more rational definition of omnipotence than that of Descartes, but there are further issues, even with this narrower definition. Is God able to ride a bicycle? A human can ride a bicycle because she has a sense of balance and has two working legs, eyes to see, hands to hold the handlebar and so on. If she lacked any of these, then her ability to ride a bicycle would be impaired, even if she knew in theory how bicycles are ridden. If God is not conceived as being flesh and blood or even in the same plane of existence as human beings, then we struggle to see how God has the ability to ride anything like a bicycle. To say this is not to say he would lack the power if he chose to move the bicycle, but moving a bicycle is not the same as riding one. It is rather to question whether as a non-material – and hence legless – reality, he would be able to cycle, any more than a fish could ride a bicycle. To ride a bicycle is *logically* possible – there is no logical contradiction in being able to ride a bicycle, and it is demonstrably

Key question

Is it possible to find any coherent definition of omnipotence that can be applied to God?

See Year 1, pages 116–17.

possible for people to do so – but to someone or something without certain attributes it would be *physically* impossible. There are other forms of impossibility than merely the logical.

All this suggests that the definition of omnipotence should be narrower than Aquinas imagines. Many modern philosophers have chosen to take the view that the meaning of omnipotence is that God can do anything it is logically possible for God to do. If we consider this in a little more depth, we recognise that certain uses of power would seem inconsistent with the nature of God.

If you think back to when you studied the problem of evil earlier in your studies, you will recall St Augustine of Hippo arguing that God cannot be the one who created evil as it would be contrary to his nature.

Augustine understands omnipotence to mean not that God can do anything at all, but that he can do anything he wills or chooses to do. He says:

> ... *He [God] is called omnipotent because He does what He wills, not because He suffers what He does not will. If that were to happen to Him, He would not be omnipotent. It follows that He cannot do some things precisely because He is omnipotent.*
>
> St Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God*, Chapter 10

Augustine's approach is rich and interesting, and perhaps more coherent than some views we have previously looked at. He argues, in essence, that God's omnipotence needs to be understood as meaning that he can do whatever he chooses to do. The power to do evil acts in God's case would be at best theoretical, as his will is always to do good. In other words, his divine power means that he 'self-imposes' certain limitations that are contrary to his nature – it is precisely because God is omnipotent that he does not commit evil or unjust actions.

Augustine appeals to something in human experience. I am not omnipotent because I know from my experience that I do not have the power to do everything I want. I cannot be rich, just because I want to be rich. I cannot by the power of thought be everywhere I want to be nor do everything I want to do. I may describe myself as frustrated in my wishes, and I shall almost certainly be very conscious of my powerlessness. I am very aware of my limitations and the boundaries of choices open to me. For Augustine, God is omnipotent because he knows no such frustration: what he wills he is able to do.

Think about our own experience. We feel restricted and impotent when we cannot do what we want to do, but we feel no lack of power about being unable to do something we have no interest in doing. I cannot walk a tightrope, but it doesn't restrict me in any significant way: I have no wish to do so.

If Augustine is right, that omnipotence means being able to do everything God wishes, without hindrance or limitation, then various problems raised by the so-called **paradox of omnipotence** seem to disappear. This paradox is the same one that caused Aquinas and Descartes to consider whether God could create a square circle. It also raises questions such as whether God could make a table that he had not made, or make a stone so heavy that no one, including himself, could lift it. At a deeper level it raises questions about whether an omnipotent God could alter the past.

Key term

Paradox of omnipotence Some things seem impossible to do for an omnipotent being. If God used his omnipotence to make a stone so heavy that no one could lift it, including himself, then he would not be omnipotent. But if he could not make such a stone, then it would seem he would not be omnipotent.

If the limited approach suggested by Augustine is adopted, it is possible to argue that, for questions like the unliftable stone, or altering the past, we might ask why God would want to do any of these things. What would be the point of a square circle? Is God's omnipotence open to challenge because he could not do something that he had no wish to do?

Modern philosophers have, in general, opted for limited interpretations of omnipotence. Anthony Kenny argues:

> *Divine omnipotence ... if it is to be a coherent notion, must be something less than the complete omnipotence which is the possession of all logically possible powers which it is logically possible for a being with the attributes of God to possess. (If the definition is not to be empty, 'attributes' must here be taken to mean these properties of Godhead which are not themselves powers: properties such as immutability and goodness.) This conception of divine omnipotence is close to traditional accounts while avoiding some of the incoherences ...*
>
> Anthony Kenny, 'The Definition of Omnipotence', *The Concept of God*, 1987, pages 131–2

Different philosophers have, then, sought to understand God's attribute of omnipotence in terms of whether it should be subject to the limits of logical possibility or divine self-limitation. An alternative would be to return to what some have described as a semantic approach, understanding the word 'omnipotence' in a scriptural way – given the difficulties in attempting to comprehend a concept which surpasses human understanding – so that there is a religious aspect to it. When a believer describes God, she does not provide a scientific definition; but neither does she seek to do so. When she describes God as omnipotent, she does so in awe and prayer and worship, aware of her own limitation when she speaks to and about God. In calling God 'omnipotent' she is describing her own finitude and dependence as much as she wants to express his greatness.

(b) Omniscience

Just as there are difficulties with the definition of omnipotence, so too with **omniscience**, the idea that God is all-knowing. What does this mean?

Key term

Omniscience The attribute of being all-knowing, which is attributed to God.

Philosophers debate precisely what it means *to know*. If God knows everything, then we need to ask both what it means for someone to *know* something, and in God's case, what is the *everything* that God is supposed to know?

(i) Divine knowledge and its interaction with temporal existence

The philosopher Sir Michael Dummett, in his Gifford Lectures of 1996, gave an interesting definition of omniscience. He reminds us firstly of the differences between God's sense of knowledge and ours, which is much more subjective:

Key person

Sir Michael Dummett (1925–2011): Oxford-based philosopher of logic and world-famous authority on Gottlob Frege. A Roman Catholic convert, he succeeded A. J. Ayer as Wykeham Professor of Logic in 1979, a post held until his retirement in 1992. He was knighted in 1999 and was also an expert on tarot cards. He was also politically engaged with an academic interest in voting systems.

> *God has no particular point of view, no location in the world, no perspective contrasted with other perspectives. He knows, not by the effect of objects or events upon His perceptual equipment, but by His comprehension of all truth. How God apprehends things as being must be how they are in themselves.*
>
> Michael Dummett, *Thought and Reality*, 2006, page 96

This point is very important. Whatever God's knowledge would be like, it is not like human knowledge. We are creatures with perspective and human faculties. I am always *here* and not *there*. As I learn more, and change more, my understanding and knowledge change. Only I can live my life and have my knowledge. Dummett reminds us that God's knowledge is beyond perspective, as it includes everything. One consequence of this, presumably, is that by knowing everything, God has complete understanding of everything. As humans, we often get things out of proportion, misunderstanding their true significance in relation to everything else. This would not happen if we knew, as God does, the true facts of everything.

Dummett goes on to characterise the nature of God's knowledge:

> *... for every true proposition, He knows that it is true. But we have no right to assume that, for every intelligible question, God knows an answer to it; if there is no answer, there is nothing for him to know.... [W]hen we speak of God's knowledge, we are using the tense of timelessness.*
>
> Ibid., page 108

This point of Dummett is interesting in several ways.

The first is whether every true proposition can be known timelessly – Dummett speaks of God knowing things 'in a tense of timelessness'. It is certainly true for certain realities. For example, the sentence 'The *Titanic* struck an iceberg on 14 April 1912 and sank in the early hours of 15 April', if it is true, is a proposition referring to a fixed historical fact. If it is true, it will always be true; and if God knows everything, then presumably he would always have known that the sentence described a true event even if the event was future to us. We can see how this could be timelessly true.

The problem is that the truth of some sentences depends on time and place. For example, if I said to someone 'I am right behind you', this could be a true sentence for me at a particular time, but not at another. A sentence like this is true only at a particular time and place, and true only for the speaker at that moment. Philosophers refer to these kinds of sentences as *indexical sentences*. The question we may ask is whether a sentence of this sort can be known *as true* in a timeless way. If not, we might have to suggest that God's knowledge is not timeless or that he has a different understanding about indexical sentences – one that is not timeless.

This thought raises further issues. Dummett's account of God's omniscience is quite limited. If God's knowledge consists in knowing for every true proposition that it is true, does that exhaust the concept of knowledge? Would someone know everything if he knew every possible fact, past, present and future? He would surely only have full knowledge if there were no knowledge other than knowledge of facts.

(ii) Types of knowledge

But there seem to be other kinds of knowledge. For example, there is *knowing what it is like to be something*. The American philosopher, Thomas Nagel, in 1974, wrote a very famous article, 'What Is It Like To Be a Bat?'. He argues that we have no idea of what it is like to be a bat – we do not have bat sense, minds or vocabulary.

If we apply this thought to God, then it is difficult to see how God's knowledge can include knowing what a non-God experience is like. To take a simple example, I do not know what will happen between now and my next birthday, or whether I shall be alive to see it. I can guess what the next months might hold, but I do not know. Now, suppose that God knows everything that will happen to me. Unlike me, he knows what presents I will receive for my next birthday, whether I shall fall under a bus or win the lottery. But if he knows everything, and is never ignorant, can he know what it is like to be ignorant?

Another type of knowledge is *knowing how to do something*. Certain types of knowledge can only be achieved through practice. Consider, for example, knowing how to ride a bicycle. I can only know how to ride a bicycle through practice. There is an important difference between knowing how a bicycle is ridden and how to ride a bicycle. So does God know how to ride a bicycle? If God has never ridden a bicycle can he be said in any significant way to know how to do so? If I had never ridden a bicycle, no one would say I knew how to ride a bicycle, however many books about cycling I had read.

So, just as omnipotence needs to be conditioned in some way, the same appears to be true for omniscience. We might suggest that God's omnipotence means that he knows everything it is logically possible for God to know. In order to be truly omniscient, God would simultaneously need to know everything, including what it is like to be ignorant. This could be held to be contradictory in some way, and therefore not logically possible, and for some philosophers this is problematic. One way of responding to this might be to argue that God knows everything he would need or wish to know. God is not prevented from the fullness of being God in any relevant way.

This does not exhaust the philosophical issues of omniscience. If we think about God's knowledge, or his other qualities, questions arise in relation to whether he is timeless or not. If God knows everything it is logically possible for God to know, what is logically possible will be different for a God who is constrained by time than it is for one who is outside and beyond time. Some of these issues will be discussed in the next chapter.

Key question

Is it possible for the idea of omniscience to cover every type of knowledge? Does knowing every truth rule out certain kinds of experiential knowledge?

(c) Benevolence

We have seen that any attempt to define divine omnipotence or omniscience is very difficult as these are ideas that stretch language and which need qualification in some way if we are to make sense of them. Definitions are even more challenging when we come to consider God as benevolent.

Key terms

Benevolence Literally, 'well-wishing' – the claim that God wants the good for everyone and everything.

Beneficence Doing good and performing good actions.

The strict meaning of '**benevolence**' is well-wishing. We use the term sometimes of amiable characters who seem to wish everyone well, look on people's foibles with kindness and seem – together with a sunny disposition – to see good in everyone and everything.

But is a God who wishes everyone well truly good? Or, indeed, truly omnipotent? We may ask whether a good person simply *wishes* the good for people or rather *does* good for people. I might wish life to be pleasant for everyone, but if I do nothing to bring goodness into people's lives, that benevolence seems worthless. Aristotle remarked that a just person could only be truly just if he performed just acts – simply having a nice feeling was not enough. It seems not enough to *be* good. One cannot truly *be* good without *doing* good (though, of course, one might do good things for bad reasons. Just doing good is not enough to make one a good person). It seems reasonable, therefore, to say of God that if he is truly good, then that goodness is not simply a matter of well-wishing, benevolence, but also well-doing, **beneficence**.

If God were merely well-wishing, he could be a very sweet, perhaps even jolly, God – and there would be no problem of evil. He might, like a cheery old gentleman, wish people would be nice to each other, and shake his head sadly when they are not. But that is not the Jewish, Christian or Muslim understanding of God. God cannot only wish good things, but also do them. That is why he is described as omnipotent and why the problem of evil is so significant. God is not understood as a helpless though well-wishing bystander. Being omnipotent, he could do something about the evil and suffering that afflict the universe, but apparently he does nothing, or, at least, very little. He might perform the occasional miracle, alleviating some pain here or there, but daily people starve to death, are massacred, raped, killed in accidents, fall ill, to say nothing of the pain of non-human animals. The problem of evil rests on the question of how a good God could stand back in the face of such evil.

Key question

Can a truly benevolent and omnipotent God permit the existence of evil and suffering?

Some argue that God's goodness lies in being good in himself. He has the goodness of not being subject to decay, rupture, disintegration or being threatened by an equal or overwhelming power. We would describe something as very good if it never broke, never went wrong and could not be destroyed (what a perfect car that would be!). The difficulty here is that this is a different use of the term 'good' from a moral one. A good meal or a good car is not *morally* good. Even if the meal or the car is good for someone, they have no intention of helping anyone. A Porsche may be a good car, but it does not *choose* to be good. It has no intention to please: it just does. But to describe someone as morally good is to say that she has good intentions – she chooses for herself to do good for people. She is good because she wants to be good, not because she happens to be useful. Most people have an understanding of God which includes his choosing good as an act of divine will. God not only *is* good, but consciously *wills* good.

(i) Just judgement of human actions

The Dominican philosopher, Brian Davies, argues that God's goodness must not be a case of simply being well behaved as a good child might be. He takes issue with Richard Swinburne's claim in *The Coherence of Theism* (1993, page 184) that 'God is so constituted that he always does the morally best action ... and no morally bad action'. For Davies, this claim is overly simplistic (reductionist):

> *The idea seems to be that God is good because he manages, in spite of alternatives open to him, to be* ***well behaved****.*
>
> Brian Davies, 'Is God a Moral Agent?' *Whose God? Which Tradition?*, 2008, page 103

Davies argues that Aquinas does not conceive of God as a moral *person*. The Bible sees God as righteous in the sense that he never breaks a covenant with his people and is always true to his own nature. A bad person is one who goes against his own – and human – nature in a destructive way. God is perfectly good because he never contradicts his own nature. For Davies:

Key quote

... Aquinas would say that God could never command us to torture children because, in effect, that would involve him in contradicting himself, or going against his nature as the source of creaturely goodness... And this, of course, is not to suggest that God's goodness consists in him acting in accordance with moral norms to which he responds in any sense.

Brian Davies, 'Is God a Moral Agent?' *Whose God? Which Tradition?*, 2008, page 122

In a recent article, the British philosopher, M. B. Wilkinson, argues that God's goodness should be understood as part of his creative action. He is not a 'person among persons', as a moral agent would be. According to Wilkinson, living a moral life should not be seen as simply following moral rules laid down by God. Instead:

> *God makes humankind creative of good. When he commands the right because it is right, this should, I think, be understood as commanding what our intelligence and imagination choose as the good for humans. It is an injunction to be human in the fullest sense, which includes values such as autonomy.*
>
> M. B. Wilkinson, 'God, Goodness, Fact and Value'. *Síntese – Rev. de Filosofia*, v.42, n.134, 2015, page 416

See Year 1, page 124.

There are other problems too. How can God be perfectly benevolent and perfectly just? To be just is to be understood as giving each person what he deserves (rewarding the good and punishing the evil). For many people, the idea is that God sends good people to heaven and bad ones to hell. But, as we mentioned when considering the problem of evil in Year 1, hell is part of the totality of evil.

If I commit an evil act on earth, most societies believe that there should be an end to that punishment (even if, in some legal systems, that end is death), a moment when that person's punishment is over. Could it ever be just to sentence someone to suffering without end, with no hope of any kind of release – even the relief of death – and no hope of reform or redemption? As John Hick pointed out, if this kind of hell were to exist it would itself be part of the problem of evil.

But there is an equal problem if God does not reward good deeds and punish sinners. The sense of justice in people goes very deep. Perhaps the earliest complaint of even a tiny child is: 'That's not fair'. It seems incompatible with the idea of a just and good God to pay no attention to the merit of people's actions.

St Thomas Aquinas draws attention to the special nature of justice in God. He distinguishes between different types of justice:

> *There are two kinds of justice. One is about mutual giving and receiving, as in buying and selling, and other types of commerce and exchange. The Philosopher (Ethic. v, 4) [Aristotle] calls this 'commutative justice', which directs exchange and business. This does not belong to God because, as the Apostle [St Paul] says: 'Who has given a gift to him, to receive a gift in return?' (Romans: 11:35). The other type of justice is about distribution, and is called distributive justice. In this a ruler or a steward gives to each person what his rank deserves. Just as the right order shown in ruling a family or any kind of large group displays the ruler's justice of this type, the order of the universe, seen both in the effects of nature and in effects of will, demonstrates the justice of God. This is why Dionysius says (Div. Nom. viii, 4): 'We are bound to see that God is truly just, when we realise that he gives to all existing things what is proper to the condition of each; and he preserves the nature of everything in the order and gives the powers that properly belong to it.'*
>
> *Summa Theologica (S.T.)* I, 21, a.1, c

Aquinas' argument is that God's justice is not and cannot be like ours on earth. For God, certain types of justice do not apply. God needs nothing from us. We do not trade with God in the way a shopkeeper and customer might trade honestly with each other. For Aquinas, God's justice is about giving everyone what they need. God's goodness works with his justice. Aquinas says:

Key quote

God's justice is about what is appropriate to him, as he gives to himself what is due to himself. It is also right for a created thing to possess what is appropriate to it; so it is due to man to have hands, and that other animals should serve him. In this God exercises justice, giving to each thing ... what is due to it. This comes from the former [God's justice towards himself]. What is due to each thing is what it needs according to the divine wisdom. Although God gives each thing its due, he himself owes no debt. He is not responsible to other things but everything else is responsible to him. This is why justice, therefore, in God is sometimes as the appropriate accompaniment of his goodness; sometimes as the reward of what people deserve. Anselm refers to both views when he says (*Prosolog.* 10): 'When you punish the wicked, it is just, since it is what they deserve; and when you spare the wicked, it is also just; since it shows your goodness.'

S.T. I, 21, a.1, ad 3

For Aquinas, then, God's justice lies in doing the right thing as a good God who wills a good universe. God is not answerable to anyone: he is the standard of justice:

> *As good as understood by intellect is the object of the will, it is impossible for God to will anything but what his own wisdom understands as good. His wisdom is, as it were, his law of justice, by which his will is right and just. Therefore, what he does according to his will is done justly. In the same way, we act justly when we do what we should according to law. But while law comes to us from something superior to us, God is a law unto himself.*
>
> *S.T.* I, 21, a.1, ad 2

Key question

How is it possible for God to be perfectly just yet merciful?

Aquinas reminds us that God cannot be answerable to some higher abstract standard: if God is a perfect being and is perfectly wise, then his standard of justice is the only possible one. Justice is demonstrated in the goodness of his creation and, according to Aquinas, by giving all creatures what they need to flourish ('What is due to each thing is what it needs according to the divine wisdom'). Of course, we are still troubled by the problem of evil. Some people seem not to have what they need. Some are born without normal limbs or the mental capacities needed for a full human life as lived by others. It is difficult to reconcile this with the justice described by Aquinas. If we say that God's justice is mysterious to us, as we are not God and cannot properly or rightly judge him, that is not an explanation, but neither are we able – if God is supreme – to find another standard by which to accuse God of injustice.

Perhaps an answer lies not in a simple question of whether God gives equally to everyone, but whether God is *just*. The American philosopher William Frankena and others have pointed out that the moral principle of justice does not mean treating everyone in the same way, but rather making the same relative contribution to the good of people's lives. It would not be justice to send everyone, without exception, to university. Many would be unhappy there, and many would be unable to cope. A state may not give the same level of welfare support to everyone. Just treatment means treating the needs of each person as seriously as those of everyone, which means giving more welfare aid to those who need it more, perhaps because of illness, poverty or disability. This might mean giving some people more in terms in resources and money to allow the same relative level of fulfilment.

(ii) Responses to God's just judgement of human actions

To be just might not mean the same as treating everyone in exactly the same way. If this is true, then God's justice would mean that everyone is equally valued even if not treated identically. But this raises other issues when we consider God's mercy, especially towards those not of his church or who have had no opportunity to encounter or believe in him.

There are many descriptions of the nature of mercy. John Calvin in his theology emphasised the unworthiness of any human compared with God. Throughout his works, there is emphasis on the greatness of God and the 'littleness' of human existence in comparison. In Part II, Chapter 3 of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion,* he argues that humankind has a

corrupt nature and, as such, is damnable. He denies the existence of free will but argues that God demonstrates his mercy through the election of certain godly people. By granting his salvation to these, God reveals his goodness. They are small in number and their election is demonstrated by their membership of the Church and by the goodness of their lives. Outside the Church, there is no salvation, but even within the Church those saved are few:

Key person

John Calvin (1509–64): born Jehan Cauvin in France, he became a major figure in the Reformation. Based in Geneva, he developed the doctrine of predestination and the absolute sovereignty of God. A lawyer by training, he was never ordained. His major work was the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, which was developed and expanded throughout his life.

Key quote

...regard must be had both to the secret election and to the internal calling of God, because he alone 'knoweth them that are his' (2. Tim. 2:19); and as Paul expresses it, holds them as it were enclosed under his seal, although, at the same time, they wear his insignia, and are thus distinguished from the reprobate. But as they are a small and despised number, concealed in an immense crowd, like a few grains of wheat buried among a heap of chaff, to God alone must be left the knowledge of his Church, of which his secret election forms the foundation. Nor is it enough to embrace the number of the elect in thought and intention merely. By the unity of the Church we must understand a unity into which we feel persuaded that we are truly ingrafted. For unless we are united with all the other members under Christ our head, no hope of the future inheritance awaits us.

John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge, Part IV, 1.2

Critics of Calvinism argue whether this is truly merciful. Many have no opportunity ever to be members of the Christian Church. Those who are not part of God's 'secret elect' might ask whether it is the sign of the true goodness of God to choose a small number and to offer neither redemption nor hope of it to others. Calvin's response is to argue that there is no injustice and no reason for the damned to complain as no one deserves to be saved. God exercises his mercy in selecting a small number for salvation.

Nevertheless, it could be argued that Calvin's vision of hell creates problems for the goodness of God. For Aquinas, hell was separation from God, chosen by those who rejected him. For Aquinas, hell is not a place of fire and torture – it is the separation from God which is the anguish. Calvin's view is more literal and more traditional:

> *Unhappy consciences find no rest, but are vexed and driven about by a dire whirlwind, feeling as if torn by an angry God, pierced through with deadly darts, terrified by his thunderbolts and crushed by the weight of his hand; so that it were easier to plunge into abysses and whirlpools than endure these terrors for a moment. How fearful, then, must it be to be thus beset throughout eternity!*

John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge, Part III, 25.12

Calvin also touches on a wider issue. Most Christians accept the idea of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (outside the Church, there is no salvation). Yet, we know good people who are not Christian, and there remain the enormous numbers who never have the opportunity to become members of the Church. Would a good and merciful God condemn these? The Roman Catholic Church for centuries insisted on the requirement of baptism for salvation, but accepted a notion of 'Baptism of Desire' whereby those who had faith in God and lived their lives according to his values might be saved. The Second Vatican Council seemed to go further:

> *All this holds true not only for Christians, but for all men of good will in whose hearts grace works in an unseen way. For, since Christ died for all men, and since the ultimate vocation of man is in fact one, and divine, we ought to believe that the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to every man the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery.*

Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, 22

The argument here was that all deserving people can receive the mercy of God. The subsequent Catechism would assert:

> *Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience – those too may achieve eternal salvation.*

Catechism of the Catholic Church, 847

Some ultra-traditionalist Catholics have argued against this view, which at first sight seems more consistent with a good and merciful God. Leonard Feeney (1897–1978), an American Jesuit, was excommunicated in 1953 for his insistence on a narrow interpretation of the doctrine, but he still has followers. But it seems difficult to make sense of terms such as 'God is good' and 'God is merciful' on this apparently narrow view. It contrasts strongly with comments of Pope Francis in a General Audience:

> *We are all sinners but we are all forgiven: we all have the possibility of receiving his pardon, which is the mercy of God; we need not fear, therefore to recognise ourselves sinners, to confess ourselves sinners, because every sin was carried by the Son to the Cross.*

Pope Francis, General Audience, 6 April 2016

The contrast with the God envisaged by Calvin is considerable. It is important to recognise, of course, that Pope Francis does not argue that everyone is saved, but that God's mercy lies in an offer to everyone.

The contemporary philosopher Vincent Brümmer, a member of the (Calvinist) Dutch Reformed Church, has argued that we can make sense of justice and mercy only if we think of God as personal. For Brümmer, forgiveness does not consist in *condoning* an action, or suggesting somehow that it doesn't matter very much. The one who forgives must be prepared to absorb the pain out of love for the sinner. The sinner must also accept the wrongdoing:

If I repudiate the damage I have done to our fellowship by confessing myself in the wrong, and express my change of heart and my desire for the restoration of our fellowship by asking your forgiveness; and if you, by forgiving me, show your willingness with me again, then our fellowship will not only be restored, but might also be deepened and strengthened.

Vincent Brümmer, *What Are We Doing When We Pray?*, 2008, page 99

Here we encounter a common issue with thoughts about the attributes of God. Some issues of God's goodness seem soluble only by thinking of God as not a personal being, not a super*human* being – but then other questions seem to require that God is personal, if we are to make sense of forgiveness and mercy.

3 Conclusions

We seem to be in a place without easy answers. We began by looking at terms that sound fairly straightforward but – even when looking at each attribute individually – there are difficulties. These are questions usually of *meaning* of words but also about possibility. Is there a definition of omnipotence or benevolence that could work in practice?

The difficulty is compounded when we ask ourselves how the attributes of God work in relation to each other, the theme of our next chapter, where we consider these four qualities in relation to issues of free will. In your studies of the problem of evil, you will have encountered already the issues of reconciling God's goodness, with his omnipotence and knowledge.

See Year 1, Chapter 8.

If God is benevolent, then why does he permit evil and suffering as he could – presumably – do something about it and, being omniscient, has full knowledge of it? Other problems arise. If God is perfectly just, how then can he be perfectly merciful? This raises the question of what it means to be merciful. Does it mean condoning something if we say God forgives? Is being merciful giving people more than they deserve? But can it be just for God to act this way? The concept of justice seems to mean rewarding or punishing people to exactly the right extent that their conduct deserves, yet mercy seems to be giving more than people deserve.

Each of these problems raises the issue known by philosophers as that of the *compossibility of the divine attributes*. 'Compossibility' is about certain things being able to happen at the same time in the same way. The states of drunkenness and absolute sobriety are not possible in the same way at the same time for the same person. In the same way, in the next chapter, we shall consider how these different attributes of God could co-exist.

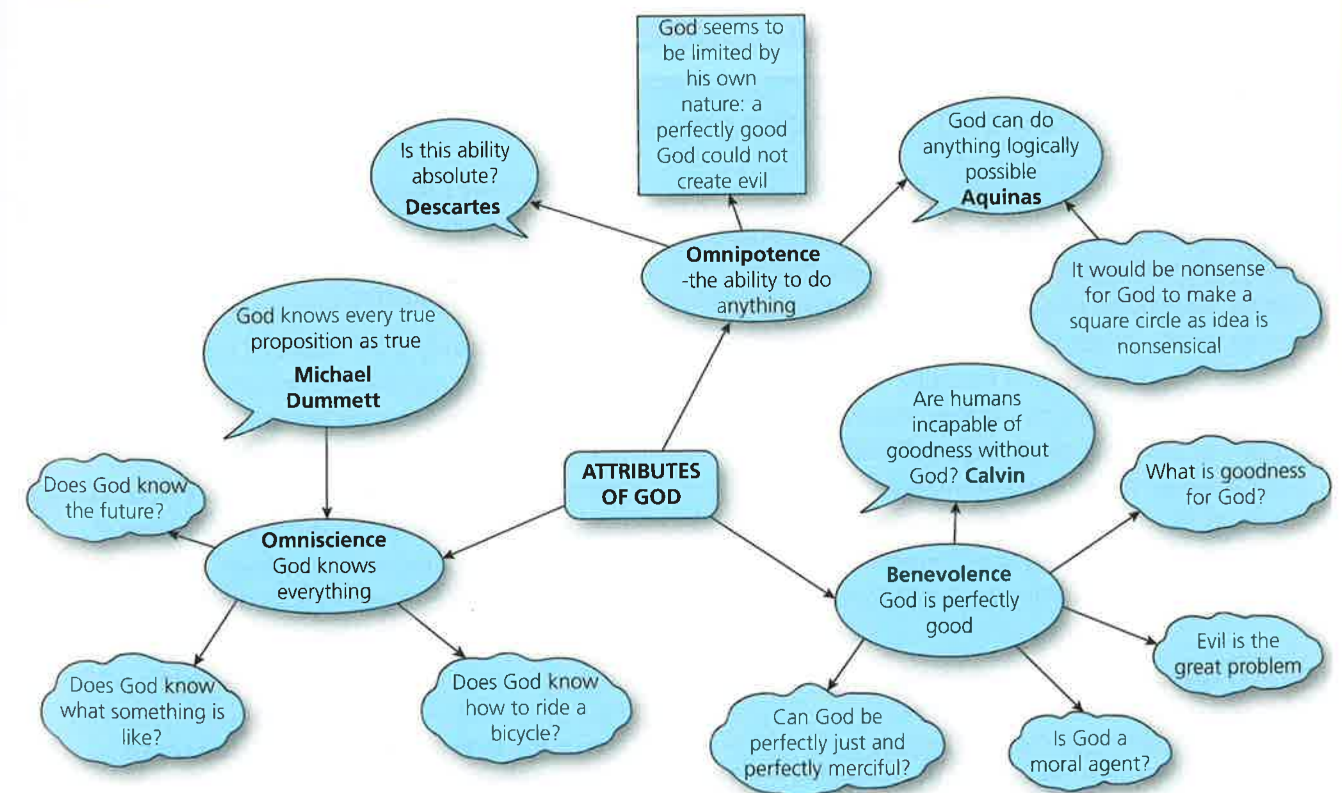
Study advice

With God's attributes there is no agreement – as we have seen – about what is meant by descriptions such as 'omnipotent' or even whether such terms have significant meaning. This can make the topic feel very nebulous to study, with discussions of all sorts of issues along the way.

A fruitful way around this, for study and revision, is to take for each attribute you must study, a provisional definition, such as Dummett's on omniscience, and then to list in your notes three or four potential problems. Realistically, most of us cannot remember more than three or four issues in a topic, so, as you work through your notes, pick out two or three which seem to you to be most important – and which you feel confident you understand and can write about – then make notes on these, relating them back to your provisional definition, to see where it might need to be modified.

In addition, whatever arguments you pick out as most relevant and interesting, think of material always in relation to the issues of language. All our philosophising about God is done in human language. What you consider in later chapters is relevant for you here too. Philosophy should never be thought of as learning a series of discrete topics. Each new topic provides an opportunity for revisiting and reconsidering other parts of your thought, considering whether ideas need further refinement and questioning.

Summary diagram: The nature or attributes of God



Revision advice

By the end of this chapter you should be able to explain thoughtfully the issues involved in finding reasonable definitions of God's attributes, especially omnipotence, omniscience and benevolence. You should be able to reflect on whether these attributes can ever be usefully expressed in human language and the limits of that language.

Can you give brief definitions of:

- omnipotence
- omniscience
- benevolence
- benificence
- mercy?

Can you explain:

- how Descartes argues that God's omnipotence is unlimited
- the idea that omnipotence and omniscience might apply only to the logically possible
- the issues of different types of knowledge
- the problems of reconciling perfect love with perfect justice?

Can you give arguments for and against:

- the idea that God's omnipotence means that he can do anything
- the idea that God's knowledge is knowledge of absolutely everything
- the claim that God can be perfectly good and perfectly just
- the claim that we can grasp the meaning of God in human terms?

Sample question and guidance

Assess the belief that God is omnipotent.

This question is one which looks simple but could be a trap for the unwary. It asks for more than a simple description of the idea of omnipotence. Asking you to assess the concept means that you need to consider very carefully whether the concept is coherent – that is, makes some sense – and what it might mean. Think about what it would mean to be omnipotent. Does it mean, as Descartes thought, that God could do anything at all, or, as Aquinas thought, anything logically possible? Is even the latter too wide?

Is omnipotence simply the ability of God to do anything he wants to do? Are objections such as the unliftable stone irrelevant to the religious concept of 'omnipotence'?

It is worth discussing the issues of human language and whether asking about omnipotence should be understood in terms of precise definition or as a poetic/religious usage. Certainly you need to demonstrate awareness that the ability of language to capture the essence of God is very limited. You might even conclude, as Kenny does, that perhaps we can say nothing significant at all.

Further essay questions

'An omnipotent God cannot escape responsibility for the evils of the world.' Discuss.

To what extent is it true to say God knows everything?

'A just God cannot be a merciful one.' Discuss.

Going further

There is a considerable literature on God's attributes.

A useful collection of material may be found in *The Concept of God* in the *Oxford Readings in Philosophy*, ed. Thomas V. Morris (Oxford University Press, 1997). Individual chapters are clearly signposted by topic.

A little more difficult, overall, is Keith Ward, *Concepts of God* (Oneworld, 1998).

Interesting material on human understanding of God can be found in Roger Scruton, *The Face of God* (Continuum, 2014) as well as in *Whose God? Which Tradition?* ed. D. Z. Phillips (Ashgate, 2008).

The collection *God, Mind and Knowledge*, ed. Andrew Moore (Ashgate, 2014) has a series of very interesting essays by philosophers including Anthony Kenny and John Cottingham. In the same series, *God, Goodness and Philosophy*, ed. Harriet A. Harris (Ashgate, 2013) has a wealth of material.

Especially rewarding in this area is Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (second edition, Oxford University Press, 2016). The largely rewritten work deals with all the issues discussed in this chapter. Swinburne in this book attempts to answer many of the criticisms made by those who argue that the very idea of God and his attributes does not make sense. This is perhaps the best-known book on the subject.

Other books discussed in this chapter are:

- Brümmer, V. *What Are We Doing When We Pray?* (Ashgate, 2008).
- Dummett, M. *Thought and Reality* (Oxford University Press, 2006).

Chapter 9

Conscience – Aquinas and Freud

Chapter checklist

The chapter begins with a discussion on the nature of conscience and its relationship to human thought. There is then a detailed account of Aquinas' theory of conscience, noting its relationship to prudence as practical reason and considering also how Aquinas develops the ideas of Aristotle, especially on the question of moral responsibility. Particular attention is paid to the ideas of *ratio, synderesis, conscientia* and vincible and invincible ignorance.

This is followed by a section on why we must always follow conscience. Some comparisons are drawn between Aquinas and the ideas of the God-given nature of conscience as argued by Newman and Butler. Discussion of Freud considers whether he is dealing with the same issues as Aquinas. Freud's ideas of *id, ego, super-ego* and *libido* are explained and discussed, and the alleged origins of the Oedipus Complex – and its relation to the *super-ego* – are also discussed. Study guidance, suggestions for further reading and sample essay titles are provided at the end of the chapter.

1 Introduction

The relationship of mind to action is an extraordinary one in human beings, and not easily reducible to simple terms. It would be easy to say that we think about a possible action, work out how to do it, then decide to get on with performing it. But even this is far from simple – choosing to act is not like pressing a button to put an electric motor into motion. The process of deciding to act is complex. We do not think in straight lines, but often double back on ourselves and decide to investigate a different action or a different way of doing the same action. We wonder not simply about whether an action *can* be done, but also about whether it *should be done*. That idea of 'should be done' can be a 'should' which has an ethical quality as the morally right and proper thing to do, or a 'should' which is purely prudential, as when I look at the sky and the weather forecast and decide that I would be wise to take an umbrella with me. Sometimes, of course, a decision to act has both prudential and moral aspects, and these are not always easy to disentangle. And even if I can conclude (without changing my mind too much) what I ought to do – and have the will and means to do it – there are still questions such as those about when and where those actions are to be performed.

If thinking about decision-making is hard enough, there are further complications: we are not only people who decide and act but also people who reflect on our lives and on actions we have performed. Often we look back on past actions with regret and embarrassment, occasionally with pleasure. We often wish we had acted differently and, sometimes, have no understanding of why we acted in a particular way. We make judgements not only about our actions, but also our motivations and feelings at a given time. But this is not a once-and-for-all process. We sometimes change our judgements about those past decisions, thinking what we did was worse or better than we thought either at the time or later.

Often we discuss these feelings, judgements and thoughts in terms of *conscience*. We may use the term in a variety of ways: 'I have a bad conscience about what I did', or 'I cannot in good conscience do that'. It has both a reference to past events and a connection with future possible actions. Sometimes a religious person may speak of 'examining her conscience', reflecting on the judgements and actions (or inactions) she has performed. Sometimes we speak of a 'crisis of conscience' when we mean that we simply have no idea of the right thing to do, or the pressures of doing what seems to us the right thing appear overwhelmingly difficult. Sometimes we speak of heroic human beings as 'prisoners of conscience', undergoing punishment for standing up for what they believe to be right, while in another way we may permit someone not to fight in a war or not to assist in certain operations or activities because of 'conscientious objection'.

The word 'conscience' simply means 'with knowledge', and is connected to people knowing what they are doing. There are interesting questions about whether animals have any faculty which approaches what we mean by 'conscience'. Certainly, some animals seem to demonstrate regret – at least of a prudential sort – but there is much to be done on animal psychology and we have enough to do, for this enquiry, with the complexities of human psychology.

2 Conscience – Thomas Aquinas' views

Perhaps the most thoroughgoing account of conscience is given by St Thomas Aquinas; his account is detailed and developed and is interesting in its attempt to do justice to the complexity of human experience of reflection on conduct.

For an explanation of divine command theory, see Year 1, pages 139–40.

Aquinas' view of conscience is sometimes described as a 'theological approach', but we must be careful not to see his idea as 'the voice of God' or some version of divine command theory.

It would be equally wrong to see his idea of conscience as some sort of intuitive little voice, which just knows what is the right thing to do.

(a) Aquinas and *ratio*

Aquinas' approach is always reasoned, as may be seen from his treatment of the intellect as a fundamental part of the soul, which itself is closely tied to reason (*Summa Theologica*, I, Q79, a1, c.).

Key term

Ratio Reason. This is placed in every person as a result of being created by God. In the case of conscience this is reason of the practical sort, requiring careful judgements of individual circumstances.

For more information about Aquinas' idea of *practica ratio*, see Year 1, pages 155-6.

Key question

Why is the distinction between practical and speculative reason so important?

Aquinas makes use of the concept of ***ratio***, which means rather more than its literal translation as 'reason': it also contains a notion of a concept or an idea. This is important, because of Aquinas' idea of *practica ratio*, that is, the use of reason in practice, which inevitably is always situational in application. *Practica ratio* entails not merely being able to know what should be done, but also the practical way of thinking through *how* that which should be done can be done by the agent with the means available.

Like Aristotle, Aquinas distinguishes between the theoretical or speculative parts of reason, such as those we use in drawing up scientific hypotheses, and the practical.

The moral life is a practical life – we have to work out carefully what it is right and proper to do. There is not an invariable right answer, and so there is a relationship between the skills of acting well and an artist's doing well. Like Aristotle, Aquinas sees a distinction between the skills of an artist ('right reason of things to be made') and those of prudence ('right reason of things to be done'). Both operate in the world of variables. Both Aquinas and Aristotle argue that an artist, such as an architect, has to reason through how to use the materials he has at hand to achieve some particular artefact – this is practical reasoning. There is not one absolute right building to be built: questions need to be asked about what the building is for, and then accommodate that need according to the means, such as space, money and materials, which are available. Circumstances cannot be ignored, and the architect has to work within those constraints.

The same is true for the individual in life. It is not enough to think of what should be done, but to ask also about what I can do from where I am with the means I have available. To do well, we need more than the theory of what is good but the skills in practical reasoning to get good results. Decisions about what to do in our lives have to begin from the reality of our here and now. If someone asks us how to get to London, it would be useless to say, 'I wouldn't start from here', as here is where we must begin. Aquinas is always insistent on the practical and immediate aspect of moral decision-making, which necessarily entails close attention to circumstance. For him, there is always close connection between conscience and practical reason (*practica ratio*).

(i) Conscience and prudence

There are close links between Aquinas' theory of natural law and his treatment of conscience. As we saw (Year 1, Chapter 10, pages 146–63), Aquinas was insistent on the importance of careful judgement of what it is right and proper to do in the circumstances. One size does not fit all situations. The practical question of moral life means understanding the general principle, but also being able to apply it in particular circumstances. The same is true in cases of conscience, both when we are judging what we need to do, but also when we judge the past actions of ourselves and others. This is the realm of conscience. We ought not, Aquinas thinks, to feel guilty for every action we have ever done which has turned out wrongly. Sometimes we could not have done differently; sometimes our motives were for the best; sometimes we could not possibly have foreseen particular consequences, which occurred despite our best intentions.

There is a close link between prudence and conscience. In his treatment of natural law, Aquinas, like Aristotle, insisted on the need for the intellectual virtue of prudence.

For Aquinas' treatment of natural law, see Year 1, especially the account on pages 155–6.

Key question

Why is it important to understand Aquinas' theory of conscience in the light of his teaching on prudence?

As Aquinas tells us:

> *Prudence entails not only consideration of the reason but also the application to action, which is the goal of practical reason.*
>
> *S.T.* II-II, 9.47, a. 3c.

Prudence involves three intellectual skills: *Understanding*, *Judgement* and *Good Deliberation.* The last of these is the practical business of working out how, in the situation in which we find ourselves, to achieve what our judgement tells us we ought to do. Notice that in the use of conscience, whether in deciding what we should do or in examining previous actions, judgement is an essential part – did we perform the right action in the circumstances? Conscience, like action, is always to be examined circumstantially.

The great Thomist scholar, Servais Pinckaers has noted:

> *... it is clear that St. Thomas saw conscience and prudence as two converging lights coming from the same source. Both are prompted by our aspiration to the truth and both share the object of the discernment between good and evil.*
>
> Servais Pinckaers, 'Conscience and the Virtue of Prudence', *The Pinckaers Reader: Renewing Thomistic Moral Theology*, eds John Berkaman and Craig Steven Titus, 2005, page 353

This connection between prudence and conscience must never be forgotten as they are a useful caution against those who have attempted, on rather thin evidence, to interpret Thomist moral thought as indifferent to circumstance.

(b) Conscience – Aquinas' view

The simplest summary of Aquinas' view of conscience may be found in *Summa Theologica*. This summary should be studied closely as it is rich in its implications:

Key quote

Properly speaking, conscience is not a power, but an act. ... The word 'conscience' comes from 'cum alio scientia,' that is, knowledge applied to an individual case. But the application of knowledge to something is done by some act of the mind. So, from this explanation of the name it is clear that conscience is an act.

This is obvious from those things which are attributed to conscience. For conscience is said to witness, to bind, or incite, and also to accuse, torment, or rebuke. All these involve the application of knowledge or science to what we do. This application is made in three ways. One way happens when we recognise that we have done or not done something; 'Your heart knows that many times you have yourself cursed others' (Ecclesiastes 7.22). In this case, conscience is said to witness what we have done. In another way of speaking, we say – through the conscience – that something should be done or not done. In this sense, we describe conscience as 'inciting' or 'binding'. In the third way, through conscience we judge that something done is well or badly done. In this sense, conscience is said to excuse, accuse, or torment us for our actions. Now, it is obvious that all these things follow the actual application of knowledge to what we do. So, properly speaking, conscience is the name of an act. But as habit is a principle which creates an act, sometimes the name conscience is given to the first natural habit – that is, synderesis. Jerome calls synderesis 'conscience' (Gloss. Ezekiel 1:6). Basil [Hom. in princ. Proverb.] calls it the 'natural power of judgment,' and Damascene [De Fide Orth. iv. 22] says that it is the 'law of our intellect.' For it is customary for causes and effects to be called after one another.

S.T. I, Q79, a.13c.

See Year 1, pages 170–1.

Key question

What is the scope of conscience, according to Aquinas, and how does it differ from the view of Joseph Fletcher?

Key term

Synderesis An inner principle, implanted by God in all persons, directing a person towards good and away from evil.

We notice at once that this view of conscience is based on a principle of reason. It is important that it entails an action of mind, because an act is always particular – it is this act, performed in the here and now.

There is something in common with Joseph Fletcher's idea when he treats 'conscience' as a verb, to refer to an action.

But Aquinas' version is richer than Fletcher's in that it continues by considering the ways in which we make judgements not just about the actions we are now to do, but also about those we have done (or not done). Notice how Aquinas, always sensitive to language in use, is concerned to demonstrate how his description of conscience fits with the way people use the term in ordinary language.

(c) *Synderesis* and *conscientia*

Aquinas' view of conscience is quite subtle, with many different strands within it, but it forms a coherent whole, not just in itself, but also in relation to his entire understanding of morality. His account always pays attention to the intellectual and rational nature of human choices as well as to how we should judge our actions. As always with Aquinas, we find how he gives close analysis of the terms we use when we speak about ideas such as conscience or prudence.

In the previous passage, we find Aquinas making reference to ***synderesis***. This is a concept with an interesting history, as Aquinas acknowledges. The term, which is not an original Greek word, is first found in a passage in St Jerome (347–420), when he comments on the vision of Ezekiel, in which he sees a human, a lion, an ox and an eagle (an eagle was traditionally seen to represent reason and the ability to reflect on our own actions). As Aquinas rightly notes, for Jerome, 'synderesis' and 'conscience' are interchangeable terms.

Background

From *syneidesis* to *synderesis*

The Latin, *conscientia* is a direct translation of the Greek *syneidesis*, which has several meanings, including being aware of something (close to our idea of 'consciousness') or also sharing understanding with someone else, perhaps knowing her secret. As a result, in Greek, *syneidesis* came to have a legal meaning, meaning 'to bear witness'. Aquinas refers to conscience as *bearing witness* in the sense of a faculty of thought which judges our own thinking processes. It is a feature of our minds that with part of our brains we can, as it were, watch our own thinking processes, and reflect not only on the process of thought but on the reflections we have about those processes. Not only do we know things, but we know that we know them, and we know that we know that we know them. In certain usages, *syneidesis* came also to mean the state of knowing one's own mind, and so it referred to making judgements about oneself.

The origin of the word *synderesis* as a synonym for *conscientia* is perhaps no more than an original transcription error, a miscopying of *syneidesis*. But by the time of Aquinas and Scholastic thought in general, it would have a useful technical function.

For Aquinas, *synderesis* is the natural inclination to do good and avoid evil, a desire which is universal, infallible and part of God's will for the creatures he created. There are questions in Aquinas and other writers about whether *synderesis* is a habit, a power, or a disposition, but these arguments can, for present purposes, be laid to one side. The infallibility of *synderesis* is, for Aquinas, self-evident: it could never be wrong to wish to do good and avoid evil.

Key term

Conscientia A person's reason making moral judgements. In general, the conscience, but in Aquinas used to distinguish individual acts of conscience – in which we may be mistaken – from infallible *synderesis*.

Key question

How useful is Aquinas' distinction between *synderesis* and *conscientia*?

Just because we have the desire to do good and avoid evil, it does not follow that this infallible desire leads to right action. ***Conscientia*** is the name Aquinas gives to the intellectual process of forming our particular moral judgements in individual circumstances, which of course includes the skill of prudence. Here, errors can be made, either because we are mistaken about the facts of the case or for some other reason, perhaps because we are blinded by desires, feel pressures from outside or are simply too hasty in our judgements.

(d) A theological account?

This distinction between *synderesis* and *conscientia* is valuable for considering whether we should see Aquinas as essentially theological in his approach to moral questions. In an important sense he is theological in that he believes we are the creatures we are because of the will of God, and because God chose that we should be the people we are, with the skills of intellect and the potential for good will that we have. In that sense, the ability to do right and avoid evil is God-given.

Nevertheless, as we have suggested, the actual business of choosing the right thing and making right judgements is, for Aquinas, absolutely to be understood in terms of a rational use of our minds (*ratio*).

Background

Difficulties in defining conscience

Aquinas would not speak of conscience, as Cardinal Newman would, in Section 5 of his *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk* (1875), as 'the aboriginal vicar of Christ'. (An aborigine is the original occupant of the country – in this phrase, Newman uses the term 'aboriginal' to mean 'original or 'primary'.) For Newman, when we feel ashamed, we are hearing the voice of God speaking to us, just as Christ may be held to speak through his Church in the person of the Vicar of Christ, the Pope. For Aquinas, God gave us reason, but it is reason that speaks to us.

Neither would Aquinas quite agree with the great Anglican thinker, Bishop Butler, in the Dissertations that appear as appendices to his *The Analogy of Religion* (1736), that conscience is a God-given principle of reflection which enables us to achieve the right judgements in particular circumstances. The difficulty with both Butler and Newman is that they find it less straightforward than Aquinas to account for errors in the application of conscience. Newman attempts to deal with this by arguing that we sometimes have false conscience, by listening to our own desires and telling ourselves that this is our conscience speaking, but that still assumes that a conscience properly listened to would always get things right. Butler, similarly, assumes that if we only attended to it, our God-given conscience would give us the right answers. For Aquinas, we can make mistakes in good conscience, just as we can make mistakes in any kind of reasoning. If Aquinas is correct, any error in conscience is very obviously a human mistake.

Key persons

Bishop Joseph Butler (1692–1752): major British writer on ethics. An Anglican, he was both Bishop of Bristol and later Bishop of Durham. His most important ideas are found in his *Sermons* of 1725. His tomb is in Bristol Cathedral.

John Henry Newman (1801–90): originally a Church of England priest, he was a significant member of the high church Oxford Movement, before converting to Roman Catholicism in 1845, when he became a Catholic priest and worked at Birmingham Oratory. Although never a bishop, he was made Cardinal in 1879. A prolific author, his major works include *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (1865–66), an autobiography, *The Grammar of Assent* (1870) and the long poem *The Dream of Gerontius* (1865, set to music by Elgar in 1900). He was beatified by Pope Benedict XVI in 2010.

Aquinas is very clear that, while reason is God-given, it is, like any use of thought, capable of error. Just as we can make mistakes in scientific reasoning, artistic judgement and any other use of our minds, so too the same, as we shall see, is true of that type of thinking which we think of as conscientious.

If, as Aquinas thinks, particular judgements of conscience are neither merely feelings nor the voice of God, it would be possible to construe his ideas on conscience in secular terms, as something that minds are capable of doing. Aquinas, as a believer, thinks that the mind is God-given, but his analysis would seem to work equally well even if the mind were simply a surprising natural fact.

Key question

To what extent is the Thomist view of conscience dependent on belief in God?

(e) Moral responsibility

A central concern for Aquinas, as for many medieval thinkers, was the question of when we can ascribe moral responsibility. Plato notoriously believed, as Greek thought in general had done, that we do wrong only as a result of ignorance. For Plato, everyone desires the good, but most people (other than true philosophers) are more or less ignorant of what the true good is. Plato held the common Greek view that if we know the good, we are bound to do it.

Aristotle disagreed. He thought that we can know the good but fail to do it, perhaps because we have fallen into bad habits or lack the courage to do what we know we should. In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book III, Chapters 1 and 2, Aristotle considers the nature of moral responsibility, in terms which have had deep influence on later discussion. Aquinas, both in his *Commentary on Nicomachean Ethics* (*Sententia Libri Ethicorum* (1270–71)) and in the *Summa*, is explicit about his debt to Aristotle, and his ideas should be seen as a development of Aristotle's theories.

Aristotle considers two factors which might excuse someone from being blamed for an action. One of these is *ignorance*, the other, *lack of choice*. In Aquinas, these ideas are developed, and Catholic moral theology, following Aquinas, still teaches that to commit a sin, one needs full knowledge and full consent.

As Aristotle notes, 'full consent' is a difficult notion. When does one freely choose? Aristotle notes that it is not always easy to decide:

> *When we think of the things that are done from fear of greater evils or for some noble reason (for example if a tyrant were to order one to do something wicked, having one's parents and children in his power, and if by doing the action they would be saved and not be put to death), it may be debated whether such actions are involuntary or voluntary. Something similar happens if the captain of a merchant ship throws goods overboard in a storm; for in the abstract no one throws goods away voluntarily, but to secure the safety of himself and his crew, any sensible man does so. Such actions, then, are mixed, but are more like voluntary actions. They are chosen at the moment they are done, and the purpose of an action is relative to the occasion. Both the terms, then, 'voluntary' and 'involuntary', must be used with reference to the moment of action. In these circumstances the man acts voluntarily because the choices that move the body to act are in him. Those things which are choices of the man are in his power to perform or not. Such actions, therefore, are voluntary, but in the abstract are perhaps involuntary because no one would choose any such act in itself.*
>
> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book III, Chapter 1

We should notice here that we can only determine the degree of responsibility case-by-case: particular practical judgement is always situational. So too for Aquinas: someone might be under such pressure that his choice cannot be said to be free, nor is he truly consenting to the action. The voluntariness of an action can be affected by many things, depending on the individual and circumstances. There might be force applied to the agent; for example, if a bank employee has a gun pointing at him, or there could be some problem in the agent, such as mental illness, which creates a compulsion to act in a particular way. In law, we assume that people below a certain age do not have full consent in their actions, and do not penalise very young children. Even with adults, we may think someone not responsible for his actions. As in the courtroom, there is a clear need to look at each individual case before ascribing responsibility.

(f) Vincible and invincible ignorance

There is a close connection between consent and knowledge. It seems impossible to give proper consent – 'informed' consent – if we are ignorant of the facts. For Plato, ignorance was a reason for blame: he advocated punishing the person who acted through ignorance to teach her to know better next time. For Aristotle and Aquinas, on the other hand, forgivable ignorance gives good reason not to punish the wrongdoer.

Aquinas distinguishes **vincible ignorance** from **invincible ignorance**.

If someone is vincibly ignorant, then he is potentially blameworthy. This is ignorance, which is avoidable and correctible. There are things which I should be expected to know. If I visit another country and murder someone, it is no excuse for me to say I was brought up in Britain and could not be expected to know that killing people was illegal in Austria. My own common sense should tell me that it is wrong to murder, anywhere. If I were unaware of Austrian law, there are always opportunities to ask (though I suspect my Austrian friends would be a little taken aback at a question about whether I could murder someone in Vienna without breaching some law). Aristotle, in his original account, explains the point very well:

> *we punish a man for his ignorance, if he is considered responsible for the ignorance, for example when penalties are doubled in the case of drunkenness; as … in the man himself: he had the ability not to get drunk and his getting drunk was the cause of his ignorance. And we punish those who are ignorant of anything in the laws that they ought to know that is not difficult to find out. The same is also true in the case of anything else that they are thought to be ignorant of through carelessness.*
>
> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book III, Chapter 5

Key terms

Vincible ignorance Ignorance which we could easily overcome and for which we are blameworthy. If I ask to be excused for my bad driving because I didn't know what I was doing, because I was drunk, that is really no excuse and adds to the offence.

Invincible ignorance Ignorance which cannot be overcome by my own efforts and for which I cannot be blamed.

Aquinas makes similar points. These ideas seem to match our commonsense understanding. A court would be unlikely to take seriously the driver who offered his drunkenness as an excuse for his dangerous driving.

Some ignorance is not of this kind. In some cases a person cannot be reasonably expected to foresee the unfortunate consequences of her actions. If I give someone a holiday as a gift and he is killed in a plane crash, then I might – and probably would – feel a sense of guilt and responsibility, but no reasonable person would hold me *blameworthy* for something I could not foresee and in which I had played no part and certainly had not wished. I could not possibly be expected to have foreseen the tragedy. This, for Aquinas, is *invincible* ignorance, an ignorance which in no sense was in my control.

Invincible ignorance has many forms. We do not hold people responsible for their actions when they are insane. Insane people, because of their illness, accept things as true that others recognise as erroneous. Of course, it is not always possible to determine precisely when people are insane, and courts sometimes have difficulty in individual cases, but Aquinas' principle seems a just one.

Other forms of invincible ignorance could be the result of being too young to know right from wrong. Even for adults, sometimes we are unable to get the necessary facts, and our actions are forgiven. Sometimes we are able to look back on an event and say honestly that we meant well – our intentions were the best – but we would have acted differently if only we had known something we could not have known at the time. In those circumstances, we feel *regret* about what happened but cannot hold ourselves to be *guilty* of a moral offence. We are sorry that we got things wrong, and we wish things had turned out differently, but we cannot say that our judgement was in any way wicked at the time. To be *guilty* is to act in a way that was clearly wrong at the time the offence was committed.

Key question

Is it ever truly possible to determine guilt?

(g) The demands of conscience

Aquinas is insistent that we have a duty always to follow conscience. He was explicit about this primacy. Even if we are objectively wrong in the decisions we make, he argues that we must still do as conscience dictates. If we happen to do what is objectively the right thing, but do it against what our conscience told us to do, we commit the sin of not following conscience.

His argument for always following conscience can be simply summarised:

1. We should always seek what is good and are naturally inclined to do so (this is *synderesis*).
2. Reason decides what is good.
3. Part of the definition of 'good' is 'rationally chosen'.
4. Therefore, what our reason (which of course can be wrong) tells us is good is the good to be pursued.
5. Therefore, if we do not follow our reason, we are seeking something which our reason tells us is not good.
6. Therefore, we must always follow our reason (otherwise called 'conscience').

Key question

What are the implications for morality and religious belief of giving primacy to conscience?

This is linked to Aquinas' belief that we have free will and are agents capable of rational decisions. In the circumstances of life, we are the people who have to make decisions, and our actions are ours, to be judged in specific circumstances. God expects us to use our reason to the best of our abilities and not simply to be creatures of whim driven by irrational urges.

3 Conscience – Sigmund Freud's view

Sigmund Freud wrote at some length about the phenomena of guilt and conscience, and his views are interesting, if often controversial.

Key person

Sigmund Freud (1856–1939): Austrian neurologist considered the father of psychoanalysis. He was a pupil of Franz Brentano and studied and worked principally in Vienna until, as a Jew, he fled to London in 1938, where he died. His ashes are at Golders Green Crematorium. He was a prolific author. His religious views were atheist.

Key terms

Super-ego Freudian term for that part of the psyche which is the internalised voice of our parents and other authority figures: creates tension with *ego* and *id*. It contradicts the *id* and, by working on internalised ideals received from our parents, it tries to make the ego behave 'morally'.

Id Freudian term for the basic self and its drives – for food, aggression and sex. The baby only has *id*. It refers to instinctive impulses that seek satisfaction in pleasure.

Ego In Freudian thought, the idea of the rational self, capable of exercising some control over the *id*, the primitive self. It mediates between the *id* and the demands of social interaction.

(a) Freud and Aquinas

For present purposes, it is essential to notice that in his account, Freud is trying to answer very different questions from those addressed by Aquinas. Aquinas asks what conscience is, its relation to proper decision-making and how we should use it. He assumes that it is essentially a rational function.

Freud, on the other hand, is attempting to answer a different question, looking to provide a naturalistic account of how moral responsibility and guilt feelings could occur. He is asking why we feel guilty and responsible, not, as Aquinas does, seeking a rational account of the proper use of conscience.

For Freud, conscience was essentially the process of internalising parental prohibitions and demands, so that they seem to come from within ourselves. This experience creates an aspect of our minds known as the ***super-ego***.

For Freud, there are three parts of what he calls the psychic apparatus – the ***id***, which is our instincts, disorganised and a bit chaotic; the ***ego***, which is the organised and more realistic part of the mind; and the *super-ego*, which criticises the rest and is the moralising function. (Incidentally, the terms used here were not part of Freud's vocabulary, but were used by the translator into English. Freud could be more accurately translated as 'the It', 'the I' and the 'Over-I'. Had the translator used Freud's terms, connections with some other aspects of German thought would have been much more clear.)

(b) *Id* and *libido*

For Freud, the new-born child is all *id*, with basic drives such as those for food, aggression and sex. This part of the mind is amoral, egocentric, pleasure-seeking. A fundamental part of the *id* is the *libido*, commonly described as the sex-drive. Freud defined *libido* as the energy of those instincts which have to do with all that may be meant by the word 'love'. As physical beings, we have sexual drives.

According to Freud, the child, sexually driven, goes through the *oral stage*, based on his love of being nursed at the breast. Next comes the *anal stage*, when he delights in his own ability to control his bowels, followed by a *phallic stage*, in which he becomes fascinated by his sexual organs. These stages can, Freud believes, all be seen in the infant. There is then a period of latency, when the child largely ignores his sexual nature, only for everything to re-emerge at puberty. But, when this re-emergence happens, there is also the subconscious recollection of parental and other authoritative warnings to the infant to ignore his sexual feelings. These early childhood stages where the child develops awareness of his libido are also known as stages of **psychosexual development**.

By the time of puberty, the child has gone beyond being all *id* and *libido*.

Key term

Psychosexual development For Freud, we are innately sexual beings who go through various stages of development, which he calls oral, anal, phallic, latent and genital.

(c) *Ego* and *super-ego*

Unlike the *id*, the *ego* is rational, capable of controlling the *id*. Freud gives the analogy of a horse and rider. The rider (*ego*) controls the way the horse (*id*) goes. Sometimes, control fails and the horse goes the way it wishes to go, over rocky terrain.

But the *ego* has to battle with the external world and the *super-ego* as well as with the *id*. When this happens, the *ego* tends to be more loyal to the *id*, avoiding conflict, excusing problems.

The *super-ego*, however, watches the *ego's* actions like a hawk, punishing it with feelings of inferiority, anxiety and general guilt. The *ego* does have defence mechanisms, such as fantasy, rationalisation, repression and others, but is in continual battle with the *id* (and *libido*).

(d) The *super-ego*

The *super-ego* develops as a result of socialisation and growth, largely through the effect of parents and authority figures on us. It is the clash between *super-ego*, *id* and *ego* that leads to the phenomena of conscience and guilt. The voice of the *super-ego* is what makes us feel guilty about having the basic sexual drives that are fundamental to our being.

The *super-ego* symbolically internalises the sense of a father figure and the regulations found in society. It tends to oppose the *id*, giving us a sense of the moral and sets up taboos against certain types of feelings and actions, especially the sexual. The more the Oedipus Complex (which inclines men to sleep with their mothers and kill their fathers, see below), is particularly repressed, through parents, schooling and authority figures in general, the stricter will be the rule of the *super-ego* over the *ego*, and the stronger the sense of the moral and of conscience rejecting – and making us feel guilty for – our urges.

Key question

How convincing are Freud's theories of personality? How well does Freud justify them?

Key term

Oedipus Complex Freud's notion, borrowed from Greek legend, that boys for inherited reasons subconsciously wish to sleep with their mothers and kill their fathers.

(e) The Oedipus Complex

The **Oedipus Complex** is one of the most disputed aspects of Freud's very controversial theories, and is rejected by many psychologists, both for its rather shaky historical basis and for doubts about its explanatory power.

Background

The Oedipus Complex and the theory of the Primal Horde

The Oedipus Complex is named after the mythical Oedipus, King of Thebes, of whom it is prophesied that he will kill his father and sleep with his mother. His father, Laius, hearing the prophesy, abandons the infant Oedipus to die on a mountainside, but Oedipus is rescued by shepherds and brought up by King Polybus and Queen Merope. As a young man, he hears the prophecy at Delphi, so leaves the home of Polybus and Merope, because he thinks the prophecy refers to them. On his journey he meets a stranger, argues and kills him (the stranger, of course, unknown to Oedipus, is King Laius). When he arrives at Thebes, he hears the king has recently been killed, and that Thebes is at the mercy of the Sphinx (a mythical creature – part lion, part human). Oedipus is able to defeat the Sphinx, because he alone can answer the Sphinx's riddle, and the people acclaim him king. He marries Laius' widow, Jocasta, and then, a year later, discovers that Laius was the stranger and his father, and that Jocasta is therefore his mother. Jocasta, driven by guilt, kills herself by hanging and Oedipus punishes himself by putting out his own eyes with two pins from her dress.

Freud found in the legend the themes of unconsciousness – Oedipus lacked knowledge of his incest and of forbidden desires in general. Freud based his ideas on material which he drew from *The Golden Bough* by Sir James Frazer (1854–1941). In its time, this was an immensely influential work on anthropology and religion. It was first published in two volumes, in 1890; by its third edition (1906–15) it had stretched to twelve. Freud was not the only thinker influenced by the work: Wittgenstein was fascinated by it, and often discussed it.

Freud drew on the theory of the Primal Horde. Once, in primitive times, the theory says, there was the Primal Horde, a tribal group dominated by the Old Man. He was stronger and more cunning than any of the other males, and exercised total rights over the females, denying other men any opportunity to release their sexual urges. The young men were deeply angry and frustrated, but if any one challenged the Old Man, he would be beaten off. In the end, the young men realised that while no single one of them could beat the Old Man, if they got together they would be able to overwhelm him. So together, they ambushed the Old Man, killed him, ate him (they were cannibals) and started to have their way with the women, able to indulge their desires.

But, disputes broke out over the women. Men do not usually wish to share their partners. One woman might be the object of desire for more than one person. To maintain any kind of balance in things, some sort of discipline has to be imposed. Gradually, the young men started to think there was a point in some of the Old Man's rules and began to feel regret (at least a prudential regret) at his death. This leads to a sense of guilt, both in that giving in to their urges led to chaos and because of the recognition that society needs to create rules, especially to regulate sexual behaviour.

Much of Freud's thinking in this area has been subsequently discredited or ignored, but it still contains valuable insights.

Freud drew on the theory of the Primal Horde (see Background box above). From that set of events we get our taboo against incest, which according to Freud is about the proper limits of sexual relations, one of the deepest and strongest of all instincts about human behaviour. Freud believes that the men's collective guilt about their sexual instincts and behaviour is the origin of the guilt we feel. If we feel guilt, then this is

not really just about ourselves but the buried memory of that primeval guilt experienced by our forefathers. It was on that basis that Freud constructed his notion of the Oedipus Complex.

Unfortunately, for the arguments of Frazer and Freud, there is not a shred of historical or other empirical evidence for this deeply moving tale, which might form the basis of a fantasy film. It is almost as if Freud has constructed these past events as an explanation which seemed to fit the data, paying insufficient attention to the possibility of other explanations. A common criticism of Freud is that his record-keeping was slapdash and that he constructed his theories with insufficient empirical evidence, based on the cases of a few of the patients (mainly middle class and frequently neurotic) encountered in his practice in Vienna. But it was on that basis that Freud constructed his notion of the Oedipus Complex.

Key question

Is the idea of the Oedipus Complex credible?

(f) Guilt, conscience, environment and God

Freud was atheist in his religious views, and this might be argued to affect his judgement about our sense of guilt. Yet there are important aspects of his theories which have abiding interest.

In his writing about primitive mankind (I use the term deliberately, as Freud's theories tend – as in the Oedipus Complex – to be male dominated), Freud is concerned to demonstrate how the senses of God and guilt are related. He notes how in primitive times nature would appear terrifying and massive in its effects. Our pre-historic ancestors were at the mercy of a nature that rose up against them, with its storms, earthquakes, droughts and floods, quicksand, bogs and avalanches. Man must have lived in a state of fear, with a deep sense of helplessness. To be helpless is to have no control and no ability to know how to control the terrors which assail us.

But there is in human nature a recognition that we are less afraid if we find an explanation for the things which terrify us. The consequence is a desire to explain. What we can understand is human actions. I can understand an earthquake if I can see it as the personal action of some God of the underworld or of the earth. And, if I can so personalise the action, then I feel more able to do something about it. If a member of my family is angry, I can do something about it, such as by some appeasement or by taking his mind off whatever caused the rage. Most people eventually calm down. I can exercise control – or at least influence – by my words and gestures. We use our voices and we give gifts. Hence, we find the origin of prayers, hymns and religious ceremonies in these attempts to appease the gods we have imagined. We try to please them by way of gifts, through sacrifices of animals, young girls or whatever we think might be sufficient appeasement. Our behaviours are reinforced when the prayers and sacrifices seem to work. Storms and earthquakes eventually stop, the rain comes and we find measures of respite. We draw the wrong conclusion through the ***post hoc, propter hoc* fallacy**. This is the logical error of thinking that because an event follows another, that the latter event was necessarily caused by the former. Because the earthquake stops when the sacrifice is complete, it does not follow that the sacrifice caused the earthquake to end. Earthquakes do end, but for other reasons.

Key term

***Post hoc, propter hoc* fallacy** Literally, 'after this, because of this'. The logical error of assuming that because one event follows another that therefore the first event caused the second.

This initial argument explains polytheism, and certainly has persuasive elements. John Hick has argued that Freud might – inadvertently – not have explained God away, but rather shown us how the experience of nature might be a way of God revealing his power and his connections with the human.

Freud explains the development of monotheism by referring to our childhood experiences. As babies, we are dependent for our thriving on our fathers who provide the means of our sustenance through their efforts and work. Because he works, he is a distant but also powerful figure, on whom all else depends, at least in our world. He is a figure of authority who sometimes visits us as we lie in our cots. When he leans over the cot to see us, his face dominates and fills our vision. Later we project the buried memory of our fathers onto our universe – hence the seeing of God as Father and Sustainer of all things (and, perhaps, God as a bearded older man). For Freud, the entire enterprise of religion was an error, with no basis in the reality of the world, something constructed out of our own needs and desires.

Key person

Ludwig Andreas von Feuerbach (1804–72): born in Rechenberg, near Nuremberg, he was educated at the Universities of Heidelberg and Erlangen. His ideas on materialism would influence Marx and Engels, as well as Freud. He is best remembered for his 1841 work, *Das Wesen des Christentums*, translated into English in 1854 by Mary Ann Evans (George Eliot) as *The Essence of Christianity*.

There is here an explicit link to the arguments of Ludwig Feuerbach, who had argued for an anthropological understanding of religion. For Feuerbach, religion is a dream of the human spirit. God, for him, is a projection of the human mind – we give our own values cosmic significance and see them in the universe as a whole. The danger of this projection is that we may be false to ourselves. While Feuerbach did not describe himself as an atheist, unlike Freud, his views would very much influence not only Freud – who acknowledged his debt – but many others who see faith as simply the consequence of wishful thinking.

Couple the sense of being answerable to our father with the Oedipus Complex and we have a clear picture of how Freud explains the consciousness of guilt, our sense of responsibility and unworthiness, and their implications for our living a more contented life. These views would seem to provide a basis for providing a naturalistic explanation for Cardinal Newman's idea that when we feel the pangs of conscience, we do so because we are actually conscious of being in the presence of God, with conscience itself as the 'aboriginal vicar of Christ'.

Key question

Does a Freudian view of conscience permit us to ascribe moral responsibility?

(i) Freud and moral responsibility and decision-making

An important question here is whether Freud's account leaves any room for the possibility of moral responsibility, as discussed by Aquinas. If our behaviours and judgements are simply the result of conflict in our subconscious and the collective unconscious, could we ever justly hold someone responsible for our action, especially if our act of judging is itself the consequence of similar dark urges? The difficulty of adequately answering this interesting and controversial question is also held by some as a criticism of Freud's theory.

(g) Criticisms of Freud's theories

The scientific basis of Freud's theories is disputed by many psychologists, scientists and philosophers. Freud himself tended to construct theories on relatively little empirical evidence, and it is not easy to see how some of these might be tested. There is no evidence for the Primal Horde, and no certainty about either the collective unconsciousness (if it is unconscious,

how can we speak authoritatively about it?) or the Oedipus Complex, which seems to be devised as a theory to fit the facts. Using Ockham's Razor (see Chapter 8, page 137), we might well argue that if we could find a theory to explain guilt using fewer guesses and hypotheses, it would be more likely to be correct.

Karl Popper argued that much psychology – and he had theories such as these very much in mind – was not scientific as it involved hypotheses that were not falsifiable – that is, it was not possible to say precisely what would prove them incorrect. According to Popper, real science is always falsifiable. If we say that pure water always boils at 100 degrees Centigrade, we can see precisely what would falsify it – an instance of pure water boiling at a different temperature. But it is difficult to see what would falsify the claim that the *super-ego* acts in the way that Freud suggests. If I say I do not feel an overwhelming sense of guilt and responsibility then a Freudian might well claim that I was in denial – that I felt it really but blocked it out. Indeed, my very denial would be evidence for its reality.

A major issue, as noted earlier, was the very limited experimental basis on which Freud constructed his theory. His largely female, largely well-off, Viennese patients were self-selected and not necessarily typical of the whole of society. A middle-class family in Vienna at the turn of the twentieth century might well have nursemaids and nurseries, but not everyone has that upbringing, nor do all fathers live in that way. Different times and societies – and families – have different norms and ways of living. Some children have no contact with or knowledge of fathers, and those who do may well have a different conception of God from the way they see their fathers. Someone might have an abusive father yet seek solace in the perceived love of God.

A potent criticism is the very male-oriented ideas of the entire theory. Men might have Oedipus complexes, but that does not account for the sexual drives of women. Freud suggested they have an Elektra Complex, in which they wish to sleep with their fathers and kill their mothers, but the argument for this is thinner than that offered for the Oedipus Complex. Women seem to be passive victims, especially in the Primal Horde.

Whatever the faults of Freud, he provided a theory that explained the moral sense in a plausible way, by pointing to the notion that we get our sense of guilt and responsibility from our upbringing or authority figures. This seems significant, even if we reject some of the more fanciful elements of Freud's theory. There is no doubt that our early experiences shape our world picture, even if there is argument over precisely how this shaping takes place. Above all, Freud shook many people's belief that God is our only explanation for the conscience.

4 Aquinas and Freud's theories: a comparison

(a) The concept of guilt and the process of rational decision-making

As suggested earlier in this chapter, Freud seems to be answering questions very different from those considered by Aquinas in exploring issues of conscience, though each explores the concept of guilt, the process of moral decision-making, and the workings of the conscience (or, for Freud, *super-ego*).

Aquinas does not concern himself with addressing psychological reasons for feeling guilt and responsibility as Freud does. His account presupposes that humans are above all rational creatures, or at least, creatures capable of reason when we function well. He agrees with Aristotle that feelings are things we share with animals, and what matters is that we direct our feelings in accordance with reason. For Aquinas, when we think of conscience we are exploring a particular use of reason: for Freud, conscience is the name of a non-rational feeling. Freud is interested in the origins of feelings such as shame, guilt and desire: for Aquinas, they are not phenomena to be explained, but just facts about how we are. He is concerned with the reality of ourselves as rational creatures capable of judgements and applying them. His is essentially a project of clarifying our use of conscience in action. Though he sees our conscience as God-given, because reason is God-given, he sees it also as an essential tool to be used with prudence in our lives. Like many medieval thinkers, he is concerned with questions of blame and responsibility. After all, if, as he believes, we all face God's final judgement, then it matters that we are justly treated. By using the ideas of consent and knowledge we can have some idea of whether we are truly blameworthy and responsible for particular actions. A just judge does not condemn a child for something he did not and could not be expected to understand.

Key quote

An interpretation of the normal, conscious sense of guilt (conscience) presents no difficulties; it is based on the tension between the ego and the ego-ideal and is the expression of a condemnation of the ego by its critical agency. The feelings of inferiority so well-known in neurotics are presumably not far removed from it.

Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, 1923, page 28

Freud equates conscience with guilt, as we can see in this key quote, where conscience and guilt seem to be used as synonyms. He goes on to argue that 'The reproaches of conscience in certain forms of obsessional neurosis are ... distressing' (ibid., page 30), which again suggests that conscience is dangerous for us, as it is simply guilt. Freud goes on to discuss the cruelties that this inflicts on the human psyche.

For Freud, guilt is a psychological issue to be overcome: like God, it might be maturely rejected as an infantile fantasy. The question of blame and responsibility is not an issue for Freud: he asks only why we feel these things. For him, there is no question of final judgement. Similarly, Freud is not concerned, as Aquinas is, with the reasonableness of our thoughts about our actions, but rather about the origin of certain feelings. For this reason, it is easier to contrast Freud's account with Aquinas' than to compare them, as we are not comparing like with like.

In summary then, Aquinas does link conscience very specifically to the rational mind: it is an act of rational thought. He does not treat it as a feeling, in the way it is used in common parlance, simply meaning guilt, but for Freud it is very much a social and psychological construct, with links to both conscious and (especially) unconscious mind.

Background

Freud and Fromm

A significant critic of Freud, within the development of psychology, was Erich Fromm (1900–80). Fromm, a Hasidic Jew, was, like Freud, a refugee from Nazi Germany, living much of his later life, from 1934, in the USA and Mexico.

While respecting much of Freud's work, he dissented from his teachings, claiming that Freud was misogynistic and too limited in his approach. Fromm was very influenced by his own strong humanistic and socialist views, considering that many psychological issues arose not because of psychological repression, but because of the inherent injustices of political circumstances.

The authoritarian conscience

People are all influenced by external authorities, such as teachers and parents, but also by the legal and coercive forces of wider society. We are punished for breaking rules. We internalise these fears and rules, and call it our 'conscience'. The effect of this is that we think of 'obedience' as virtuous and disobedience as wicked.

This has serious political and social consequences. Authoritarian conscience makes us submissive to authority – which accounts for why Germans were submissive to Nazism. This submissiveness leads to a loss of autonomy, which means distrusting our reason and thinking rigidly. Authority is then idealised as infallible.

Fromm goes on to argue that this sort of conscience can lead us into evil. He thought that the Nazi authorities played on this sort of submissiveness to get ordinary Germans to despise Jews and other minorities.

Humanistic conscience

Later in his career, Fromm considered a second view of conscience, which considers what is truly human and what is inhuman, seeking what is good for human flourishing, through self-development, and rejecting what destroys it. This enables us to develop personal integrity and to oppose groups such as the Nazis.

If we are to grow, we need conscience of this type – but it needs the right environment in which to grow and develop.

Freud v. Fromm

A Freudian might argue that Fromm is looking at conscience too superficially. To say that we are all influenced by external authorities does not look deeply enough into the internal conscious and subconscious reasons for being susceptible to these environing pressures. If we are so subservient, there must be internal reasons why this is so.

Other critics have argued that Fromm was too influenced by his strong socialist views and active involvement in left-wing politics, giving not a psychological account of conscience but rather a sociological one.

Fromm provides an alternative account to Freud, though his concept of the authoritarian conscience seems to be a development of conscience-as-guilt, while his humanistic conscience presents an ideal to which, as humans, we should aspire.

5 Conclusions

See Year 1, page 170.

In studying the views of Aquinas and Freud, as well as Fletcher, we might ask whether there is a single definition that can be given to 'conscience'. The conception of each thinker is so different: for Aquinas, conscience is about rationally judging human actions, past and present; for Freud it is a synonym for 'guilt', in the sense of feeling ashamed; for Fletcher it is 'merely a word for our attempts to make decisions creatively, constructively, fittingly' (Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics,* 1966, page 53).

Given the varieties of understanding, it might be possible to argue that the term means just whatever an author wants it to mean.

This might be too trite. It is clear, from our study of Aquinas and Freud, that the word may be given various meanings. We might argue that, while we use the term 'conscience' in many different ways – as Aquinas and Freud, Fromm and Fletcher obviously do – each usage is attempting to capture something fundamentally important about human life. This may be, for Aquinas, how we rationally and morally choose our actions, for Freud about why we feel guilt and shame, for Fromm how we should relate to political and social structures, for Fletcher how we determine our actions. Each thinker picks out important facets of human experience, related to the central questions of what it means to act 'with knowledge' – conscientiously.

Study advice

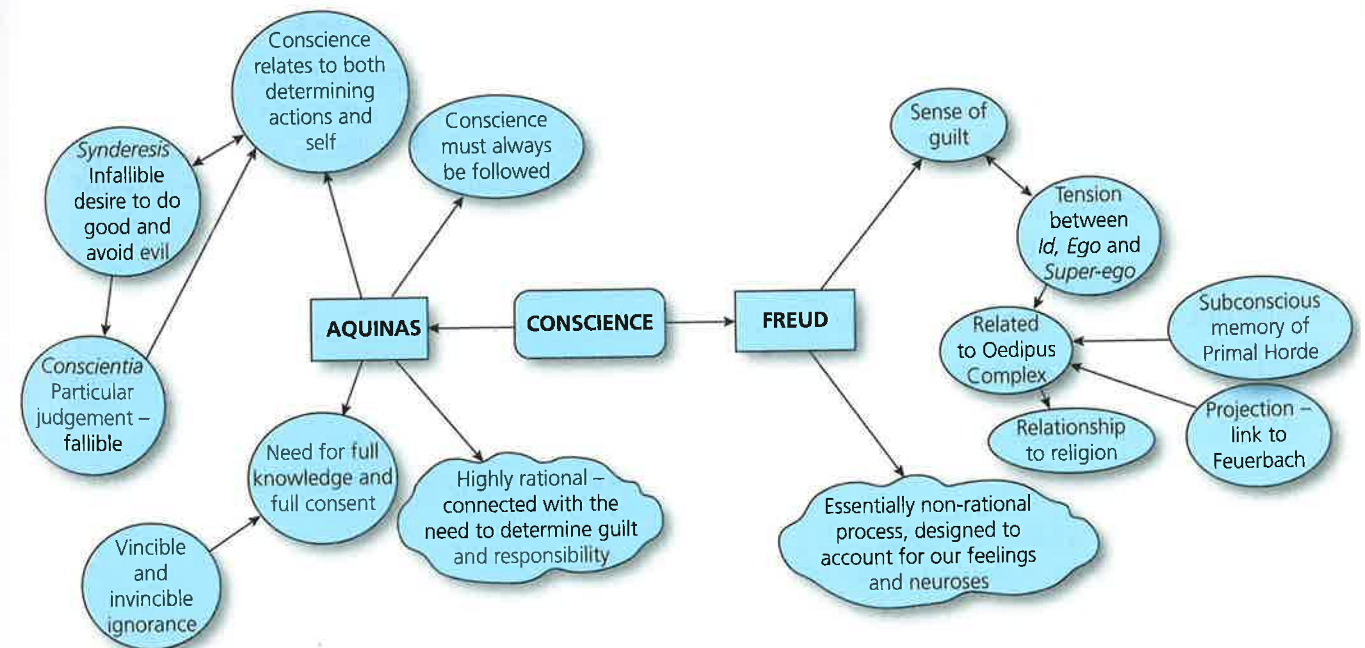
The same test can usefully be applied to Joseph Fletcher's theories of conscience, see Year 1, pages 170–1.

It is always useful to go back to the original sources. This is very valuable here, especially for Aquinas, as his writings on conscience are some of his most accessible.

Throughout this book and its predecessor (Year 1), we have stressed the need to think about what questions thinkers have been attempting to answer. Think very carefully about whether Freud and Aquinas are answering the same questions and – if not – what were the questions to which they were responding. In relation to Freud and Aquinas, a useful exercise is to examine your own experience, to see how accurately their accounts reflect your own experience of making decisions and reflecting on your own actions. If an account does not match our introspective experience, we have good reason to question it.

As always, take time to reflect on, and not simply to learn, the ideas you have studied.

Summary diagram: Conscience – Aquinas and Freud



Revision advice

By the end of this chapter you should be able to explain the issues involved in understanding conscience. You should be able to reflect on the differences between Freud and Aquinas, always in the light of consideration of the purposes of their theories.

Can you give brief definitions of:

- *synderesis* and *conscientia*
- prudence
- vincible and invincible ignorance
- *id* and *libido*
- *ego* and *super-ego?*

Can you explain:

- how Aquinas argues that we must always follow conscience
- the relationship of prudence and conscience in Aquinas
- the Oedipus Complex and its relation to conscience
- Freud's idea of the relationship of *id, libido, ego* and *super-ego*?

Can you give arguments for and against:

- the idea that conscience is God-given
- the idea that, according to Aquinas, we are not always blameworthy for our actions
- the claim that conscience is simply the consequence of unconscious desires
- the Freudian account of guilt and conscience?

Sample question and guidance

'Aquinas' account of conscience is less convincing than that of Joseph Fletcher.' Discuss.

This question is a useful reminder that in the examination you might be asked about material drawn from any part of the course over the last two years, and a reminder to think about Fletcher's account of conscience as well as those of Freud. Fletcher has an account which treats 'conscience' as a verb, not a noun, seeing it simply in terms of its relationship to action. It is therefore useful to think about whether Aquinas' treatment is more comprehensive and truer to the ways in which we actually use the word in our ordinary language. In doing this, it might be useful to consider the passage in which Aquinas speaks of conscience rebuking us for our actions. If you are asked to discuss the different views, as in this question, it is very important to take care to describe – accurately but briefly – what these views actually are, judging their respective merits not just in your final paragraph but as you work through the essay.

This title is a good example of a title with which the examiner might not agree, and a useful reminder that you are at liberty to use any justified and supported argument. Such an argument would not include asserting that Fletcher's ideas must be superior as more modern: you would need to demonstrate in what ways they are superior to those of Aquinas, if you wanted to make this case.

Further essay questions

'Freud's account of conscience is mistaken.' Discuss.

To what extent is Aquinas successful in arguing that we must always follow conscience?

'"Conscience" is just a fancy name for old-fashioned guilty feelings.' Discuss.

Going further

Much relevant material on Aquinas is to be found in the *Summa Theologica*, notably II-I, Q. 57, a.4 & 5, II-I, Q96, a4, and II-II, Qq 47-51. The last of these deals with the question of prudence.

Freud's more speculative theories may be found in *Totem and Taboo* (Routledge, 2001).

In Paul Strohm, *Conscience: A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford University Press, 2011), chapters 1 and 3 have some useful material, without digging very deeply: its value is as an overview, but much of the discussion is around the historical development of the idea and its political significance.

A useful collection of Freud's works, including *The Ego and the Id* may be found in a very cheap edition: Sigmund Freud, *Collected Works* (PacificStudio, 2010), while *The Ego and the Id* may be accessed free of charge at www.sigmundfreud.net/the-ego-and-the-id-pdf-ebook.jsp. Eli Sagan, *Freud, Women and Morality* (Basic Books, 1988) touches on many points raised here.

Erich Fromm's 1947 book, *Man for Himself: An Enquiry into the Psychology of Ethics* (Routledge, 1947) has useful material if you wish to look at his thought – though no examination questions will be asked on this – but needs to be supplemented by *The Sane Society* (Routledge, 1955), arguably his most systematic and important book.

Other books discussed in this chapter are:

- Aristotle *Nichomachean Ethics*.
- Fletcher, J. *Situation Ethics* (SCM, 1966).
- Frazer, J. *The Golden Bough* (third edition, 12 volumes, 1906–15).

Going further

Owen Chadwick, *The Secularization of the European Mind in the 19th Century* (Cambridge University Press, 1975). Chapter 9 on Comte, Darwin, Henry Sidgwick and others on the relationship of religion and morality.

Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Bantam Press, 2006). Chapters 1–2 and 9 set out his views of the rationality of science and the unreasonableness of a belief in God and the damage religious belief can have on society.

Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion, Civilization and its Discontents and Other Works*. General editor James Strachey (Vintage Books, 2001). Both these essays set out Freud's claim that the human spirit is crushed by many aspects of civilisation, notably religion.

Alister McGrath and Joanna Collicutt McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion?* (InterVarsity Press, 2007). An easy-to-read analysis of Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*.

Keith Ward, *The Case for Religion* (Oneworld, 2004). Part 1 is especially helpful in analysing the sociological and psychological arguments for and against religion.

Rowan Williams, *Faith in the Public Square* (Bloomsbury, 2012). Read Part 1, especially Chapters 1 and 2 on different types of secularism and how Christianity still has a role to play in the public square.

Other books, articles and websites discussed in this chapter are:

- The Amsterdam Declaration: http://iheu.org/humanism the-amsterdam-declaration/
- Brown, C. 4 May 2003, *The Telegraph*: www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1429109/Campbell-interrupted-Blair-as-he-spoke-of-his-faith-We-dont-do-God.html
- Eagleton, T. *The Death of God and the War on Terror*: https://oxfordleftreview.com/olr-issue-14/terry-eagleton-the-death-of-god-and-the-war-on-terror/
- Hume, D. *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, and The Natural History of Religion*, ed. G.C.A. Gaskin (Oxford University Press, 2008).
- National Secular Society: www.secularism.org.uk
- Taylor, C. *A Secular Age* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

Chapter 16

Liberation theology and Marx

Chapter checklist

This chapter begins by considering the social and political context of Latin America in the 1970s when Oscar Romero was assassinated and liberation theology was emerging. It then considers why some theologians used Marx in the development of their ideas, especially his teaching on historical materialism. The chapter explores liberation theology's teaching on praxis and the meaning of the term a 'preferential option for the poor'.

1 Introduction

Key person

Oscar Romero (1917–80): born in El Salvador, South America, the son of a carpenter. He was ordained priest in 1942 and completed his doctorate in 1943. He worked for over 20 years as a parish priest before being appointed auxiliary bishop of San Salvador (the capital of El Salvador) and then Archbishop in 1977. In 1979 the Revolutionary Government Junta came to power. Their human rights abuses caused the Salvadoran Civil War. Romero criticised the USA for giving military aid to the government. He was assassinated on 21 March 1980 while celebrating mass. His funeral was attended by 250,000 people. He was beatified by Pope Francis in 2015.

On 21 March 1980 the Archbishop of San Salvador, **Oscar Romero**, was in the act of celebrating mass in a city chapel when he was shot and killed. The day before he had given one of his influential radio sermons in which he had pleaded with the army's soldiers as Christians not to continue to murder and exploit the poor. This was sufficient for him to be branded a communist and murdered as a rebel. Romero had said previously, 'As a Christian, I do not believe in death without resurrection. If they kill me, I will rise again in the Salvadorian people.' His martyrdom has continued to inspire many to fight against injustice and exploitation in Latin America and throughout the world.

Although Romero was not a liberation theologian, what he stood for and the reasons why he died stand at the heart of **liberation theology**.

Key term

Liberation theology A contextual theology which considers that the heart of the Christian message is to bring spiritual and material justice and freedom to those who are oppressed.

What makes liberation controversial is its active engagement with a sociological and political analysis of society and its often outspoken critique of secular culture as well as of the Church itself.

Favela and luxury apartments illustrate the rich-poor divide in Latin America.

Key term

Favela A shanty town or slum area.

Latin America economic key facts

- On average, half of each nation's income goes to the wealthiest 15 per cent of the population.
- In Brazil, the richest 10 per cent of the population accounts for 46 per cent of the wealth, while the poorest 50 per cent accounts for just 14 per cent.

Liberation theology grew out of the political, social and pastoral situation in Latin America during the 1960s and 1970s. At that time the contrast between the rich landowners and the poor was even greater than it is today. Then, as today, the poor often lived in **favelas** or shanty towns of houses made of corrugated iron and other scraps of materials overlooked by luxury apartments of the rich. There was no proper sewerage system, infant mortality was high and gangs of children often roamed city streets in search of food and shelter. El Salvador, where the liberation theology movement gained its momentum, is still one of the most violent countries in the world with an average of one murder taking place every hour.

By nature Romero was conservative and cautious about the politicisation of theology. But he changed his mind after the murder in 1977 of his close friend and fellow priest Rutilio Grande, who had stood up for the rights of the poor. Romero's conscience dictated that to be true to Christ's example he had no option but to abandon political neutrality and act in solidarity with the poor. Standing up for justice against the government cost him his life. He was not the only one to lose his life. In 1989 the Salvadoran army also murdered six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her daughter at the Universidad Centroamericana in San Salvador. Because of their teachings on liberation theology they were regarded as anti-government terrorists.

2 Marx and liberation theology

Key term

Contextual theology A type of theology by which theologians reflect on a specific situation in the light of experience and within the Christian tradition.

(a) Contextual theology

Contextual theology is a type of theology by which theologians reflect on a specific situation in the light of experience and within the Christian tradition. In responding in particular to the plight of the poor politically and spiritually, liberation theology is self-consciously a contextual theology. For example, in liberation theology, the 'first step' is to deal with the situation of oppression and injustice, the 'second step' is to reflect theologically. However, by placing the needs of the poor and

Key quote

Like all theologies, liberation theology is the product of a particular historical moment; unlike some theologies, liberation theology is fully aware of this fact.

James Nickoloff, *Gustavo Gutiérrez: Essential Writings*, 1996, page 5

oppressed before the official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, liberation theology has often been regarded as radical, subversive and dangerous by church and state authorities.

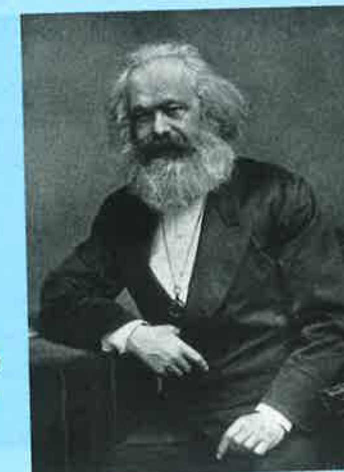
(b) Challenge to Western secularism

Criticism of traditional theology has also led liberation theologians to a critique of northern European and North American culture and, in particular, its secular tendency to 'privatise' religion and give priority to materialism over spiritual matters.

But liberation theologians consider that it is quite right and proper for the Church to be involved with the material conditions of society. They consider that as God created the material world, matter and spirit are not separate but different aspects of the same reality. Therefore, it would be quite wrong to treat politics and religion as being independent from each other. Liberation theology has therefore been called a 'bottom-up theology' as it begins first with the material conditions of the poor, the marginalised and exploited, rather than beginning with and imposing official Church teaching on the poor. These are the same conditions that **Karl Marx** also found to be unacceptable, inhumane and unjust. Although an atheist, his economic and sociological analysis of the conditions which have led to alienation and exploitation of the poor has been of great use to many liberation theologians. Following in his footsteps, many liberation theologians have also been critical of institutions such as the Church (along with schools, universities and governments), which impose laws rather than work for those who don't have the power to tackle injustice.

3 Marx's teaching on alienation and exploitation

Key person



Karl Marx (1818–83): born in Trier then part of German Rhineland. Although his father converted to Christianity from Judaism for social reasons, his grandfather was a much-respected rabbi. At university he came under the influence of a radical group of Hegelians, the 'young Hegelians', and through them developed his atheism and later his analysis of economics. He was aided financially and academically by Friedrich Engels (1820–95) and they collaborated on many works. Marx fled Paris in 1849 and settled in London where he wrote and worked as a journalist. His influential writings include *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) – written with Engels – and *Capital* (1867–83).

At the heart of Marx's philosophy is the idea that all processes of the world are governed by physical material forces. Humans contribute to the material conditions of the world and in turn are affected by them. When

Key terms

Historical materialism In Marxism, describes the material or physical conditions of all processes in the world, including history, which develop through a process of conflict, then harmony, only to fall into conflict again.

Alienation Occurs when a person is treated as a thing or object, rather than being valued as an individual.

On Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78), see Year 1, page 249.

Key terms

Capitalism The belief that human societies flourish best when operating in a free competitive market motivated by profit.

Communism The belief that human societies flourish best when everyone shares equally the means of production and are not motivated by profit but the desire for social harmony.

humans and the material forces are in harmony with each other, then people feel useful, productive and purposeful. But, according to Marx, history indicates that societies rarely manage long periods of stability. Every moment of history is a material or physical process working towards harmony, which then collapses and has to be rebuilt. This historical process is often referred to as historical materialism, which is an aspect of Marx's more general view of the world referred to as **historical materialism**.

Marx's aim was to investigate the causes of social instability. He shared some of **Rousseau's** assumptions that there was a stage in a 'state of nature' when families all shared the means of production without anyone being exploited. The initial cause of disharmony is not clear but was probably the result of disputes with other families over land ownership. Since that time many factors have led to competition and **alienation** – the degrading of the human person into a thing or object, rather than as a valued and purposeful individual subject.

(a) God and religion

> *The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness. The demand to give up the illusions about their condition is the demand to give up a condition that requires illusion.*
>
> Karl Marx, *Deutsch-französische Jahrbücher* in David McLellan, *Karl Marx Selected Writings*, 2000, page 71

Marx argued that a major cause of alienation is belief in God. The reason is two-fold:

- First, he rejected that God is the driving force of history. The material forces of history are blind; belief that God controls history is false-consciousness and leads to false hopes and illusions.
- Second, the place of religion gives power to the state or ruling group to control the population by stating that God's natural order is that some humans are born to be rulers and others servants. If this seems unfair then it will all be sorted out in the afterlife when those who have suffered in this life will be recompensed in heaven.

This is why Marx argued that the abolition of religion should be the first move in over-coming exploitation and alienation.

But next to religion Marx argued that **capitalism** was a major source of alienation and exploitation. In his vision of a harmonious society Marx imagined that everyone would willingly share their material and intellectual goods, but that capitalism's competitive nature makes this harmonious life impossible, therefore the only viable economic alternative is **communism**.

(b) Means of production

One of the primary causes of exploitation and alienation is ownership of the means of production. As Marx argues in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), in a capitalist society when what matters is production of goods, everyone becomes alienated and dehumanised. This is particularly so for the worker because he has no power to control production and is merely 'an appendage of the machine'. Working in the factory he has no creative input

into what he makes; he is alienated from the product and hates his work. Finally, even when he receives his wages, the bourgeoisie (owners, ruling class) still manage to exploit him because they own the shops where he spends his money on goods and his lodgings where they charge him rent.

(c) Bourgeoisie and proletariat

Finally, in his analysis of history Marx observed that at various times the exploited have come to realise that their position is not ordained by God or nature and have attempted to free themselves. Such moments had often been met with violent oppression by their masters who feared that their power and easy way of life would be lost. For Marx, the polarisation of master and slave was particularly stark in the nineteenth century with the rise of industrialisation. He named two classes: the **bourgeoisie** (the owners of production) and **proletariat** (the workers).

> *The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles… Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other: Bourgeoisie and Proletariat.*
>
> Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* in David McLellan, *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, 2000, page 246

Key terms

Bourgeoisie and **proletariat** The terms Marx used to describe those who own the means of production (bourgeoisie) and workers or those who have no ownership and are alienated from production (proletariat).

(d) Praxis

Praxis is one of the most important ideas derived from historical materialism. Praxis is the belief that as history is constantly changing, then humans have the ability to understand the material conditions of any situation and change them. Praxis begins by analysing a situation where there is oppression or injustice, working out what has caused it, and then changing it. The problem with philosophy, Marx said, is that it may analyse the world but it does nothing to change it. He famously said:

> *Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.*
>
> Karl Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach* XI in David McLellan, *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, 2000, page 173

Key term

Praxis The belief that as history is constantly changing, then humans have the ability to understand the material conditions of any situation and change them.

Liberation theologians agree: theology like philosophy has become too abstract, the point is for it to change the world not merely to think about it theoretically.

4 Liberation theology's use of Marx

Key question

Should Christian theology engage with atheist secular ideologies?

Liberation theologians and Marxists agree that even though human life is intrinsically good, it is also human nature which has been the source of human misery. Marxism explains this tension in terms of material and historical conditions. Liberation theologians find Marx's analysis useful as it refocuses theology on the world whereas traditionally theology has used more abstract terms such as 'sin' and 'original sin'. This illustrates why Marx has been a useful device for many liberation theologians – even if, as Gutiérrez says, confrontation with Marxism has helped develop his theology.

Key quote

... contemporary theology does in fact find itself in direct and fruitful confrontation with Marxism.

Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 1974, 2001 page 53

Key quote

Therefore, it uses Marxism purely as an instrument. It does not venerate it as it venerates the gospel. And it feels no obligation to account to social scientists for any use it may make – correct or otherwise – of Marxist terminology and ideas, though it does feel obliged to account to the poor... Marx (like any other Marxist) can be a companion on the way (see Puebla paragraph 544), but he can never be the guide, because 'You have only one teacher, the Christ' (Matthew 23:10).

Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, 1987, page 28

But, at the same time, almost no liberation theologian would argue that Marx is essential for Christianity, for if that were the case then it would suggest that Christianity has been defective until Marx. However, theologians have varied enormously in the way they have used Marx. There are those who make explicit use of Marx and those who use him only to analyse an economic situation. More radically, there are those who find his language and general concepts useful for a re-thinking of many basic Christian ideas. In other words, Marx is a useful tool or instrument for doing theology; as Leonardo and Clodovis Boff comment, Marx is a useful 'companion on the way', but there is only one teacher, Jesus Christ.

(a) Historical materialism and reversal

It is Marx's central idea of historical materialism that establishes liberation theology as a contextual theology by reversing traditional 'top-down' with a 'bottom-up' theology. As Marx argued, once we see how history has developed the material and economic basis for society then we can understand on what basis other human institutions are formed. Once these structures are understood we are then in a position to reform these structures from the bottom up.

Many liberation theologians find Marx's analysis of historical materialism very useful. For example, the idea of reversal can be seen in the argument that theology should begin with the condition of the poor as the underside of history rather than 'top down' abstract doctrines such as the nature of God. A bottom-up theology begins with actual human experience of suffering, alienation and hope. Seen in this way, Christian historical materialists argue that the Kingdom of God isn't heaven, but a transformation or reversal of material society based on Christian values; the meek not the powerful will inherit the earth. Thought about in this way Jesus' teachings about the Kingdom of God take on new meaning:

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

Matthew 5:5

The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you.

Luke 17:20–21

Key person

José Porfirio Miranda (1924–2001): born in Mexico, and ordained into the Catholic priesthood, Miranda studied economics at Munich University and theology in Frankfurt and later in Rome. He was a professor of economics, philosophy, law and biblical exegesis at various universities in Latin America. His books include *Marx and the Bible* (1971) and *Communism in the Bible* (1981).

(b) Critique of capitalism

Marxist analysis is most useful when in a particular situation of injustice and exploitation a church leader needs to reflect on what the causes are: who the oppressors are, who owns the means of production, and the ideologies which have reinforced the situation of exploitation. In essence, all injustices can be traced to the inherent unfairness of capitalism, which always creates an exploited underclass (or proletariat).

Liberation theologians share the basic Marxist idea that as humans are designed to work and be productive (Genesis 1:28), then failing to share in the means of production is a major cause of alienation and exploitation. For this reason, liberation theologians often present Marx in the same prophetic tradition (stretching from the 8th century BC prophets to Jesus), which attacked the social and economic conditions that exploited the poor.

Key quote

The God who does not allow himself to be objectified, because only in the immediate command of conscience is he God, clearly specifies that he is knowable exclusively in the cry of the poor and the weak who seek justice.

José Porfirio Miranda, *Marx and the Bible*, 1971, page 48

Key quote

You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath... You shall not bow down to them or worship them.

Exodus 20:4–5

Key question

Why are institutions, such as schools, churches and businesses, often major sources of alienation?

Key terms

Puebla State situated in Mexico and was the location of the third meeting of the Latin American Catholic bishops or CELAM in 1979. The meeting there is usually referred to simply as 'Puebla'.

Integral liberation The idea that promoting liberation is an essential, vital and fundamental part of the Church's role.

José Porfirio Miranda used Marx's suspicion of private ownership of property as the basis for his liberation theology. For Marx, private ownership of land is the root cause of injustice because it creates in the mind of the owner the idea that as an owner he can treat people who live on his land as objects. This illustrates Marx's fundamental principle set out in his first *Theses on Feuerbach* that alienation and oppression are caused when humans objectify the world and treat it as their own possession.

This important Marxist insight, Miranda argues, brings our attention to a similar idea which is also at the very heart of the Bible. Thanks to Marx, this idea, which has become lost through centuries of western theology, can now be recovered. However, Miranda argues that once recovered, it will be seen that the biblical view is in fact more radical than Marx for two reasons:

- **Human nature**. According to Miranda, Marxism has underestimated the insight of the biblical writers that capitalism since the start of human civilisation is due to human sin – not just external material economic causes. In describing the fallen aspect of human nature the Bible gives a much fuller reason than Marx as to why humans oppress and exploit others.
- **Idolatry**. Marx fails to give an adequate explanation for the causes of private ownership because of his rejection of God. The answer is provided in the second of the Ten Commandments, the command against idolatry, which warns against treating God as a thing or object. The abandonment of this commandment in the west has been the fundamental reason why the world has not been treated with respect as God's creation and why capitalism (as exemplified in private ownership) has been worshipped instead.

(c) The Church and the People's Church

The meeting of Latin American Catholic bishops at **Puebla** in 1979 marked a significant moment in the development of liberation theology. One of the terms they often used in conjunction with liberation was **integral liberation**, to indicate how liberation is not an additional idea but fundamental to all aspects of Church life. Puebla constantly reinforced the view that it is the essential duty of the whole Church to deal with the external economic conditions which have created the social structures of sin and injustice and not just personal sin.

Even more revolutionary was Puebla's call that for integral liberation to be truly effective it must involve ordinary people as part of the Church decision-making process. Puebla developed the controversial notion of the People's Church or *iglesia popular*. It was controversial because it recognised that for many of the poor the official Church was no more than an extension of the state, an institution that was the source of their alienation and exploitation. Puebla shared the Marxist suspicion that all institutions tend to give power to the few over the many. Puebla's call for an *iglesia popular* challenged the very essence of the Church's authority on moral and spiritual teaching; the Church should not be an institution but a community founded on love and solidarity.

(d) Praxis, social sin and alienation

Liberation theologians share Marx's notion that it is we who can change society. This may sound obvious but often people forget this or feel that it is God's will that things are the way they are. As Marx says:

> *The materialist doctrine concerning the changing of circumstances and upbringing forgets that circumstances are changed by men and that it is essential to educate the educator himself.*
>
> Karl Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach* III in David McLellan, *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, 2000, page 172

See Year 1, pages 310–13 for more on the idea of Jesus the liberator.

(i) Praxis

As we have seen in the life of Romero and elsewhere, theology cannot be a purely personal and theoretical subject because the Gospel and the example of Jesus indicate that the Christian life must involve action to tackle injustice and deal with those who live on the 'underside of history'. Liberation theologians quote with approval Marx's maxim that the purpose of philosophy (or theology in their case) is not merely to interpret the world but change it.

But for praxis to be effective some analysis is needed of the social, economic and political conditions that have caused injustice. Christian theology doesn't have the tools to do this analysis and that is why many liberation theologians turn to Marx as a sociological system which does offer the means for explaining the causes of exploitation.

(ii) Social sin and alienation

Marxism therefore provides a useful way of re-thinking traditional Christian notions of sin in material terms. Whereas sin, in traditional terms, refers to personal disobedience of God's will, liberation theologians consider sin in the social and economic structures of society.

Liberation theologians refer to this kind of social sin as **structural sin**; it is one of the great contributions of liberation theology to contemporary theology. Structural sin is dialectical:

> *When humans sin, they create structures of sin, which in their turn, make human beings sin.*
>
> José Ignacio González Faus, 'Sin' in Sobrino and Ellacuría, *Systematic Theology*, 1996, page 198

Key term

Structural sin Refers to the social and economic organisation of society, which causes its members to be alienated from each other and perpetuate injustices.

Structural sin means that humans are alienated from each other because, at a deep level, there is no recognition of each other as humans. Structural sin is therefore a deeply ingrained form of social alienation in which every member of society is dehumanised. For example, Faus illustrates how structural sin in Latin America based on the false truth of capitalism that a 'human being is not worth anything' and the false truth of communism that 'a human being is always an enemy', led to the situation where during a great earthquake in Mexico City the owners of some firms saved their machinery out of the ruins before rescuing many of the buried but alive women workers.

For a fuller explanation of false-consciousness, see page 230.

For more on **original sin**, see Year 1, pages 256–7.

Key term

Hermeneutic of suspicion The process of interpretation of a text or situation in which one questions the official or commonly accepted explanation. A Marxist hermeneutic of suspicion considers the underlying economic motivations of the accepted views.

Key question

Has liberation theology engaged with Marxism too much or too little?

Key person

Gustavo Gutiérrez (1928–): a Peruvian Catholic priest and theologian who lives and works with the poor in Lima. His book *A Theology of Liberation* (1971) was foundational in the development of liberation theology.

Key quote

At no time either explicitly or implicitly have I suggested a dialogue with Marxism with a view to a possible 'synthesis' or to accepting one aspect while leaving others aside.

Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Truth Shall Make You Free*, 1990, page 63

Liberation theologians argue that this collective sense of alienation is already contained in the Christian doctrine of **original sin**. Sin cannot exist in isolation; sin exists because humans are fallen and corrupt and this state is continually perpetuated through false-consciousness.

Understanding structural sin helps liberation theologians apply what is known as a **hermeneutic of suspicion**. In the example of Jesus' encounter with the rich ruler (Luke 18:18–25) the usual interpretation is that the man is a good man (he has kept the commandments not to steal, not to lie and to honour his parents) but is unable to give his money to the poor because of his personal sin. Traditional Church teaching is that he was not wrong to have wealth; the test is how he should have used it.

But liberation theologians question this interpretation as it favours capitalism, the Church's institutional teaching, and reduces sin to one individual rather than seeing him as part of a wider social system of injustice. The hermeneutic of suspicion asks:

- How has this man gained his riches?
- If he belongs to the ruling class then he will certainly own lands, so doesn't he control the means of production of the poor?
- If he has control of production then hasn't he in effect stolen and lied to the poor because he has perpetuated a structural system of sin?
- Can he really have honoured his parents when he doesn't honour God's covenant to honour and protect the poor by showing them justice and mercy (Hosea 6:6)?

Although using Marx is not necessary to apply a hermeneutic of suspicion, using him as a 'companion along the way' (L. and C. Boff) reveals new and fresh challenges in texts where the meaning has lost its force.

(e) Should theology engage with Marxism?

To what extent have liberation theologians used Marx (or Marxism) as a means of analysing poverty and oppression? While some, such as Leonardo Boff, Clodovis Boff, José Miguez Bonino, Juan Luis Segunda and José Miranda have all explicitly used Marx as a tool for analysis, others, such as **Gustavo Gutiérrez** and Jon Sobrino, are far more guarded. Over time, Gutiérrez made it clear that Marx and Christianity could not be combined, even if they share some common ground.

Gutiérrez's hesitancy might be due to the criticisms which the Vatican raised against liberation theology because of its engagement with Marxism as an overtly atheistic political system. Others, though, consider that in fact Marxism and Christianity share a lot in common and their relationship should be encouraged and developed.

(i) Too much engagement with Marxism

In 1984 the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith issued its *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the 'Theology of Liberation'* (or *Libertatis Nuntius*) chaired by Cardinal **Joseph Ratzinger**. The core of the *Instruction* was an outspoken critique of Marxism, and by extension, liberation theology. At first, the *Instruction* is less hostile and speaks of 'theologies of liberation'. It is sympathetic to those theologies that use the term 'liberation' to mean that justice should prevail in defence of the weak but it is extremely critical of other radical liberation theologies which have been 'insufficiently critical' of Marxism.

Key person

Joseph Ratzinger (1927–): professor of theology at various German universities. In 1981 he was appointed Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith (whose role is to protect the Catholic faith against errors in teaching and doctrine). In 2005 he was elected Pope and took the name Benedict XVI. He retired as Pope in 2013.

Key quote

Taken by itself, the desire for liberation finds a strong and fraternal echo in the heart and spirit of Christians.

Instruction on Certain Aspects of the 'Theology of Liberation' III.1, 1984

Key term

Reductionism The idea that everything can be explained simply in basic, often physical, terms. Reductionist arguments are often in the form 'x is nothing but y'.

Key person

Alistair Kee (1937–2011): was Professor of Religious Studies at Edinburgh University. His many publications include *Marx and the Failure of Liberation Theology* (1990) and *The Rise and Demise of Black Theology* (2006).

As stated in its introduction, the aim of the letter was:

> *... to draw the attention of pastors, theologians, and all the faithful to the deviations, and risks of deviation, damaging to the faith and to Christian living, that are brought about by certain forms of liberation theology which use, in an insufficiently critical manner, concepts borrowed from various currents of Marxist thought.*
>
> Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, Introduction, *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the 'Theology of Liberation'*, 1984

Although positive about the place of liberation in Christian theology, the *Instruction* is critical of the way the liberation theologians have limited theology in the following ways:

- Liberation is at the heart of Christian theology, but it is the liberation from 'the radical slavery of sin' not economic conditions.
- There are many kinds of freedom; liberation theologians tend to stress only the political kind.
- Liberation theology has placed too much emphasis on temporal or political liberation – it fails to look sufficiently at human sin.
- Liberation theology is **reductionist**. By interpreting sin in terms of social structures it equates salvation with praxis and revolution, not God's grace.
- Liberation theology makes truth exclusive only to those who practise a certain kind of praxis.
- Establishing the Kingdom of God is mistakenly interpreted to mean human struggle, whereas it is only possible through God's grace.

It is for many of these reasons that Oscar Romero was also critical of liberation theology. For him, liberation must first be spiritual and then practical; too much emphasis on Marxist materialism undermines the distinctiveness of Christianity.

(ii) Too little engagement with Marxism

> *My criticism has been that it is not Marxist enough. Or rather liberation theology, far from using Marx's philosophy 'in an insufficiently critical manner', has not cared deeply enough or dared to apply it in a sufficiently careful and comprehensive manner... in fact resistance to Marx is the cause of its failure.*
>
> Alistair Kee, *Marx and the Failure of Liberation Theology*, 1990, pages 211 and 257

Alistair Kee's thesis is that the Vatican's criticism that liberation theologians have used Marx too much and in an insufficiently critical manner is almost entirely wrong. In his view, the problem is that even those theologians who have used Marx critically, have done so without ever really tackling Marx's fundamental premise that the criticism of religion is equally a criticism of all other ideologies. Kee's point is that liberation theologians cannot just select the bits of Marx they find helpful and avoid the basic premise on which they are built.

At first, Kee's argument appears contradictory. Why would liberation theologians embrace Marx's atheism which states that religion is the primary source of alienation and false-consciousness? Kee argues that despite his atheism, Marx's historical materialism relies on a strongly

Key quote

Many of them purport to accept historical materialism, but they have not located themselves within it. They have proposed analyses and courses of action which disregard its basic premises.

Alistair Kee, *Marx and the Failure of Liberation Theology*, 1990, page 264

spiritual sense in which each historical stage gives way to the next driven by an idea of a better world. Marx may have tried to justify this in purely physical or material terms, but science does not support his claim; this is because his historical materialism is in fact an ideology. So, in fact Marx and Christianity are not so very different; the difference for Kee is that Christianity accepts that it is an ideology: history is determined by material forces but also by God or Spirit.

However, the value of Marx's historical materialism, which Christian theology should take more seriously, is that every new historical stage requires a radical re-assessment of its beliefs and ideas. If Christianity is to survive as a radical force in the next stage, its task now is to consider how it is to tackle the mindset of the present age of secular capitalism. Sadly, Kee argues, liberation theology is far too conservative and traditional to meet this challenge; that is why it has failed.

So, Kee concludes, liberation theology has lost the opportunity to tackle the greatest challenge to human existence in this capitalist and liberal age: secularism. Although Marx personally professed to be an atheist, this does not mean to say that the next dialectical stage of historical materialism should be secular. A more radical progression, even in Marxist terms, would be to suggest that in the dialectic historical process the next stage after secular capitalism could be spiritual socialism.

5 Liberation theology's teaching on the 'preferential option for the poor'

Key term

Preferential option for the poor The Christian duty of the privileged to side with the poor in solidarity and act against exploitation.

In addition to the theme of integral liberation the meeting at Puebla also developed an idea which has now become absorbed into standard Catholic social teaching, the '**preferential option for the poor**'. The first thing to notice about the phrase is that it is not aimed at the poor but those who are in a privileged position to act in solidarity with the poor in the battle against exploitation. The use of 'preference' is aimed at all Christians (especially Church leaders and teachers) who are not poor and therefore have the power and means to place the poor first. 'Option' means that solidarity is a free act where the privileged learn to be poor themselves by discarding any feelings of arrogance and superiority. In this way the Church becomes what it was always intended to be – radically egalitarian.

> *We affirm the need for conversion on the part of the whole church to a preferential option for the poor, an option aimed at their integral liberation.*
>
> Puebla *Final Document* number 1134

Key question

Why should Christians side with the poor?

(a) Theological motivations for a preferential option

The Boff brothers (*Introducing Liberation Theology*, 1987, pages 44–6) outline five theological motivations that justify the preferential option for the poor:

- **Theological motivation.** This motivation focuses on the God of the Bible as a living God who is immanent in the world and involved in human history. God hears 'the cry' of his people (Exodus 3: 7) and

See Year 1, pages 272–3 for a detailed discussion of the parable of the Sheep and the Goats.

Key quote

All need to make the option for the poor: the rich with generosity and no regard for reward, the poor for their fellow poor and those who are even poorer than they.

Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, 1987, page 46

Key question

Is it right for Christians to prioritise one group, such as the poor, over another?

Key term

Utopia Can mean 'no place' (an imaginary perfect world) or a 'good place'. Because of its ambiguity Leonardo Boff prefers the term 'topia' to refer to this world transformed.

Camilo Torres Restrepo (1929–66): see Year 1, pages 310–11.

seeks justice. When the Church imitates God it must hear the cry of the poor and seek justice.

- **Christological motivation.** Jesus sided with the poor and acted in solidarity with those who were marginalised by society.
- **Eschatological motivation.** The moment when God judges the world will be based on whether a person has sided with the poor according to Jesus' parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Matthew 25:31–46).
- **Apostolic motivation.** After Jesus' death the first apostles organised a general levy on all Christian groups to raise money for the poor. They did not distinguish between Christian and non-Christian poor.
- **Ecclesiological motivation.** All Christian members of the Church should, as a matter of faith and commitment, seek the transformation of society.

(b) Revolution and solidarity with the poor

In the Marxist material view of history, circumstances evolve to provide moments; those who can read the signs of the time, recognise the moment and force history to move on to the next stage. Revolution is necessary because there will always be those reactionary forces who resist and therefore impede change. In Marxism, revolution does not begin with the oppressed but those philosophers who can interpret the world, and, by acting in solidarity with the oppressed, organise change. Marx's view was that the only way of changing the deep-seated situation of exploitation was through 'despotic inroads' (powerful, violent means) – but only if other methods failed.

The 'preferential option for the poor' is indebted to Marx as it awakens the conscience of those in power to force the Church into a 'class struggle' against injustice. Taking inspiration from Jesus the liberator, theologians point to his example of siding with the marginalised as a response to his call to prepare for the kingdom of God. For liberation theologians the Kingdom of God is not an abstract **utopia** because as Marx pointed out, the promise of utopia or heaven to the poor is the ultimate false-consciousness; Boff prefers to call the Kingdom of God a 'topia' or place, where the present existing social conditions have been transformed.

Liberation theologians have certainly been persuaded that the capitalist status quo will not change merely by tinkering with the system, but most are reluctant to use the revolutionary 'despotic inroads' to bring about change. The exception is the iconic figure of **Camilo Torres Restrepo**, who argued that words without action are empty and if this meant revolution, even violence, then it was a sign of faith to be involved. As a priest, his decision to join the guerrillas was instantly shocking, daring and inspirational.

> *If the Marxist problem is closely analysed, I believe that an affirmative answer is possible. Dialectical and historical materialism in the mental process of Marxists appears to be so useful for revolutionary methods that it can be considered quite objective... with firm decision and without timidity, we should enter into this collaboration...*
>
> Camilo Torres Restrepo, speech in 1964

So, for liberation theologians it is right for Christians to prioritise one group, such as the poor, over another.

6 Orthodoxy and orthopraxis

Key question

Does Christianity tackle social issues more effectively than Marxism?

Key terms

Orthodoxy is the official teaching of the Catholic Church.
Orthopraxis is the right action needed to bring about justice for the poor, marginalised and oppressed.
Pre-theological In liberation theology, the stage prior to any theological reflection when acting in solidarity with the poor is more important than official Christian teaching.

Fundamental to liberation theology is the distinction between right action (orthopraxis) and the official or 'right' teaching of the Church (orthodoxy). Some summarise the relationship of **orthopraxis** and **orthodoxy** as 'bread before theology' – the idea that feeding the poor should come before urging them to be obedient to Church teaching. The point being made here is that being a good Christian in terms of church attendance and church loyalty is meaningless without endeavouring to be a good human being. In other words, a preferential option for the poor is in the first instance not a *theological* endeavour but a *human* project. As we shall see, in practice it is not as simple as this as praxis is not merely action but the (dialectical) relationship of beliefs and practice.

Orthopraxis as it has been developed by church workers operates in two acts or steps: first act praxis and second act praxis.

(a) First act praxis

First act praxis is **pre-theological**, it does not begin with doctrine or the official teaching of the Church but with the simple realisation that injustice and human exploitation are wrong. First act praxis begins when Christians act in solidarity with the poor, live alongside them as humans and learn what the conditions are which have led to this situation. So, as Leonardo and Clodovis Boff describe in their book *Introducing Liberation Theology* (1987), a preferential option begins with a 'preliminary stage' where church workers and theologians might act through:

- **visits** to the base communities/pastoral work
- **alternating** scholarly work and pastoral visits
- **living permanently** alongside the poor.

Although this is not a theological stage, it would be wrong to say that this lacks theological *motivation*. Those who opt to side with the poor do so because they already have a theological view of the world which recognises that God in Christ chose to be part of the human condition and to bring joy out of suffering. As Leonardo and Clodovis Boff put it:

Key quote

Being a theologian is not skilfully using methods but of being imbued with the theological spirit.

Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, 1987, page 23

First act praxis is closely related to the much quoted passage from the New Testament, Jesus' parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Matthew 25:31–46), when Jesus praises those who have acted spontaneously from faith by feeding the hungry, giving water to the thirsty and visiting those in prison.

(b) Second act praxis: the three mediations

Although second act praxis is the most theoretical aspect of liberation theology, its origins are practical and pastoral. Gutiérrez says that

theology 'rises at sundown', meaning that it is essential after the day's social and pastoral activities to sit quietly and reflect. As he says, 'theology does not produce pastoral activity; rather it reflects on it' (Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (1974), 2001, page 55).

In the 1950s, parish priests were already developing their own strategies to provide practical care for the poor; gradually a well-known process evolved of 'seeing, judging and acting'. These form the foundation of the three mediations. A **mediation** is a distinctive phase of theological praxis; the mediations form the heart of liberation theology.

Key term

Mediation A distinctive phase of theological action or praxis.

(i) Socio-analytical mediation: seeing

Socio-analytical mediation, the first mediation, is about analysing and understanding the socio-economic reasons for oppression in a particular situation. At the time when the liberation theologians of Latin America were developing their theology, a scepticism of capitalism and development naturally led to a suspicion of any economic system which supported the free markets of northern Europe and the USA. These systems were seen to be the fundamental causes of poverty and injustice. The first mediation, therefore, favours a socialist or even Marxist critique of the economic situation. Some theologians have explicitly used Marx, while others have used his language but not necessarily all his thinking. Again, Marxism has provided a useful 'companion on the way' for analysing the causes of poverty and injustice.

Key term

Socio-analytical mediation The first of the three mediations; a phase of praxis whereby the socio-economic reasons for oppression in a particular situation are analysed and discerned.

For example, using Marx highlights different ways in which people think about the causes of poverty and its solution. The Boff brothers suggest three:

- **Empirical poverty** is the view that poverty is the result of vice, laziness and ignorance. This analysis of poverty is weak because the solution is usually through the giving of aid or charity, which simply treats the poor as objects of pity not as persons.
- **Functional poverty** is the view that poverty is the result of backwardness. This view is typical of liberal capitalists who tackle poverty through loans and development aid. Even though this view recognises collective responsibility to solve the problem, in a capitalist world it can make the situation worse by creating a situation of dependency where the poor rely on the rich rather than dealing with the structural problems that have caused poverty.
- **Dialectical poverty** is the view that poverty is the result of oppression. Marxist or socialist analysts consider that poverty is the result of exploitation, exclusion from the process of production and priority of capital over labour. Tackling poverty requires revolutionary and radical confrontation with oppressive social conditions and structures.

The socio-analytic mediation also broadens the notion of the poor to refer to all those who are oppressed and marginalised because of deep-seated social prejudices and discrimination such as racism, ageism and sexism.

Key question

Why is the hermeneutical mediation necessary if a person is already motivated by being a Christian?

(ii) Hermeneutical mediation: judging

Once they have understood the real situation of the oppressed, the theologians have to ask: What has the word of God to say about this? This is the second stage in the theological construction – a specific stage, in which discourse is formally theological.

Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, 1987, page 32

The hermeneutical stage is the most explicitly theological moment in the process. Having analysed the socio-economic reasons for oppression in a particular situation, the task of **hermeneutical mediation** is then to reflect on it from a specifically Christian perspective. As the Boff brothers put it, 'what has the word of God to say about this?' Liberation theologians are not fundamentalists but nor are they sceptics; for them, the primary source for the word of God is the Bible. The Bible offers insights from many moments in history, which can be reinterpreted according to the present historical situation.

Key term

Hermeneutical mediation The second of the three mediations. This mediation involves reflecting on a situation of oppression or exploitation from a specifically Christian perspective through the study of the Bible.

Reading the Bible from the experience of the poor produces new interpretations of the biblical texts. Providing opportunities for the poor to interpret the Bible directly also helps them to become aware of its challenges and to become more aware of their own spiritual and political situation. As the Boff brothers say, the primary aim of liberation theologians is to favour *application* rather than *explanation* of texts; the role of professional theologians is therefore to provide scholarly information but not ready-made answers.

Key quote

Liberative hermeneutics reads the Bible as a book of life, not as a book of strange stories... Liberative hermeneutics seeks to discover and activate the transforming energy of the biblical texts... rereading of the Bible stresses its historical context in order to construct an appropriate – not literal – translation into our own historical context.

Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, 1987, page 34

For example, as we have seen (page 291) in the story of the Rich Ruler (Luke 18:18–25), the poor recognise the ruler as typical of the rich landlords they experience who perpetuate injustices even if superficially they might appear to have kept the commandments. The theologian may offer some historical background about landowners in Galilee at the time of Jesus. Reflection might note how Jesus did not ask the ruler to give some of his wealth away but for a complete transformation of his lifestyle. This in turn might inspire the poor to see that God sides with them and not the rich and that they should be persistent in their quest for justice.

(iii) Practical mediation: acting

Liberation theology is far from being an inconclusive theology. It starts from action and leads to action... And so, yes: liberation theology leads to action: action for justice, the work of love, conversion, renewal of the church, transformation of society.

Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, 1987, page 39

Key term

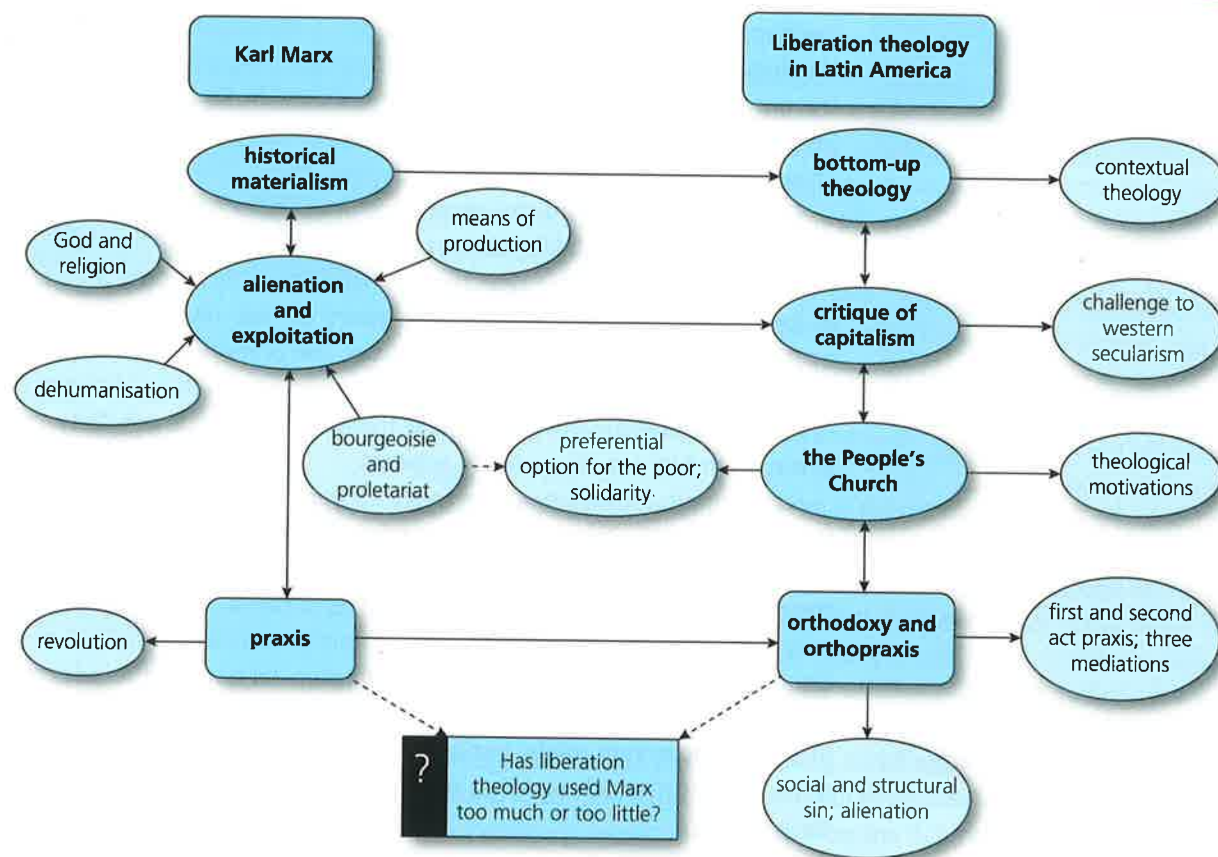
Practical mediation The third of the three mediations. This mediation leads to action by empowering the poor to bring about economic, social and spiritual change.

The first moment of action comes when siding with the poor in solidarity. Having analysed the situation socio-economically and through theological reflection, then those involved are obliged to act – this is the **practical mediation**. Action requires a change of mind and material conditions not just reform.

(iv) Critique

Many critics point out that the first mediation is the only really important one. If action is required to change a situation in the local community, which is unjust or causing harm, economic analysis is more appropriate than reading the Bible. However, if the second mediation is removed then the process is not really Christian and the spiritual values which the Bible offers become powerless and irrelevant. If this is the case, then the whole liberation theology project appears to be crumbling away. Perhaps theology cannot change the world.

Summary diagram: Liberation theology and Marx



Revision advice

By the end of this chapter you should be able to explain the aims of liberation theology as a contextual theology. You should be able to explain the main ideas of Marx and how his ideas of historical materialism were used by liberation theologians to develop their orthopraxis. Finally, you should be able to explain whether liberation theologians have used Marx too much or too little.

Can you give brief definitions of:

- historical materialism
- alienation
- capitalism
- praxis
- integral liberation?

Can you explain:

- liberation theology's challenge to secularism
- what the Boff brothers mean by saying Marx is a 'companion on the way'
- Miranda's claim that the Bible is more radical than Marx
- structural sin
- preferential option for the poor?

Can you give arguments for and against:

- whether Marx and Christian theology are incompatible
- the view that liberation theology is too focused on the poor
- the view that theology should begin 'from below' with humans not 'from above' with God
- the claim that religion is the cause of alienation?

Sample question and guidance

'The sole concern of theology should be the preferential option for the poor.' Discuss.

The essay might begin by explaining how the phrase 'preferential option for the poor' emerged from the situation of extreme poverty and exploitation in Latin America from the 1970s. You may wish to explain that it is aimed at Christians who have the means to deal with the condition of the poor and not, in the first instance, the poor themselves.

You might then consider the theological justification of a preferential option. You might refer to the example of Jesus as liberator and his teaching and treatment of the marginalised (you should use the examples from the topic on Jesus Christ from Year 1) and discuss that one possible meaning of the Kingdom of God is the reversal and transformation of the world today.

Your essay might then focus on the claim that it is the 'sole concern' of theology to focus on the poor. You might agree that given Jesus' teaching on judgement in the parable of the Sheep and the Goats and the message of the prophets before him, that acting justly as expressed in siding with the poor does support the claim.

On the other hand, you might consider that theology is also concerned with human nature, personal sin, the nature and knowledge of God and many other important ideas other than the poor. The essay title invites you to select what you have studied from other parts of the course and not just ideas in this chapter.

Further essay questions

To what extent should theology be about changing the world not interpreting it?

Assess the view that in theology orthodoxy is more important than orthopraxis.

'Marx does not offer a satisfactory solution to the problem of the exploitation of the poor.' Discuss.

Chapter 1.1 The nature or attributes of God

Does the omnipotence of God mean that there is nothing God cannot do?
If God can do anything, can this be compatible with God being perfectly good?
If God knows the future with certainty, does this restrict human free will?
If God exists at all, does God exist outside time or does he move along the same timeline that we do?

Key Terms

Omnipotent: all-powerful

Omniscient: all-knowing

Omnibenevolent: all-good and all-loving

Eternal: timeless, atemporal, being outside the constraints of time

Everlasting: sempiternal, lasting forever on the same timeline as humanity

Free will: the ability to make independent choices between real options

Existentialism: a way of thinking that emphasises personal freedom of choice

Immutable: incapable of changing or being affected

Specification requirements

Developments in the understanding of:

- omnipotence
- omniscience
- (omni)benevolence
- eternity
- free will

Introduction

One of the most fundamental questions in the philosophy of religion is, what do people mean when they talk about 'God' or 'gods'? Theists are people who believe that God exists, but what exactly is it that they are saying exists, and what are they asking other people to believe in? Are they talking about an object, one amongst all the other objects in the universe? Are they, perhaps, talking about 'Existence-Itself', encompassing the entire universe? What do they understand the nature of God to be?

Different religions have different understandings of the nature and attributes of God, although there are also many ideas in common. In the Hindu tradition, for example, one God can be understood and experienced in many different forms through different deities such as Krishna, Ganesha and Lakshmi. The Hindu deities illustrate the many facets of God. They can be male or female, both creative and destructive, and both gently benevolent and fiercely aggressive. In the Muslim tradition, the oneness of Allah is emphasised alongside the complete dependence of humanity on Allah.

Think question

Do you think different religions believe in different gods, or do they just express their ideas about the same God differently?

The Christian tradition also has a distinctive way of understanding the nature and attributes of God. Because Christianity began and grew within the context of the Greco-Roman world, Christian understandings of the nature of God developed from the interweaving of biblical ideas and concepts from the ancient Greek philosophers.

Christians inherited the language, symbolism and poetry of the Old Testament, in which God is anthropomorphised (made to seem like a human person), involved with the world and unpredictable. The God of the Old Testament seems to have thoughts and feelings: he is satisfied when people obey his Commandments, and angry and disappointed when they fail. He sometimes seems to have to wait and see what people will do next, and gives them warnings and promises, as if the future is as unknown to God as it is to his people. God is concerned about moral behaviour, taking an interest in what people do and passing judgement on the decisions they make, suggesting that whatever they do is their own choice and that, when they do wrong, it is their own fault.

However, the writers of the New Testament and the Christians who were responsible for shaping early Christian thought also came from a culture in which classical ideas of a timeless, spaceless, unchanging First Cause were very attractive. In particular, ideas from Plato and Aristotle were adopted and woven into Christian interpretations of the nature of God – sometimes successfully, and sometimes in a way that produces apparent contradictions. If God has perfect power, does this mean that he is in total control of everything that ever happens (in which case, can we ever be free to make independent decisions)? Can God be entirely loving in nature, and yet also powerful to the extent that he can do anything at all (including unloving things)? Can God be infinite and outside time, and yet be concerned with a finite creation that exists within time?

> **Think question**
>
> If someone told you that they believed in God, what would you understand them to be saying?

Can God know the future with perfect knowledge, and yet still allow us to be free to choose our own futures and be responsible for our own actions?

Many theists, including Christians, assert that God is **omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent,** and **eternal** or **everlasting**, and they sometimes have differing views about what these attributes mean. Philosophers of religion work to explore whether traditional beliefs about the nature or attributes of God make coherent sense, and whether these beliefs can be held simultaneously without creating contradictions.

The idea of divine power

The idea that God is omnipotent, or all-powerful, is a familiar one in Christian thought. However, it has caused a considerable amount of controversy.

The idea of God as omnipotent raises questions about whether there is anything God cannot do

One question that immediately arises is whether omnipotence is a coherent concept, whether applied to God or to anything else. For example, people have for years debated the questions of whether God can create a stone too heavy for himself to lift, or a knot that he cannot himself untie. Can there be such a thing as omnipotence, or does it necessarily involve logical contradictions? On the one hand, omnipotence involves (allegedly) being able to do absolutely anything. On the other hand, there are some actions that seem impossible for an omnipotent being to do, such as 'fail at a task' or 'be defeated by another being'. If omnipotence itself is impossible, then there cannot be any omnipotent beings. These problems are often referred to as 'the omnipotence paradox', where the whole notion of total power seems to be self-contradictory.

Another question that arises is whether omnipotence can be compatible with other characteristics traditionally ascribed to the Christian God. People discuss whether God's omnipotence is compatible with his being all-loving, since it would be illogical for God to be both able to do evil (because he is able to do absolutely everything) and unable to do evil (because he is perfectly loving) at the same time. Perhaps God's omnipotence is incompatible with his omniscience, since it would be illogical for God to be both able to add to his knowledge (because he is able to do everything) and at the same time unable to add to his knowledge (because he already knows everything).

Such questions then lead on to the further question of what the concept of 'an omnipotent being' might actually mean. Does it mean 'a being that is able to do absolutely anything, including the impossible'? Does it mean 'a being that is able to do everything possible'? Perhaps it means 'a being that has maximal power (more power than any other being in existence)' without this necessarily implying total power and all the difficulties that entails.

There are many passages in the Bible that support the view that God is omnipotent in some sense. The creation stories at the beginning of the book of Genesis, the references to creation in the Psalms, the words of the prophets, the ending of the book of Job, the miracle stories and the resurrection of Jesus are all examples that point to a God who has such power that he just has to want something to happen for it to come about:

> "And God said 'Let there be light' and there was light."
>
> Genesis 1:3, New International Version

The prophet Amos speaks of a God who has total power over nature:

> "He who made the Pleiades and Orion,
> who turns midnight into dawn
> and darkens day into night,
> who calls for the waters of the sea
> and pours them out over the face of the land—
> the Lord is his name."
>
> Amos 5:8, New International Version

God's omnipotence is also shown in his dealings with individuals, where he makes things happen for them that would never have occurred without the help of God. For example, in the book of Genesis, there is the story of Abraham and his wife Sarah, who showed kindness and hospitality to three strangers, bringing them water and preparing a meal for them to refresh them before they went on their way. As a reward, God told Abraham that he and Sarah would have the son they had always longed for, even though Sarah was well past child-bearing age. The idea was so ridiculous to her that she could not help laughing and God immediately knew her secret thoughts. But, the story emphasises, she should have realised there is nothing that is too hard for God:

> "Then one of them said, 'I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son.'
>
> Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind him. Abraham and Sarah were already very old, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing. So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, 'After I am worn out and my master is old, will I now have this pleasure?'
>
> Then the Lord said to Abraham, 'Why did Sarah laugh and say, "Will I really have a child, now that I am old?" Is anything too hard for the Lord? I will return to you at the appointed time next year, and Sarah will have a son.'
>
> Sarah was afraid, so she lied and said, 'I did not laugh.' But he said, 'Yes, you did laugh.'"
>
> Genesis 18:10–15, New International Version

The Bible emphasises the power of God to create and perform miracles

Apply your knowledge

1. In the passage from Matthew's gospel, what do you think Jesus meant when he said 'with God all things are possible'? Do you think he meant that God can do absolutely anything? Give reasons for your answer.
2. Look up the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness before he began his ministry (Matthew 4:1–11). In the story, Jesus is tempted to use his supernatural powers, but he resists the temptation. What do you think the story is trying to show about Jesus' power? Why does Jesus refuse to use it?

Think question

How convincing do you find the view that God, by definition, must be omnipotent?

There is a similar story in Luke's gospel, where Mary the mother of Jesus hears from the angel that her cousin Elizabeth is pregnant with John the Baptist, despite the fact that Elizabeth, like Sarah, has passed the menopause and has never been able to have children:

> Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail.
>
> Luke 1:36–37, New International Version

Even performing miracles that go against the laws of nature are within the power of God. Stories of Jesus in the gospels present Jesus as a miracle worker to show his divine nature. Jesus is shown to be someone who could walk on water, turn water into wine, raise the dead and calm storms just by giving a command.

In the New Testament, God's omnipotence is declared by Jesus in the context of the story of the rich young ruler. He asked Jesus what he needed to do in order to be saved and was told that he needed to sell all he had and give the money to the poor:

> Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'Truly I tell you, it is hard for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.'
>
> When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, 'Who then can be saved?'
>
> Jesus looked at them and said, 'With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.'
>
> Matthew 19:23–26

Christian theologians have taken the view that if God did not have supreme power, he would not be able to do the things that are necessary for human salvation. Unless God had omnipotence, he would not be able to create and carry out his plans for the universe; he would not be able to save people from their sins; he would not be able to resurrect people from death; he would not be able to give them eternal life in heaven. Both Anselm and Descartes depended on this understanding of God when they formed their ontological arguments, claiming that God is 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived' (Anselm), and that God has all the perfections (including perfect power). If God were anything less than omnipotent, then we would be able to conceive of a greater, more perfect and more powerful being; so God, by definition, must be omnipotent.

Different understandings of omnipotence

Different thinkers have considered the problems raised by the notion that God is omnipotent, and have developed a variety of ways of understanding what the omnipotence of God might mean.

Perhaps omnipotence means that God can do absolutely anything, including the impossible and the self-contradictory

When Descartes explored what it meant for God to be perfectly powerful, he came to the conclusion that God can do absolutely anything, even that which is logically impossible. According to Descartes, God could make a square circle, or make $2 + 2 = 5$, because God is the supreme perfection and, therefore, he can have no limitations at all. God is the source of logic and has the power to suspend logic or replace it whenever he wants to. Descartes argued that the laws of mathematics only exist in the way that they do because God created them that way, and God can change them or override them whenever he likes. Descartes rejected any other understandings of omnipotence because he thought that they put limits on the greatness of God and dishonoured God's greatness. Saying God had to conform to the laws of logic made it sound as though the God of Christianity was no more powerful than Zeus, who was at the mercy of the Fates.

Descartes thought that an omnipotent God should be able to do anything at all, even the logically impossible

For Descartes, God could be capable of doing evil (because of his omnipotence), and incapable (because of his love) at the same time, even though this involves a logical contradiction. Although we cannot see how such a God could exist, this (for Descartes) is because we are limited by logic and by the smallness of human understanding. God can see how to be self-contradictory because he is omnipotent God.

However, most Christian scholars have argued that this kind of understanding of omnipotence is mistaken. God can do anything; but logical contradictions are not 'things'. It is not a lack of power that prevents God from making a square circle, or a lack of knowledge that would prevent God from scoring more than 100 per cent on a test. It is the fact that square circles and test scores of more than 100 per cent are nonsense.

Descartes' view also turns God into an unpredictable and arbitrary tyrant, who might do anything (and therefore cannot be relied upon). If God is really all-powerful in the sense that he can do anything at all, then God has to be capable of doing evil, of being unforgiving, of turning against us, and of failing. He has to be capable of being self-contradictory by, for example, making unbreakable promises and then breaking them. It presents God as a being that humans cannot hope to understand or rely upon. It means that God's moral rules might change at any minute, or be both true and false at the same time. It makes it impossible for people to have a relationship with God or trust in him for their salvation.

Descartes' view creates difficulties for theodicy (attempts to justify God in the face of the existence of evil). The theodicies that have been put forward by most Christian thinkers, such as Irenaeus, Augustine and John Hick, suggest that God could not act in any other way than the way he does without depriving us of our **free will**. Suffering is a price that has to be paid in order for us to make free choices and be autonomous moral agents. However, if Descartes is correct and God is capable of absolutely anything, such as suspending the laws of logic to allow us to have free will without the consequent evil, then the existence of evil in the world becomes something that God could change if he wanted to, but which he chooses to inflict on us even though there is no justification for it. This then becomes difficult to reconcile with the idea that God is perfectly loving.

It could also be argued that Descartes' understanding of absolute omnipotence is not wholly supported by the Bible. For example, Numbers 23:19 claims that because God is God and not human, he cannot fail in some of the ways that humans fail:

> God is not human, that he should lie,
> not a human being, that he should change his mind.
> Does he speak and then not act?
> Does he promise and not fulfill?
>
> Numbers 23:19, New International Version

Think question

Do you think that Matthew 19:26 and Hebrews 6:18 contradict each other? How might someone defend the view that both verses are true, if at all?

Hebrews 6:18 states that 'it is impossible for God to lie' (Hebrews 6:18, New International Version).

The Bible certainly emphasises that the greatness and power of God is on a scale way beyond anything that humans can do or imagine, but it does not necessarily support Descartes' idea that literally nothing is impossible for God.

Perhaps omnipotence means that God can do everything that is within his own nature, and which is logically possible

In the Abraham story from Genesis, where Sarah is promised a child, God asks a rhetorical question, 'Is anything too hard for God?', implying that God can do anything and everything that he wants to. It is this idea of 'everything that he wants to' that has given many Christian thinkers an opportunity to try to resolve the difficulties of God's omnipotence. If God is capable of doing anything that he wants to do, then he is omnipotent – but there are things that God would never want to do because they are against his nature, such as breaking the laws of logic, failing or doing something unjust.

Aquinas argued that God could do anything that is non-contradictory and that is within the nature of God

Thomas Aquinas argued that God is completely omnipotent in the sense of being in charge of the whole world, creating it and keeping it in existence. Aquinas said that God is omnipotent because: 'he can do everything that is absolutely possible', qualified by saying that 'everything that does not imply a contradiction is among those possibilities in respect of which God is called omnipotent' (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1265–74, Part I, Q25.4).

So Aquinas is saying that God can do anything logically possible, but if it is not logically possible then it cannot be done, even by God. If something is logically contradictory, such as a square circle, then it is not a thing that can be made at all.

From this, then, it follows that God cannot do anything that is inconsistent with his nature because that would imply a contradiction. God is incorporeal (he has no body) for example, and therefore cannot swim, or die, or become tired. God is perfectly good, and therefore cannot deceive or do any other form of evil.

The modern theologian and philosopher of religion, Richard Swinburne (b. 1934), also takes this view. In his book *The Coherence of Theism* (1977), he argues that God's omnipotence means that God can do everything – but 'everything' has to be understood properly. God can do and create all 'things', but self-contradictory definitions do not refer to 'things'. A square circle is not a 'thing', so God cannot make one. A 'stone too heavy for God to lift' could not be a thing, and a 'knot that God could not untie' could not be a thing, so God could not make them. This, for Swinburne, is not a challenge to God's omnipotence, because God remains capable of doing and creating everything.

Swinburne argues that God can do anything, but not the logically impossible, because impossible things are not things

Perhaps God deliberately limits his own power for our benefit

In *The Puzzle of Evil* (1992), Peter Vardy (b. 1945) suggests that God's omnipotence is much more limited than many Christians have previously suggested. God is not in control of the whole of history, able to move anything around like pieces on a chessboard, Vardy argues, and it is wrong to suggest that everything that happens is because of the will of God.

Vardy suggests that God created the universe in such a way that his ability to act is necessarily limited. The whole of the universe is finely tuned in such a way that if God acted in any different way, everything would not be able to exist in the way that it does. He argues that the universe is perfectly suited for the existence of free, rational human beings, and that in order for it to remain this way, God's omnipotence has to be very much limited. However, this limitation is self-imposed. God chose to create the universe in this way, knowing what it would mean, and therefore it is still right to call God omnipotent because nothing limits his power except when he chooses.

> To call God Almighty, therefore, is to recognise the ultimate dependence of the universe and all things within it on God. It is to recognise God's creative and sustaining power. However, it specifically does not mean that God has total power to do anything he wishes. God is limited by the universe he has chosen to create [. . .] his limitation does not, however, lessen God in any significant way. It

is rather a recognition of God's wish to create a universe in which human beings can be brought into a loving relationship with him. ”

Peter Vardy, *The Puzzle of Evil*, 1992, p. 124

Many leading Christian thinkers point out that limits on God's omnipotence are self-imposed. God chooses to limit his own power for our benefit

John Macquarrie makes a similar point in *Principles of Christian Theology* (1966). Like Aquinas in the thirteenth century and Peter Vardy today, Macquarrie emphasises that any limitations on God's omnipotence are self-imposed. God is not constrained by logic, nor by the physical world, nor by the actions of human beings, but is constrained in his omnipotence merely because he chooses to limit his own power out of love for humanity.

This idea of God being self-limited is one that has been explored by Christian theologians, particularly in the context of Christology (a branch of theology involved with understanding the nature of Christ). In answer to the puzzle of how Jesus could have been the Son of God, given that Jesus did not always display God's attributes of omnipotence or timelessness or being without a body, theologians have developed a doctrine known as kenosis. This means 'self-emptying'; in other words, God deliberately emptied himself of some of his divine attributes before coming to earth, in order to make Jesus' encounter with humanity possible. Jesus had to have human limitations in order to be human at all, and this was because of God's own choice and freely given love. The doctrine is based on a passage from the letter to the Philippians in the New Testament, where the writer encourages his readers to imitate Christ's humility:

“ In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;
rather he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to death—
even death on a cross! ”

Philippians 2:5–8, New International Version

This idea has gained in popularity in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, perhaps because of the need for Christians to re-evaluate the idea of God's omnipotence after the horrors of the twentieth century wars, and perhaps also because of rising interest in **existentialist** ways of thinking, where free will and finding personal meaning is emphasised.

Perhaps problems with the idea of God's omnipotence are an issue of religious language

Macquarrie and other thinkers emphasise the need for believers to remember that when they speak of the power of God, they are using analogy, and should understand that God's power is very different from our own. They need to remember that the word 'power' refers to power within this world, so when it is applied to God, it cannot be applied literally because God is infinitely greater than we are. Following Aquinas, he argues that there will always be aspects of God's nature that remain unknowable to us. Even if we can understand them partially, and express them partially with the use of analogy, we should nevertheless bear in mind that if God's omnipotence is something we have difficulty comprehending, that is only to be expected given that we have small fallible human minds whereas God is God. When we think of 'perfect power', we think of the kinds of power that we know and understand from our limited human world. We try and magnify them in our minds and imagine what power might be like on an infinite, divine scale. However, the kinds of power we know are fallible, and our imaginations are limited, and therefore if we struggle to understand God's power we should not be surprised.

See the discussion of religious language in Chapters 1.2 and 1.3. *Aquinas argues that when we speak of God's attributes we need to remember that we are using analogy and not speaking literally.*

Thinkers such as Aquinas and Macquarrie point to issues with religious language as a key to understanding the attributes of God

Perhaps total omnipotence is not a great quality, and God should be understood as 'unsurpassably great' rather than totally powerful

Another interesting position in the debate about God's omnipotence comes from thinkers such as A.N. Whitehead (1861–1947) and Charles Hartshorne (1897–2000). They argued that absolute omnipotence in the sense of total power would not in reality be a perfect quality, and that it would be better to think of God as a being whose power cannot be surpassed by any other being, rather than as a being with total power. Hartshorne argues that total power, when we examine the idea, is not actually all that impressive.

Hartshorne considers that total power means that nothing else is able to put up any resistance at all to that power. If something else can offer resistance, then the power is not total. Omnipotence for Hartshorne means having total influence and effect. A totally omnipotent God would have total control over everything, and nothing would be able to do anything unless God allowed it and controlled it.

If I want to tidy the garden and cut a small overhanging branch off the roses, the rose will offer some resistance. I have to squeeze the clippers quite hard to get through the branch. I am stronger than the rose branch and so I can do the clipping. But if I were omnipotent, the branch would offer no resistance at all; clipping it would be like slicing through melted butter or I could just will the rose to be the shape I wanted and it would happen. Hartshorne asks us what would be so impressive about a being who can conquer things that can put up no resistance? It would be like praising someone who came first in a race with no other competitors.

Apply your knowledge

3. **a.** Which of the different understandings of God's omnipotence, if any, do you find the most coherent? What do you think are its strengths?

   b. Which of the views do you find the least convincing and why?

4. Some scholars have argued that difficulties arise for us because we cannot conceive of the power of God, and the problems stem from our own limitations of understanding rather than because ideas about God are nonsense. Do you think this is a fair point? Give reasons for your answer.

Hartshorne argued that God's omnipotence is only impressive if it is not total

For Hartshorne, it is important for an understanding of God's power that we recognise that other beings, through their free will, are capable of putting up resistance to God. Therefore, God's power over them is not total, although his power is always greater than that of any other being. This, for Hartshorne, is more impressive than a being that nothing can challenge. In his view, God's omnipotence means that God can overcome all resistance, not that God will meet no resistance.

Divine omniscience and God's relationship with time

What does it mean to say that God is omniscient?

Most people understand the omniscience of God to mean that God knows everything; there is nothing that he cannot know. However, it also means that God has no false beliefs and cannot be mistaken. If God knows something, then that thing is true.

If God is omniscient, God's knowledge includes things that are unavailable to the human mind. For example, God knows details of history that humanity has long forgotten; he knows whether there is life on other planets, in other galaxies; he knows whether there are other universes besides this one. He knows people's secret thoughts even when they are never expressed.

Omniscience, when attributed to God, is also closely linked with the idea of wisdom. God always knows the right thing to do, the best choices to make, which moral rules to give and when to intervene in the world. If God does something, then that action is the best action and it is done at exactly the right time.

However, attributing omniscience to God raises questions. If God knows everything, does this include events in the future as well as those in the past? Particularly significant for theology is the question of whether God knows in advance all the moral decisions that people will make in their lives. If he does know these decisions (and if his knowledge is always certain and never mistaken) then it raises the issue of whether people have any real freedom of choice.

For example, if God knows for all time that someone will steal an item this Friday, and God's knowledge is certain, then perhaps when Friday comes that person has no choice but to steal it. God's certain knowledge that it will happen might 'fix' the event and make it unchangeable. The person might feel that they are making a choice to steal the item, but in actual fact there was no possibility that they could have decided at the last minute not to steal it after all. And if there was no possibility that they could have acted otherwise, then it becomes difficult to blame them for following the only course of action open to them.

In Christianity, Judaism and Islam, alongside the belief that God is omniscient is the belief that humans are morally responsible for at least some of the actions they perform. It is believed that people have genuinely free choices about what they do. God does not compel them to choose one way rather than another, but leaves it to each individual to decide, independently, what to do in different situations as they arise. This means that they can then be held responsible for their choices. Islam, in particular, stresses that this earthly life is a testing place, where people make choices between right and wrong. Their responses to these choices are judged by Allah, and their place in heaven depends on whether they make the right decisions. Similarly, in Christianity, people are held to have a free choice about their moral decisions and about where they place their faith, and they are judged by God accordingly.

There is, then, a firm belief that it is possible both for people to have genuinely free will and for there to be an omniscient God. Within Christianity, different thinkers have offered different possible solutions to the problems this raises.

Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) argued that there is a possible solution to the problem of whether God's omniscience restricts our freedom. He drew the analogy of the knowledge that close friends have of each other's future behaviour to conclude that God could be omniscient while still allowing people to act freely:

Think question

What do you think are the differences between knowledge, belief and wisdom? If God is omniscient, could he have 'beliefs'?

> In the same way, we estimate the intimacy between two persons by the foreknowledge one has of the actions of the other, without supposing that in either case, the one or the other's freedom is thereby endangered. So even the divine foreknowledge cannot endanger freedom.
>
> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 1831, trans. W.E. Matthew, p. 228

Perhaps Schleiermacher is right. If I go to an Indian restaurant with my husband and Amritsar fish is on the menu, I can be fairly certain that he will choose it as it is his favourite meal. He can be very certain that I will avoid meat dishes, as I am vegetarian. Does our knowledge of each other's future choices mean that in some way we are restricting each other's freedom of choice? Most would say that the answer is no; because although I *know* what my husband will choose, I am only making a *reliable guess*. There is a possibility that I could be wrong; he might prefer something else this time. There is nothing in my knowledge of what he likes to eat that compels him to choose the dish I think he will choose. His knowledge that I am vegetarian, too, does not force me to make a vegetarian choice. I would make the same choice regardless of what my companion knew. I am not going to choose anything that is not vegetarian, but this is not *because* my husband knows this. There is nothing in his knowledge or lack of knowledge that forces my choice. For Schleiermacher, this is comparable with God's knowledge of our actions. His knowledge does not force or affect what we choose to do, and therefore we can still be held morally responsible and still make genuinely free choices.

Schleiermacher thought that the knowledge God has of us is like the knowledge close friends have of each other

See Chapter 2.3 of the AS and Year 1 book for more about Kant's understanding of ethics.

The problems with Schleiermacher's idea are that, unlike the knowledge partners or friends have of each other, God's knowledge is said to be infallible. I could be wrong in guessing what my husband will eat, but God cannot be wrong; he never makes mistakes. There is nothing that God knows that could turn out to be untrue. God is also said to *know* the future, rather than making a reliable prediction of it. It is the certainty of omniscient knowledge that makes it difficult to reconcile with human freedom of choice.

If our freedom to act morally were only apparent, then there would be serious implications. We would not be able to be held morally responsible for our actions because we would not have been able to behave in any other way. A genuine freedom of choice is considered by ethicists to be essential as a basis for morality. Kant, for example, argued that without freedom, there can be no moral choices. We have to have genuine options available to us to choose between, not just an illusion that we are making a free choice.

If God's omniscience determines our choices, then God cannot justifiably punish us when we do wrong or reward us when we do good.

The problem for our moral freedom becomes even more acute when belief in God's omniscience is coupled with the belief that God intends and creates every individual life, fashioning each person in accordance with his plans. God could have chosen to make us differently, or he could have chosen not to make us at all. If God not only knows the future with certainty, but knew when he made us and from the beginning of time exactly what we would choose at every point of our lives, perhaps God can be held responsible for all kinds of evil, including so-called moral evil.

There is the added difficulty that God might know, for all time, each person's religious choices. Perhaps God knows from the beginning of time which of us will have faith and which will doubt or disbelieve. Perhaps God knows, even before we are born, whether we will end up in heaven or hell, so that there is nothing we can do about it.

If, however, God does not have a clue what we will do, and wondered when he made each individual how they would turn out, and was sometimes taken aback by the choices they made, then this seems to imply a less than all-powerful God. It suggests that God can be surprised, or can make choices that turn out to have been unwise. God's capabilities seem to be limited.

Different Christian thinkers have formed different responses to the issues raised by the idea that God is omniscient. The ideas of Boethius and Anselm have been particularly influential. The modern philosopher Richard Swinburne has also contributed to the debate.

Discussion of what it means for God to be omniscient, and whether this restricts our free will, is closely linked to different understandings of God's relationship with time. Is the future already known to God, or does God have to wait and see what happens, just as we do?

God's relationship with time

Christianity claims that God is eternal, but what does this mean? There are two main views.

1. The view most commonly adopted by classical theologians, is that God is timeless. In other words, God is outside time, and is not bound by time; God is the creator of time. God is described as 'eternal' or 'atemporal'.
2. The other view is that God is everlasting. In other words, it is the belief that God moves along the same timeline that we do but never begins or ends. The past is past for God as well as for us, and past events are fixed for God just as they are for us. The future is unknown to us and is also, to some extent at least, unknown to God because it has not happened yet. In this view of God, he is described as 'sempiternal'.

Our understanding of what it means for God to be eternal is important because it affects many other ideas about the attributes of God. It affects ideas such as:

- Omniscience: Can God know with certainty the details of events that have not yet happened?

Apply your knowledge

5. Look up Romans 11:33–34 and Hebrews 4:13.
   a. What do these verses say about the knowledge of God?
   b. Do you think these verses support the view that God is omniscient?
6. Do you think that if God is omniscient, this must mean that he knows all our future choices? Give reasons for your answer.
7. It could be argued that to call God omniscient does not have to mean that God knows everything. It could mean that God's knowledge is unsurpassed by the knowledge of any other being. What do you think of this argument?

- The problem of evil: Can God see the whole picture from the beginning, in which case can he be at least partly blamed for things being the way that they are, because he knew in advance what would happen?
- Omnipotence: Can God change the past, and make events that have already happened un-happen, or is that beyond his power?
- Justice: Can God justifiably blame us for actions he knew we would perform even before he made us?
- Prayer: Is there any point in praying for something if God already knows what he will do and the future is fixed?

The view that God is timeless (atemporal)

This is the view that has been the more popular among Christian thinkers, and has been held by, for example, Augustine, Boethius, Anselm, Aquinas and Schleiermacher. It is the idea that God exists outside time, and can see the past, the present and the future, all with perfect knowledge. Time, it is argued, is an aspect of the created world, like space, and God is in control of it. God is not bound by space, in the Christian view; he can be and is everywhere at once. In the same kind of way, he is not bound by time but exists in every part of history and in every part of the future while being present in the world today.

The classical view of God's relationship with time is that he exists eternally, outside time and is unconstrained by time

This view is popular because it shows that God is not limited. As an aspect of the created world, time is something introduced by God rather than something to which God is subject. God's omnipotence is not threatened if God is not bound by the constraints of time – perhaps a God who could not know the future would be less powerful than one who could. It is a view that also allows for the belief that God is **immutable** (unchangeable), which is argued by some thinkers to be necessary if God is perfect.

People who support the idea that God is eternal argue that if God were bound by time, then he would be much more limited. He would not know what the outcomes of actions might be; he would have to wait and see how events turn out before deciding what to do next. There might be times when God's plans were thwarted because of unforeseen difficulties – and then God would have to resort to a different plan. His omnipotence and omniscience would be reduced to a point where God could hardly be called *all*-powerful and *all*-knowing. A God who was sempiternal rather than atemporal would not meet Anselm's definition of 'a being than which nothing greater can be conceived', because we would be able to conceive of a greater being than one who was constrained by having to exist within time.

Think question

Do you think that a God who exists outside time would be greater than a God who moves along the same time line that we do?

Those who defend the view that God is outside time argue that other concepts of God's relationship with time do not recognise the uniqueness of God. God can bring things about in time, and cause changes in people without being changed himself, because God is not a person in the same way that we are. There are things that are possible for God, because of the unique nature of his existence, even if we cannot see how they are possible with our limited understanding.

The view that God is everlasting (sempiternal)

Other people have raised objections to the view that God is timeless, saying that it creates more problems than it resolves.

One problem is that it seems to limit our free will: when God already knows what we are going to choose and how things will work out for us, in a fixed and certain way, there is nothing we can influence or change, and nothing for which we can be held responsible.

Some Christian thinkers, such as Swinburne, offer the view that God is everlasting rather than existing outside time

Another difficulty is connected with the problem of evil: it is difficult to reconcile the idea of a loving God with the idea of a God who knows that terrible natural disasters, acts of terrorism and diseases will happen and yet does not step in. This is linked to the issue of how God can act in the world at all if there is no 'before' and 'after' for God. Some scholars have therefore taken the view that God acts within time, responding to events and to people as they happen and as they act. This is the view of theologians such as Charles Hartshorne, as well as other thinkers such as Richard Swinburne.

God as timeless in the thinking of Augustine and Aquinas

In the fourth century, Augustine considered the question of whether the Bible supports the idea of a God who is atemporal, or a God who is sempiternal, and Augustine reached the opposite conclusion from Swinburne. For Augustine, the problem was that God had made the world at a particular point in time, which raised the issue of what God had been doing all the while beforehand if God moves along the same time line as we do. Augustine wondered why, if God is everlasting, he picked that particular moment to create the universe, and how God might have been spending his time (because God would have had time, just as we understand it) in the eternity before the universe existed. For Augustine, the biblical account of creation points towards a timeless God, who chooses to create day and night, and chooses to create the seasons, as described in Genesis, but who transcends notions of 'before' and 'after'. For Augustine, there cannot have been a 'before' for God.

Augustine and Aquinas both wrote extensively about the idea of an unchanging, eternal God, and have influenced much of Christian thought. According to Augustine, in his book *The City of God*, God is absolutely immutable, completely unchangeable, and cannot be other than he is. This is firmly bound to the idea that God is timeless. Aquinas followed Augustine's view, adding the important point that when we speak of God, we need to recognise that the language we use is analogical and not univocal. This means that any words that we use to describe God cannot be applied directly, because God is not like us. We have to use words from our own experience of the world when we speak, because those are the only words that human language has. But God is not like anything else in the world, and so when we use language, according to Aquinas, we have to use analogy, mentally putting the characteristics that we ascribe to God into inverted commas. We might say that God 'moves' in mysterious ways – and

See Chapters 1.2 and 1.3. *Aquinas pointed out that when we talk of God we have to remember that God's existence is very different from our own.*

when we do, we are using the word 'moves' analogically. We are not saying that God goes from one place to another so that he is not in the former place any more. We might say that God is a 'loving father' – and when we do, we are not saying that God's love is limited to the kind of love a human is capable of feeling and expressing, nor that God can only do as much for us as a human father can do. Aquinas, then, wanted to point out that some of the philosophical difficulties people have when trying to understand the attributes of God, arise because we are taking our own language too literally, and failing to take account of the unknowability of God.

One of the questions that arises with the view that God is outside time is the question of whether an unchanging being that exists outside time can be capable of love. Some modern scholars argue that love involves emotional response, feeling happy when the loved one is happy and worried when the loved one is unhappy. An unchanging God outside time would feel exactly the same way, all the time, whether people were contentedly worshipping him or suffering terrible pain.

The idea of an eternally timeless God raises issues about whether God can have loving relationships with humanity

Aquinas did not, of course, criticise later thinkers directly, but he did hold that God could be both loving and unchanging, just because he is God. People cannot be loving and at the same time unchanging; but God is different from us, and things that are not possible for us are possible for God. Aquinas drew a distinction between God's nature combined with God's will, which are immutable (unchangeable), and God making a change in other things: God's activity. Aquinas argued that God's nature, because it is perfect, is unchanging, always love, always perfect goodness. God's will, then, is always the same because God does not change his mind; he knows perfectly what the good is because he is goodness itself, and he does not change his will because of circumstances that he did not expect. However, in Aquinas' view, God's unchanging nature does not prevent God from having relationships. God does not change, but his creation changes. People learn and mature, they can move towards God or away from God, and so there is a dynamic relationship that allows for the existence of love even though God stays the same.

Richard Creel, in his book *Divine Impassibility* (1986) also argues that God can be loving as well as immutable. God can know what his own will is, in response to any of an infinite number of possibilities. He does not have to wait until people exercise their free will, then see how they act, and then decide how he will respond to them. Although people have genuine free will, according to Creel, God can still know what all of the possibilities are, and can know in advance what his will is in response to each of those possibilities.

The omniscience and justice of God in relation to human free will

Boethius and *The Consolation of Philosophy*

In the sixth century, the Christian philosopher Boethius took up the problem of God's omniscience and the effect it might have on our moral

freedom. He was particularly concerned about the judgement of God, and whether it would be fair of God to praise or blame people if they did not have any real moral freedom and were constrained by what God already knew about their future.

When he wrote his book *The Consolation of Philosophy*, he was a prisoner awaiting execution. He had led a life of great ups and downs. He was born in Greece into a renowned family with excellent connections and received a very good education. In his middle years, he held positions of great power in the government, and he had many academic interests. However, it all went wrong when political rivalries led to an accusation of treason, and Boethius was sentenced to death. He was executed in AD524.

Boethius was worried about the problem of God's omniscience, because it seemed on the surface that if God knows the future, then he is wrong to reward us or punish us for our behaviour. Yet the Bible does teach about divine reward and punishment very clearly. Believing that he was likely to be facing God's judgement in the near future, Boethius wanted to find a solution to this philosophical difficulty.

Thinking aloud in Book V of *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Boethius considers the different possibilities. He asks himself: 'How can God foreknow that these things will happen, if they are uncertain?' (Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Book V, Section 3). If God knows that something will happen, when in fact it is uncertain, then God's knowledge is mistaken, and that cannot possibly be. However, if God knows that something might happen, and then again it might not, then it can hardly be called 'knowledge' at all, and it puts God in the position of being no wiser than we are. But if God firmly knows things, then they become inevitable. Things that at the moment seem fair (the reward of the good, and the punishment of the bad) become unfair:

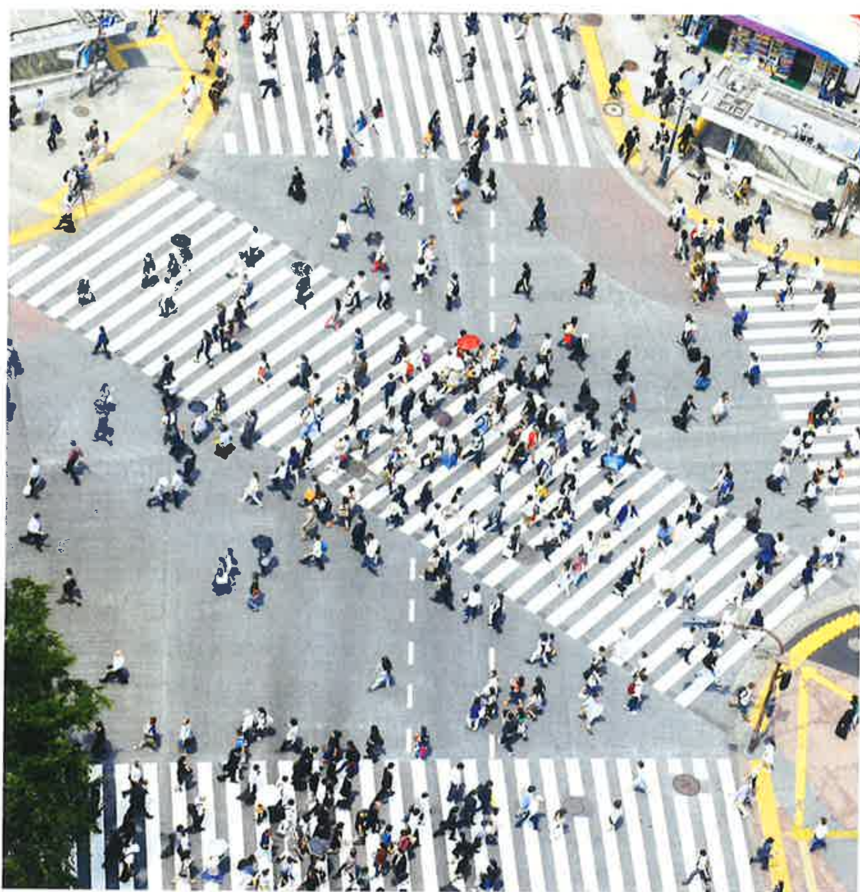
> “That which is now judged most equitable, the punishment of the wicked and the reward of the good, will be seen to be the most unjust of all; for men are driven to good or evil not by their own will but by the fixed necessity of what is to be.”
>
> Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Book V, Section 3

After much contemplation, Boethius reaches the conclusion that he has made a mistake. He has forgotten that God can see things in a different way from the way in which we see them. Humans exist within time. They have pasts that are fixed once they have happened, they have a present that is gone in an instant, and futures that are uncertain. And because the future is uncertain, humans have genuine free will.

Boethius argued that God can see us in our past, our present and our future, all simultaneously

However, when God is knowing, he does not have the same constraints in time that we have. God, therefore, does not have a past, present and future, and so 'his knowledge, too, transcends all

temporal change and abides in the immediacy of his presence.' God can look down on us, moving along our timelines, 'as though from a lofty peak above them' (Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Book V, Section 6). God can see us in the present; he can also see us in our pasts and in our futures, so that he has perfect knowledge of what we will freely choose to do. He does not know what moral choices we will make in advance of our making them because there is no such thing as 'in advance' for God. All events occur simultaneously for God, in his eternal presence.



Boethius suggested that God can see us simultaneously at different moments in our lives, 'as though from a lofty peak'

As God does not know things in advance of them happening, Boethius thought, it makes no sense to talk of what God should have known in the past or what God will come to know in the future. God cannot be accused of a lack of wisdom in not realising that Adam and Eve would disobey him, nor of a lack of morality in allowing evil dictators to be born. God does not know what we will do in the future because there is no future for God. All time happens in 'simultaneity' for God. Boethius concludes that we, therefore, have a genuine free choice and can be rewarded or punished with justice.

Think question

Do you think that Boethius has successfully solved the problem of God's foreknowledge and human free will?

Anselm's four-dimensionalist approach to the timelessness of God

In the eleventh century, Anselm took up Boethius' ideas of a God who can 'see' all moments of time at once. Anselm developed it further in what has become known as his 'four-dimensionalist' approach to questions of God's relationship with time.

Anselm's view contrasts with a view known as 'presentism'. According to presentism, only the present moment exists. The past is gone, and the future has not happened yet. The only reality is that which exists in this moment. We cannot go back and change what happened yesterday because it is gone. We cannot know what will happen next week because it does not exist yet.

Anselm's understanding of time is different. We humans, he thought, live in a presentist way, but this is not how things are for God. God is timeless, just as he is spaceless, whereas we humans are constrained by time just as we are constrained by space.

A four-dimensionalist view of time, in contrast with a presentist view, is that the past and the future exist in the same way that the present exists. Terms such as 'yesterday', 'the past', 'next week' and 'the future' are relative terms, relative to the person doing the perceiving at any given moment in time, just as 'right next to me' and 'a mile away' and 'the other side of the world' are relative to the person in any given place in space. Time, then, is understood as 'the fourth dimension' alongside height, width and depth which all relate to space.

A four-dimensionalist view of time holds that the past and the future exist, as the present also exists

It can be difficult to imagine the past and the future 'existing' in the way that the present exists. However, works of fiction often make use of the idea, inviting us to imagine that we can 'go back in time' or go forward into the future to see what might happen. Anselm, in any case, did not think that the limits of the human imagination provided any kind of evidence against the eternity of God.

Think question

a. Would you like to be able to visit the past or the future? Why, or why not?

b. What are some of the difficulties that might be involved in visiting the past or the future?

Human beings exist in a particular place in space. There are some places that are near to us and other places which are further away. Different people live in different places, and can only be in one place at a time. In the same way, different people live in different times. The First World War is further away from me than it was from my parents, and my grandparents lived right through it. We are limited by space as well as by time. But because God is eternal, in Anselm's thinking, God is unlimited by either space or time, and therefore God can be in the past, present and future all at once, just as he can be in the whole universe at once. In Anselm's view, God is not just 'in' every time and every space, but every time and space is 'in' God, created and sustained by God. God is not constrained by them but is in control of them.

For Anselm, the four-dimensionalist understanding of the eternity of God means that we do have **free will**. God can see the free choices that we

make, and have made in the past, and will make in the future. However, Anselm goes a step further than Boethius. Boethius wrote about God being able to see our free actions 'as though' from a lofty peak, whereas Anselm thought there was no 'as though' about it. God literally can see us in our pasts, our presents and our futures, because of his eternal timelessness.

For both Boethius and Anselm, therefore, God can justifiably judge us, and we can be held morally responsible for our actions, which we choose freely and which God can see at all times.

Swinburne's view of a God in time

It has been argued that if God is timeless, and therefore immutable, then God cannot be a person, or be said to have a 'life'. This view has been expressed by, for example, Richard Swinburne. A person with a life has to be changeable, he argues, in order to have relationships and respond to people according to what they do. A timeless God would not be able to love, because a timeless God is immutable and is therefore not affected by anything.

Their argument is that love (even unconditional love which is not because of our deserving but because of the nature of God) cannot be compatible with immutability (unchanging quality). A loving being responds to the object of his or her love, as a process and a sequence of events. Therefore, God has to exist within time for God to be able to respond to us with love. If there is a living God, who has relationships with people as individuals, then God cannot also be timeless.

Richard Swinburne writes that the view of a timeless God contradicts the Bible:

> If God had thus fixed his intentions 'from all eternity' he would be a very lifeless thing; not a person who reacts to men with sympathy or anger, pardon or chastening because he chooses to there and then. Yet [...] the God of the Old Testament, in which Judaism, Islam and Christianity have their roots, is a God in continual interaction with men, moved by men as they speak to him, his action being more often in no way decided in advance. We should note, further, that if God did not change at all, he would not think now of this, now of that. His thoughts would be one thought which lasted for ever.
>
> Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, 1977, p. 221

Swinburne argued that the God of the Bible exists within time, responding to his creation and allowing people to have free will

Swinburne argues that the view of a God outside time is not biblical, but has permeated Christian thought through the influence of the ancient Greeks, and was then promoted by Thomas Aquinas. Swinburne does not see why a perfect being should have to be

changeless. It was Plato who planted the idea in Western minds that a world of unchanging and unchangeable concepts was inevitably more perfect than the changing world, but we do not have to accept Plato's ideas.

See Chapter 1.1 of the AS and Year 1 book. *Plato thought that things that are unchanging, such as concepts, are more perfect than the changeable world of physical objects.*

In the Bible, Swinburne argues, God does not have fixed purposes for all eternity. He does not intend for all time that something should happen on a particular day and then remain unchanged in that intention. In contrast, God interacts with people, and God's decisions about what will happen may change because of his ongoing relationships with individuals.

A biblical example, which might support Swinburne's view, is the story in Isaiah of King Hezekiah's illness:

> In those days Hezekiah became ill and was at the point of death. The prophet Isaiah son of Amoz went to him and said, 'This is what the Lord says: Put your house in order, because you are going to die; you will not recover.'
>
> Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the Lord, 'Remember, Lord, how I have walked before you faithfully and with wholehearted devotion and have done what is good in your eyes.' And Hezekiah wept bitterly.
>
> Then the word of the Lord came to Isaiah: 'Go and tell Hezekiah, "This is what the Lord, the God of your father David, says: I have heard your prayer and seen your tears; I will add fifteen years to your life."'
>
> Isaiah 38:1–5, New International Version

Perhaps, then, Swinburne is right: God had been planning to end Hezekiah's life, but was persuaded to change his mind in response to Hezekiah's prayer. However, there are also passages where the changelessness of God is emphasised:

> God is not human, that he should lie,
> not a human being, that he should change his mind.
> Does he speak and then not act?
> Does he promise and not fulfill?
>
> Numbers 23:19, New International Version

In this passage, at least, God does seem to have fixed intentions which do not change. Unlike humanity, God knows with perfect knowledge what he will do, and has no need to alter his views or intentions.

The omnibenevolence and justice of God

The Christian understanding of God holds unequivocally that God's nature is love. This idea is not just a New Testament concept, but can be seen in the Old Testament too. The Old Testament speaks mainly of God's love for Israel rather than for particular individuals. The Hebrew word used is *hesed*. God's love is not caused by any special worth in its object. God did not choose to love Israel because Israel had especially loveable qualities; Israel has special worth because of God's love:

> The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples.
>
> Deuteronomy 7:7, New International Version

God's love, like God's existence, has no cause. It is not brought into being by something else but is part of the nature of God from the start.

Love as an attribute of God is closely connected to ideas about God's goodness and righteousness. Unlike Plato's static 'Form of the Good', which exists as a concept in the realm of ideas unaffected by anything, the goodness of God described in the Bible is demonstrated as love for the people. Plato's Form of the Good does not have feelings, and does not care whether people measure up to it or not. But the love of the biblical God is a love which is interactive, which requires a response and cares about what that response will be. Aristotle's Prime Mover, too, although seen to be perfect, does not have the characteristics of the Christian God of love. The Prime Mover cannot be affected or changed and so it thinks only of itself and its own perfect nature, whereas the God of the Bible is moved by the way people act, especially by the way they treat those who are weak or in poverty.

The loving God of the Bible contrasts with the ideas of Plato and Aristotle. See Chapter 1.1 of the AS and Year 1 book.

In the Bible, God's love is compared with the love of a human parent, full of tenderness for the child and profoundly hurt when the child rejects the love shown:

> To them I was like one who lifts infants to the cheek, and I bent down to feed them. [...] Ephraim has surrounded me with lies, Israel with deceit. And Judah is unruly against God, even against the faithful Holy One.
>
> Hosea 11:4, 12, New International Version

The prophet Hosea lived in the eighth century BC and was given the unenviable task of forming a marriage that was to work as a symbol of God's love for Israel. Hosea was told to marry Gomer, a woman known to be adulterous, and this marriage became a kind of visual aid for Hosea as he taught people about their behaviour and its consequences. Gomer was repeatedly unfaithful to Hosea, just as Israel was repeatedly unfaithful to God, but Hosea loved her, and took her back even though he knew she would probably repeat her behaviour. In the same way, Israel is tempted away from God by the attractions of other religions and by a secular lifestyle, and God, because of his love for Israel, is hurt and angry. He is determined to punish the people even though he wants to be able to restore their loving relationship:

> Woe to them,
> because they have strayed from me!
> Destruction to them,
> because they have rebelled against me!
> I long to redeem them
> but they speak about me falsely.
>
> Hosea 7:13, New International Version

This understanding of the love of God has created some philosophical problems for Christians. Does God's love come and go, or does it stay the same? Can God be affected, and be hurt, and suffer, and if so, does this imply a limitation to his omnipotence? Does God remain unchanging, and, if so, does this suggest limits to his relationships with us? If God loves his people unconditionally, and is also omnipotent, then why does he not stop them from doing the things that hurt him?

The love of God is a central theme in Christian scripture and teaching

Although the love of God illustrated by Hosea appears to be part of a stormy relationship, in the Psalms the emphasis is on the reliability of the love of God:

> ... and with you, Lord, is unfailing love
>
> Psalm 62:12, New International Version

> Because your love is better than life,
> my lips will praise you.
>
> Psalm 63:3, New International Version

> Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
> his love endures forever.
>
> Psalm 118:1, New International Version

In the Old Testament there is a strong theme of the love that the people should have for God and for each other as a result of loving God. It is taken for granted that God should be obeyed and that his laws are right. Showing loving concern for each other's welfare is the proper response to the love that God has shown for them. When the Hebrew people have been rescued from slavery in Egypt, have been led to Mount Sinai, and are about to be given the Ten Commandments, they are reminded that they have this special role because of the love that God has shown for them:

> You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.
>
> Exodus 19:4–6, New International Version

Think question

Do you think that the moral commands given by God in the Bible, coupled with warnings of punishment, are compatible with the idea of an all-loving God?

The love shown to the Hebrew people by God results in heavy responsibilities. They are to become a kingdom of priests, setting an example for the rest of the world: a holy nation, set apart because of their relationship with God. God's love seeks moral fellowship with Israel. The love of God cannot be separated from righteousness. It is not sentimental love, and it goes with a demand that the people should keep the Commandments. The idea of an omnibenevolent God is closely linked with a God of justice and of judgement.

God's love is expressed through judgement and forgiveness; his punishment of sin is precisely because of his love. One well-known example comes from the book of the prophet Amos, who, although he was a humble sheep farmer, had great skill in public speaking and addressed the people of his hometown with the messages he believed God had given him. The people were expecting to hear that, although God would punish their neighbours, they would be left alone and protected because they were God's holy nation. However, they were wrong. God's special love for Israel meant that they were to be singled out for punishment:

> You only have I chosen
> of all the families of the earth;
> therefore I will punish you
> for all your sins.
>
> Amos 3:2, New International Version

Some Jewish post-Holocaust theologians have built on this idea, claiming that the Jews were singled out for God's punishment during the twentieth century precisely because they are his chosen people. However, this view is not attractive to everyone, as it implies that the atrocities of the Holocaust were God's own doing, that the Jews deserved them and that God wanted them to happen.

In the New Testament, the word used for Christian love is 'agape'. Agape has the connotations of showing love through action rather than love as simply a feeling or emotion. In the first letter of John, the writer summarises Christian understanding of the love of God. He equates love with God: God is not just the prime example of a loving being, God is the source of love, and demonstrated his love by becoming incarnate in Jesus, giving people the opportunity to see God by seeing his love for the world. The source of all human love is God, and the love of God requires that people reciprocate by showing love for each other:

> Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.
>
> 1 John 4:7–9, New International Version

In the Christian view, then, God is equated with love; any love shown by humans for each other is a reflection of God. God is not only love in the Platonic sense of being the 'Ideal' love. The theme of God's love is strongly linked with concepts of salvation, reconciliation and redemption. God's love involves activity, shown supremely in the sacrifice and death of Christ. This is taken as evidence of the love of God.

Christian teaching is that all love comes from God and that the essence of God is love

In Christianity, the sacrificial death of Christ is understood to be conclusive evidence of the love of God

The Christian understanding of the love of God is that it is perfect love. It is unconditional (agape). It is personal to each individual, as well as to humanity as a whole: 'even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.' (Matthew 10:30–31, New International Version). And it is everlasting. Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians, counts love as the greatest of the three things that last forever. He explains the importance of love underpinning everything else that Christians do, and he explains how the love of God will be revealed in the way that people treat each other:

> If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.
>
> Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.
>
> Love never fails.
>
> 1 Corinthians 13:1–8, New International Version

The existence of evil and suffering in the world appear to some people (such as David Hume and J.S. Mill) to contradict the idea that there is an all-loving, all-powerful God. We might assume that, if a loving God really did exist, then there would be no suffering in the world. Disasters such as tsunamis and earthquakes, epidemics and hurricanes would not happen. No one would die young and everyone would reach a peaceful old age, having lived a happy and contented life of bliss. Perhaps there would be no death at all. However, it is all too obvious that the world is not like this, and nearly all of us encounter hardship and suffering of some kind, at some point in our lives.

Aquinas thought it was important that people should remember that everything we say of God is not literally true but is using analogy. See Chapters 1.2 and 1.3 on religious language.

Aquinas argued that we need to remember that when we speak of the love of God, we are using analogy. We are talking of a love that is like ours in some respects, but we have to bear in mind that God is infinitely greater than us and that we can only understand a tiny proportion of divine love.

The usual Christian view is that we cannot expect to understand the love of God. We experience it whenever we experience love, because all love comes from God, but we do not know why God acts in the ways he does. However, for many Christians, the key is that God does not leave us to suffer on our own. Christians believe that in Christ, God came to earth in human form and suffered with us. They believe that God is with us in our pain, even if we do not understand the reasons for it. This is the theme of Jürgen Moltmann's book *The Crucified God* (1973). Moltmann argues (along with other process theologians) that Christianity shows that God does not just sit outside time being perfect and immutable. He gets involved with us and shares the pains of human existence to the extent of suffering death by torture. Moltmann explored Christian theology as a result of his own experiences in the Second World War and concluded that God exists within time rather than in the timeless, eternal way suggested by Anselm.

In the Christian understanding, we may not understand the love of God or the reasons why people suffer, but we can still be confident of God's love and confident of a life after death when all will be made plain. We cannot understand God's power, God's knowledge and its relation to our freedom of will, or God's relationship with time, because we are limited, but one day we will come to an understanding:

> For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.'.
>
> 1 Corinthians 13:12–13, New International Version

Apply your knowledge

8. The Greeks had other words for love in addition to the word 'agape' (unconditional love). They also used the words *storge*, *phileo* and *eros*. Find out and make a note of what these different words mean.
9. Do you think the concept of an all-loving God is compatible with the concept of an all-powerful God, or should an all-powerful God be able to do unloving things? Give reasons for your answer.
10. Using your knowledge from Year 1, how do you think the loving God of the Bible compares with Plato's Form of the Good and with Aristotle's Prime Mover?

Discussing the nature or attributes of God

Is it possible, or necessary, to resolve the apparent conflicts between the traditional attributes of God?

One possible way of addressing the apparent conflict between traditional attributes of God is to adopt the view that God cannot be understood by the finite human mind. A God who is infinite in power, in knowledge and in goodness is not going to be readily comprehended by limited people who exist in time and space. Aquinas, in particular, was keen to emphasise this. God is essentially unknowable: we can learn about God, and explore what we understand of God and strive to do the things God seems to want of us, but in the end we will not understand him completely.

See Chapters 1.2 and 1.3 for a discussion about religious language, especially the via negativa, and the view that human language and concepts are inadequate to encompass the nature of God.

Perhaps the idea of God having a range of attributes, such as eternity, love and power, is an effort to break God down into manageable pieces so that

Apply your knowledge

11. Do you think that people should accept that they will not be able to understand fully the nature of God, or do you agree with Mackie that this is just a refusal to accept that the concept of God is nonsense (or do you have a different point of view)? Give reasons for your answer.

we can comprehend him more easily. If we were trying to understand a magnificent building, we might look at it from the south and then from the north; we might look at a floor plan, go inside and look first at the entrance hall and then at different rooms. We would not be able to take it all in at once because we are so much smaller than the building. This might give rise to apparent contradictions. Some people might argue that windows are for looking in from the outside, while others might argue that they are for looking outward. This demonstrates only the different limited perspectives of the viewers, not that the building could not exist at all.

However, other thinkers are not satisfied with the view that any apparent contradictions are due to our own limitations and that we should not expect to understand. Richard Dawkins (b. 1941), a modern biologist, argues that this 'it's a mystery' kind of thinking is lazy and damaging. He argues that we should not be satisfied to set aside difficult questions and accept that we cannot understand. If the idea of God is unintelligible to us then this, for him, is reason to stop claiming that such a being exists. J.L. Mackie (1917–81) also writes of the 'miracle of theism', claiming ironically that it is a 'miracle' that reasonable people should continue to support Christian beliefs given their incoherence.

Which understanding of the relationship between God and time (that of Boethius and Anselm or Swinburne) is the most useful?

Boethius and Anselm have very similar ideas about the relationship between God and time, each claiming that God exists outside time and is able in some way to know the past, the present and the future.

Swinburne, however, argues that God exists within time and that this understanding fits better with the biblical idea of a God of love who is capable of action and of having dynamic relationships with his people.

Both of these positions have their difficulties. If the view of Boethius and Anselm is adopted, then perhaps there are problems connected with the possibility of people having a relationship with God. It might not be possible to please or anger God if God was outside time and able to be in the future as well as in the past and present. God would always be the same, and so he could not 'become' pleased or angry, no matter what we did. There is the problem of whether a God outside time could really be totally omniscient, as perhaps God could not know what day or what time it is. There is a problem of whether a God outside time can act in the world. In works of fiction, such as novels and films, when time travel is imagined as a possibility it creates all kinds of difficult issues. People who 'go back in time' and meet their life partners at a time before their relationship are trapped, unable to do anything that might jeopardise the relationship and change the future, even though they know what the future holds. Perhaps the same is true for God, where he is unable to

act because of his own omniscience. There is also the issue of whether a God outside time is really compatible with our having free will, and the question of whether Boethius and Anselm have successfully resolved this. On the other hand, a timeless God seems to be more perfect than a God who exists in time, capable of offering eternal life to people and able to make promises with certainty.

The idea of a God who is in the same time as us, who has a past and a present and a future, also creates difficulties. Before he came to the conclusion that God is timeless, Augustine wondered what God was doing all the time before he created the universe, and this could be a problem for those who believe that God exists in time in a sempiternal way. It could be argued that a God who exists in time is much less powerful than a timeless God, because he is constrained by time. A God who existed in time would have to wait and see what happens rather than knowing. Perhaps a God who exists in time cannot be all-knowing if he does not know what the future holds and has to deal with unforeseen events. On the other hand, a God who exists in time seems to be more personal and capable of having relationships with us, and this view of a God in time perhaps allows more scope for human free will.

Apply your knowledge

12. Which idea of God's relationship with time seems the most plausible to you? Give reasons for your answer.

13. If all of the suggestions for God's relationship with time create philosophical difficulties, does this demonstrate that God does not exist at all?

Have Boethius, Anselm or Swinburne successfully resolved problems connected with God's attributes and human free will?

For some people, the thinking of Boethius and Anselm on God's omniscience and timelessness has successfully dealt with problems of human free will. They argue that God can see us at all times in our lives, freely making choices. The fact that God can see us making those choices, and knows what our future choices and their consequences will be, does not restrict our freedom to act freely. Ideas of past, present and future work differently for God. We can still be praised or blamed for our moral choices that we make in time, because God's knowledge of our choices is not foreknowledge (knowledge in advance) as there is no 'in advance' for God. Therefore, our future choices are not fixed before they have even happened.

Think question

Do you think that the existence of a God who knows all our thoughts and choices would restrict our ability to act freely?

Others might argue that Boethius and Anselm have not really solved the problem at all. God does still know our choices with certainty, and while this might not be 'beforehand' for God, it is still 'beforehand' for us, as we do exist in time. A related issue is the question of God having free will himself. The timeless, four-dimensionalist God described by Boethius and Anselm does not seem able to make free choices himself. He cannot have options available to him and subsequently choose between them as there is no 'subsequently' for God. God's choices are already made, for all time. Everything God thinks and does is restricted by his timelessness and his perfect nature.

Apply your knowledge

14. Some people argue that we only think we have freedom to act, but actually our actions are completely beyond our control. Known as 'hard determinists', they argue that our sense of ourselves making free choices is just an illusion. How far would you agree with this point of view?

Swinburne's view of a God who exists in time might seem to resolve problems of human free will because the future is not fixed in this model. People can make genuine free choices about what to do next, and no one knows what they will choose, not even God, until it happens, perhaps. However, a God who exists in time may still be omniscient in the sense of knowing everything that can be known. God might know everything about our personalities and the influences on us, our secret wishes as well as the ones we admit to, and know with perfect knowledge how we are likely to respond in any situation. If God cannot be mistaken, then even if God is predicting rather than knowing our choices, he will always predict correctly, which might not be very different from knowing with certainty.

It could be the case that we have no free will, whether God exists or not, outside or within time. We could be so determined by genetics and by external factors that none of our actions are free even if we feel ourselves to be acting freely.

Should the attributes of God be understood as subject to the limits of logical possibility or divine self-limitation?

The idea that God should be subject to the limits of logical possibility is one that has given rise to debate. Descartes' view was that logic is created by God, and that God is not subject to anything. God can, therefore, make some kind of nonsensical object if he so wishes or can act in a way that is contrary to his own nature.

However, most Christian thinkers reject Descartes' view on the grounds that logically impossible 'things' are not 'things' at all and, therefore, cannot be done or created. This does not make God subject to the laws of logic, because the reason God cannot do the logically impossible is not a failure on God's part.

Christian scholars such as Aquinas have argued that God can do everything possible. The question remains as to whether God can change his mind and break the laws of logic, and some of the miracle stories of the Bible suggest that he can. There are several different positions that could be held on the issue, for example:

- a Cartesian view, in which God can do absolutely anything
- a Thomist view (following Thomas Aquinas), in which God can do everything that can be done without contradiction and which is within his nature
- a view that holds that the idea of an omnipotent God makes no sense and is a reason for rejecting theist beliefs.

Many thinkers have struggled with the idea that God is totally powerful, or all-knowing.

These ideas, when explored, seem to present a God whose control over creation and over human life is such that people can put up no resistance to God's will and have no freedom to act. Some have, therefore, concluded that God intentionally limits his own powers in order to allow humanity to live purposefully and responsibly. God creates a world with 'epistemic distance' (a distance in knowledge) between himself and humanity so that it is not so obvious that people have no choice but to believe in him and worship him, it is argued. He also limits his own omnipotence so that we can choose to resist him, and limits his own omniscience so that we can take moral responsibility for our actions.

Others might argue, however, that this is simply making excuses for ideas that do not work. In his discussion of religious language, Antony Flew (1923–2010) argues that theistic beliefs die a 'death of a thousand qualifications' when they are challenged. When sceptical people raise objections to the claims of religious believers, the believers qualify their claims by saying, 'Ah, but God works in mysterious ways', and keep finding ways around problems until there is nothing left of their original statements.

It could also be argued that a God who limits his own omnipotence and omniscience (and who deliberately makes himself obscure from human view) is then not omniscient and omnipotent after all. He may have chosen these limitations for himself, but, even so, they are then limitations and so God's power and knowledge is not absolute.

Think question

a. Do you think it would be better if God made himself more obvious to us, so that religious faith became easier?

Think question

b. Do you think that a God who has chosen to limit his own powers can still be called 'omnipotent'?

Learning support

Points to remember

» When you are offering evaluative comment in response to an essay title, remember that you need to go further than just describing different possible points of view. You need to say which option you find the most convincing, and give your reasons for it. You need to offer criticisms of the opinions you find weaker, and say why you find them unconvincing. You should aim to persuade your reader and not simply display the various options.

» It can be difficult to write evaluative essays about beliefs if you do not hold those beliefs yourself. Discussion of the attributes of God might seem pointless if you do not believe God exists at all. However, in your essays, you are entitled to criticise all of the Christian beliefs if you want to. You could draw the conclusion that none of the suggestions work and that this points to scepticism as a reasonable position. If you do have religious belief, the fact that you believe something is not enough to count as evidence. You need to persuade your reader that your beliefs can stand up.

Enhance your learning

» Novels and films that explore ideas about time travel can be an interesting way of developing your thinking about four-dimensionalism. *The Time Machine* by H.G. Wells (1895, with later film adaptations), *The Time Traveler's Wife* by Audrey Niffenegger (2003, adapted for film in 2009); and *About Time* (a 2013 Richard Curtis film) are good places to start.

» Boethius (*Consolation of Philosophy*, Book V), Anselm (*De Concordia*), Aquinas (*Summa Theologica*, 1265–74), Descartes (*Meditations*, 1641) and Swinburne (*The Coherence of Theism*, 1977, Part II) are all readily available to read in the original, although they can be quite difficult to understand.

» *God, Foreknowledge and Freedom* (1989), edited by John Martin Fischer, is an excellent anthology of articles by different authors on the subject of God's omniscience, which would be interesting further reading for developing your knowledge beyond the demands of the course.

» Matthew 19:23–26 is the passage where Jesus says that with God, all things are possible.

» Sections 2 and 4 of *The Puzzle of God* (1999) by Peter Vardy are very accessible and provide a good supplement to enhance your knowledge.

» Chapter 11 of John Macquarrie's *Principles of Christian Theology* (1966) is a very sound and academic text but also readable.

Practice for exams

At A level, essay questions invite you to demonstrate your knowledge and understanding of factual material (AO1) and also your critical ability in putting forward a coherent, balanced argument (AO2). You should aim to write essays that are persuasive responses to the question throughout, rather than writing a lot of description and then tacking an opinion on at the end of each paragraph.

How convincing is Boethius' view of God's relationship with time?

In this question, you are asked to consider one view of God's relationship with time, and assess the extent to which you find it convincing, so you need to start by deciding whether or not you think Boethius' position is strong or weak.

Your knowledge and understanding can be demonstrated in your explanation of Boethius' views, showing that you understand the problems he faced explaining the relationship between God's omniscience and human free will. Try to make your own argument the key feature of the essay rather than giving a lot of uncritical description. It would be useful to compare the views of Boethius with the views of other thinkers so that you can say whether you find his views more or less persuasive than the alternatives. Give reasons why you find Boethius' position convincing or unconvincing, so that you have a structured argument rather than just an assertion.

Discuss critically the view that God deliberately limits his own powers for the good of humanity.

This question invites a consideration of the popular view that any limits to God's power come about because God chooses to limit himself. For example, the view that God chose to come to earth as a man in Jesus, limiting himself to a physical body. In your answer, you need to explain this view, making reference to thinkers and writers who support it (such as, for example, Peter Vardy), and discuss whether or not you find their arguments convincing. You should also consider different points of view, such as the view that God has the power to do absolutely anything in an unlimited way.

Show clearly what you think about each of the positions you present so that your conclusion naturally follows from the arguments you have been making.

Conscience

Should we follow our conscience?
Does conscience connect us to moral knowledge?
Is conscience mainly about a desire to please and a fear of rejection?

Key Terms

[illegible]: the word used by Aquinas to describe reason, something which is placed in every person as a result of their being created in the image of God

Synderesis: for Aquinas, this means to follow the good and avoid the evil, the [illegible] that all precepts follow

Id: for Freud, this is the part of the mind that has instinctive impulses that seek satisfaction in pleasure

Super-ego: Freud uses this word to describe the part of the mind that contradicts the id and uses internalised ideals from parents and society to make the ego behave morally

Ego: Freud uses this word to describe the mediation between the id and the super-ego

Conscientia: this is the name Aquinas gives to the process whereby a person's reason makes moral judgements

Vincible ignorance: this is how Aquinas describes a lack of knowledge for which a person is responsible, and can be blamed

Invincible ignorance: this is how Aquinas describes a lack of knowledge for which a person is not responsible, and cannot be blamed

Specification requirements

- Aquinas' theological approach
- Freud's psychological approach

Introduction

How do we determine what is the right thing to do? Do we act and then wait to see if we regret what we have done; wait to see if we feel guilty about what we did? Or do we have a sense that one course of action is right and the other is wrong, even if it is a struggle to do the right thing: 'For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing' (Romans 7:19)? What is the cause of these feelings of guilt and obligation, and this sense of right and wrong?

Apply your knowledge

1. Find out and make a note of these passages where Paul seems to refer to conscience in the New Testament. Try: 1 Corinthians 8:10–12, 2 Corinthians 1:12, Romans 2:15, and Romans 7:15 and 18. To what extent do you agree with him and why?
2. Read these thoughts about conscience. Choose the one you find most stimulating or provocative and explain why you have chosen it:
   a. Martin Luther King Jr, in a speech made on 31 March 1968, said that there are times when you need take a position that is dangerous or unpopular because conscience tells you it is right.
   b. 'Conscience is the inner voice that warns us somebody may be looking' (attributed to Mencken, *A Mencken Chrestomathy*, 1949).
   c. 'The only tyrant I accept in this world is the "still small voice" within me. And even though I have to face the prospect of being a minority of one, I humbly believe I have the courage to be in such a hopeless minority.' (Mahatma Gandhi, *Young India*, 1922).

St Jerome (AD347–420) thought 'the spark of conscience' was the power to distinguish good from evil. Does it matter, then, if we do not follow our conscience? Some have refused to fight for their country because of conscience. Some have carried out acts of civil disobedience (they have broken the law) because of their conscience. Conscience can be disruptive, but it seems also to be a compelling dimension of the human experience that is somehow linked with moral integrity.

This chapter explores two different approaches to the concept of conscience. Thomas Aquinas' approach is theological. Drawing on many threads of ancient thought, Aquinas explains conscience as linking to the God-given gift of *ratio* (reason), moving the mind from knowledge of this world to some higher truth. He also links conscience with *synderesis*, a human inclination or habit towards good. Aquinas holds conscience to be incredibly important and argues that it is essential that a person follows their conscience. Humans may make mistakes, but if they follow their conscience responsibly, they cannot be blamed for their actions. Aquinas' account of conscience influences the official teaching of the Catholic Church and, therefore, many millions of Catholics today.

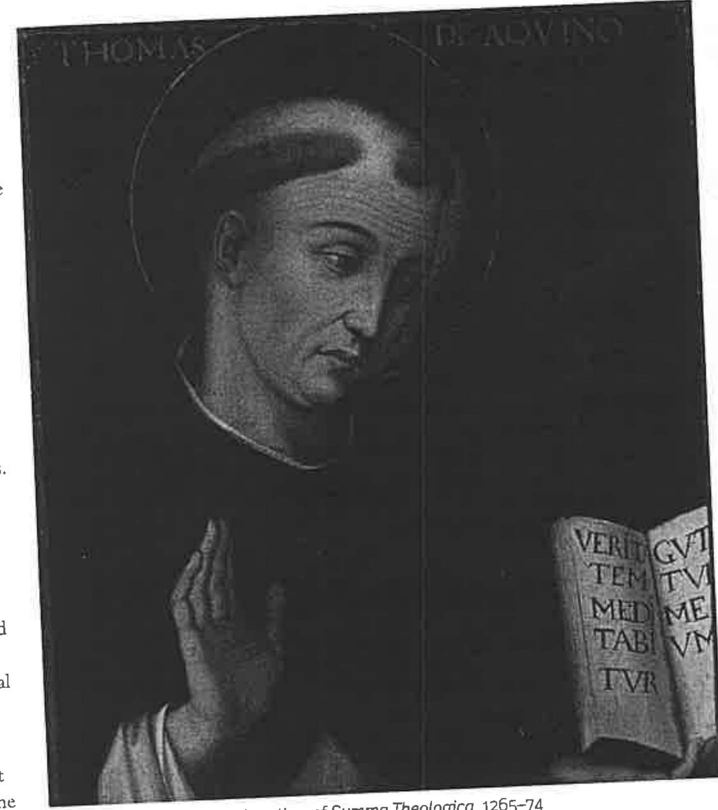
Sigmund Freud's approach to conscience is psychological. Freud sees all three of the elements of human psyche at work in what is commonly described as conscience: the impulse to seek satisfaction in pleasure (the **id**) on the one hand and the human tendency to act to please those in positions of authority (the **super-ego**) on the other, mediated by the **ego**.

In a speech made on 31 March 1968 Martin Luther King Jr said that people should act according to their conscience, even when their actions could be disliked or dangerous

Aquinas' theological approach to conscience

Ratio

Aquinas did not share the common belief that conscience is a special power or part of our mind that tells us what is right or wrong. He thought that to understand conscience you have to understand *ratio* (reason).



Thomas Aquinas (1225–74), author of *Summa Theologica*, 1265–74

Humans have many special qualities that mark them out from other creatures, including imagination and intellectual ability. Humans can create ideas, pictures, music, stories and machines. They can learn to do complex and sophisticated things, like speaking languages, performing complex mathematical equations and sophisticated dances, and developing impressive levels of physical skill in sports.

St Augustine of Hippo (AD354–430) thought that reason, the intellect and the mind were all one power in human beings, but Aquinas distinguishes *ratio* (reason) as a separate thing. Aquinas believed that *ratio* distinguishes human beings from other animals. Of all creatures, only humans deliberate over moral matters and *ratio* is, therefore, a fundamental part of the created human being. It is a divine gift from God. The Bible refers to human beings made in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:27) and it is therefore, according to Christians, placed in every person.

Ratio is more than simply comprehending things, understanding them or perfecting them. I can comprehend the things I see before me; I can learn

to master a particular skill, like singing a song. But this comprehension, this understanding or ability, is not *ratio*. *Ratio* moves us in our thinking from one thing to another. There is something progressive about it. It has some sort of direction linked to judgement. It is an act of working things out.

One ancient philosopher thought that opinions come from our imagination and the mind then judges the truth or error in the opinions to discover what is true. Aquinas, however, was inspired by Paul's letter to Romans (1:20), which suggests that we can move from the knowledge of this world to knowledge of the eternal world. *Ratio* (our ability to reason and to make moral judgements) connects us to the eternal realm, to the divine. People sometimes talk about having a powerful sense of the wrongness or rightness of something and Christians might describe this as a connection to a higher knowledge, some eternal or divine insight.

Think question

Does morality always come down to following one social convention or another?

This means morality is not simply about doing that which is accepted by the many, what is culturally, socially or politically 'normal'. Recalling the crowd condemning Jesus, Pope Benedict XVI reflects on the dangers of following the crowd:

> But at that moment they are caught up in the crowd. They are shouting because everyone else is shouting, and they are shouting the same thing that everyone else is shouting. And in this way, justice is trampled underfoot by weakness, cowardice and fear of the diktat of the ruling mindset. The quiet voice of conscience is drowned out by the cries of the crowd. Evil draws its power from indecision and concern for what other people think.
>
> Pope Benedict XVI, 'Good Friday Reflection on the Gospel', 2005

Hannah Arendt, writing about the Holocaust, argues that when the norms of society become profoundly immoral you must reject them. She argued that, in future, we need:

> human beings [to] be capable of telling right from wrong even when all they have to guide them is their own moral judgment, which, moreover, happens to be completely at odds with what they must regard as the unanimous opinion of all these around them.
>
> Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem, a report on the banality of evil*, 1994, pp. 294–96

Morality may manifest itself in insubordination towards socially upheld principles, and in an action openly defying social solidarity and consensus

If, as Zigmunt Bauman argues, morality 'may manifest itself in insubordination towards socially upheld principles, and in an action openly defying social solidarity and consensus' (Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, 1989, p. 177), then the moral instinct cannot simply be the

fear God and live according to their conscience, God, in his infinite mercy, will give them salvation even though they err.

Aquinas deliberately uses an unlikely scenario to make the point that human beings must do what their ratio tells them is right. He considers a situation where mistaken reason bids a man to sleep with another man's wife. This is clearly an evil act based on ignorance of the divine law, the commandment prohibiting adultery, that he ought to know. However, if the misjudgement comes about by thinking the woman really is his own wife, and if she wants him, then his will is free from fault. This example seems ludicrous, but Aquinas is deliberately trying to emphasise that a person is not blameworthy for invincible ignorance, for making a genuine mistake, even when the mistake involves breaking the commandment against adultery, an act that the Bible suggests should be punishable by death (Deuteronomy 22:22).

This powerful idea about the duty to follow conscience led a famous Catholic thinker to make another point that sounds curious. Cardinal John Henry Newman, in a letter to the Duke of Norfolk in 1846, wrote:

> “Conscience is the aboriginal Vicar of Christ [...] I shall drink – to the Pope, if you please, – still, to Conscience first, and to the Pope afterwards.”
>
> Cardinal John Henry Newman, 'Letter to the Duke of Norfolk, Section 5.' *Certain Difficulties felt by Anglicans in Catholic teaching II*, 1885, p. 249

Newman was not suggesting disrespect to the Pope, the highest of all bishops in the Catholic Church, but rather he was stressing that obedience to conscience is more important than anything else. The weight of moral responsibility in life falls on the individual. You should not surrender your moral responsibility to someone else. You cannot evade your duty to it by pleading that you are happy to do as you are told. The plea 'I was just following orders' is not enough.

The Catholic Church, following Aquinas' thinking on conscience, concludes:

> “Conscience must be informed and moral judgment enlightened. A well-formed conscience is upright and truthful. It formulates its judgments according to reason, in conformity with the true good willed by the wisdom of the Creator. The education of conscience is indispensable for human beings who are subjected to negative influences and tempted by sin to prefer their own judgment and to reject authoritative teachings.”
>
> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, para 1783

Think question

Should we always follow our conscience?

Following conscience is the priority in moral action. Although it seems unlikely that anyone would believe a man who said he believed the woman he slept with was his wife when she was not, the point that is being made is that people make moral decisions when they have imperfect information. This is because human beings are finite creatures and can never have all the facts about a situation available.

People can feel deeply responsible for things they could not have foreseen. This does not mean they should surrender moral responsibility to others. It is not about simply obeying other people's rules. If you practice good habits and try to lean towards the good (*synderesis*), your reason (*ratio*) will help you act well. And if you try to gather knowledge to inform your decisions then your actions cannot be blameworthy (invincible ignorance) even if there are things you do not know. This is *conscientia* in operation.

Aquinas' theological approach to conscience is provocative. It challenges the notion that there is some sort of intuitive voice of morality (coming from God or from somewhere else) telling us what to do. Instead *ratio* (reason), *synderesis* (good habit or 'right' reason) and *conscientia* (moral judgement) are the essential components of moral decision-making. He acknowledges, pragmatically, that people make mistakes, but argues that a person should not be blamed for a genuine mistake arising from invincible ignorance. Note, however, that his basic positive view of human inclination towards the good is tempered by an awareness of the sensual temptations that draw people away from *synderesis*.

Aquinas' approach to conscience can be criticised for failing to take into account the social, political, environmental and economic pressures that affect a person's moral decision-making. Shame and guilt, regrets about past actions and a misplaced sense of duty are just some of the factors that affect our conscience and heavily influence our moral decision-making.

Apply your knowledge

3. Consider the following examples and decide whether they demonstrate vincible ignorance (the person should have known better) or invincible ignorance (the person should not be blamed as they could not have known the truth):
   a. A head teacher employs a new teacher who goes on to abuse the children in their care. The head teacher did not request references or carry out criminal record checks before appointing the teacher. It later transpires that the new teacher had been banned from teaching as a result of a previous offence related to the abuse of children.
   b. The mother of the birthday girl prepares a birthday tea, which includes chocolates with many different centres. One of the girl's friends becomes ill at the party. She has eaten a chocolate with a nut centre and has an allergy to nuts.
   c. An arms manufacturer is approached by a foreign government wanting to buy weapons. The foreign government is currently fighting a war against a neighbouring country. The foreign government promises not to use the weapons against civilians, and the sale is completed. It later transpires that large numbers of civilians were killed by forces using the weapons that were sold.
4. What might a school for good conscience look like and what might a school for bad conscience look like? Consider the elements of *ratio*, *synderesis* and *conscientia* in conscience and the sort of curriculum and ethos each kind of school should have.
5. Do you think factors other than *ratio* (reason), *synderesis* (good habit or 'right' reason) and *conscientia* (moral judgement) might affect how a person feels they ought to act, and impact on 'conscience'? Consider social pressure from friendship groups and social media and parental expectations.

reproduction of what is seen in front of you. This is where Aquinas' idea that in *ratio* there is a movement to something else, something higher, matters. It reaches beyond what is socially acceptable to a higher morality.

Synderesis

Aquinas thought that within each human person there is a principle called *synderesis*, that directs us towards good and away from evil. Aquinas noted that there is also sensuality within each of us, which tempts us towards evil, and which was operating in the Garden of Eden when Eve and Adam were tempted to eat the forbidden fruit. But, while he thought that both *synderesis* and sensuality are present in human beings, Aquinas was positive about the outcome of any conflict between them. He had a positive view of human beings' capability to lean towards the good and away from the selfish. *Synderesis* is a habit or a leaning, not a power, and humans can use ratio (the ability to reason and make moral judgements) to cultivate the habit of *synderesis*.

***Synderesis* is a habit directed towards the good**

Can we resist temptations and instead form habits that are good?

Word of God

Do not eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge

Conscientia

Although some Christian writers had written about ***conscientia*** as a kind of spark of moral wisdom, Aquinas has a different understanding. For Aquinas, conscience is an act within a human person (a pronouncement of the mind) arising when the knowledge gained from the application of *ratio* to *synderesis* is applied to something we do. Conscience is 'reason making right decisions' (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1265–74, Part I–II); it is not a voice giving us commands.

> "Wherefore from this explanation of the name it is clear that conscience is an act. The same is manifest from those things which are attributed to conscience. For conscience is said to witness, to bind, or incite, and also to accuse, torment, or rebuke."
>
> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1265–74, Part I, Q79

Think question

Identify situations showing how conscience:

- witnesses
- binds
- incites
- accuses
- torments
- rebukes.

According to Aquinas, therefore, man's reasoning is a kind of movement which begins with the understanding of certain things that are naturally known as immutable principles without investigation. It ends in the intellectual activity by which we make judgements on the basis of those principles.

Ignorance

Aquinas is clear that conscience is binding, even when it is utterly mistaken and directs awful misdeeds. To go against reason is always wrong, for, as Paul says, 'everything that does not come from faith is sin' (Romans 14:23). For Aquinas, coming from faith means coming from conscience, and that means coming from the application of *ratio*. This can sound as though Aquinas was a relativist. But he is not saying that whatever you feel to be good is in fact good and you should do it. He is saying that human beings should do what they think is right, and that human beings can, using reason, discern correctly what is right. He is also acknowledging that human beings make mistakes because the operation of *ratio* involves knowledge, and knowledge may be incomplete or erroneous.

For Aquinas, a responsibly informed action is not blameworthy, even though it may be wrong. A person can honestly do the wrong thing, whilst believing it is the right thing. This does not mean, however, that people are always blameless. A person might, through irresponsibility or even the temptation of sensuality, fail to educate themselves and may consequently act without the necessary knowledge.

There are two kinds of ignorance: **vincible ignorance** and **invincible** ignorance:

- Vincible ignorance is a lack of knowledge for which a person can be held responsible; they ought to have known better. Vincible ignorance is not an excuse and a person who demonstrates vincible ignorance is morally culpable for the acts carried out as a result. They cannot claim that 'conscience' justifies their action.
- Invincible ignorance is a lack of knowledge for which a person is not responsible. It is when a person acts to the best of their knowledge, having done all they can to reasonably inform themselves, but nevertheless gets it wrong and does not act in accordance with what is right and good. Aquinas does not believe that God will condemn humans for invincible ignorance. If they

Freud's psychological approach to conscience

Sigmund Freud provides an alternative account of conscience in his books *An Outline of Psychoanalysis* (1940) and *The Ego and the Id* (1923). According to Freud, conscience is not based on rational decision-making, it is a product of psychological factors that influence human beings in ways that may or may not be healthy.

Sigmund Freud (1856–1939)

Freud developed the theory of psychosexual development. He argued that psychological development takes place in a series of fixed stages, and each stage is associated with a particular part of the body as the libido (sexual desire) focuses on that part of the body as a source of pleasure, frustration or both. According to Freud, the psychosexual stages of development are as follows:

- Oral (0–1 years): concerned with sucking and swallowing
- Anal (1–3 years): concerned with withholding and expelling
- Phallic (3–6 years): concerned with masturbation
- Latency (6 to puberty): concerned with the absence of sexual motivation
- Genital (puberty to adulthood): concerned with sexual intercourse.

Think question

Are human beings rational actors or are they driven by unconscious, primitive, instinctual desires?

Freud's theories about the genitals, especially the penis, are controversial. Freud thought that frustration in women was linked to penis envy. He also thought boys suffered from a fear of castration and had deep desires to replace their father so they could have exclusive possession of the mother (a phenomenon known as the Oedipus complex).

Much of Freud's thinking has now been challenged or rejected in the fields of psychiatry and psychoanalysis, in part due to a lack of evidence to support his notions. However, he raised the idea that there is an inner unconscious that interacts with our conscious awareness of our actions, which raises important questions about popular understandings of conscience.

Freud argued that the human mind is made up of the:

- *unconscious mind*: the repressed thoughts and feelings, including primitive desires, wish fulfilment, pleasure and dreams of gratification
- *preconscious mind*: the memories not readily available but accessible

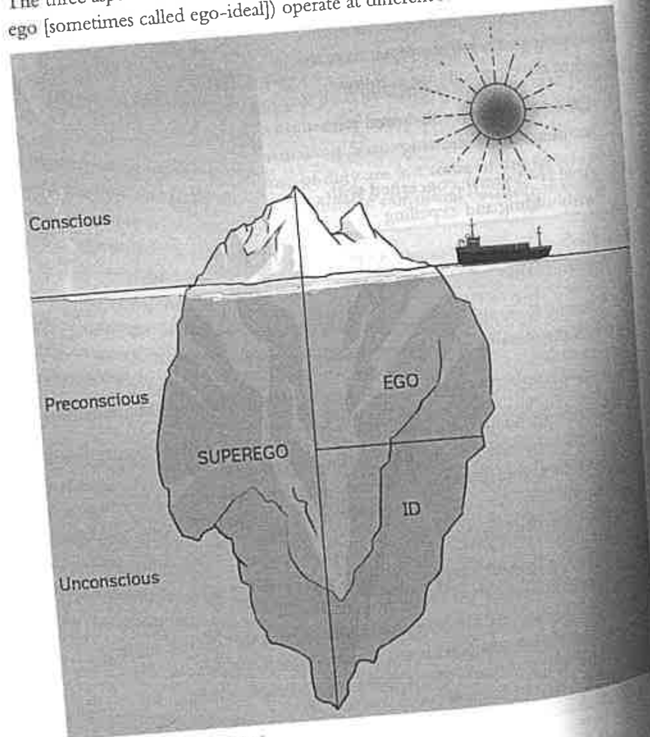
> "The preconscious contains thoughts and feelings that a person is not currently aware of, but […] It exists just below the level of consciousness, before the unconscious mind. The preconscious is like a mental waiting room, in which thoughts remain until they 'succeed in attracting the eye of the conscious.'"
>
> Sigmund Freud, 1924, *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, trans. Joan Riviere, p. 306

Think question

Could there be a link between the preconscious and unconscious and what philosophers sometimes describe as intuition?

- *conscious mind*: the thoughts a person currently has, which the unconscious mind cannot access.

The three aspects of the human personality (the id, the ego and the super-ego [sometimes called ego-ideal]) operate at different levels of the mind.



Freud's theory of the mind

The id

The id is an entirely unconscious aspect of personality that is present from birth. It is the central component of personality and it is powerful, instinctive and primitive. It is driven by the pleasure principle; it seeks immediate gratification. If the striving for immediate gratification fails to satisfy all basic needs and desires, then anxiety and tension result. For example, the desire for food or drink to satisfy hunger or thirst is extremely strong and drives infants to cry when they want food or drink. Freud wrote, of the id:

> It is the dark, inaccessible part of our personality, what little we know of it we have learned from our study of the dreamwork and of course the construction of neurotic symptoms, and most of that is of a negative character and can be described only as a contrast to the ego. We approach the id with analogies: we call it a chaos, a cauldron full of seething excitations. […] It is filled with energy reaching it from the instincts, but it has no organization, produces no collective will, but only a striving to bring about the satisfaction of the instinctual needs subject to the observance of the pleasure principle
>
> Sigmund Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, 1933, pp. 105–6

The id is a 'dark, inaccessible part of our personality' according to Freud

Libido is central to the human personality. Sexual pleasure and sexuality begins in early childhood, not at the onset of puberty as was, and sometimes still is, popularly thought. Children show an early interest in their genitals and form early sexual interests in other people. This is something that is commonly accepted by those who work in child development, even though it may sound a little disconcerting. For Freud, the libido drives the id to desire sexual gratification, and frustration ensues if that desire is not satisfied. When Freud wrote about sexual frustration, he used the term in a broad sense to refer to many different frustrations, including the frustration of not being able to go to the toilet or the frustration of not getting food or drink, as well as sexual frustration.

Think question

Are human beings ultimately always driven by desires?

It is not always possible to satisfy all of the id's desires. For example, food may not be available, and hunger may go unsatisfied. Freud thought the id sought, therefore, to resolve the resulting tension by, for example, imagining food to try and satisfy hunger.

Ego

It is not socially acceptable to seek immediate gratification for all of our desires, i.e. to act on all of the impulses of the id. If we did we would be lustful, greedy and angry. Children, therefore, learn to keep these desires in check. They are taught by their parents and by wider society what is, and is not, socially acceptable and they develop tactics to satisfy their desires in ways that do not disrupt society's rules. This mediation between the id and social

norms is governed by the ego. The ego is driven by the reality principle. The ego reconciles the id, which otherwise drives us by the pleasure principle, with the demands of social interaction. Freud used the analogy of a horse and its rider to explain the relationship between the id and the ego.

The ego reconciles the id and the demands of social interaction

Freud used the analogy of a horse and its rider to explain the relationship between the id and the ego. The rider (the ego) manages and guides the horse (the id)

Delayed gratification is one strategy used by the ego to manage the tensions caused when the id's desires are not immediately satisfied. The pleasurable activity is put off until a time and place when it will not be viewed as inappropriate.

A good conscience can, therefore, be seen as the effective operation of the ego over the id, where desires are achieved in such a way as to avoid censure and punishment from social authorities.

The ego helps us to moderate our behaviour so that it is socially acceptable. In this way, our ego acts as our conscience

The super-ego (sometimes referred to as ego-ideal)

The super-ego is sometimes referred to as the ego-ideal. It is the last part of the human psyche to develop, around five years of age.

The super-ego is the repository of internalised moral standards of right and wrong that children acquire from their family and society. Early messages from authority figures establish a set of rules. Fulfilling these rules leads to a sense of pride and accomplishment, affirmation, approval and recognition. Failing to live up to these rules leads to criticism, punishment, guilt and remorse. The greater the extent to which the super-ego dominates over the ego, the greater the extent to which a person avoid actions that might result in them breaking the rules. This can lead to a person acting to please the external authority rather than finding a way to manage their desires in the least socially unacceptable way. If they do act on their desires, they will feel guilty. This, in turn, can interrupt the balance between the id and the ego and make it difficult for the ego to manage the id.

If the super-ego dominates the ego, it can lead to a person acting to please the external authority

According to Freud, religious and moral feelings and conscience are related to the super-ego. When we talk about conscience we are not discerning the moral thing to do, we are feeling guilty because of the super ego. This may have nothing to do with the rightness or wrongness of our actions and everything to do with the feelings arising from the interplay between the id, the ego and the super-ego in our minds.

Making sense of Freud's psychological approach to conscience

Barbara Engler and Bernado Carducci provide helpful explanations to make sense of Freud:

> In discussing the id, ego, and super-ego, we must keep in mind that these are not three separate entities with sharply defined boundaries, but rather that they represent a variety of different processes, functions, and dynamics within the person
>
> Barbara Engler, *Personality Theories*, 2009, p. 43

> With the ego placed in the middle, and if all demands are met, the system maintains its balance of psychic power and the outcome is an adjusted personality. If there is imbalance, the outcome is a maladaptive personality. For example, with a dominant id, the outcome could be an impulsive and uncontrollable individual (e.g., a criminal). With an overactive super-ego, the outcome might be an extremely moralistic individual [...]. An overpowering ego could create an individual who is caught up

> in reality (e.g., extremely rigid and unable to stray from rules or structure), is unable to be spontaneous (e.g., express id impulses), or lacks a personal sense of what is right and wrong (e.g. somebody who goes by the book).
>
> Bernado Carducci, *The Psychology of Personality: Viewpoints, Research, and Applications*, 2009, p. 85

Later psychologists developed Freud's theory with specific reference to conscience. They argued that conscience has a mature and an immature dimension.

The mature dimension is healthy and is identified with the ego's search for integrity. It is concerned with right and wrong, and acts dynamically and responsively on things of value. The mature conscience looks outwards to the world and the future, developing new insights into situations.

> Conscience is thus [...] the voice of our true selves which summons us [...] to live productively, to develop fully and harmoniously. It is the guardian of our integrity.
>
> Erich Fromm, *Man for Himself: An Inquiry into the Psychology of Ethics*, 1947, p. 159

The immature conscience comprises the mass of guilty feelings that humans acquire in their early years as their super-ego develops. These guilty feelings have little to do with the rational importance of the action the person is feeling guilty about. Rather, the immature conscience is acting out a desire to seek approval from others.

Conflict between the mature and immature dimensions of conscience emerges when people make moral decisions. On the one hand, I feel guilty about something because I was brought up to think it was wrong. On the other hand, I no longer believe it is wrong. The immature conscience urges us to conform to the will of the majority in order to live in harmony with other members of our social group, while the mature conscience is autonomous and encourages us to pursue individual self-fulfilment.

Apply your knowledge

6. Do you think parents have an undue influence on the choices their children make later in life? Can parental influence lead to a sense of guilt, regret or frustration in later life?
7. How might the stages of a person's psychological development in childhood influence their actions later in life?
8. Does the psychological explanation of conscience reduce the significance of people, like Martin Luther King Jr, who make conscious decisions to face personal danger because it is the right thing to do?

Discussing conscience

Comparing Aquinas and Freud

See Chapter 2.1 of the AS and Year 1 book for more about Aquinas' natural law.

Aquinas and Freud both offer theories to explain conscience, and although one is theological and the other is psychological, both attempts are based on observations of the world. In Aquinas' case, he thought he could reason from his observations of the world. In Freud's case, his observations were based on his patients.

On guilt

One way of thinking about guilt is that it is the conscience telling a person they have done wrong; it is the price of committing a sin. However, both Aquinas and Freud add different reflections to this simple account.

According to Aquinas, guilt is the gnawing sense that an action is not good, it is not in accordance with divine law. *Synderesis* indicates that things are not right, and guilt is the result. It would be wrong, however, to see Aquinas as advocating a tally system. He is not arguing that guilt registers sins that must be accounted for and God acts as some kind of sin accountant going through each instance of guilt and then making a judgement based on the overall 'score'. Guilt is not a mechanism for balancing the books. Rather, it helps God to restore a proper relationship with a person. The consequences of sin are damaging because they disrupt a person's relationship with God. For reconciliation to occur, guilt must be extinguished and good relations must be re-established. For Aquinas, it is God's grace that expels guilt from a person.

When a person makes a moral mistake through no fault of their own, and is not blameworthy, then they should not feel guilty. Despite their great sense of sinfulness, their guilt is misplaced because they are blameless. Misplaced feelings of guilt like this can disrupt a person's inner relationship with God.

Think question

Is it possible for a person to feel guilt or shame for their actions in a way that is unjustified?

Freud's approach to guilt is different, although there is a similarity with Aquinas in the disruption it causes. For Freud, guilt is a result of internal conflict in the mind; the struggle between what you desire and what you feel you should or should not do: 'The tension between the demands of conscience and the actual demands of the ego is experienced as a sense of guilt' (Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, 1923, p. 37). For Freud the inner turmoil of guilt can cause a person to do bad things. It is not, therefore, a consequence of wrongdoing, but a cause of future wrongdoing. Paul Strohm suggests Freud draws on Nietzsche:

> Conscience […] is not, as you may believe, 'the voice of God in man'; it is the instinct of cruelty, which turns inwards once it is unable to discharge itself outwardly.
>
> Friedrich Nietzsche, 'Why I Write Such Excellent Books', *Ecce Homo*, quoted by Strohm in *Conscience: a very short introduction*, 2011, p. 64

Freud himself said:

> The more a man controls his aggressiveness, the more intense become the aggressive tendencies of the ego-ideal [super-ego] against his ego
>
> Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, 1923, p. 53

Some later psychologists have distinguished between guilt and shame, suggesting that inner conflict can produce shame and it is shame that can be damaging to a person. Shame may be associated with things unconnected to moral actions, such as when a person loses their job through no fault of their own and feels ashamed to be unemployed, or a victim of rape feels a sense of shame and blames themselves, when it is the rapist who is to blame.

Both shame and guilt seem to be present in the story of the Garden of Eden in Genesis, a story that informed Aquinas' thinking about guilt and may also be interpreted from a Freudian perspective:

> When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized that they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.
>
> Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, 'Where are you?'
>
> He answered, 'I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.'
>
> Genesis 3:6–10, New International Version

Both Freud and Aquinas see the link between guilt and desire. For Freud this was exclusively sexual, for Aquinas it embraced all sensual desires. For Aquinas, Adam and Eve gave in to sensual pleasures when they were tempted by the fruit of knowledge. As a result, they experienced guilt when they realised they were naked and had done wrong. From a Freudian perspective, the story illustrates the tension between desire for the fruit of knowledge encouraged by the id and then the sense of guilt at having done something that the authority figure (God) prohibited as a manifestation of the super-ego.

On the presence or absence of God within the workings of the conscience and super-ego

For Aquinas, knowledge in this world leads the human being to a higher knowledge, to the divine goodness of God's law. God has created human beings with *ratio* and *synderesis*. *Conscientia* is explained by this connection with God and God's law. In contrast, Freud makes no reference to God in his approach to conscience, and links religion to the kind of social authority that can cause the super-ego to become overactive.

However, the existence of God need not invalidate the psychological observations that Freud makes. Parallels can be drawn between Freud's description of a healthy personality, with the id, ego and super-ego in balance, and Aquinas' belief in the effective operation of reason and the cultivation of good character and good habits that it leads to.

Likewise, the psychological forces at work within a person need not invalidate the belief in reason or the possibility that reason connects to a divine law. You could even argue that imbalances in the relationship between the id, the ego and the super-ego interrupt the process of reasoning.

On the process of moral decision-making

For Freud, moral choices are choices that strike a balance between a person's desires and socially acceptable behaviour. For Aquinas, moral decision-making involves the application of *ratio*, *synderesis* and *conscientia* to bring about decisions that are good and not evil. Aquinas' approach sounds exclusively philosophical when compared to Freud's psychological account. Certainly there is no place for a connection to the divine in Freud's approach. However, Aquinas was aware of the presence of human emotions and the disruptive potency of what he called sensuality, which could direct human decisions away from the good. Both, therefore, have a sense of the possibility that decisions can be better or worse.

Aquinas was writing in the thirteenth century, long before the behavioural sciences and the social sciences emerged and began to study human behaviour, and human society and social relationships. Moral decision-making is now framed by many more insights than the theological ones that Aquinas explored when thinking about conscience. Perhaps, therefore, he is using theology to try to answer questions that, today, we would draw on other disciplines to help us answer.

A similar observation can also be made of Freud's approach, in that later psychologists have developed different thinking around moral decision-making and the interplay between the id, the ego and the super-ego. For instance, some think that, like the id, the ego is also present from birth and is, therefore, influenced by nature as well as by nurture. Criticisms have been made about Freud's reliance on his discredited theory of psychosexual development.

Think question

Does modern scientific understanding of human behaviour challenge both Freud and Aquinas?

Apply your knowledge

"Deep within his conscience man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey. Its voice, ever calling him to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil, sounds in his heart at the right moment. […] For man has in his heart a law inscribed by God. […] His conscience is man's most secret core and his sanctuary. There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths.

Moral conscience, present at the heart of the person, enjoins him at the appropriate moment to do good and to avoid evil. It also judges particular choices, approving those that are good and denouncing those that are evil. It bears witness to the authority of truth in reference to the supreme Good to which the human person is drawn, and it welcomes the commandments. When he listens to his conscience, the prudent man can hear God speaking.

Conscience is a judgment of reason whereby the human person recognises the moral quality of a concrete act that he is going to perform, is in the process of performing, or has already completed. In all he says and does, man is obliged to follow faithfully what he knows to be just and right. It is by the judgment of his conscience that man perceives and recognizes the prescriptions of the divine law:

Conscience is a law of the mind; yet [Christians] would not grant that it is nothing more; I mean that it was not a dictate, nor conveyed the notion of responsibility, of duty, of a threat and a promise. […] [Conscience] is a messenger of him, who, both in nature and in grace, speaks to us behind a veil, and teaches and rules us by his representatives. Conscience is the aboriginal Vicar of Christ."

Catechism of the Catholic Church, paras 1776–8

9. Identify the parts of the text that link directly to Aquinas' approach to conscience.
10. Identify where precisely Freud would want to add a different or contrasting perspective.

Is conscience linked to reason or the unconscious mind?

For Aquinas, *ratio* (reason) is the key factor in moral decision-making. *Ratio* helps a person to cultivate *synderesis* (good habit or 'right' reason) and move from knowledge to a moral decision; *conscienta* is a person's reason making moral judgements. Humans are reasonable beings (or they can be if well informed), and operation of their conscience is, therefore, a reason-oriented process. According to Aquinas, conscience is linked to and flows from reason.

In contrast, for Freud, conscience is not a conscious reason-oriented process. It is not about being well informed and trying to do things that lean towards the good because there is an unconscious and a preconscious dimension to the operation of the mind when it makes moral decisions. It will not matter that a person has the right knowledge and can use their reason to make a good moral judgement if their unconscious and preconscious mind leads them to act immorally. The interplay between the id, the ego and super-ego produce an account of morality that, therefore, has little to do with reason.

Despite the fact that many of Freud's theories have never been proven, psychoanalysts and psychiatrists continue to take the existence of the unconscious mind very seriously. Freud's theories, therefore, leave us needing a new explanation for human moral behaviour.

Psychological and behavioural sciences apply reason when they try to understand how factors such as environment, upbringing and socio-economic background affect human instincts and choices. Therefore, perhaps reason is a tool that human beings use to make sense of moral responses, and it helps people to understand and explain the moral choices they make.

Aquinas' idea that conscience is directly linked to reason is not accepted by all Christian thinkers. St Augustine of Hippo thought that conscience is the intuitive voice of God directing people to God's law in their hearts. Others have suggested conscience is a product of imagination or of opinions, and that there is divine influence over conscience through these human capacities. Perhaps, therefore, there is a spiritual dimension to conscience to which neither Aquinas nor Freud give credit.

Does conscience exist or is it an umbrella term covering various factors involved in moral decision-making?

There seems to be a popular feeling that conscience matters, however it is understood. People often refer to 'following their conscience' when they explain why they commit significant acts. Activists in many political movements (including the Suffragette movement in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Britain, the Black Consciousness Movement in twentieth-century South Africa, the Civil Rights movement in twentieth-century America, and environmental campaigners in the twenty-first century) resort to civil disobedience, to breaking the law on a point of principle, in order to change the status quo. People who refuse to serve in the armed forces because killing is against their principles are called 'conscientious objectors'. There is a sense that moral integrity is linked to conscientious action. The concept of conscience feels important because of the desire to explain moral action as something principled and arising from integrity. But is there one uniform concept of conscience or is it a term than encompasses lots of factors involved in decision-making?

While some thinkers, such as Augustine, argue that conscience exists as part of the human body, a message from God to the brain, some sort of intuition or insight, neither Aquinas nor Freud offer an account of conscience as a simple, disconnected thing. They both believed that multiple factors influence the moral decision-making process. For Aquinas, conscience involves *ratio* (reason), *synderesis* (good habit or 'right' reason) and *conscientia* (moral judgement). For Freud, conscience involves the operation of the id, the ego and super-ego at different levels of the mind.

Apply your knowledge

> "The term 'the unconscious' is actually a mystification (even though one might use it for reasons of convenience, as I am guilty of doing in these pages). There is no such thing as the unconscious; there are only experiences of which we are aware, and others of which we are not aware, that is, of which we are unconscious. If I hate a man because I am afraid of him, and if I am aware of my hate but not of my fear, we may say that my hate is conscious and that my fear is unconscious; still my fear does not lie in that mysterious place: 'the' unconscious."
>
> Erich Fromm, *Beyond the Chains of Illusion: My Encounter with Marx and Freud*, 1980, p. 93

11. How does Fromm disagree with Freud?
12. How might Aquinas' thinking be integrated with Fromm's thinking?
13. Do you think conscience can be better explained by psychology, theology or spirituality? Explain your answer.

Yet it can be argued that there are many more factors that influence moral decision-making, including culture, environment, genetic predisposition and education. Conscience is not a simple, definable thing at all. This need not mean that conscience, conscientiousness and a sense of integrity do not matter, but rather the concept of 'conscience' is an umbrella term for a wide range of factors that influence decision-making and how humans feel about the decisions that they make.

Apply your knowledge

14. Marie has just started university and is living independently for the first time. Below is some information about Marie. Consider what Aquinas and Freud might make of each statement and how it might influence Marie's conscience and her moral decision-making.
    a. She had strict religious parents and a conservative upbringing.
    b. At an early age, she had a best friend at school who died tragically in a swimming accident.
    c. Her parents' business folded when she was a teenager and the family went through a period of being very poor.
    d. She experimented with soft drugs at school.
    e. She suffers from anxiety attacks and worries about her body shape.
    f. Her parents have high expectations of her and have taught her that she must work hard in order to do well in life.
    g. She has had two serious but not long-lasting relationships, neither of which her parents approved of, one with a boy and one with a girl.
    h. She has a tumultuous relationship with her father and, when she left for university, she was not on speaking terms with him.
    i. Her parents wanted her to do a Business Studies degree but she chose to study Performing Arts instead.

Chapter 3.6 Liberation theology and Marx

Should Christian theology begin with information or action?
Are the stories of liberation and salvation in the Bible about heaven or revolution in this world?
Should Christian theology be informed by all experience of human life and human thought?

Key Terms

Exploitation: treating someone unfairly in order to benefit from their work or resources

Alienation: the process of becoming detached or isolated

Capitalism: an economic system in which the means of production are privately owned and operated for profit, in contrast with communism where trade and industry is controlled by the state

Conscientisation: the process by which a person becomes conscious of the power structures in society

Basic Christian communities: Christian groups that gather together to try to directly resolve difficulties in their lives

Structural sin: the idea that sin is not just a personal action, but something that can be brought about through unjust organisations and social structures

Preferential option for the poor: the idea that Jesus Christ stood with the poor and oppressed, and that the Church should focus on the poor and oppressed and stand in solidarity with them

Specification requirements

The relationship of liberation theology and Marx, including:

- Marx's teaching on alienation and exploitation
- liberation theology's use of Marx to analyse social sin
- liberation theology's teaching on the 'preferential option for the poor'

Introduction

Liberation theology is a theological movement that starts with action rather than belief. It focuses on the experiences of the poor and interprets Christianity as a response to poverty and other examples of **exploitation** and **alienation**. Bringing about the Kingdom of God and salvation are not just events that happen after death; they are part of a physical struggle in this world to make the lives of the poor better.

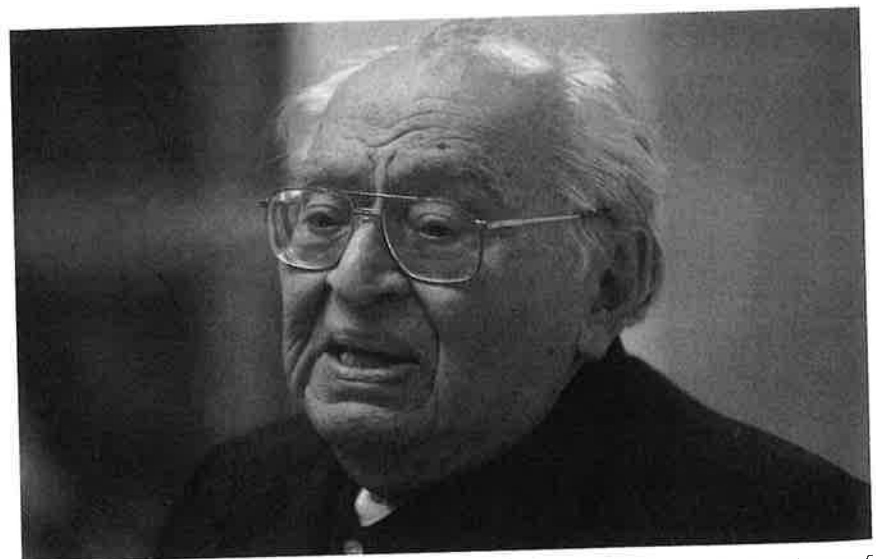
Liberation theology is linked to Karl Marx's analysis of **capitalism**. Marx argues capitalism created a world in which wealth and power are concentrated in the hands of the few at the expense of the many.

Liberation theology has been criticised for its reliance on Marxism, a non-Christian explanation of human experience, but it has also contributed to a renewed emphasis on the importance of the poor in Christian thought.

What is liberation theology?

For many centuries theology was studied in seminaries and universities. From a liberation theology perspective, this is all wrong. Theology should not be exclusively academic. It should start with people's lives.

Liberation theology is a theological movement that began in 1964 when young Catholic theologians met in Petropolis in Brazil and pledged themselves to finding the truth of the Christian message in the poverty of Latin America. It therefore began as both an intellectual movement and a practical movement, among those who worked with the poor. The group included two people who became leading liberation theologians: Jon Sobrino and Gustavo Gutiérrez.



Gustavo Gutiérrez (b. 1928) is a Peruvian theologian, Dominican priest and one of the principal founders of liberation theology in Latin America

Jon Sobrino (b. 1938) is a Jesuit Catholic priest and theologian, known for his contributions to liberation theology

Liberation theology drew on the work of Paulo Freire who, in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), invented the term '**conscientisation**' to describe the process by which a person becomes conscious of the power structures in society. Freire thought that education should liberate people by raising their consciousness, teaching them how to read not only words but also the power structures in society. He was opposed to the idea that education was simply about moving information from one generation to the next; he wanted it to transform society.

> "When I give food to the poor they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me communist."
>
> Dom Hélder Câmara, Brazilian Archbishop, cited in Zildo Rocha, *Helder, The Gift: A Life that Marked the Course of the Church in Brazil*, 2000, p. 53

Traditionally, theology is something that is explained to people by theologians: theological facts move from the heads of theology teachers to the heads of their pupils. Theological explanation comes first and action comes second. Liberation theology turns this around. It argues that action should come first and then explanation. Orthopraxy (right practice) should come before orthodoxy (right belief). Liberation theology is, therefore, a theology of doing, and everyone can do it. It requires Christians to reflect critically on their experience of life.

Orthopraxy (right practice) comes before orthodoxy (right belief)

Think question

If theology begins with action, who decides what action is right?

The concept of the Kingdom of God is central to liberation theology. It is the world made anew, not somewhere to go after death. The coming of the Kingdom of God is something that must be hoped for, and worked for, in this world: '[t]he growth of the Kingdom is a process which occurs historically in liberation, insofar as liberation means a greater fulfilment of man' (Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 1973, p. 177). Christians must destroy the roots of exploitation and oppression by living a Christian life and working for peace and justice in the hope of creating the Kingdom of God on earth. In this way, liberation theology offers hope to the poor and the oppressed that things may change for them. This implies a real revolution, not just a revolution in word and thought.

For Gutiérrez, liberation happens in two distinct ways. First, there must be social and economic liberation. Poverty and oppression are caused by humans and can be remedied by them. Therefore, people must take responsibility for liberation and act to bring it about. Secondly, people must be liberated from sin, reconciled with God and all of God's brothers and sisters in Christ. Both methods of liberation are essential. It is not enough to focus on liberation from sin without liberation from socio-economic injustices, and vice versa. This means that the political liberation of people is the work of salvation. Sin is not just personal, it is historical and collective because it is found in the social structures and institutions that harm people.

Liberation theologians disagree about whether earthly liberation or spiritual liberation should come first. Juan Segundo argues that, 'Liberation is first and foremost liberation from the radical slavery of sin' (Segundo, *Theology and the Church: A Response to Cardinal Ratzinger and a Warning to the Whole Church*, 1985, p.160), but others, such as Gutiérrez, seem to emphasise earthly liberation.

Liberation theology draws on a number of key biblical texts:

- The Exodus story and the liberation of the people of Israel from oppression:

> Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Go to Pharaoh and say to him, "This is what the Lord, the God of the Hebrews, says: 'Let my people go, so that they may worship me.'"
>
> Exodus 9:1, New International Version

- The Magnificat, with the announcement of a coming change:

> He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
> he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.
> He has brought down rulers from their thrones

but has lifted up the humble.
He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty. ”

Luke 1:51–53, New International Version

- Jesus' denouncement of the wealthy, including lawyers, Pharisees and the rich:

“ Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God. ”

Matthew 19:24, New International Version

- The requirement to treat all those in need as if they were God:

“ The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.' ”

Matthew 25:40, New International Version

- The Resurrection, which is the ultimate form of liberation:

“ For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day. ”

John 6:40, New International Version

- The Beatitudes, a kind of road map to liberation:

“ Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ”

Matthew 5:3, New International Version

Liberation theology is a theology of hope. These Bible passages are not just metaphors for what will happen. They are parables of the struggle for liberation of the poor, the oppressed and the unjustly treated today, in this world, in this time. Liberation theology emerged in Latin America in the 1960s, a part of the world where many governments were corrupt and many people were very poor. Christians formed discussion groups, called **basic Christian communities**, where they talked about their experiences and the challenges they faced, searching for practical solutions, supported by the Gospel.

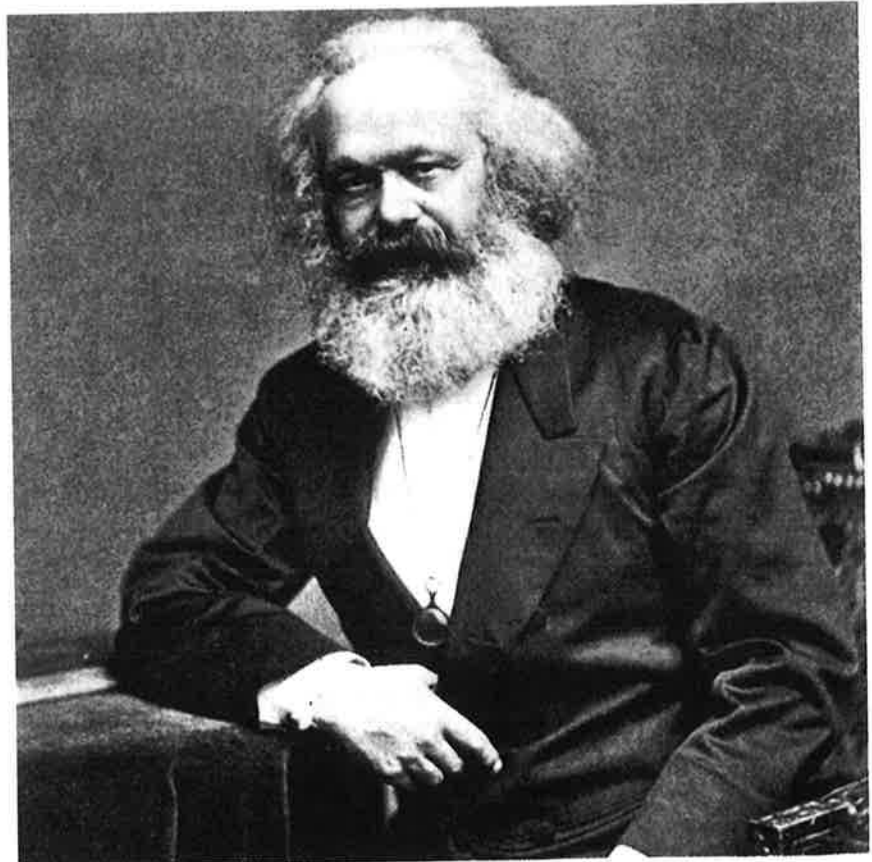
Liberation theology is a theology of hope

Apply your knowledge

1. What should education be about?
   a. Moving facts from the minds of teachers to the minds of students.
   b. Equipping students to recognise the power structures at play in the world around them, in the knowledge they are learning and in the language they are using.
2. Explore what is meant by a structure being sinful. What sorts of structures in the world today might be sinful?
3. If the Kingdom of God is a social reality and not just a private reality, does that imply a need for radical revolution? If so, does radical revolution lead to the taking of life, something Jesus seemed to be opposed to? Discuss the implications of these questions.
4. If Christianity is really about a social and political revolution, how can we explain Jesus' reluctance to overthrow the Romans or the fact that Christ was crucified and did not lead a revolution to replace the government of the time? Discuss.
5. If the Kingdom of God and salvation require liberation, what happens to those people who are imprisoned. Are they not fully saved?

Liberation is part of God's continuing work of creating and sustaining the world. The people of God (in the Hebrew Scriptures they are described as the people of Israel) were liberated and God made a new covenant with them so that they may become a new people. God's love, therefore, involves both liberation and creation.

Marx, alienation and exploitation



Karl Marx (1818–83)

The world is filled with incredible technology: space travel, genetic engineering, robots, the Internet, etc. Many of these technological developments, which were unimaginable even a short while ago, have revolutionised our lives. Yet, at the same time, human beings seem to feel helpless in the face of the extraordinary forces, such as the threat of nuclear destruction and climate change, that technology and industrialisation have unleashed. Paradoxically, the more human beings have the power to control the world, the more they feel they are not in control. Karl Marx's writing reflects this feeling.

Marx was a nineteenth-century German economic theorist and philosopher who is best known for laying the foundations of socialism and communism. His most famous works are *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) and *Das Kapital* (Capital) (1867). He wrote:

> On the one hand, there have started into life industrial and scientific forces, which no epoch of the former human history had ever suspected. On the other hand, there exist symptoms of decay, far surpassing the horrors of the Roman Empire. In our days everything seems pregnant with its contrary. Machinery, gifted with the wonderful power of shortening and fructifying human labour, we behold starving and overworking it. The new-fangled sources of wealth, by some strange weird spell, are turned into sources of want. The victories of art seem bought by loss of character.
>
> Karl Marx, 'Speech at the Anniversary of the Peoples' Paper', quoted in Eugene Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism*, 1984, p. 31

Marx's theory of alienation reveals that there is human activity behind this experience of powerlessness. The social institutions that foster it seem to have developed naturally, but they are not natural. They have been shaped by human action. Specifically, they have been shaped by the appropriation of the means of production by the powerful.

Marx did not think that humans have a fixed nature, but he believed they have to work to survive and, unlike other animals, they are conscious of their work and can develop new ways of doing things. He also believed that humans are social beings: 'Society does not consist of individuals; it expresses the sum of connections and relationships in which individuals find themselves' (Marx, *Grundrisse*, 1858, p. 77).

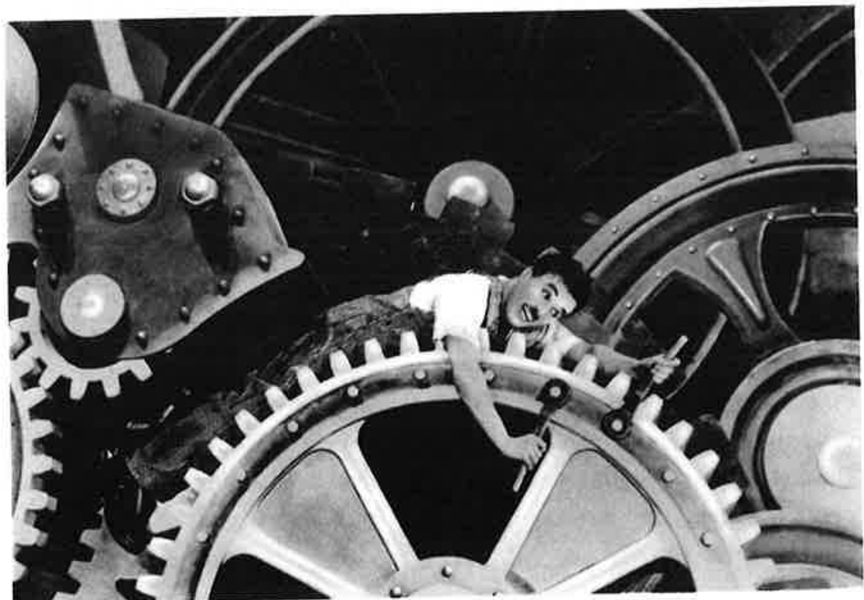
When human society reached a point that it could create a surplus (e.g. grow more wheat than was needed to make bread to feed everyone in the community) it began to fracture. Class divisions emerged between those who had control over the means of producing this surplus and those who did not. This was first evident through the ownership of land:

> In feudal landownership we already find the domination of the earth as of an alien power over men. The serf is an appurtenance of the land. Similarly the heir through primogeniture, the first-born son, belongs to the land. It inherits him. The rule of private property begins with property in land which is its basis.
>
> Karl Marx, *Early Writings*, [1833–4] 1975, p. 318

The feudal lords own the land and, therefore, the means of producing food. The serfs, who work the land but do not own it, are reliant on the lords for access to the means of producing food and must give their surplus to the lords in return for working the land. The serfs are alienated from the land they work and subservient to their feudal lords.

The advent of capitalism (an economic system in which the means of production are privately owned and operated for profit) changed the relationship between people and the means of production. Workers no longer had the right to dispose of what they produced. Wage labour replaced other forms of labour; labour, just like any other commodity, could be bought and sold for money. This resulted in social division, with the wealthy who owned the means of production divided from the workers. The worker:

> is depressed, therefore, both intellectually and physically, to the level of a machine, and from being a man becomes an abstract activity and a stomach, so he also becomes more and dependent on every fluctuation in the market price, in the investment of capital and on the whims of the wealthy.
>
> Karl Marx, *Early Writings,* [1833–4] 1975, p. 285



Charlie Chaplin in the film *Modern Times (1936)*. Are workers cogs in the machine?

According to Marx, workers cannot work independently of capitalism. To work means to be part of the capitalist machine. And work is a living death; labour becomes forced labour because without work, without money to buy food, people die. This is most visible in the factory system, where the stages of production are separated, people only relate to the part of the process they are working on, and have no sense of the whole; they only understand the part of the machine that they serve. They are dehumanised and unable to live fulfilling lives because they are being exploited by the factory owners as a means to an end. Marx predicted the emergence of a class struggle between the different groups in society. He said that in order to create a fairer society, those who were oppressed would begin to violently resist the structures that alienated them.

Human beings are forced into relationships defined by the part of the capitalist machine they work in, but they are also connected to others through the buying and selling of commodities. Today we can use a debit card online to buy a new pair of jeans from a retailer that manufactures them in factories on the other side of the world and ships them to your front door. The pair of jeans that reaches us has passed through many hands, yet we may meet or even think about only the postal worker who brings the package to the door. We do not see the people in the supply chain as fellow individuals with equal rights. They become dehumanised and, as part of the supply chain, we are dehumanised as well. Capitalism means everyone appropriates the produce of others, alienating them from their own labour. As some factories make technological improvements that reduce costs and make it cheaper for them to produce a pair of jeans, other factories drive down wages in order to compete. We celebrate because our jeans are cheaper today than they were yesterday, but our happiness comes at a price: the exploitation of others.

Apply your knowledge

6. Describe five purchases you regularly make that involve people you do not know as individual human beings.
7. 'Education is part of the machine of capitalism and pupils are the cogs in that machine.' To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement? Give reasons for your answer.
8. Look at some recent newspapers and find examples from the political and business pages of stories that seem to validate Marx's thinking on alienation and exploitation.

Liberation theology's use of Marx to analyse social sin

Liberation theology grew in popularity at a time when Latin America was a key battleground in the cold war conflict between the USA and the USSR, and between the competing ideologies of capitalism and communism. Latin America was an under-developed part of the world where many people lived in poverty, and it was at a crossroads: would it stick with capitalism or would it choose socialism (the first stage in the journey towards communism)? This ideological battle impacted on general elections and caused violence and revolution: socialist governments were overthrown with the support of the USA, and communists led rebel movements. The violent uprising that Marx had predicted seemed to be happening in Latin America.

Liberation theology drew on the idea that the purpose of development is not to increase wealth but to increase human well-being.

While industrialisation might lead to greater wealth, it might do so in a way that sacrifices human well-being for some or all people, especially if the benefits of development are not shared. If workers are alienated and exploited there is injustice. The structures of sin that support industrialisation become part of the organisational structure of society, part of schools, systems of government and other institutions, and injustice becomes institutionalised.

Gutiérrez mentions Marx's theories of alienation and exploitation in his theology, and also Marx's belief that human beings have the power to change the world they live in. He cautioned against endorsing every aspect of Marxism, but believed that the people of Latin America had a deep-rooted desire for liberation from the burdens of capitalism. Gutiérrez identified political movements in Latin America as responding to this need and called for the Church to stand with those movements:

> “In Latin America to be Church today means to take a clear position regarding both the present state of social injustice and the revolutionary process which is attempting to abolish that injustice and build a more human order.”
>
> Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 1974, p. 265

For Gutiérrez, to not get involved in politics is helping to keep things as they are. This is impossible for a Christian. Being Christian requires a person to be political. He argues that it is the responsibility of the Latin American Church to denounce every dehumanising situation that is contrary to brotherhood, justice and liberty. The Church must be a voice against alienation and exploitation, and right action (orthopraxis) should come before right belief (orthodoxy). Working to change people's lives for the better should come before concerns about the official doctrines and teachings of the Church.

Gutiérrez draws on Marx's language of class struggle in his theology:

> “Unity is one of the notes of the church and yet the class struggle divides men; is the unity of the Church compatible with class struggle? [...] the class struggle is a fact and neutrality in this matter is impossible. The class struggle is a part of our economic, social, political, cultural and religious reality [...] moving towards a classless society [...] It is a will to build a socialist society, more just, free, and human, and not a society of superficial and false reconciliation and equality.”
>
> Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 1974, pp. 273–4

To reject the class struggle is to legitimise the existing system and work as part of it. The current system embraces structural inequality and this creates **structural sin**, which is seen most clearly in the injustices suffered by the poor and oppressed masses. The acceptance of the class struggle against the structures of sin is, arguably, Marx's most important impact on liberation theology.

> **Think question**
>
> Is neutrality on the issue of poverty impossible for Christians?

Liberation theologians are clear that liberation theology is not Marxist but uses Marx's analysis of society:

> In liberation theology, Marxism is never treated as a subject on its own but always from and in relation to the poor. Placing themselves firmly on the side of the poor, liberation theologians ask Marx: 'What can you tell us about the situation of poverty and ways of overcoming it?' Here Marxists are submitted to the judgement of the poor and their cause, and not the other way around. Therefore, liberation theology used Marxism purely as an instrument. It does not venerate it as it venerates the gospel. And it feels no obligation to account to social scientists for any use it may make – correct or otherwise – of Marxist terminology and ideas [...] To put it in more specific terms, liberation theology freely borrows from Marxism certain 'methodological pointers' that have proved fruitful in understanding the world of the oppressed.

Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology,* 1987, p. 28

The Marxist analysis of structural inequality informs the liberation theology concept of structural sin. Marx's understanding of the development of capitalism and the concentration of the means of production in the hands of the wealthy and powerful, as well as his belief that humans could change the world they live in, also informs liberation theology. Liberation theology concludes that capitalism has failed to satisfy the basic needs of the poor and, although socialism may not be a perfect solution, the socialist ideal is better than the capitalist ideal. Fitzgerald sums up the appeal of Marxist ideas to liberation theologians thus:

Liberation theology concludes that capitalism has failed to satisfy the basic needs of the poor

> According to liberation theology, capitalism has clearly been incapable of satisfying basic needs in Latin America, despite the fact that government and business leaders are professed Christians. Socialism in practice has not provided a satisfactory solution either: although advances have been made in basic needs provision [...] None the less, the socialist ideal is more suitable than capitalism.

Valpy Fitzgerald, 'The Economics of Liberation Theology'. In *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology,* 1999, p. 222

Apply your knowledge

9. Discuss the following points of view:

a. Christianity should stay out of politics. It should not get involved in political movements.

b. Christianity is a religion of the poor and so it should seek to bring about actual change for the poor.

c. Christianity is about spiritual salvation, not violent revolution.

Liberation theology's teaching on the 'preferential option for the poor'

The phrase **'preferential option for the poor'** was first used in 1968 by Father Pedro Arrupe, Superior General of the Jesuits, and was picked up by the Catholic bishops of Latin America. It refers to a trend in the Bible that shows a preference for individuals who are on the margins of society and who are powerless, and also refers to the way in which Jesus associated himself more closely with the poor and the dispossessed ('Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.' See Matthew 25:40, New International Version.) The preferential option for the poor became a central feature of liberation theology and is encapsulated in the writing of the Jesuit theologian Juan Segundo (1925–96).

Juan Segundo argues that whatever criticisms can be levelled at liberation theology for its use of Marxist theories, there is an authentic Christian response in the preferential option for the poor. Christians should not maintain an attitude of neutrality in the face of tragic and pressing problems of human misery and injustice. He writes:

> “[N]umerous Christians [...] are committed to live the Christian life in its fullness, [and] become involved in the struggle for justice freedom and human dignity because of their love for their disinherited oppressed and persecuted brothers and sisters. More than ever, the Church intends to condemn abuses, injustices and attacks against freedom wherever they occur and whoever commits them. She intends to struggle, by her own means, for the defence and advancement of the rights of mankind, especially of the poor.”

Juan Segundo, *Theology and the Church: A Response to Cardinal Ratzinger and a Warning to the Whole Church,* 1985, pp. 169–70

The biblical claim that human beings were made in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26–27) placed the importance of human dignity at the centre of Segundo's thinking. The Gospel advocates living a peaceful and just life, and being oppressed by the crushing effects of poverty or allowing the inequalities between rich and poor to continue

is not compatible with peace and justice. Just as God is the defender and liberator of the poor and the oppressed, so liberation theology has a special concern for the poor and the oppressed, and it urges people to act to defend and liberate them.

Segundo differed from Gutiérre, for while Gutiérrez held that social and economic liberation must precede liberation from sin, Segundo believed that liberation from sin should come first because it might not be possible to change the world's social and political structures. For example, Paul's letter to Philemon acknowledges the possibility that unjust social structures, in the form of slavery, will continue. Nevertheless, Christians must give priority to helping the poor and stand in solidarity with them.

Although the preferential option for the poor became central in liberation theology, in time it gained wider acceptance. In 1991, Pope John Paul II used the term in his encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, which celebrated the 100-year anniversary of Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum On Capital and Labor*. John Paul II argued that it reminded the Church to have:

> “constant concern for and dedication to categories of people who are especially beloved to the Lord Jesus. The content of the text is an excellent testimony to the continuity within the Church of the so-called 'preferential option for the poor', an option which I defined as a 'special form of primacy in the exercise of Christian charity'. Pope Leo's Encyclical on the 'condition of the workers' is thus an Encyclical on the poor and on the terrible conditions to which the new and often violent process of industrialization had reduced great multitudes of people. Today, in many parts of the world, similar processes of economic, social and political transformation are creating the same evils.”
>
> Pope John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 1991, para 11

John Paul II went on to argue that the advancement of the poor constitutes a great opportunity for the moral, cultural and even economic growth of all humanity. However, he made it clear that the preferential option for the poor includes a concern for spiritual poverty, and does not focus exclusively on material or economic poverty:

> “This option is not limited to material poverty, since it is well known that there are many other forms of poverty, especially in modern society – not only economic but cultural and spiritual poverty as well.”
>
> Pope John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 1991, para 57

And spiritual poverty is something that can be caused by an over-emphasis on material goods and consumerism. He wrote:

> A striking example of artificial consumption contrary to the health and dignity of the human person, and certainly not easy to control, is the use of drugs. Widespread drug use is a sign of a serious malfunction in the social system; it also implies a materialistic and, in a certain sense, destructive 'reading' of human needs. In this way the innovative capacity of a free economy is brought to a one-sided and inadequate conclusion. Drugs, as well as pornography and other forms of consumerism which exploit the frailty of the weak, tend to fill the resulting spiritual void.
>
> Pope John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 1991, para 36

Apply your knowledge

10. What does spiritual poverty mean, according to Pope John Paul II?
11. 'Pope Francis seems to emphasise the preferential option for the poor in a more direct way than previous recent popes.' Discuss.

Following his election in 2013, Pope Francis has developed this thinking even further, by rejecting many of the trappings of papal luxury and challenging the Catholic Church to be a poor Church for the poor.

Pope Francis continues to drive his old second-hand car in Rome

The Catholic Church's response to liberation theology

The Catholic Church became concerned with liberation theology's use of Marx's theories. In the *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the 'Theology of Liberation'* (Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, 1984), Cardinal Ratzinger articulated the Catholic Church's disquiet. The liberation theologians may have felt that adopting Marx's theories was the only

immediate and effective response to the desperate situation in Latin America, but:

- it is dangerous to take parts of Marx's theories and use them in theology because Marxism contains intolerant aspects, including the denial of the individual and the emphasis on class and communal action
- it is a perversion of the Christian message for the Eucharist to become a celebration of power struggle
- there is a danger that violent revolution will take precedence over evangelism
- Christian liberation should be primarily understood as spiritual liberation from sin
- ultimately, only God can remove the suffering that human beings experience.

Ratzinger argued that the Catholic Church will continue to struggle for the poor, but using its own means and in its own way. Christian theology cannot adopt a Marxist analysis without changing from a Christian world view to a Marxist world view because Marxism is inherently unchristian:

> " Thus no separation of the parts of this epistemologically unique complex is possible. If one tries to take only one part, say, the analysis, one ends up having to accept the entire ideology [...] Let us recall the fact that atheism and the denial of the human person, his liberty and rights, are at the core of the Marxist theory. "

Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the 'Theology of Liberation'*, 1984, para 7.6

Christian theology cannot adopt a Marxist analysis without changing from a Christian world view to a Marxist world view

In *Temptations for the Theology of Liberation* (1974), Bonaventure Kloppenburg, a Brazilian theologian, summarises the criticisms of liberation theology. He argues that liberation theology emphasises practical opposition to oppression above the message of the Gospel, thereby equating theology with political action and sidelining the spiritual messages of Christianity. It emphasises structural sin over personal sin, despite the fact that Jesus reached into people's personal lives and spoke of the individual coming back to God through forgiveness and reconciliation. It places too much emphasis on people being able to deliver liberation and salvation, whereas ultimately the Kingdom of God is brought by God's intervention and salvation is a gift from God. If, Kloppenburg asks, theology is linked to a political movement, what happens if that movement fails? Has theology also failed?

This leads to the general criticism that liberation theology is so concerned about action that it has not paid sufficient attention to Christian theology and, specifically in the case of Catholic theologians, the teachings of the Catholic Church. In starting from action it cannot determine which actions might be right and which might be wrong.

In an article written in 1984 for www.liberationtheology.org, Richard McBrien adds that liberation theology seems to focus almost exclusively on some biblical themes (poverty, Exodus, concern for the poor and the Kingdom of God) at the expense of others, and it is much more interested in Luke's Gospel than John's Gospel. It defines oppression in economic terms, ignoring other kinds of oppression that derive from cultural forces, such as sexism and racism.

Nevertheless, even taking these critical observations into account, there are still questions that point to the need for a new theology like liberation theology:

- For the starving oppressed poor, is liberation from personal sin the most important liberation?
- Is change happening for the people in our world who live in poverty?
- Salvation and liberation may first be about inner spiritual change, but is there not a point when someone has to do something: see Matthew 25 New International Version, which focuses on human actions for the most needy.

Although liberation theology was formally viewed with suspicion by the Catholic Church, the election of the first Latin American pope may indicate a change of heart. In 2015, Pope Francis asked Gustavo Gutiérrez to be a keynote speaker at an event at the Vatican. While Pope Francis is said to have been critical of Marxist liberation theology in the past, he has certainly criticised capitalism and named Óscar Romero, the Salvadoran archbishop who was assassinated by right-wing death squads in 1980, as a martyr. Perhaps the impact of liberation theology on Christianity has only just begun? The Catholic Church's official position has not changed, but some in the media write of a thaw between the Vatican and the Latin American Christian thought of the 1960s and 1970s.

Apply your knowledge

12. Explore the strengths and weaknesses behind these points of view:

a. Theology should be prepared to hear new ideas that respond to crises in the world. This might help it focus on parts of Christian thought and the Bible that have been forgotten.

b. Liberation theology should focus more on established teaching and less on thinking linked to non-Christian philosophies, which are in danger of distracting it from right belief.

Discussing liberation theology and Marx

Should Christian theology engage with atheist secular ideologies?

The Vatican's key concern about liberation theology is its adoption of a Marxist account of human development. Marxism offers a comprehensive analysis of the world and clearly articulates how the workers can liberate

themselves from oppression by developing a socialist society. This world view contradicts Christianity. Christianity offers an account of the world centred on the creation of human beings by a loving God. The account focuses on the ways in which humans sin and turn away from God and God's response, as he seeks to bring people back to him by sending his son Jesus Christ to save the world. In Marxism, the analysis is economic; in Christianity, the analysis is spiritual. Therefore, if Christian thought adopts elements of Marxism (a theory that is not expressed in Christian sources of faith, including the Bible, and makes no space for God) then it is abandoning the Christian world view and adopting an alternative world view. Consequently, it can be argued that Christianity should avoid such atheist secular ideologies.

However, others argue that Christian theology has a strong record of engaging with and adapting in response to new insights, and will not be corrupted if it borrows from Marxist thinking. For example, scientific developments that have brought about a better understanding of how our universe and human life first came about have led to a re-evaluation of the creation story in Genesis, and developments in psychology and medicine have helped to shed new light on some of the healing stories in the New Testament. From Genesis 2:19 onwards, God even gives human beings a duty to learn about and look after the world around them when he asks man to name the livestock, birds and wild animals. Furthermore, some Christians believe that God can be encountered in all things, including human thought, making 'Christian Marxism' (which both draws from Marxism and seeks to inform Marxism) possible.

Many liberation theologians are aware of Marxism's limitations and they counsel against adopting it wholesale and without critical analysis. For example, José Míguez Bonino argues that:

> "The rigid Marxist orthodoxy or dogmatism is immediately rejected [...] The Marxist scheme cannot be taken as a dogma but rather as a method which has to be applied to our own reality in terms of this reality"
>
> Bonino, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation*, 1979, p. 35

Meanwhile, Leonardo Boff argues that, ultimately, liberation for Christians must draw inspiration from the Gospel, and that Marxism can never be allowed to become a central principle of Christian thinking. Christians must, he suggests, be vigilant in their criticism of Marxism and must reject Marxism's closed, monolithic socialist system that denies God and the dignity of the human person. Marxism, as a system, is in opposition to Christianity (see Boff and Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, 1987, p. 66).

If Christian theology applies to all aspects of human life then, arguably, it must engage with secular thought. However, there remains a question about the extent to which it adopts political ideologies and interprets its own core messages through the lens of those political ideologies.

Apply your knowledge

13. Discuss the following points of view:

a. I think that Christian thought should only pay attention to recognised sources of Christian faith, such as the Bible.

b. I think God can be encountered in all things, even atheist theories. I think God wants us to challenge and develop those theories and make them Christian.

Does Christianity tackle social issues more effectively than Marxism?

Social issues are widespread and wide ranging. They affect people in less economically developed countries and people in more economically developed countries, people in the global north and people in the global south. They include poverty, low rates of literacy and numeracy, poor physical and mental health and well-being, hunger, child abuse, child labour, human trafficking, modern-day slavery, alcoholism and drug abuse. As Marx identified, many people around the world are oppressed and marginalised by those in power who control the means of production. It can be argued that there is, as Marx believes, a struggle at the centre of life.

Marx claimed that, through revolution, many social problems would ultimately lead to a socialist, classless society. Yet many today would argue that communism was unable to respond effectively to suffering and poverty in society. For example, it was unable to hold back the tide of globalisation. China and Cuba, both communist countries, have begun to open up their close economies to capitalism in recent years. This is despite the fact that, while globalisation has made a tiny minority much richer, it has also increased social fragmentation and made the lives of the vast majority much more precarious.

In contrast, Christianity, with its emphasis on the spiritual and on the individual as part of a community, may be of more practical help for people struggling with unhappiness and oppression. Suffering cannot be removed from life, even in a truly classless society, and people therefore need something to help them respond to this suffering. Marx does not provide any comfort for those who die in the struggle to achieve a classless society, but Christianity can provide hope and solace by teaching that God loves you and is there for you during difficult times. Christianity offers insights into the human experience and provides spiritual strength to help people live with suffering and through uncertain times. For some Christians, the belief in eventual salvation in heaven is a comfort.

The concept of the coming Kingdom of God is a concept in Christian thought. The Kingdom of God is both here now, in righteous actions, and in the future, in the realisation of a fully just and fair and loving world. Performing charitable acts, out of love and concern for the alienated and the oppressed, is a manifestation of the Kingdom of God. Marx once said that religion was 'the opiate of the people', acknowledging that religion helps people to live with life as it really is, supporting them through difficult times (*Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right'*, 1843, p. 1). For Marx, this means it helps to maintain the status quo and limits people's desire for revolutionary change. But, looking at it from the opposite perspective, religion also helps people to live in the present and not spend their lives wishing for a future that might never happen.

Apply your knowledge

14. Two young, single women go to confession at a city church. The first woman is a single mum, who can only find temporary low-paid work with zero-hours contracts. Her poor qualifications mean she cannot get a better job. She is finding it difficult to pay her rent, is drinking heavily and using drugs. The second woman belongs to a wealthy family so does not need to work. She lives independently in an affluent part of the city and spends her time going to an endless round of parties, where she takes drugs and has casual sex. She finds her life utterly empty but cannot bear to leave it and all her friends behind. What might Christianity have to offer each of these people? Would Marx be able to offer them more, or less?

Has liberation theology engaged with Marxism fully enough?

It can be argued that liberation theology fails to fully appreciate the significance of Marx's fundamental belief in the need for revolution. Of course some liberation theologians do call for revolution, and there were cases of priests taking off their dog collars and taking up arms in South American struggles in the 1960s and 1970s. But many liberation theologians adopt a Marxist analysis of society to promote social change without engaging with the wider aspects of Marxism.

> Placing themselves firmly on the side of the poor, Liberation Theologians ask Marx: 'What can you tell us about the situations of poverty and ways of overcoming it?' Here Marxists are submitted to the judgement of the poor and their cause, not the other way round. Therefore, liberation theology used Marxism purely as an instrument. It does not venerate it as it venerates the Gospel.
>
> Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, 1987, p. 28

Therefore, some argue for a deeper dialogue between Marxism and Christianity:

> At one time Marx's contributions to both disciplines were disdainfully considered as less than irrelevant; now there is an overwhelming need to study his theses with great dedication. But institutions have always demonstrated a conspicuous inability to repent, to recognize errors and injustices and remedy them. Thus we must realize that it is not enough merely to take seriously today the Marx whom we scorned yesterday; [...] If we are to abandon yesterday's position, we must also revise the whole system of ideas and values which made such a position necessary. Real conversion is needed, not lukewarm concealment of changes which are made underhandedly.
>
> José Miranda, *Marx and the Bible: A Critique of the Philosophy of Oppression*, 1974, pp. xiii–xvii

Here, Miranda is talking not just about theology's rejection of Marxism, but also its rejection by the disciplines of economics and history in the West during the height of the cold war. With the decline of communism, Marxist thinking is seen by many as less relevant now than ever before. However, there is an indication of a revival of Marxist socialism. In recent years, a number of South American countries have

been led by socialist leaders including Hugo Chávez of Venezuela, Rafael Correa of Ecuador, Evo Morales of Bolivia, and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva of Brazil. Miranda's argument from the 1970s might, therefore, have some relevance today. He believed a compelling dialogue between Marxism and Christianity was possible. There are similarities between the two: both Marxism and the Bible emphasise history, for example, and both have a sense that an approaching event will bring about a change (revolution in the case of Marxism, the coming of the Kingdom of God in the case of Christianity). But how can Christianity deal with the atheism that is at the heart of Marxism?

In 'Marxism, Liberation Theology and the Way of Negation' (*The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, 2nd edition, 2007), Denys Turner argues that liberation theology should go further and embrace the apophatic way to more effectively engage with Marx. The apophatic way is a way of speaking about God and theological ideas using only negative terms. Drawing on the works of Pseudo-Dionysius, Meister Eckhardt and John of the Cross, Turner shows how an apophatic theology need not affirm or deny the essence of God, and if Christian thought asserts that God does not exist, then Marxism has no God to deny. If theology disposes of its language of affirmation, then Marxism can dispose of its atheist language of denial. Turner is not arguing that Christian theology abandons belief in God, but rather that it abandons any attempt to try to describe God because only a theology based around a God that is beyond language and experience can have any meaningful interaction with Marxism.

Think question

Is it too early to know whether capitalism and socialism have failed or succeeded? Might there be another way of living together that is still to be realised?

See Chapter 1.2 for a discussion about religious language and the apophatic way.

Apply your knowledge

15. Consider the following points of view and identify which you find most compelling and why:
    a. Christian thought should focus more on changing the world to be a better place for the poor, and less on trying to say what God is like. It should be more like Marxism.
    b. Christian thought is full of practical ideas for making the lives of the poor better.

Is it right for Christians to prioritise one group over another?

One of the more controversial aspects of liberation theology is the extent to which it prioritises one group, the poor and oppressed, over other groups.

A case can be made that Christianity is, and should be, centrally focused on the poor. This begins with the biblical observations of the actions and teachings of Jesus, which emphasised that God is close to the poor and the poor are close to God, and that trappings of power, wealth and social status do not raise a person's standing in the eyes of God. Boff and Boff argue that God does not sit back, dispassionate and disengaged with the world, but gets involved and takes sides with the poor:

> "God is especially close to those who are oppressed; God hears their cry and resolves to set them free. God is father of all, but most particularly father and defender of those who are oppressed and treated unjustly. Out of love for them, God takes sides, takes their side against the repressive measures of all pharaohs."
>
> Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, 1987, pp. 50–1

However, while many Christians are deeply concerned about the poor and the oppressed, and many religious orders focus their vocation on working with those in greatest need, liberation theology takes things one step further. Liberation theology suggests that God takes the side of the poor against the rich and actively works for the poor:

> “He is a God who takes sides with the poor and liberates them from slavery and oppression [...] the reciprocal relationship between God and the poor person is the very heart of biblical faith.”
>
> Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor in History*, 1983, pp. 7–8

For Gutiérrez, ‘to know God as liberator is to liberate, is to do justice’ (Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor in History*, 1983, p. 8).

Some liberation theologians have been criticised by the Vatican for focusing on the poor in opposition to the wealthy. Writing about the works of Jon Sobrino, the Vatican says he manifests a dangerous preoccupation with the poor and oppressed in Latin America and, whilst that preoccupation is shared by the Catholic Church, it believes it is wrong to prioritise one group over the needs of others, for all are to be saved.

Think question

Does God take sides with the poor, *against* the rich?

John Paul II argued that wealth does not shelter people from spiritual poverty, that rich people can be just as profoundly unhappy as poor people, and this spiritual poverty was as much of a concern for the Gospel writers as material poverty: ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit’ (Matthew 5:3). More fundamentally, the message of salvation that Jesus brings is a message for all of humanity, not just the poor. Emphasising one group as mattering more than another puts us in danger of forgetting the universal nature of salvation. However, it is difficult to make a case that churches should not be deeply concerned with the poor and the oppressed. Equally, the Catholic Church invests poverty with special status through, for example, the vows of poverty taken by many in religious orders.

One solution might be to define ‘poverty’ widely, to encompass both material and spiritual poverty. If Christians work to reduce poverty of all kinds, then they will make the world a better place. If work to reduce spiritual poverty encourages the wealthy to live more socially responsible lives and to share their wealth with their poorer neighbours, then it will operate alongside efforts to reduce material poverty to improve the lives of the poor and the dispossessed.

> “Liberation theologians are quite clear that the Kingdom belongs to the poor (Luke 6.20) and the rich as such have no part in it (Luke 6.24 et seq.; Luke 16.19–31; Mark 10.23–25) because

money is an idol which becomes an absolute value: we cannot serve God and Mammon (Matt. 6.24) – private property is by definition exclusive. However, Jesus does not idealise the poor, because poverty is the consequence of the sin of exclusive possession. Rather, his aim is for abundance for everyone – expressed symbolically by the banquet of the Kingdom – so that this can be possible. He teaches us to abandon the goods of this earth (Matt. 6.25–33) and invites us to share what we have with the poor (Luke 12.14 et seq.). ”

Valpy Fitzgerald, 'The Economics of Liberation'. In *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, 2008, p. 249

Apply your knowledge

16. Discuss the following points of view. Which do you find most compelling and why?

a. Jesus spent most of his time with the poor and so Christianity is a religion for the poor in their struggle against the rich. It should encourage people to rise up against the status quo, against the establishment and the wealthy.

b. Jesus spent time with those who were wealthy and who had been corrupted by wealth and power, including tax collectors and the Pharisees. The poor will be always with us, but it is vital to reach out to those in positions of wealth and power to try to make things better for everyone.

c. If Jesus is the redeemer of all then he is interested in everyone, irrespective of their economic background.

Learning support

Points to remember

- For Marx, the concentration of the means of production in the hands of the wealthy few leads to the alienation and oppression of the masses. He believed that capitalism was inherently unstable and would eventually lead to revolution and the establishment a new (socialist) order.
- Liberation theology is more than Marxism. While some of its critics reduce it to Marxism, it draws more deeply on biblical texts than on Marxist literature.
- Liberation theology takes the situation people find themselves in, their suffering, as its starting point. This is distinctive and empowering for those in poverty.
- Liberation theology is often discussed as a failed theology because it was rejected by the Catholic Church, but the preferential option for the poor has become central to Catholic thought, and since the appointment of Pope Francis there has been a change in the relationship between the Vatican and the once condemned liberation theologians.

Enhance your learning

- *Introducing Liberation Theology* (1987) by Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff is an excellent introduction to liberation theology.
- Gustavo Gutiérrez is, arguably, the father of liberation theology and his book *A Theology of Liberation* (1974) is highly readable and quite revolutionary, and direct in tone. Chapters 1–3 in particular, set out both the method of practising liberation theology and its relationship with Marx. Chapter 13 explores the Catholic Church as a movement for protest and solidarity with the poor.
- *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the 'Theology of Liberation'* by the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith (1984) is readable and readily available on the Internet. It summarises the Catholic Church's official response to liberation theology.
- 'Liberation Theology's Temptations', an article by Richard McBrien, summarises Bonaventure Kloppenburg's criticisms of liberation theology. It is available at http://liberationtheology.org/library/liberation_theology_temptations---article_by_richard_mcbrien.htm.
- Valpy Fitzgerald's article, 'The Economics of Liberation Theology' in *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, 2008, contains a detailed discussion of the economics of liberation theology.
- An article in *The Guardian* on 11 May 2015 discusses possible signs of change in the relationship between the Papacy and liberation theology: 'Catholic Church Warms to Liberation Theology as Founder Heads to Vatican'. It can be found at: www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/11/vatican-new-chapter-liberation-theology-founder-gustavo-Gutiérrez.

Practice for exams

At A level, essay questions invite you to demonstrate your knowledge and understanding of factual material (AO1) and also your critical ability in putting forward a coherent, balanced argument (AO2). You should aim to write essays that are persuasive responses to the question throughout, rather than writing a lot of description and then tacking an opinion on at the end of each paragraph.

'Christianity is better than Marxism at tackling social issues.' Discuss.

This question invites a comparison between Christianity and Marxism in relation to social issues such as poverty, low literacy rates and substance abuse.

In order to gain high marks for AO1, you should show knowledge and understanding of the ways in which both Christianity and Marxism understand and tackle these issues. For example, you might refer to the Christian understanding of social issues as symptomatic of a world that has been corrupted by human sin since the Fall, and the Marxist understanding of social issues as symptomatic of alienation due to private ownership of the means of production.

For AO2, you need to make a comparison between ways in which Christianity and Marxism tackle these issues, and say which you think is better. You could explain what you mean by 'better', for example whether you mean that it has

longer-lasting results or reaches a greater number of people. You might want to argue that some kind of combination of Christianity and Marxism is most effective.

When an essay question asks you to make a comparison, try to look at the two ideas side by side throughout the essay rather than writing about Christianity on its own and then Marxism on its own.

Discuss the claim that Christianity should not show preference to the poor and oppressed, but should treat everyone equally.

This question invites a critical evaluation of the concept of Christianity showing a 'preferential option for the poor'.

For AO1, you should be able to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the idea that Christians should be actively involved with the world in fighting injustice and seeking to help the poor. You should be able to refer to the ideas of liberation theologians to support your answer. You might also want to make use of biblical passages that can be used to support different points of view.

For AO2, you should evaluate the reasons why some people think that Christianity should show preference to the poor. You could consider biblical teachings about poverty and wealth alongside teachings that everyone is made in the image of God.

In formulating your argument, make sure that you consider counter-arguments and try to give persuasive reasons to support your own point of view.