



**life, death & beyond**

# **ESSENTIAL INFORMATION BOOKLET**

## **TOPIC 1 – RELIGIOUS & SECULAR VIEWS ON THE NATURE & VALUE OF HUMAN LIFE**

THIS BOOKLET CONTAINS WHAT YOU **MUST** KNOW FOR THIS PART OF THE UNIT – YOU NEED TO MAKE SURE YOU ARE FAMILIAR ENOUGH WITH THIS MATERIAL SO THAT YOU CAN USE IT AND BE FLEXIBLE WITH YOUR UNDERSTANDING IN ANSWERING QUESTIONS.



## Unit 4 Topic 1

### Religious & Secular Views on the Nature and Value of Human Life

In one sense, it is very difficult to separate the concepts of “nature” and “value” especially as to a religious believer, we are intrinsically valuable – it is precisely *what* we are, as human beings “made in the image of God” that makes us valued above the rest of creation. However, the issues are more complex than this and various thinkers have propounded different views about the human condition. It is a question which has permeated philosophy from the ancient Greeks, right through to the modern existentialists and remains of concern to the masses. As we search for meaning to our lives, we are inevitably confronted with the fundamental questions of existence: *who am I?* and *why am I here?*

#### **RELIGIOUS VIEWS:**

For a Christian, the first place they can learn about their position in the universe is in the Creation accounts found in Genesis, the first book of the Bible. The earlier account, chapter 2 describes Man being formed “from the dust of the ground” with “the breath of life” being breathed into his nostrils. Creation is then built up around man, for the sole purpose of providing him with the ideal environment in which to live. Man is also provided with a helper, formed from one of his ribs and thus Adam and Eve are created.

In contrast, the later account in Genesis chapter 1 describes man and woman being formed together on the final day of creation (day 6). They are the pinnacle of the new creation, elevated above the rest by being made in God’s “image”.

Although strikingly different in some respects, most Christians will identify common messages from both: Mankind is made superior to the rest of the created world; Man has been blessed with a soul which many Christians identify with human intelligence and moral autonomy; Mankind was also made for a specific purpose – that being to enter into a free and loving relationship with God.

Most Christians tend to approach the Biblical text in one of two ways: the Literalist Christian (commonly found within Evangelical Protestant Churches) believes the Bible to be divine revelation, received directly from God. All that is written in the text is literally (factually) true. Therefore they reject modern scientific theories such as evolution or the Big Bang theory as being contrary to the truth of the Bible.

Other Christians tend to adopt a more liberal or interpretative approach, preferring to unpack the myth by exploring stories and images of the text in order to reveal the true message underneath. Such Christians would therefore find the Creation accounts to be entirely compatible with modern science as the underlying message can remain intact. Intelligent design of the universe and the superiority of humans are, to such Christians, in keeping with a modern world view and still inline with the symbolic truths of the Genesis myth.



The 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter in Genesis tells a story which is central to the philosophy of one of the most influential theologians of the early Church, St Augustine of Hippo. The Fall of Man describes the disobedience of Adam and Eve in eating the fruit forbidden to them by God.

Augustine saw the Fall as the turning point within the human condition. Where before man had been immortal, in his fallen state man will “grow old and die”. Where before man had been free to do good, in his fallen state man’s nature was tainted and sinful. According to Augustine, Eve was to blame for the fall of Man and women were thereon perceived to be the “gateway to the devil”. Satan, in the form of the serpent had succeeded in tempting mankind away from God which would separate them until the resurrection of Christ enabled mankind to be reconciled to God. Man, being “seminally present in Adam” is responsible for the evil found in the world because as a result of the Fall, the natural world began to corrupt and humans were unable to overcome their evil nature without being first blessed by the Grace of God.

Augustine’s view of human nature rests heavily on a literalist interpretation of the text. Modern, enlightened Christians have suggested the symbolism within text need to be interpreted to reveal the truths hidden beneath. For example, the actions of Adam and Eve demonstrate the inquisitive nature of humans and the danger of choosing the wrong path. In addition, instead of seeing the serpent as an incarnation of the devil and Eve as the temptress of Adam, these Christians suggest that the ‘eating of the apple’ (ie, there existing a real possibility of humans doing the wrong thing) was necessary in order to give meaning to the actions and decisions we make. Arguably, they say, without an understanding of both good *and* evil, our moral actions become empty of any meaning or significance. In order for us to be moral and to freely choose to enter into a relationship with God, there must be a real possibility of us choosing to do evil.

One of the consequences of Augustine’s understanding of the Fall was his doctrine of Predestination. According to Augustine, in our naturally fallen state, we are unable to choose to do the good and therefore we are cut off from God. Unless we are blessed with God’s *Irresistible Grace* via *Divine Election*, our nature remains tainted and we are unable to be good. This was later developed by John Calvin into his idea of the “damned and the elect” whereby God selected those who would be saved before birth. Both theologies have serious implications for a Christian understanding of the human condition. Both Calvin and Augustine suggest that although we are free to act in accordance with our nature, that nature has been affected by the group we find ourselves in: the “elect” are naturally good whereas the “damned” are naturally inclined to be bad. This arguably, is not ‘freedom’ as in order to be free, there must be the possibility of a real alternative course of action. In Christianity, free will is of central importance for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is what separates us from animals; we are able to rise above our animalistic instincts and choose to act out of compassion, empathy or altruism. Secondly, at death we will face judgment. If this is to be just and meaningful, we must have responsibility for our actions which can only be the case if I freely chose the decisions I made. Also, humans must be free to accept the truth of God’s word and enter into a relationship with him. Lastly, if humans are not free then the problem of evil becomes God’s responsibility which calls into doubt his love and mercy as well as his omnipotence. For these reasons, the doctrine of Predestination is not popular among modern Protestant Christians.

In contrast, the 5<sup>th</sup> C theologian Pelagius suggested that humanity had not been tainted by the Fall, as humanity was not seminally present in Adam. Rather, he argued that we are free to choose to do good or evil. Pelagius was, rather unfortunately condemned for heresy and Augustine’s theology was adopted as the dominant belief system in the early Church.



Therefore, in terms of nature, most Christians would believe that humans are sacred animals, superior to the rest of creation due to our ability to think, reason and be moral as well as our ability to have a unique relationship with God. At death, unlike any other living creature we will be judged and (hopefully) be reconciled to God in Heaven.

Our value, as I mentioned, is in many ways bound up with these beliefs about human nature however there are a few other points worth mentioning:

According to Thomas Aquinas, our “natural” state is the state that God intends us to be in – ie, our state pre Fall. Being ‘good’ is, for Aquinas ‘being natural’. Therefore arguably, for Aquinas we increase in value the closer we get to achieving our divine potential. However, even this is shaky ground for Aquinas as he argued (contrary to Augustine) that all people are intrinsically good and in doing evil, we simply ‘fall short’ of our intended good action.

The vast majority of Christians would object to the idea that some people are of more value than others because of the danger of prejudice and discrimination such a view could lead to. Instead, for many Christians, our value is illustrated by the role and responsibility we are charged with due to our status in the natural world.

In Genesis 2, Man is charged with naming the animals indicating the authority he has over the animal kingdom. In Genesis 1, Man is commanded to “have dominion” over the natural world. Although in the past both references have been seen to justify man’s destruction of the natural world for his own benefit, it is now much more widely understood in terms of stewardship – that is each generation holding the natural world in trust for the generations that will follow. In this way, our value therefore is as Stewards of the natural world.

Similarly, in the Gospels, Jesus is recorded as having given his followers the task of creating a “Kingdom of God” on earth. This means that it is the duty of all Christians to work towards ensuring that all people are treated fairly and justly and that their intrinsic worth is recognized. Therefore many Christians see it as their duty to stop the exploitation of the vulnerable and to protect and help the weak. In this way, they are seen as ambassadors of God on earth. Their value comes in what they do to ensure God’s will is done.

## SECULAR VIEWS

Secular beliefs are in the main part, atheist. In contrast to religious views, according to secular philosophies, *what we are* is fairly straightforward. It is what makes us *valuable* which becomes a more interesting question.

Secular beliefs about human nature can be described as **materialist**, **naturalist** or **reductionist**. What we are, is all that we are. There is no supernatural element to us as there is for the Christian. Most secular philosophies are compatible with the evolutionary theory of Charles Darwin which states that humans are simply highly evolved apes. Evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins argues that it is our big brains which define us and give us our value – as a product of a highly complex and remarkable process of evolution, humans are incredible. Dawkins argues that to attribute such an achievement to divine intervention is to undermine it and fail to recognize just how amazing humans really are.



The question of value is closely associated with how we live and the choices that we make. Unlike the religious believer, the secularist will struggle to argue that humans are intrinsically valuable (although, of course there are some – I'll come back to that later). Therefore, we are instrumentally valuable. We earn our value, we become valuable through the character that we develop.

The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle defined "Good" in terms of fulfilling potential: a good knife is a sharp knife. Therefore, for Aristotle, a good human is a human who has fulfilled their potential. As humans are "rational animals" according to Aristotle, fulfilling our potential must have something to do with the way in which we can decide for ourselves and make decisions. For Aristotle, the aim of all humans was to reach *Eudaimonia* – a state of happiness brought about through the fulfillment of potential by being **virtuous**. For Aristotle, being a good human was all about being a virtuous human. He identified both intellectual and moral virtues which should be exercised regularly in decision making so that they become habitual. In this way, according to Aristotle, we shape our own character – we become what we practice. If I want to become more courageous, I need to practice being brave. Therefore it can be argued that we are able to decide what we are through the way in which we behave.

This idea is closely reflected in the existentialist philosophy of Heidegger and Sartre. According to the existentialists, we are "authors of our own existence" – there is absolutely nothing preventing us from being the individual that we wish to be and therefore the burden of responsibility weighs heavily on our shoulders as we struggle to identify with what it is that we ought to strive to be.

Jean-Paul Sartre argued that there is no God and therefore no such thing as human nature – there is nothing that links us together as individuals instead we are completely free: "condemned to be free" as it is up to us to choose our own standards and way of living. Sartre famously said "existence precedes essence" meaning that we become what we are by the way in which we live: There is no such thing as "Sara": I *become* "Sara". Therefore we are in charge of sculpting what we are and we are entirely responsible for the person that we become. According to Sartre, I am living "in bad faith" if I delude myself that there is any purpose or meaning to my existence other than what I fabricate for myself. It is the absurdity of the human condition that we must live and strive to meet the standards we impose upon ourselves yet at the same time know full well that those standards are arbitrary and ultimately meaningless.

According to Aristotle and Sartre, our nature is closely tied in with our character (you are what you do) and it is our character which arguably gives us value.

This leads to the problematic assumption that there are people who are more valuable than others. This position has in the past led to the justification of slavery and segregated societies which are now regarded as being violations of our human rights.

The assumption that all humans have certain rights to which they are automatically entitled indicates that on some level, all humans are in fact intrinsically valuable. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights outlines numerous rights that all humans are entitled to, regardless of culture, faith or gender. Are these rights necessary to maintain a harmonious society, to prevent a "war of all against all" as Thomas Hobbes would argue? Or are they rooted in the very fabric of human nature? However, if that value is not the result of being made in God's image, where does that value come from?

According to Kant, it is the ability to reason which defines us as human beings and gives us value. Kant argues that to treat another person as a means to an end is wrong as in doing so, you are failing to recognize the intrinsic worth of that individual.



Therefore for Kant, human rights are rooted in human value – as human beings, we are entitled to be treated as ‘ends’ rather than ‘means to an end’ and therefore humans cannot be exploited or maltreated.

In addition, the rule utilitarian philosopher John Stuart Mill also argued that humans are more valuable than animals due to our ability to access the higher level pleasures. In addition, Mill argued that it was wrong to inflict harm on another person in an attempt to maximize utility.

Both philosophers attribute automatic value to human beings purely on account of being human, as in being a human such attributes are natural. Peter Singer, on the other hand identifies a distinction between being human and being a person. Both Kant and Mill are guilty of speciesism as they fail to recognize personhood qualities in species that are not human – dolphins or chimpanzees for example. According to Singer, our value as humans comes from our having personhood qualities. Therefore it is quite possible that a chimpanzee is regarded as more valuable than an infant or a retarded adult.

Moral codes of conduct can indicate a lot about how we perceive the nature and value of human life. According to most ethical theories, including religious laws, Murder is wrong. Yet, there is arguably more leeway for allowing abortion or embryonic stem cell research. Classical Utilitarians like Jeremy Bentham perceive all life as a commodity – expendable for the greater good whereas others such as Mill, Singer, Kant, and Aquinas would attribute value albeit to different beings and for different reasons.

The nature and value of human life therefore is a complex and important area within philosophy. What *we are* underlies so much of our moral outlook, our existential understanding and the way in which we understand the purpose of our life. As I said right at the start, our beliefs about *what we are* fundamentally shape our attitudes about *why we are here*. These ideas underpin so much of this unit and therefore it is very important that you spend the time getting to grips with the key concepts.

⇒ Below are some questions which you need to consider as you prepare for an essay on this topic. All exam questions are very open and broad so you need to be confident in your ability to handle the material we’ve studied.

Section A - knowledge: Watch out for the links to Unit 3!

1. What does being made “in the image of God” mean / imply?
2. Which philosophers believe that humans are essentially sinful? Which would argue that humans are essentially good?
3. Outline the main similarities / differences between religious & secular views
4. What symbolic truths would a liberalist Christian gain from passages such as the Creation account / The Fall of Adam & Eve? What would Rudolf Bultmann say about this?
5. Can any religious beliefs about the nature of humans be meaningful to a logical positivist?
6. What do you think Wittgenstein might say about these religious views?
7. How might John Hick’s (soul making) views link to religious views about the nature & value of human life?
8. What do various moral perspectives (theories) suggest about the nature /value of human life?



Section B – evaluation & argument: Watch out for the links to Unit 3!

1. What potential problems are there in saying that humans have instrumental rather than intrinsic value?
2. Which is more reasonable in the 21<sup>st</sup> C – religious views about nature & value of human life or secular views? What might some of the philosophers from our unit on religious language say about this? The Logical Positivists / Wittgenstein, for example?
3. Outline the main strengths & weaknesses with a religious / secular approach. Don't forget to support any claims you make with references to Biblical teaching/examples/philosophers.
4. Can a secular thinker ever argue for humans having intrinsic value?
5. Which view goes further in respecting the value of humans – religious or secular?
6. Which view do you adhere to most from religious views or secular views? Be specific and explain why. Try to avoid your reason being “because I am an atheist...(believer)...” justify your view!