



The Manual



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You are looking for ways to maximise what you get out of your courses, while keeping stress to a minimum. If you have experienced problems, almost certainly they can be traced to misguided techniques. Change them and everything else will fall into place; you become happier and your grades get better. It really is that simple.

This manual can help¹. Think of it as the self-help book for budding moral theologians. Simply put, it is a ‘how-to’ booklet. It provides some basic instructions for getting more out of your course work. Although written with moral theology in mind, the guidelines are applicable to all the fields of theology and the humanities as a whole. By making its guidelines a natural part of how you study, all your courses (and grades) will improve.



Moral Theology

You are already involved in the ethical enterprise. You are immersed in responsibilities and regularly face meaningful choices and questions. You ponder, argue points, pass judgements, make commitments and act accordingly on issues that affect the value and quality of life. The study of ethics is a moment of standing back in order to reflect on this movement. So the good news is you already have the ability – all that is required is the honing of your skills.

¹ It is based on Clare Saunders et al, *Doing Philosophy: a practical guide for students* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2007), 3-66, 87-165.

Hopefully, there are pressing issues about which you already feel passionate. But the study of ethics has wider value. It enables us to think carefully and clearly about all sorts of practical problems by looking beneath and beyond the circumstances to the beliefs, theories and arguments that support potential positions and actions. On one hand, this standing-back reveals the reasons that justify positions and actions; on the other, it highlights contradictions, inconsistencies or unacceptable consequences.

Because it develops your ability to reason through an issue towards a judgement, moral theology is an activity as much as it is a body of knowledge. The study of ethics heightens your moral sensitivities and analytical abilities. It is then both a key source to human knowledge and an important life skill that can equip you with the tools necessary in facing many of life's problems.



If ethics in general aims towards consistency in reasoning and action, moral theology in particular aims towards a similar consistency centred on Jesus Christ and the commitments of a specific faith-community. The evaluative judgements about life's questions are made in the light of the Christian revelation on the meaning of human flourishing, relationships, suffering, community, death and so on.

All human behaviour is complicated and multi-faceted. Moral theology is therefore necessarily interdisciplinary. Most obviously, it combines the principles of morality and the insights of theology but it will also draw on other fields to the extent that they open out our understanding of what it is to be human, including psychology,

sociology, law, politics etc. What makes the study of ethics different is that it evaluates human behaviour and not just describes it.

Doing Moral Theology

In sum, how you study is as important as what you study. But the question arises, and you may have asked it already, what required of me? Take the following moral issue:

The Case of Mr C

Mr C, aged 68, had been detained in a secure mental hospital for 30 years as a paranoid schizophrenic. His delusions included the belief that his doctors were torturers, whilst he himself was a world-famous specialist in the treatment of diseased limbs. When his own foot became infected, he therefore hid his condition from medical personnel until it had actually become gangrenous. His doctors believed that unless his foot was amputated, he stood an 80 to 85 per cent chance of dying.

Mr C, however, refused to consent to the amputation, saying that he would rather die intact than survive with only one foot. He sought reassurances from the hospital that his foot would not be amputated without his consent if he slipped into a coma. The health authority in charge of the hospital refused to give an undertaking not to amputate his foot without consent. Mr C then sought a High Court order to prevent amputation if he became unconscious.

M. Parker and D. Dickenson, ed, *The Cambridge Medical Ethics Workbook*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 15.

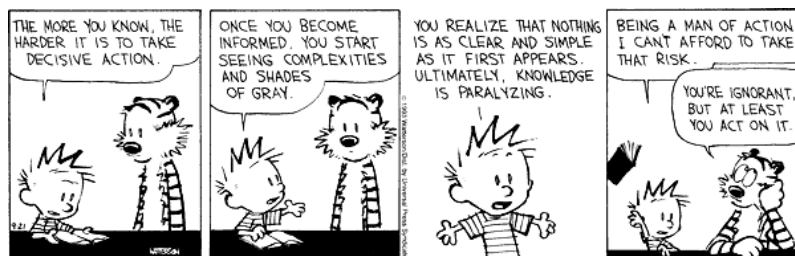
A moral theologian's response hinges on questions such as

- What are the key issues in the case? How are the key terms defined?
- Is there a relevant Christian stance? How is it articulated? How is it sourced?
- What ought to be done? And why?
- And is the final judgement reasoned well? Is there a framework or model that is guiding the decision?

Answering such questions can seem daunting but remember you are doing in a formal and detailed manner what you do quite naturally. Always keep these questions

in mind when approaching any issue, or indeed any lecture, article or book. Answering them is doing the formal study of moral theology.

The expectations of you are so different from secondary school. The depth of reflection requires a higher level and range of abilities. Most value is placed on your capacity to analyse and construct an argument. Either orally and or in written form, your position needs to be reasoned well, articulated clearly and properly sourced. In short, the expectation is that you know how to *do* moral theology and not just know about it.



The formation of the argument concerns the internal logic of what you are proposing and its clear articulation. Your tutors and lecturers are interested in ‘how’ you analyse information, theories, and positions and ‘how’ you structure your response. Success is in developing and demonstrating your own understanding of, and interaction with, the issues in question. A crucial element of this process is clear articulation. Be careful and precise is your use of language, grammar and presentation. Perhaps it could be prepared to a polished window that allows more to be seen. The more polished your work, the more the tutor and lecturer can see, and so appraise (and then praise), your efforts.

Your presentations must always be more than just opinion. Well sourced information grounds what you say, making it ever more credible. Our ideas are never formed in a vacuum: you need to be informed by the work of others. There is always an element of transmission of knowledge and value, which is at base the recognition

of wisdom. This is particularly true of moral theology, which takes place within the context of a specific faith-community, a particular tradition and a unique Revelation. Reflection on the experience of contemporary moral issues must take these sources of information and value into account.

Reading Moral Theology

Morality and theology are directly concerned with the immediate decisions that face you in life. Yet the formal study of ethics is primarily a textual based discipline. What then am I to read? Before anything else, consult your Reading List. It is offered as the specific guidance that you need. Often, it may be a daunting list of famous and/or obscure texts. Although you are not required to buy them all, you are expected to use them as your main resource.



The most important reading is Primary Texts. These are the original, significant or influential texts in the field. In moral theology, they include texts from the scriptures, the tradition, Magisterium, influential theologians or works from other disciplines, such as philosophy, psychology, political science etc. The temptation is to skip them as they are often difficult on first appearance. DON'T! They are the basic sources of information: without them, your theologising will be empty.

Secondary Texts are those written about primary texts by other thinkers. They provide a detailed analysis of the original text and its impact on subsequent thinking. As a result they can be a good way to get a grip with difficult primary texts. However,

they should always be read in conjunction with the original rather than instead of it. After all, they only offer one person's interpretation of the material.

Journals and articles are a distinctive feature of academic life – and theology is no different. It is one of the principle means by which academics discuss and develop their ideas and so is an important way of finding out the latest developments in your subject. When reading a journal article, do not be intimidated if you do not understand everything on your first, or even second, reading. In time, as you progress and develop, their ideas will become more useful to you.

Because reading is a significant part of being a student, it is important to approach it with some strategies that help you get the most from it. Your first question in approaching a text is to locate the exact nature of the problem. This helps you find the key themes and ideas that run through the text and to identify the wider context. Sometimes the problem is obvious – and the author may even outline it in the introduction. Although always orientated towards practical action, much of morally theology is necessarily abstract, for deeper concepts help shape our individual judgements. Such questions include: what does it mean to be human? What is faith? What is free action? What is family? Focusing such general ideas makes for a better understanding of issues at stake in the particular issues

Justifications – or arguments – are at the core of moral theology. Justifications are those reasons held in support of a conclusion. But what do we mean by a justification or argument? Most importantly, it is NOT an emotional statement of opinion! A justification is a proposition aimed at making reasonable a particular judgement, action or theory. It is meant to be persuasive and convincing by using rational principles applied to some accepted evidence, authority or commonly held observance. Doing moral theology then is to justify stances soundly. So when you

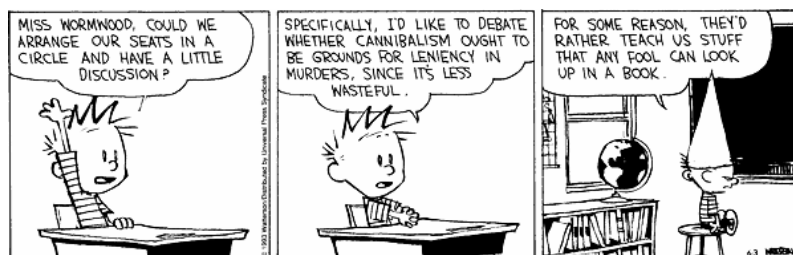
read, look for them. What distinguishes them from mere statement of opinion is that they will be grounded in evidence, accepted authority or commonly held belief. Furthermore, they must be coherent, in other words, at some level they must hang together. A strategic approach towards analysing arguments would be:

- What is the basic point of the author? In other words, what is the conclusion of the arguments presented? Is it clearly articulated?
- What are the basic reasons supporting the position? What are his sources?
- What is the structure of the presentation? How does it “hang-together”? Is it one long argument or many smaller ones building on each other?

The argument is valid if the structure follows logically, even though the answer may be misleading because one of the presuppositions is false. The argument is sound if the logic is correct and the presuppositions are true.

Discussing Moral Theology

In the ordinary doing of ethics you seek advice, you look for someone to bounce ideas off and you get passionate out of a sense of justice. All these things involve discussion. Good skills in discussing include presenting your views clearly, defending them from criticism and collaborating with others to formulate judgements and plans of appropriate action. As such, they are highly valued in professional life as well as life in general. What is more, they help you get the more out of your courses.



Although texts are the primary means of sharing ideas, the history of universities is rooted in discussion. Take a look at how Aquinas' *Summa Theologica* is structured – it has a dialogical form of question and response.

Discussion is an important opportunity for you to develop your skills. But poor preparation and lack of engagement undermines what is happening and frustrates your tutor – who ends up doing most of the talking. The key is to set aside some time for preparation. Bring anything you have written to the discussion, to help you keep to the important points and help you in presenting them clearly. What is more, it helps with nerves as it can be intimidating if the topic is difficult and the numbers are large. A common scenario is for the teacher to ask the first question and if nobody responds to pick on an individual – it may be you!

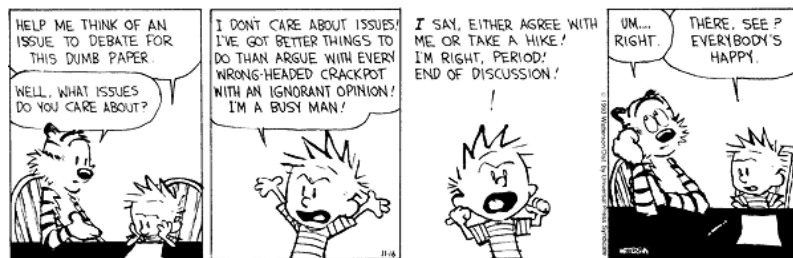
As we said above, moral theology is about justification and sound reasoning. So be ready to give reasons for what you say. Points of assessment include

- Show that you have come prepared.
- Express yourself clearly and concisely. Stick to the point. Participate actively, without talking too much.
- *Give reasoned arguments rather than unsupported assertions, whether making a point of your own or responding to someone else's question.*
- Listen to what others say without interrupting.

Importantly, continue the discussion all the time. Many issues do have interesting angles so talk to your friends, other students, and lecturers. In fact, talk to anyone who will listen to you. The advantage of ethics is that everyone has an opinion. The difference will be, yours is becoming more and more informed.

Writing Moral Theology

The most significant means of evaluation happens in written form – whether it is an essay or examination. At its most basic, essays or exams are the means of getting down your understanding of the issues in your own words. At the heart of academic life is the ability to write ideas clearly and logically, conveying new concepts and the relationships between concepts in a creative and accurate way. So this is your opportunity to show your abilities. They are not meant to be repetition, paraphrasing of lecture notes or books or for the spouting of simple opinions that lack any support.



For a successful paper, make sure you understand the question and that you are addressing it directly. It may be obvious but it is vital you stick to the point – if you wander you are failing to fulfil what is required of you and so failing your paper. So the first step is to identify precisely what the assignment is asking of you. If you have a doubt, ask your lecturer/tutor. They are glad to help. Fortunately, what is expected is often held within the question, so read it carefully. For example

Referencing the Case of Mr C, write a brief note on the following ethical issues: freedom, the goals of medicine, Christian anthropology.

This is a *structured question*: it asks you to complete a number of small tasks. How the final answer ‘hangs together’ is done from you. But you have to pay attention to presenting in a concise and logical manner in each part of the question.

Show how a utilitarian approach to morality would apply to the Case of Mr C.

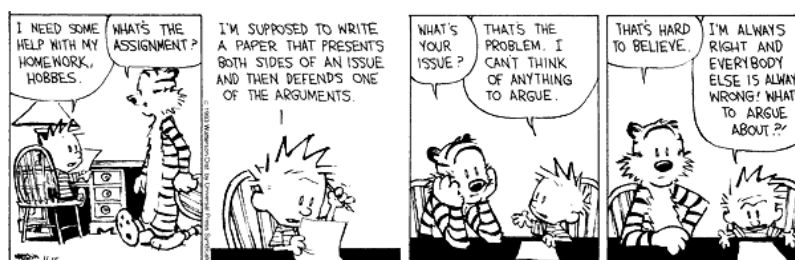
Descriptive questions are identifiable by words such as ‘describe’, ‘show how’ or ‘demonstrate’. You are being asked to explain, in your own words, how the arguments of others work. It is not enough to state your own opinions or give conclusions to arguments. What is required is to identify the justifications and show how they hang-together in an argument.

Respecting the dignity of a person is always to respect their freedom. Discuss with reference to The Case of Mr C.

These kind of essays are based on *evaluative questions*, indicated by words such as ‘discuss’, ‘evaluate’, ‘critically examine’ or ‘assess’. More than merely describe the arguments of others, you need to provide a critical assessment of their justifications and judgements. Crucially, you are required to form an opinion of your own, which is supported by evidence from what others have said, or by what you can argue yourself.

Compare and contrast how the principle of autonomy and the principle of beneficence would work in the Case of Mr C.

In *comparative questions*, you are required to look at two or more positions. It may be either a straightforward ‘compare and contrast’ or you may be asked to argue one over the other. Either way, you are being asked to show how arguments differ and are similar, so you need to show that you understand the point and the workings of both, and are capable of formulating reasoned opinions on which view is more defensible.



Getting started on an essay can be difficult. So ask yourself the following questions. Each essay will differ somewhat but these basic principles apply to all – even in to exam papers.

Firstly, what is the required format and word count? This is vital. A clear presentation makes for a clear case of what you are trying to do. The format of St. Patrick’s College is in the Appendix. FOLLOW IT WITH NO EXCEPTIONS OR VARIATIONS! The bottom line is your essays should look and have the same appearance as provided in the Appendix.

Secondly, what *sort* of question is it? Be careful, for it may cut across two of them, requiring your essay to take two approaches. In turn, what do you need to know in order to address the point or question in the title? Are you supposed to have read a certain text, or have made notes on a particular issue? For instance, do you have to define different terms in the question?

Thirdly, how will you allocate your time? This will depend somewhat on your own personal experience. However, never underestimate how much time you need. Start early! Good quality work requires quality time.

Fourthly, what will your lecturer/tutor be looking for in your work when it is assessed? So know what the requirements are. The marking criteria are laid out in the Kalendarium. These are not arbitrary divisions, for they are comparable to other universities. Finally, read carefully the advice given in the Appendix – it is meant for your benefit.



One of the most serious offences in a university is plagiarism. Plagiarism is the presentation of ideas as one's own work the thoughts or language of another without their acknowledgement. It is so serious that some have been refused their qualification, with obvious consequences for their future careers. You may do it intentionally as a short cut. Put the only person that you cut short is yourself. Be assured, people get caught all the time. In fact, it is quite easy to spot. **SO DON'T DO IT!** It is possible to get caught out unintentionally, by forgetting references or confusing your notes. So be sure to reference all and any quotes or ideas read elsewhere. It is a sign of wide-reading and will be sure to impress.

As with the presentation style of the essay, you must follow the referencing system of St. Patrick's College and outlined in the Appendix. A "Cheat Sheet" provides a simple tool to cross check how you write your references. **FOLLOW IT!** Be sure to reference the information provided by your lecturers – handouts, course packs etc. The key is honesty. On one hand, you should not abuse sources by using them inappropriately; on the other, you are encouraged to use the sources abundantly and effectively. They are the raw material – but not the substitute – for your own reflections.

At base what is required of you is personal thought – that is, the ability to reflect in a manner that is more than re-hashing lecture notes or cobbling together passages from secondary sources. You are not expected to be original. To take an example: imagine that you are studying mathematics. You are requested to prove Pythagoras' theorem, with some pointers to guide you. If you provide the proof, your work will not be original because that honour belongs to Pythagoras. However, it will be the result of personal thinking. If you go to a text book and look it up and copy out the proof, then you are not thinking for yourself.

In solving a maths problem, you must write each step and not simply give a final answer. If it is wrong due to a mistaken calculation, you will still get high marks for a correct method. The same is true in writing your text. Don't just give your idea, even if you know it to be right. Instead you should show how the idea is to be arrived at. It will require support and evidence from the sources at the heart of theology and ethics.

Essays are short. If you only quote another or just describe what they say, you are wasting space that could have been used for show your personal thinking. A golden rule is not to quote unless you are going to comment upon it and don't comment unless you have a reference/quote to back you up. Source material is used for building up your position. It acts as evidence. By using it, your position no longer becomes just an opinion (no matter how right that opinion may be!).

Feedback

This manual wants to outline the ways in which you can maximise your performance by showing what others are looking for in your work. Yet the whole point of writing is to aid your own reflection. So assessments are more than just a mark; they provide an opportunity to improve. It is about looking forward as much as looking back. The essay itself is a resource for your future study, especially, if what you learn are the skills that will help you in your next assignment. So try to get as much feedback as you can on your strengths and weaknesses. Best of Luck



Appendix

See “ESSAY WRITING – THE BASICS”