Religious Studies A level

Course plan

This plan shows the structure of the course and gives an outline of the contents. Sections 1–5 cover the requirements of the AS and Part 1 of the A level; Sections 6–10 cover Part 2 of the A level. You need to do Sections 1–10 to prepare for the A level.

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AS/A Religious Studies Course guide

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[topic titles to come]

Sample of the A Level Religious Studies Course from Section 1

Topic 1

Introduction to philosophy of religion

Introduction

Philosophy of religion is a branch of philosophy concerned with questions regarding religion, including the nature and existence of God, the examination of religious experience, analysis of religious vocabulary and texts, and the relationship between religion and science. In Sections 2 and 3 of this NEC A level course you will explore some of the key philosophical issues and questions about religion and develop your understanding about the influence of religion on contemporary society and ideas. You will make a further study of philosophy of religion in the second half of the course if you decide to pursue the full A level. This topic is intended to provide a brief introduction to the field.

In the sections which follow, you will be engaging in arguments and debates that have shaped modern views of the world, such as the problem of evil and suffering, and the nature of religious experience. You'll look at religious and non-religious views of the world and consider how religious beliefs differ from contemporary views as expressions of beliefs about the world. Finally, you will

study the development of philosophical ideas over time and the crucial influences on this process.

A key part of the course is the use of the writings of key scholars to explore different viewpoints and ideas. Study of these texts will enable you to gain a broader and deeper understanding of the key ideas and enable you to make links between the philosophy of religion and other areas of study within the course, for example Christianity and ethics.

The study and interpretation of religious texts and scholars' arguments is fundamental to the study of philosophy of religion, and to the A level. In the second half of the A level you will look at key texts by scholars such as Bertrand Russell and F C Copleston and examine how their writings contributed to the key debates.

Before you embark on detailed study of the various arguments for the existence of God (Section 2), the nature and influence of religious experience, and the problem of evil and suffering (Section 3), you need to understand the nature of philosophical argument. Philosophical argument, and the key terms used to describe different types of argument, is therefore the focus of this first topic.

You will probably need 3 hours to complete this topic.

Objectives

When you have completed this topic you should be able to:

- explain what is meant by an argument in philosophy
- outline the difference between deductive and inductive reasoning
- explain the difference between analytic and synthetic propositions
- identify the distinction between necessary truths and contingent propositions
- explain the difference between *a priori* and *a posteriori* knowledge.

Argument and reasoning

A key component in the study of philosophy of religion is an understanding of the nature of argument and reasoning. All of the topics we will be looking at are grounded in the nature of argument and you will need to develop the ability to recognise types of

argument, and to analyse those arguments, in order to evaluate the material in the topics effectively.

An argument is not the same thing as a quarrel. The goal of an argument is not to attack your opponent or to impress your audience. The goal of an argument is to offer good reasons in support of your conclusion, reasons that all parties to your dispute can accept. Thus an argument includes:

■ a position or point of view

■ an attempt to persuade others to accept that point of view

■ reasons given to support the point of view.

As you work through the course and do the reading, you need to be able to distinguish between arguments, summaries, explanations and descriptions.

Activity 1   (Allow 10 minutes)

Read the following passages. Decide, for each one, whether it is an argument, a summary, an explanation or a description? Note down the reasoning behind your decisions.

1   The article outlined the difference between individual yawns and infectious yawning. It referred to research by professor Platek which suggests that only humans and great apes yawn sympathetically. The article went on to say that people who yawn more easily in response to other people's yawns are also more likely to be good at inferring other people's states of mind. Finally, the article indicates some social benefits of yawning, suggesting that contagious yawning might have helped groups to synchronise their behaviour.

2   There were many reasons why Matthew was an hour late for his lesson. First of all, a pan caught fire, causing a minor disaster in his kitchen. It took 20 minutes to restore order. Then, he couldn't find his house keys. That wasted another ten minutes of his time. Then, just as he closed the door behind him, the postman arrived, saying there was a parcel to be signed for. His pen didn't work, which held him back even further. Finally, of course, he had to find his keys, which had once more slipped to the bottom of his bag, in order to re-open the door and place the parcel on the table.

3   Bilingualism and multilingualism confer many benefits. Speakers of more than one language have a better understanding of how languages are structured because they can compare across two different systems. People who speak only one language lack this

essential point of reference. In many cases, a second language can help people have a better understanding and appreciation of their first language.

4   Plants need nitrogen in order to grow. Although there is nitrogen in the air, plants cannot absorb it by taking it in from the air. Instead, they are reliant on bacteria in the soil to absorb nitrogen in a process known as 'nitrogen fixation'. Thus, the bacteria turn the nitrogen into nitrates which are easier for plants to absorb through their roots.

You should have spotted that the first passage is a summary of the article; it just outlines what the article says. The second is an explanation of why Mathew was late with reasons. The fourth passage is a straightforward description of the process of nitrogen fixation. Only the third is an argument. It's an argument because it is trying to persuade you of something, in this case that bilingualism and multilingualism confer many benefits. Did you get these right?

Philosophy is the art of constructing and evaluating arguments. Arguments are meant to be convincing, so philosophers must be sensitive to what makes an argument convincing and students need to be able to evaluate arguments fully.

In order to evaluate arguments you need to:

■ Think critically. What is the argument trying to say? Why does the argument succeed, or not?

■ Consider the form of the argument. What's the point? How do we get to the point?

■ Consider the structure. How do the parts of the argument fit together?

In general, arguments consist of:

■ the thesis or position argued for – the conclusion (C)

■ the reasons why the conclusion should be accepted – the premises (P).

There are different types of premise:

■ general observations – hairdressers are prone to bad backs

■ statements of fact – all men are mortal

■ theoretical assumptions – events have causes

■ definitions – a triangle is a three-sided figure

- hypotheses – if you exercise regularly you will be healthier.

Philosophical arguments may be written out in prose or in this form:

Premise 1 (P1): justification

Premise 2 (P2): justification

Conclusion (C): Therefore,…….

Whether an argument convinces us depends wholly on whether we believe its premises, and whether its conclusion seems to us to follow from those premises. So when we're evaluating an argument, there are two questions to ask:

- Are its premises true and worthy of our belief, or can we question them?
- Does its conclusion follow logically from the premises?

Activity 2
(Allow 10 minutes)

Read the following arguments. Evaluate them by asking yourself these two questions:

1   Are the premises true or can they be questioned?

2   Does the conclusion follow logically from the premises?

Argument 1:

P1 All trees are plants.

P2 The redwood is a tree.

C   Therefore, the redwood is a plant.

Argument 2:

P1 Getting wet in the rain gives you a cold.

P2 The builders worked for several hours in pouring rain.

C   Therefore, they will get colds.

Argument 1 is straightforward: the premises are true and the conclusion follows logically from the premises, so we would consider this to be a sound and convincing argument.

Argument 2, however, is not as straightforward.

- We can question P1– getting wet in the rain does not always give you a cold

- We can also question the conclusion – just because the builders work in the rain doesn't mean they will get colds because they might be wearing waterproofs, or might be immune to colds or might be working under shelter.

Therefore, the second argument is not sound and is less convincing. As you proceed through the topics on philosophy of religion (Section 2), you should consider whether the arguments you encounter work and whether they are convincing.

Inductive and deductive reasoning

The basis for the arguments for the existence of God is inductive and deductive reasoning. What is important is not just to answer the question of whether the existence of God can or cannot be proved, but also to consider the quality of argument and whether the argument works logically. Before we look at the arguments themselves let's look at what inductive and deductive arguments are.

In **deductive argument**, the premises offer logically conclusive support for the conclusion: if the premises are true, the conclusion must be true.

P1 All soldiers are brave.

P2 Martha is a soldier.

C   Therefore, Martha is brave.

In this argument, the truth of the premises guarantees the truth of the conclusion. As you can see from this example, deduction involves arguing from the general to the particular, so if all *x* is *y*, then this *x* must be *y*.

Deductive arguments can be very strong, but essentially they only confirm what is contained in the premises. One of the most famous examples is:

P1 All men are mortal.

P2 Socrates is a man.

C   Therefore, Socrates is mortal.

The premises here are true and therefore the conclusion – that Socrates is mortal – must also be true. But we would still need to

ensure that the premises are true to guarantee that the conclusion is true.

Inductive arguments provide probable support for their conclusion: if the premises are true, the conclusion is probably true.

P1 Almost all students in this school support the Labour Party.

P2 Maria is a student here.

C Therefore, Maria probably supports the Labour Party.

Induction goes beyond the information contained in the premises and therefore an inductive argument cannot guarantee the truth of the conclusion. It is an **argument from probability**: the conclusion is a probability based on using what is known to speculate about what is not known.

Inductive arguments argue from particular instances to general conclusions, e.g. all observed *x* is *y*, therefore all *x* is *y*. Here's another example:

P1 The sun rose this morning.

P2 The sun has risen every morning since records began.

C The sun will rise tomorrow morning.

This seems very convincing and in this case the premises are true: we know that the sun rose this morning and has risen since records began. However, while the conclusion has an extremely high probability of being true, it is still only a probability and cannot be guaranteed.

Types of proposition

We have looked at types of argument and have seen that they will be vital in evaluating the topics in philosophy of religion. The last thing to do before starting on the topics is to identify types of proposition: statements about the world. Being able to identify different types of proposition will be important for understanding inductive and deductive reasoning and for evaluating arguments such as the ontological argument. We need to define:

■ analytic and synthetic propositions

■ necessary and contingent truths

■ *a priori* and *a posteriori* ideas.

Analytic and synthetic propositions

'All bachelors are unmarried' is an example of an **analytic proposition**. The use of the word originates in the fact that you have only to analyse a statement of this kind in order to know whether or not it is true.

Analytic propositions are very important in philosophy since, once you know that a certain proposition is analytic, you know it to be true without any further investigation or without any observation of the world (which is required before you can know the truth of most propositions we believe). You do not have to investigate anything in the world apart from language to discover whether or not the proposition is true.

If you analyse the meaning of the word 'father' you know that 'fathers are male' is true. You know it from analysing the sentence itself, not from observation of the way the world is.

To summarise:

■ An analytic statement or proposition is one whose negation is self-contradictory: if someone said 'black is not black' he would be contradicting himself.

■ An analytic proposition is one whose truth can be determined solely by an analysis of the meaning of the words in the sentence expressing it.

Another way of expressing this is to say that no additional meaning or knowledge is contained in the **predicate** that is not already given in the subject. A predicate is a property, quality or attribute that is affirmed of a subject. In the example above, the predicate 'male' doesn't tell us anything new about the subject 'father', because the definition of 'father' includes male-ness.

Analytic statements take the general form 'all AB is A'. You know this is true from analysing the sentence itself, not from observing the world.

Analytic statements tell us about logic and about language use. They do not give meaningful information about the world. You are probably wondering what the point of them is! Hopefully this will become clearer when you come to look at ontological arguments for the existence of God in Section 2 Topics 4 and 5.

Synthetic propositions are propositions that are not analytic: the predicate is not contained in the subject. For example:

All cats are selfish.
The president is dishonest.

Synthetic propositions take the general form 'some AB are C'.

Unlike analytic statements, in the above examples the predicates (selfish, dishonest) are not contained already in the subjects (all cats, the president). Synthetic propositions cannot be verified simply from the meaning of the words – you need to investigate the world to check that it is true. In addition, negating either of the above would not result in a contradiction. It would not be a contradiction to say that 'The president is not dishonest' as it would to say 'The father is not male'.

Here's another example:

Analytic proposition: Vegetarians are people who don't eat meat.

Synthetic proposition: Some vegetarians don't like spinach.

Check your understanding in the next activity.

Activity 3   (Allow 10 minutes)

Which of the following propositions are analytic? Explain why.

1   All swans are birds.
2   All swans are white.
3   Paris is the capital of France.
4   All triangles have three sides.
5   Frozen water is ice.
6   Bachelors are unmarried men.
7   Two halves make up a whole.

You should have spotted that all of these are analytic apart from 2 and 3. Did 3 catch you out? Certainly Paris is the capital of France at the moment, but it hasn't always been and it might not be at some point in the future. In the other propositions you can analyse the words to understand the meaning and the truth of the proposition: triangle means three-sided figure, etc.

Necessary and contingent truths

Some propositions are necessarily true: **necessary truths** could not possibly be false. For example, 'one cannot be in two different places at the same time', or 'if one event precedes a second event and the second precedes the third, then the first precedes the third'. It could not be any other way. These propositions are widely considered to be necessary truths, and their negation would be necessarily false.

In contrast, there are **contingent** propositions. These are propositions which are true, but just happen to be true: there is no necessity about them. For example, the statement that 'there are 20 people in this room' is contingent on what the world happens to be like. It could be some other way, i.e. there could be just two people in the room.

In summary, the terms necessary and contingent refer to truth:

■ a necessary truth cannot be any other way

■ a contingent truth is dependent on something else (for example the senses) and could change at any time.

Activity 4   (Allow 10 minutes)

Which of the following propositions are necessary and which are contingent truths?

1   Some dogs are white.

2   The internal angles of a triangle add up to 180 degrees.

3   All bachelors are unmarried.

4   If it is a square, it cannot be a circle.

5   He is either coming or he is not.

6   Human beings have two legs.

Propositions 1 and 6 are contingent. Some dogs are black, red, brown; the fact that some dogs are white is dependent on the dog. Human beings might normally have two legs but some humans only have one leg or no legs and so the statement is contingent. The other statements are all necessary, they cannot be any other

way: you can't come and go at the same time, a married man is not a bachelor, etc.

A priori and *a posteriori* knowledge

A priori means 'what comes before'. *A priori* knowledge does not depend on experience for its justification. For example, we can know that 2 + 3 = 5 *a priori* since we only need to think about how to work out the sum. We don't need to look at the external world or examine our own experiences to recognise that it is true. What we do need, however, is reason. The truths of mathematics, geometry and logic are often considered to be knowable *a priori*.

> **Study hint**
>
> You will see in Section 2 Topics 4 and 5 that the ontological argument for the existence of God is an *a priori* argument because it is based on the *idea* of God The argument claims that once you have defined God, no doubt remains about his existence – he has to exist, by definition (just as, once you have defined a triangle, no doubts remain about it being three-sided).

A posteriori means 'what comes after'. Another word for this is 'empirical'.

A posteriori knowledge depends upon evidence that can only be gained through experience for its justification. We cannot work it out just by thinking about it.

> **Study hint**
>
> You will see in Section 2 Topics 1 and 2 that the design argument for the existence of God is an a posteriori/empirical argument, because it relies on our sense-experience of the universe and of things in it, i.e. we perceive the order, beauty and complexity of the universe through our eyes, ears and other senses and argue that this evidence of design and order implies the existence of a designer, i.e. God. The cosmological argument (Topic 3) is also a posteriori.

Necessary truths are necessary because they are knowable *a priori*. They are *a priori* in so far as they necessarily hold true for all cases, whether today, tomorrow or in a million years. What makes a statement *a priori* – and hence necessary – is how we come to know it, not the structure of the statement itself, as with analytic statements. An *a priori* statement doesn't need any verification by further experience.

Any statement that we do have to test to see whether it holds for future cases is a contingent statement, knowable only *a posteriori*.

Activity 5 (Allow 10 minutes)

Which of the following propositions are *a priori* and which are *a posteriori*?

1 2 + 3= 5

2 A square has four sides.

3 The sky is blue.

4 I exist.

5 There are more than three students in this class.

Statements 1, 2 and 4 are all *a priori* – I can know them without experiencing them; they are necessary and analytic. Statements 3 and 5 are *a posteriori* – they rely on experience; they are contingent on the way the world is and synthetic.

Study hint

Make sure you are thoroughly familiar with the various terms covered in this topic so that you can apply them when you come to look at the various arguments for the existence of God in Section 2. You might want to generate a table of definitions, with examples for each term.

Self check (Allow 10 minutes)

Read the following statements and decide whether they are true or false.

1 In a deductive argument, the truth of the premises guarantees the truth of the conclusion.

2 'All mammals suckle their young' is an analytic proposition.

3 The predicate in 'All blondes have fair hair' is 'blondes'.

4   Deductive arguments are arguments from probability.

5   Analytic statements tell us nothing new about the world.

6   *A posteriori* ideas rely on sense-experience.

7   Synthetic propositions take the form 'all AB is A'.

8   'London is the biggest city in the UK' is a necessary truth.

9   'A square has four sides of equal length' is an *a posteriori* statement.

10   'If I come third in the race I can't come second' is a necessary truth.

You will find feedback to self checks at the end of the section.

Summary

Philosophy of religion involves the study and analysis of key arguments about the nature and existence of God. These arguments, as we shall see, are either inductive or deductive and they rely on the use of premises that are synthetic or analytic, necessary or contingent and evidence that is *a posteriori* or *a priori*. Developing the ability to analyse argument effectively will enable you to fully understand and evaluate controversial issues about beliefs and values and will give you the confidence to express your ideas and put forward your own beliefs and ideas supported by reasoned argument and evidence.

Key terms

a posteriori: known after sense-experience; for example, that 'some roses are red' can only be known by seeing them; 'fluffy rabbits are lovely' can only be known to be true if (1) you have seen rabbits, and (2) you have experienced something fluffy. The modern term for *a posteriori* is 'empirical'.

a priori: known before or without sense-experience (i.e. what you know as a result of using your five senses of touch, taste, hearing, smell and sight); for example: 'a bachelor is an unmarried man','a triangle has three sides'.

analytic proposition: a proposition that is true or false by definition, that is, by virtue of the meaning of the terms and grammatical rules used. For example 'triangles have three sides' is analytically true because a triangle is defined as a three-sided polygon. Conversely, 'The soldier recovered from his fatal wounds'

is analytically false because 'recovered from' contradicts 'fatal', which means 'resulting in death'. *See* **synthetic proposition**.

argument from experience: asserts that it is only possible to experience that which exists; the phenomenon of religious experience demonstrates the existence of God according to this argument.

argument from probability: the design argument asks you to decide which is more probable – that the appearance of design in the universe is purely by chance, or that it is the work of a guiding intelligence. The truth of the design argument is therefore a question of likelihood or probability.

contingent proposition: proposition for which there are possible circumstances in which it could be false. Propositions that can be denied without self-contradiction are contingent, and so any proposition that is not logically necessary is contingent, e.g. 'dogs have four legs' is a contingent proposition, because we can deny that dogs have four legs without contradicting ourselves (the dog might only have three legs due to an accident). *See* **necessary truth**.

deductive argument: the process of inferring a conclusion from premises using valid forms of argument. If an argument is deductively valid, then the conclusion must follow necessarily from the premises. Deduction involves arguing from the general to the particular so if all *x* is *y*, then this *x* must be *y*. *See* **inductive argument**.

inductive argument: process of reasoning from particular instances to general conclusions, e.g. all observed *x* is *y*, therefore all *x* is *y*. *See* **deductive argument**.

necessary truth: a proposition is a necessary truth if, and only if, its denial involves contradiction. Necessary truths are propositions that cannot be false under any circumstances (they are true in all possible worlds). *See* **contingent proposition**.

predicate: property, quality or attribute that is affirmed of a subject, i.e. anything that could complete the phrase '*x* is…'.

synthetic proposition: a proposition the truth of which depends on factors other than the meanings of the terms used; it has to be tested through observation of the world. A synthetic proposition consists of two logically unrelated parts, e.g. '[all dogs] are [clever]'. Unlike **analytic propositions**, synthetic propositions are neither self-evidently true nor self-evidently false.

What next?

We hope this sample has helped you to decide whether this course is right for you.

If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact us using the details below.

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