

# Chapter 9

## The issues of ethics

### 1 Introduction

#### Chapter checklist

This chapter gives essential background to the understanding of ethical discussion. It begins by seeing how ethics affects and permeates daily life, not only in making decisions about actions but in making judgements about others, giving advice and developing good character to live a good life. It relates ethical thought to practical reasoning and the nature of the person. The chapter then deals briefly with issues of ethical language, the relationship between morality and religion, before giving an overview of the subject, explaining some main technical issues. It briefly defines concepts which will be used in both AS and full A Level Studies. As in any subject, knowledge of terminology matters.

When we hear or think of the term 'ethics' we recognise that we are talking about the good life, and how we might live – that is, the question of morality.

It is essential when embarking on ethical studies to be conscious of what is involved in the ethical life. When we hear that we should be moral, we think at first of what we are expected to do, or what we ought ourselves to do. But that is not the total of what is required by the ethical life. To be sure, we do have to act. There are things we need to do, and things we should do. There are also things we ought not to do, as well as things we ought to do, but which we leave undone. Each of these involves moral judgement.

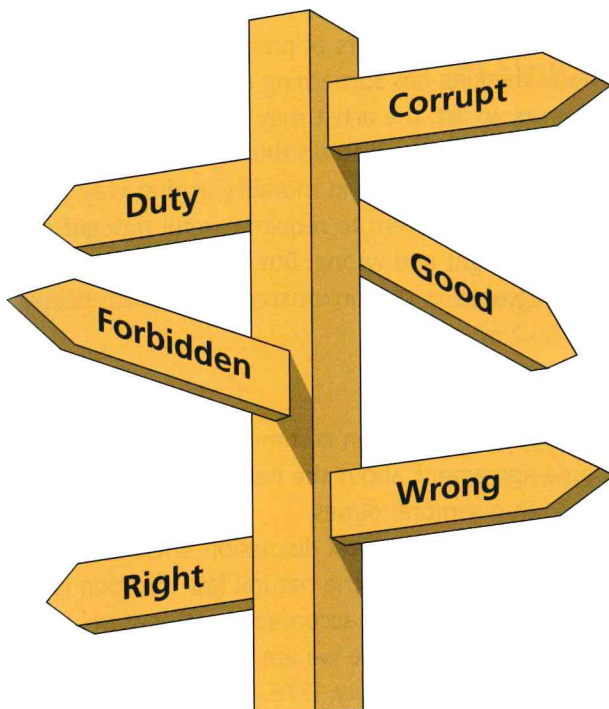
Even when we have listed all these, there are other activities which are part of the moral life. We raise young people. How should we do that? What is the good we want those children to have? Sometimes we are asked to advise others. What is the right thing to seek when doing this? Should we advise for our own good, or for the sake of others?

Beyond this, we sometimes have to make judgements on the actions of others. These judgements are not simply about whether someone has performed a right or wrong act, but whether he or she should be held responsible for that action. Aristotle argued that we cannot hold someone responsible for an act if that person acted in unavoidable ignorance or through being forced to do so. This view was subsequently adopted in Catholic moral teaching.

#### Key person

**Aristotle (384–322BC):** A Macedonian, son of the court physician. He studied at the Academy for 20 years, but disagreed with Plato's theory of the Forms, taking a much more empirical approach to his studies. He created his own school, the *Lyceum*.

## 2 Person and community



Discussion of this kind reminds us that morality arises from the fact that we are social creatures, living in community. Living in community has so many advantages, because we are not self-sufficient. A baby cannot look after herself but depends on the care of others. In the same way, I cannot provide for all my physical and emotional requirements. I need to relate to others who help to supply my needs, just as I find I must contribute to their needs. If I treat my neighbour without concern, with contempt and ingratitude, he may feel less inclined to give me the help I need. Therefore, I need to constrain my behaviour in various ways.

It can be argued, as it has been throughout the history of moral thought, that ideas of duty, responsibility, rights and obligations must arise out of this mutual need. Alan Gewirth gives a detailed justification of this approach in *Reason and Morality* (1978). It is interesting to consider whether someone living alone on a desert island could be considered capable of living a genuinely moral life. He presumably has no duty to others, and there is no one to have a duty towards him. Does he perhaps have duty towards himself? Even if he can be said to have moral demands, these will fall short of the full moral life. He is beholden to no other human being. He has no one other than himself to educate, counsel or judge.

If these considerations are true, the moral life entails life in community.

## 3 Ethical life

### (a) Ethics and practical reasoning

If our ethical life is something lived in community, then it follows that it requires certain types of skill. This will be developed further in Chapter 10, but it is helpful to think carefully about the type of understanding entailed in the moral life.

Plato attempted, not successfully, to argue that the moral life flowed properly from our understanding of the Form of the Good. His was an essentially intellectualist account. For him, wrongdoing is always the result of ignorance. This is psychologically unconvincing. I can know that some activity, such as smoking, is harmful, but still do it anyway. The smoking habit is not the result of ignorance of why it is harmful but must have some other explanation.

If this is true, simply knowing what is right or wrong is not enough to direct our behaviour. Aristotle and a rich tradition since his time argue that moral life requires a kind of practical reasoning, just as art does. Knowing what a good painting is will not make me a good artist, and, in any case, there is no one 'right' painting to paint. The painter has to make judgements not only about what to paint but how to paint it. He may be



### Key person

**Plato** (c.427–347<sub>BC</sub>): Pupil of Socrates. Created the Academy c.387<sub>BC</sub> and developed the ideas of Plato into his own distinctive philosophy, explained in a series of dialogues still central to philosophical discussion.

restricted in the size of canvas he may use, and by many other factors. He brings not only intellectual skill to the creation of his painting, but accumulated experience of materials, awareness of his own painting abilities and their limitations, as well as years of practice and experiment.

If Aristotle is right, moral thinking has something of the same character, although there are differences. In art, the artist may make a deliberate error as part of the art (Josef Haydn loved to do this in his music). But deliberate error seems not to be acceptable in morality in that way. Nevertheless, moral judgement does seem to require careful thought and the ability to work out what is right and wrong. But it also needs to work out what is practically manageable, in the circumstances in which people find themselves.

### (b) Ethics and the person

If, as suggested, ethics is about the person in community, then it follows that we need to have some agreement about the nature of the person and what he or she is owed in our moral duties.

Agreement on this is hard to find. In ethical discussion, there is a large literature on natural human rights. In the natural law tradition (see Chapter 10), thinking about 'right reason in accordance with nature', it is assumed that we have rights simply because we are human. The United States Declaration of Independence, from July 1776, is unequivocal:

*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.*

The assumption that we are endowed with rights makes for much discussion. The claim, 'I know my rights!' seems to follow every perceived injustice that someone suffers.

Yet it is not self-evident to philosophers that we have such rights. What is their origin? What are these rights? When you study utilitarianism you will discover that the theory dismisses any theory of natural rights, arguing that a notion of natural rights interferes with the goal of achieving the best possible outcome. From a different perspective, the American philosopher Ronald Dworkin (1931–2013) argued that rights were not to be understood absolutely. In *Life's Dominion: An Argument About Abortion, Euthanasia and Individual Freedom* (1993), he argues that we should instead see a human life in investment terms, and think of rights incrementally. If a young person dies at 20, it is an immense tragedy. So much has been invested in her by way of care and education, but little return has been given. This life is so much more significant than that of an old person who has paid back society through all she has given, or a baby in whom little investment has been made.

Against such views, Ingolf Dalferth (b. 1948) has argued that basic rights, and above all human dignity, are central. Human dignity is not a possession that can be taken away, as freedom may be in some circumstances. We are dignified in being ourselves. It is the essence of being human.

Religious views emphasise that we are children of God. From this they derive an insistence on the sacredness of life and the infinite value of the human person.

See Ingolf Dalferth: 'Religion, Morality and Being Human: The Controversial Status of Human Dignity', in: P. Jonkers and M. Sarot (Eds.), *Embodied Religion* (2013), pp. 143–179.

However, the question of the status of the person is developed, it seems at least clear that ethics makes sense only in terms of human activity. It is about persons and for persons.

### (c) Ethics and language

If we are social persons, much of that sociality comes through language. We use language to frame the ideas we use to understand the world. We use language to tell others our memories and activities. We also use it when we think out the meaning of what we are doing or have done. We use language to reach judgements, to advise, to give instructions or to make requests. We use language to give thanks, whether to other people or to God. We use it to teach and learn, to encourage or to condemn, to complain or to praise.

Being human and being speaking persons are intricately entwined. If we are in constant relationship with each other, and we speak in but also about those relationships, then we cannot think about morality without thinking about the language we use.

The questions to think about in relation to language are not simply questions about the meaning of words or sentences. They are questions about how they are or should be used. If I describe someone as 'good', what am I saying about her? After all, 'good' is used in so many ways. Sometimes we use it as a term of moral approval: for example, when I say 'Mother Teresa was a good person', or 'Giving to the poor is good'. But sometimes I use the term in non-moral ways, such as when I praise someone for being good at something: 'Picasso was a good artist' or 'Marin Alsop is a good conductor.' Again, I may use it to express pleasure: 'That was a good meal.' Sometimes I use 'good' as a description, sometimes as an encouragement on a student's piece of work.

Both moral and non-moral uses of 'good' are significant for ethics, but there are also deep questions to consider about whether 'Giving alms to the poor is good' is a descriptive sentence like 'Everest is a high mountain'. These questions are called metaethical, and will be important in your Year 2 work.

#### Ethics

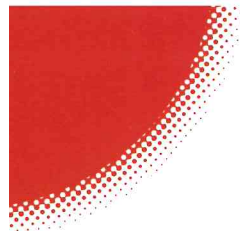
Ethics in business  
moral principles  
rules and regulations  
of right conduct  
values that guide

### (d) Ethics and religion

Ethics is often taught in schools in conjunction with, or as part of, the subject of religious studies. Such a connection has value. All the great religions make ethical claims and provide guidance, and sometimes firm directions, on what it means to be moral.

This connection can sometimes have an unfortunate side-effect of leading people to imagine that there is a necessary condition of the ethical, that morality somehow *depends* upon a religious basis. This assumption leads to misunderstandings. People sometimes say of an action that it is wrong *because it is forbidden by the Ten Commandments*. Many Christian philosophers, including St Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther and Pope St John Paul II, would argue that this interpretation gets things the wrong way round. Murder, theft, adultery and lying are forbidden by the Ten Commandments *because they are wrongful acts*. In other words, they are wrong in themselves, and can be known to be wrong in





themselves by reason. Natural law theory argues that what is right and wrong is knowable by reason. On this view, the Ten Commandments simply sum up what we should know by reason.

This view seems to have a good biblical foundation. The Jews behave badly and God gives Moses the Ten Commandments. He does this not to tell his people something new but forcibly to remind them of what they ought to have known very well. Evil and wrongdoing happen in Genesis before the Commandments are promulgated, as we can see in the tales of Noah and the Flood or Abel's murder by Cain. These actions are not presented as those of people acting in ignorance – the wrongdoer is not given the excuse that he couldn't know he had done wrong because the Ten Commandments had not yet been set out. Much later, in the New Testament, St Paul says:



Archbishop William Temple

*When Gentiles, who do not possess the Law do instinctively what the Law requires, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves. They show that what the Law requires is written in their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them on the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all.*

Romans 2:14–16

Notice the mention of the law written on men's hearts, by which they can work out what is right and wrong. Closer to our own time, the future Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, was categorical:

*In its nature, the moral judgement is quite wholly independent of Religion.*

William Temple: *The Kingdom of God* (1914), p. 42

### Key person

**William Temple (1881–1944):** British churchman, ecumenist, social activist and philosophical theologian. The only son of an Archbishop of Canterbury to become Archbishop of Canterbury (1942–44). Works include *Nature, Man and God*. Coined the term, 'Welfare State'.

Of course, some religious people insist that their beliefs rest simply on the commands of scripture, thinking that *x is wrong* just because the Bible or the Qu'ran says so. But this belief might not always be more than skin-deep. Suppose a critic were to say, 'So if God changed his mind and decided to make murder, pillage, adultery and lying compulsory, then we should all do them?' Most, perhaps all, would almost certainly say, 'But God would not do that!' If that is their reply, it suggests that there really is something intrinsically wrong about those actions. This is why a good God would not command them. These are things knowable as wrong in themselves.

## 4 Theories of ethics

### Key term

**Normative ethics** Theories of ethics which give guidance (norms) on how we should behave and/or the character traits we should develop.

Philosophers generally distinguish three areas of enquiry: **normative**, **applied** and **metaethics**.

Metaethics concerns the theory of ethics. It involves questions such as what we mean by terms like 'right', 'wrong', 'good', 'bad', and important issues such as the justification of ethics or the relationship between ethics and law. Some especially significant metaethical theories include:

- **Emotivism:** the view that ethical sentences simply evince [exhibit] an emotion and have no factual justification. 'Killing is wrong' is logically



### Key terms

**Applied ethics** Discussion of ethical approaches to specific problems of living, such as medicine, politics, theories of punishment, sport, taxation and so on.

**Metaethics** The branch of ethics concerned with the justification of ethics and the meaning of the language used. It would be a metaethical question to ask what we mean by the term 'good'.

### Key quote

A system of morality which is based on relative emotional values is a mere illusion. A thorough vulgar conception which has nothing sound in it and nothing true.

Socrates

### Key person

**Martin Luther** (1483–1546): Religious reformer and prolific author. Initiated the sixteenth-century Reformation when in 1517, he published the 95 Theses in Wittenberg, where he was a professor. Attacked the excesses of medieval religion, seeking a simpler and more direct form of religion, based on scripture and personal faith.

### Key term

**Deontic ethics** Any type of ethics, such as Kantianism or utilitarianism (see Chapters 12 and 13), which emphasises the actions we should perform.

equivalent to 'Killing – boo!' This theory was held by, among others, Rudolf Carnap and A. J. Ayer.

- **Subjectivism**: the view that x is right because I say so and for no other reason. This view is held most notably by **Existentialists** such as Jean-Paul Sartre or Martin Heidegger.
- **Relativism**: the view that rightness is culturally or religiously determined. Incompatible positions are justifiable by their cultural roots. This view is surprisingly common today, especially in the form of **vulgar relativism**, which holds that as all beliefs are relative, all should be tolerated. The theory has only to be stated for its absurdity to be apparent: if there is a requirement to be tolerant, then there is, after all, a universal principle of tolerance. If there is a single universal principle, then this version of relativism is contradictory.
- **Divine command theory**: the view that x is right because God commands it. This view is rejected by most Christian philosophers, including St Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther and Pope St John Paul II. It is sometimes found in some – but not all – Evangelical circles.
- **Natural law theory**: believes that moral rightness can be determined through careful reflection on the facts of the world: 'right reason in accordance with nature'. Aristotle, Cicero, St Thomas Aquinas, Richard Hooker, Hugo Grotius and, today, John Finnis, support this view.

Metaethics will be studied in more depth in the second year of the course. For the moment you need only to understand what metaethical questions are about.

### Key terms

**Emotivism** A theory that argues that ethical statements do no more than *evince* emotions, having no factual content. These statements do not *express* emotion as the emotion might not be felt by the speaker.

**Subjectivism** The view that all ethical judgements are simply statements of the speaker's beliefs and are right because the speaker says they are, and for no other reason.

**Divine command theory** (sometimes called theological voluntarism) The theory that something is right *because* God commands it, rather than believing that God commands something *because it is right*.

**Natural law** 'Right reason in accordance with human nature'. This can be worked out by considering what is good for human flourishing.

**Existentialism** A philosophical movement that believes the universe just exists and has no meaning in itself. Any value it has is the meaning each individual chooses to give it. Famous existentialists include Søren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers and Jean-Paul Sartre.

**Vulgar relativism** The belief that as every value judgement is relative, all should be tolerated. The position is contradictory because tolerance would be a universal value, not a relative one.

The main concern of the first year of your course is normative ethics. It consists of particular theories of how we ought to live. An important division is between **deontic ethics**, which emphasises what we should do, and **aretaic ethics** (virtue ethics), which emphasises the type of persons we should strive to be.



## Key terms

**Aretaic ethics** Term for virtue ethics which concentrates on the goodness of the agent rather than the goodness of the action performed. It emphasises the dispositions, motives and character of the person who performs the action.

**Teleological theories** Any theory in which goodness or rightness is determined by the outcome.

**Utilitarianism** The moral doctrine that one should always seek the greatest balance of good over evil.

**Deontological ethics** Any ethical system which ignores outcomes, concentrating just on whether the act is good in itself.

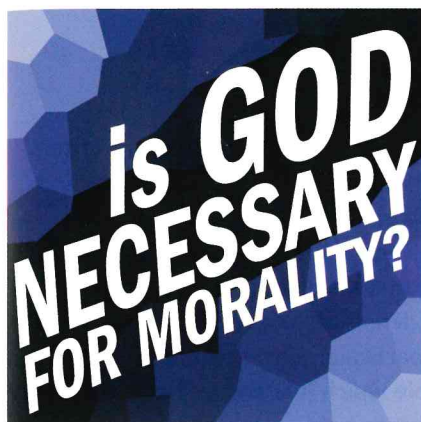
Categorical imperatives are discussed in Chapter 12.

Aretaic ethics are associated with Aristotle and his followers, both ancient and modern. Alisdair MacIntyre, Philippa Foot, G. E. M. Anscombe and Martha Nussbaum are key writers in the modern tradition. The perception that it is not enough to perform a good act is crucial to this school of thought. One might perform a just act for an unjust reason. One can never be a just person without performing just acts. But performing just acts does not make one a good person. Motivation and character are crucial.

Deontic ethics are normally split into two kinds:

- 1 **Teleological theories** (often called consequentialist) determine what is good by outcomes: *x* is seen as good because it leads to good results. Some well-known theories of this kind include:
  - **Utilitarianism** which holds that we should seek always the greatest balance of good over evil. This does not mean 'the greatest good of the greatest number' as the theory is sometimes inaccurately described. It is important to notice that this theory stresses the idea that we should always follow this one principle. The theory has no room for any view of natural rights. Rights get in the way of utility. Supporters of this theory include Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, Henry Sidgwick, and, more recently, Derek Parfit and Peter Singer.
  - **Egoism** (not egotism, which is not a moral theory, but simply refers to complete selfishness) is an ethical theory which believes that we should all seek to act in our own best interests. It argues that if everyone did this, we would all achieve the best results. This approach is presupposed in many theories of economics, including some types of free market theory.
  - **Situation ethics**, generally associated with Joseph Fletcher, argues that in each situation we should do that which will produce the most loving outcome. This approach is sceptical about rules, arguing that always following rules can lead to cruel and unloving consequences.
- 2 **Deontological** theories argue that something is right in itself:
  - **Kantian** ethics are often understood to emphasise the primacy of doing one's duty regardless of consequences. The categorical imperative emphasises in its first form that we should act only on that maxim we can at the same time will to be universal law, in its second that we should so act as to treat people always as ends and never as means only. What matters above all is having a good will.
  - **Agapism** stresses love. It holds that we should just love. 'Love is all you need.' This theory has few philosophical adherents – Archbishop William Temple dismissed it as 'fatuous bleating' – but it is sometimes heard. The absence of a specific theory of justice appears to make it impractical and emphasises its distance from other views, including those of Christianity.
  - **Divine command theory** also sometimes appears in this category as well as under the guise of a metaethical view.





See Chapter 12 for a discussion of Kantian ethics.

### Key persons

**John Stuart Mill** (1806–73): English utilitarian, Liberal politician and social philosopher. Brought up on utilitarian principles by James Mill, his father, and Jeremy Bentham. Major works include *Utilitarianism* (1863) and *On Liberty* (1859). His marriage to Harriet Taylor greatly influenced his thinking on social policies. Supported women's legal rights. His basic philosophical position is that all knowledge is based on experience and that our desires and beliefs are products of psychological laws. Ethics, for example, are based on the psychological law that all humans desire to be happy (although he famously differed from Bentham in that he considered that intellectual pleasures are higher than other forms of happiness). MP for Westminster 1865–68, until defeated by W. H. Smith (of the bookseller's). Godfather to Bertrand Russell.

**Immanuel Kant** (1724–1804): Philosopher from Königsberg in East Prussia. One of the greatest thinkers in history, attempted to reconcile the insights of the Rationalists, such as Descartes and Leibniz, and the Empiricists such as Locke, Hume and Berkeley. Author of *The Critique of Pure Reason*, the *Critique of Practical Reason* and *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*.

### Background

#### Teleological and deontological theories: a word of caution

The division between deontological and teleological theories is best understood in terms of orientation rather than dogmatic categories.

The American philosopher William K. Frankena (1908–94), especially in his very influential textbook *Ethics* (1973), devoted attention to systematic categorisation of ethical theories, especially in the distinction between teleological and deontological theories. The result of the distinction was to create a climate of discussion in which people became needlessly wrapped up in whether a given theory is deontological or teleological, often at the expense of concentrating on what the theories said.

An obvious example was in Kantian ethics. Frankena labelled this deontological, which has led many to understand Kant as strictly unconcerned with consequences. But this is to misread him. As you will see when you study him, he says that we should always do our duty because it is our duty, not because it leads to good outcomes. This is deontological, but, at the same time, when he comes to working out what our duty is, he becomes consequentialist. The principle of universalisation says that we can only treat as

moral an action that we are willing for everyone to do. Also we should treat people always as ends, never as means only. Both these principles are consequentialist, and do not make sense without thinking about outcomes. William Temple always treated Kant consequentially and there are interesting essays taking this view in *Essays on Derek Parfit's On What Matters* (2009). Perhaps we can say of Kant that the right-making feature of his theory is whether we have done our duty, which is deontological, but determining that duty requires a teleological approach.

In the same way, natural law is occasionally rather oddly described as a deontological theory, though it is much more commonly understood as a teleological one. For Aristotle and Aquinas, 'right reason in accordance with nature' is to be understood in terms of the consequences for human flourishing.

The important thing to remember is that philosophers who devise or outline ethical theories do not begin their work by thinking 'I am going to write a deontological theory about how to live'. They set out what they believe is right. Any categorising comes later, and by others.

The best way to think of Frankena's categories is that they illuminate the general direction of theories. They are not definitive pigeonholes.



For more detail on the thought of Aquinas, see Chapter 10.

For a discussion of act utilitarianism, see Chapter 11.

## Background

### A note on relativism and situationalism

Among commonly found terms are 'relativism' and 'situationalism', often contrasted with 'absolutism'. People often confuse the two concepts and it is important to be clear about the difference.

A **relativist theory** is one which believes that all ethical judgements are relative, whether to culture or to some set of beliefs. There are no absolutes in ethics because nothing is definitively right or wrong.

A **situational theory** is one where particular judgements are relative to situations, but there is some principle which it is always right to apply. In natural law theory, one must always use right reason in accordance with nature. In act utilitarianism, one must always follow the general principle of seeking the greatest balance of good over evil, though what that will be has to be determined in each situation. In situation ethics, there is an absolute command always to perform the most loving act. It would be a mistake to describe any of these theories as relativist.

## Study advice

This chapter contains a large number of 'isms'. As with many things, it is not easy to learn them in one go. It is better in your learning to go back to them as you work through ideas in the following chapters. Seeing how the ideas work out in practice is the best way of making sense of more abstract concepts.

The question of practice matters very much for developing the skills of reflection on the ethical theories mentioned in the next chapters. Sir Karl Popper, one of the greatest philosophers of the twentieth century, used to become very cross when people said: 'It's fine in theory, but it won't work in practice.' His objection to people saying this was an obvious one. If a theory doesn't work in practice, it is a bad theory, because the test of a theory is how it works out in practice. It is very helpful, when you think about ideas you will study, such as utilitarianism or natural law, that you think about actual circumstances and instances, to see whether a particular theory of right and wrong would give the kind of guidance people want. Giving specific examples and instances is good practice in all writing about philosophy, but invaluable in ethics.

Sometimes it can seem difficult to reach a conclusion in ethics. Very often, teachers find students concluding their essay with statements such as 'It is all relative', or 'It is all a matter of opinion' or even 'If it is right for you, then it's right.' When students write in that way, it is just an assertion, not a philosophical argument. What is needed here to do well would be a justification of your point of view.

Take just one of these assertions: 'It is all a matter of opinion.' The point being made here is that we can make no certain ethical judgements and it is a personal matter to decide. In philosophical terms, the student is arguing for subjectivism, the theory that something is right for me because I say so, or choose it as right, and for no other reason.

There is no requirement not to hold the position you have taken, but you need to defend the point. It is not a self-evident truth that there are

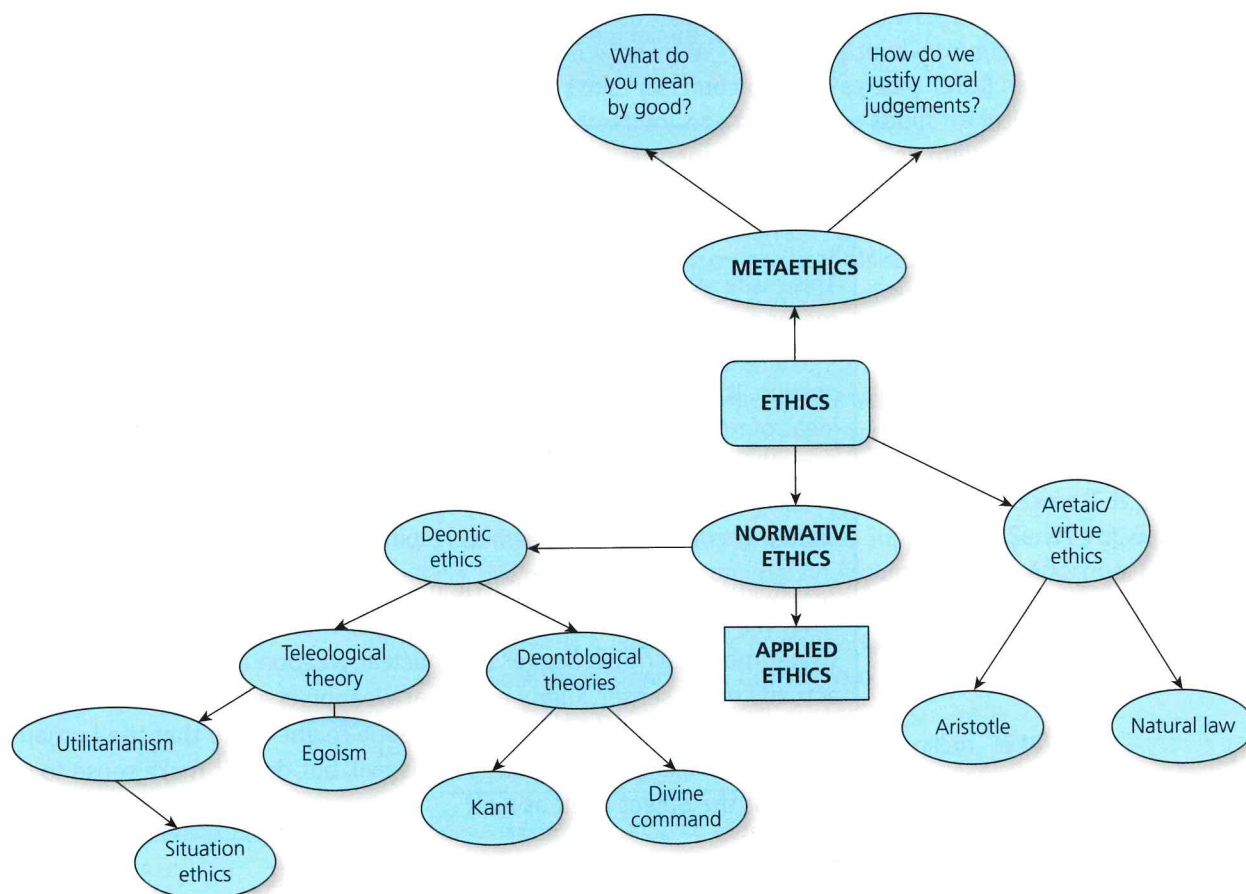
no objective reasons for moral judgements. Your case has to be made and sustained. How should you go about doing so?

The best way is to think about what someone who disagrees with you might argue. What might she say?

Suppose she said: 'I cannot agree with you. Are you saying that I am wrong to say that a man torturing children for his own gratification is doing something objectively wrong, and that my condemning him as immoral is no more than a personal opinion? Surely I can show that torture is bad for people psychologically and physically? Can you demonstrate how someone could really argue that torture is absolutely fine? In the same way, I think that incest is really wrong, because it can have no good results for people and many truly bad ones. And I don't think it is just my opinion that rape, stealing or putting arsenic in someone's coffee just because I don't like her are wrong.'

Now, if you think she is wrong to say these things, and you believe that ethical judgements are just matters of opinion, then the challenge is to show in the specific instances she has mentioned why she is wrong and why it would be legitimate for someone to say these acts were not really wrong in themselves. You would need to justify your conclusion, that these were just matters of opinion, with reasons. If you are able to do so, you are arguing well. If you find that you cannot give good reasons, then perhaps you might want to modify the original assertion. In good philosophical work, we should be prepared to change our minds if we think there are better arguments than we have considered.

## Summary diagram: The issue of ethics





### Revision advice

It is worth remembering that many terms used in this chapter will recur throughout the course, which means that you will learn about them in more depth through practice. Nevertheless, it is really helpful to have some certainty about key terms before you continue with your studies, recognising that your understanding will gradually deepen as you move beyond basic definition.

Can you give brief definitions of:

- metaethics
- normative ethics
- divine command theory
- natural law theory
- aretaic (virtue) ethics?

Can you explain:

- the difference between metaethics and normative ethics
- the difference between deontic and aretaic (virtue) ethics
- the difference between teleological and deontological approaches to ethics
- relativist and situational approaches to ethics?

Can you give arguments for and against:

- relativism
- subjectivism
- teleological approaches to ethics
- the idea that ethical theory presupposes religious belief?

Before you begin a detailed study of ethics, it is really helpful to begin the habit of thinking reflectively about ethical issues for yourself. Think about specific instances in life and how they might illustrate issues. Perhaps you will find it helpful, in order to begin thinking ethically, to try one or two of the following essay titles, which are designed to get you in the habit of thinking reflectively about questions.

### Sample question and guidance

**'There is nothing in life which is truly evil.' Discuss.**

This essay requires initial thought before you begin writing. The title makes a very bold claim, but it provides an opportunity to think about those who argue that ethical judgements are just subjective matters of opinion. It also requires you to begin to think about what we mean by ideas of right or wrong. You might like to think about whether to describe something as right or wrong means that it is good or bad for people or sentient beings in general. Think perhaps about whether certain actions are always right or wrong, such as helping the poor, or incest.

You might choose to think a little more widely. Is ethical behaviour what we mean by describing something as morally good? People will sometimes describe a dagger or a nuclear weapon as 'evil'. Does this actually make sense? Surely a nuclear weapon is an inanimate thing, made from neutral ingredients? Someone might argue that the human actions of making or using weapons is evil, but does it make sense to speak of the object itself as evil?

This is a very open question, and it is difficult, as so often in philosophy, to say it has a right answer. The question is designed to encourage you think hard and deeply about issues, but it is also designed to develop the use of examples. The question cannot be answered without using examples of things and actions you might want to argue really are evil, or really are not.

### Further essay questions

'If there is no God, then nothing is right or wrong.' Discuss.

To what extent would someone living alone on a desert island have moral responsibilities?

When India was a colony, the British authorities did not attempt to prevent people from practising their beliefs. However, they banned the practice of *suttee*, used by a minority of Hindus, in which the widow of a deceased man was burned on the funeral pyre with him. To what extent do you consider the colonial authorities were correct to interfere in people's beliefs in this way?

### Going further

There are many books which give general introductions to ethics. Most are rewarding in various ways. One of the finest is Julia Driver: *Ethics: The Fundamentals* (Wiley–Blackwell, 2006). Piers Benn: *Ethics* (Routledge, 1997) provides a solid introduction, and William Frankena: *Ethics* (second edition, Pearson, 1988) remains invaluable despite reservations one might have about his insistence on particular categorisation of theories. His insights on utilitarianism and other theories are penetrating and important. Michael J. Sandel: *Justice: What's the Right Thing To Do*, (Penguin, 2010) is justly popular and wide-ranging, also touching on political philosophy. Simon Blackburn: *Ethics: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2003) is interesting and useful for developing your own ideas. For any student of ethics, an invaluable source is *A Companion to Ethics* (*Blackwell Companions to Philosophy*), Ed. Peter Singer (Blackwell, 1993).

Other books discussed in this chapter are:

- Dalferth I. 'Religion, Morality and Being Human: The Controversial Status of Human Dignity', in: P. Jonkers and M. Sarot (Eds.), *Embodied Religion* (Utrecht: Ars Disputandi Supplement Series Vol. 6, 2013).
- Dworkin R. *Life's Dominion: An Argument About Abortion, Euthanasia and Individual Freedom* (Knopf, 1993).
- Gewirth A. *Reason and Morality* (Chicago, 1978).
- Suikkanen J. and John Cottingham J. *Essays on Derek Parfit's On What Matters* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).
- Temple W. *The Kingdom of God* (Macmillan, 1914).