

Studying religion and ethics

What is goodness?

What does it mean to be a moral person?

Why study religion and ethics?

Making moral decisions is something every human being does throughout life. How we live has an impact on others. Not just whether we are kind or unpleasant to the people we meet, but also in terms of the sort of relationships we cultivate, the behaviours we adopt or avoid and the principles we choose to live by.

Ethics are often linked to things we believe in, whether that means religious ideas or philosophical principles. For some vegetarians their decision to not eat meat arises from a belief that it is wrong to use animals in that way. For some religious people, charity is not an option but a duty because of features of doctrine, sacred text or religious teaching. Ethics brings responsibilities from beyond our private preferences. It is found in the commitments people make, as well as in their intuitions.

To study ethics we need to examine theories, which are different approaches to making moral decisions that thinkers have proposed. These apply certain principles, rules or ways of thinking about how moral decisions are made. The theories make assumptions about life and how we think, and we can ask whether they are the right assumptions or the right way of thinking. It is important that we don't just take the ideas theories give us for granted, but really look at those ideas to check they seem reasonable.

For some, ethics is a logical, rational thing that, above all, is about some kind of clear thinking, not driven by desire or emotion. For others it is about obedience to a higher authority or power (natural law) or a sense of duty (Kant). Others still see ethical thinking as driven by essential human feelings like love (situation ethics). There are some theories that see ethics as a product of human psychology – our desire for happiness and wish to avoid harm (utilitarianism). Once we understand a theory we can ask what it does to make moral decisions easier and what it misses out that makes moral decisions harder? Does it miss things which seem morally important?

We can explore theories by applying them to particular issues. Do they provide compelling answers to the moral problems of our time, like whether it is right to give people the chance to decide the manner

and timing of their own death (euthanasia), or whether certain kinds of business decisions are wrong (business ethics)? Ethics is a practical subject, about making sense of decisions, consequences, human beings and human life.

Sometimes when trying to make sense of ethics we can use hypotheticals or 'what if' scenarios. What if you only had one meal and two people were starving? What if you were with a group of people on a life raft, but there were too many people on board and it was starting to sink? 'What ifs' may be realistic or unrealistic, but they help us to think through ethical ideas and theories. We can also think about historical events and things happening right now and wonder whether the right thing was, or is, being done. Finally, we can think ethical systems through – what sorts of assumptions do they make about the world? Are these assumptions correct?

Is ethics more about the actions or the consequences?

When approaching a moral issue, is it better to focus on the actions or the consequences? For example, consider the boy who steals from the rich tourist. Stealing is the action. One approach to ethics is to refer to rules about actions. So the rule 'do not steal' might be followed, in which case the boy in this example is wrong to do what he does. This is a deontological approach to ethics, one focused on actions. The rightness or wrongness of an action is found inside the act itself – it is intrinsic (within) to the action. Right and wrong is **absolutely** determined by the action itself – there is no question of special circumstances or situations.

Another way of thinking about the issue is to look at the results of the action. In the case of the boy stealing from the rich tourist, the tourist loses money, which seems bad. However, perhaps there is a reason for the theft that should be considered. Maybe the boy needs money to feed his family. Maybe there are no other sources of money, apart from picking the pockets of wealthy and well-insured tourists. Perhaps his family is starving. Ethical thinkers who are interested in consequences might be prepared to set aside the rule 'do not steal' if the outcome is better. If stealing is the only way to survive and if that means a family survives, perhaps stealing in this case is right. This is a **teleological approach**. Rightness or wrongness in this sort of ethic is extrinsic – it places rightness or wrongness outside the action in the consequence/result. Goodness is **relative** to the ends.

The issue here is not to worry too much about the example, but to see that each of these approaches is different. Each leads to different questions being asked about the moral issue. They may reach similar or different conclusions, but perhaps one is better than the other; perhaps one seems more reasonable.

Are morals universal or do they change according to the situation?

Another division between moral theories is between those who think that there are rules or principles that cover all situations, all places, all times and all people – universal laws – and those who think that the best approach to morality is to set aside rules and focus on the situation. Immanuel Kant believed in universal ethics, while Joseph Fletcher thought we should focus on the situation.

Consider this example: after the death of a beloved father, two brothers are sorting through some personal possessions, private letters and documents, as they prepare to say something about their father at the funeral. They know that their father was loving and attentive to their mother, and that she misses him terribly. They discover a stash of letters in the attic and are shocked to realise these record a long-running affair between their father and another person. After considering their options, they place the stash back into its hiding place and write the eulogy for the funeral extolling their father's virtues. They agree to say nothing to their mother.

A universal approach to morality is not going to like this deceit. If honesty is the best policy then it is always the best policy and they should tell their mother. But someone who takes a situational approach might choose a different path. Maybe it is not the most loving thing to do, to reveal such letters. Perhaps it is compassionate not to put their mother through such a trauma. Perhaps keeping secrets can sometimes be good.

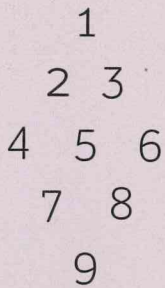
What sort of ethics do you want?

1. Do you think ethics should tell us what is right and tell us what to do, or is it more of a guide? Would you prefer clear direction when faced by moral decisions or choice about what to do?

2. Are you the kind of person who uses your head to make decisions, or your heart?
3. Do you believe ethics come from beliefs (religious or philosophical ones) human psychology or something else?
4. Do you think ethics really exist?

How do we live a good life?

There are many ethical theories explored in this book. Consider the mini ethical theories below, which link to the book's chapters. Think about them and arrange them in a diamond nine shape.



1 = the mini theory
you most like;
9 = the mini theory
you least like.

- A. A moral is a personal opinion, or something linked to a particular culture. People are different and cultures are different, so morals are different. There is no right or wrong answer, only right for you or right for your culture. When in Rome, do as the Romans do! When in Japan, do as the Japanese! Morals are relative.
- B. Morals are fixed rules, standing apart from our opinions. They are there to challenge us to live better lives. They are there to protect people from the damage that can be done when lines are crossed.
- C. There are some things we should just not do. It is always wrong to rape and abuse children, the poor, the sick, and the elderly. Morals are about understanding that some acts should never be carried out.
- D. There are better ways of living and worse ways of living. We need to look at the most important things in life: how precious life is, how important it is to look after each other, how important it is to learn from each other. We need to do things that support the most important things in life, and avoid doing those things which do not support them.
- E. The good life is not just about following rules; it is about practicing a way of life. Taking on certain attitudes and behaviours that we can exercise to become good people – honesty, courage, justice, integrity, etc. The attitudes and behaviours which are right, are those which lead to the best overall result. This is something we all do together, not as individuals, so that the behaviours we adopt are shared by our communities.
- F. You cannot always predict what the right thing to do is. Sometimes you just have to look at the situation and make a decision at that moment. Rules can get in the way because, in the situation you face, following the rules may do harm. So just try to do the loving thing, and forget about the rules. Being moral is about acting with the most important principles in mind – ultimately you have to decide on a course of action that you think fits these principles.
- G. Morals are there to try and get us to think about other people, rather than ourselves all the time. They are there to force us to think about what life is like for people who are not like us, but different from us, maybe even strange to us. It is easy to be nice to people who are like us, but life involves meeting many other people who are not like us. That is when we need morals.
- H. We always have to think of the bigger picture. It is easy to rely on rules from the rulebook of life, but life throws up situations where the rules don't seem to help, so we need to think about what happens as a result of what we do. We need to look beyond the moment when we act to the consequence of our actions and ask ourselves – what is the best outcome? Once we have agreed on what that is, we should do whatever it takes to get that outcome, even if that means breaking rules.
- I. Human beings are selfish creatures and left to our own devices, society would break down and become a frightening place. We see that in parts of the world where there is no law and order, things become terrible. It could be a dog-eat-dog world if we are not careful. We need a strong moral authority to stop us from tearing each other apart for our own selfish interests.

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