

What is ethics?

At its simplest, ethics is a system of moral principles. They affect how people make decisions and lead their lives. Ethics is concerned with what is good for individuals and society and is also described as moral philosophy. The term is derived from the Greek word *ethos* which can mean custom, habit, character or disposition.

Ethics covers the following dilemmas:

- how to live a good life
- our rights and responsibilities
- the language of right and wrong
- moral decisions - what is good and bad?

Our concepts of ethics have been derived from religions, philosophies and cultures. They infuse debates on topics like abortion, human rights and professional conduct.

Are ethical statements objectively true?

Do ethical statements provide information about anything other than human opinions and attitudes?

- Ethical realists think that human beings *discover* ethical truths that already have an independent existence in some way, within the universe and / or is hard-wired into the human brain (perhaps by a God or genetics).
- Ethical non-realists think that human beings *invent* ethical truths drawing on their experience of what is necessary in the world for us to co-exist with each other.

The problem for ethical realists is that people follow many different ethical codes and moral beliefs. So if there are real ethical truths out there (wherever!) then human beings don't seem to be very good at discovering them.

Are there universal moral rules?

One of the big questions in moral philosophy is whether or not there are unchanging moral rules that apply in all cultures and at all times.

Moral absolutism

Some people think there are such universal rules that apply to everyone. This sort of thinking is called moral absolutism. Moral absolutism argues that there are some moral rules that are always true, that these rules can be discovered and that these rules apply to everyone. Immoral acts - acts that break these moral rules - are wrong in themselves, regardless of the circumstances or the consequences of those acts. Absolutism takes a universal view of humanity - there is one set of rules for everyone - which enables the drafting of universal rules - such as the Declaration of Human Rights. Religious views of ethics tend to be absolutist.

Why people disagree with moral absolutism:

- Many of us feel that the consequences of an act or the circumstances surrounding it are relevant to whether that act is good or bad
- Absolutism doesn't fit with respect for diversity and tradition

Moral relativism

Moral relativists say that if you look at different cultures or different periods in history you'll find that they have different moral rules. Therefore it makes sense to say that "good" refers to the things that a particular group of people approve of. Moral relativists think that that's just fine, and dispute the idea that there are some objective and discoverable 'super-rules' that all cultures ought to obey. They believe that relativism respects the diversity of human societies and responds to the different circumstances surrounding human acts.

Why people disagree with moral relativism:

- Many of us feel that moral rules have more to them than the general agreement of a group of people - that morality is more than a super-charged form of etiquette
- Many of us think we can be good without conforming to all the rules of society
- Moral relativism has a problem with arguing against the majority view: if most people in a society agree with particular rules, that's the end of the matter. Many of the improvements in the world have come about because people opposed the prevailing ethical view - moral relativists are forced to regard such people as behaving "badly"
- Any choice of social grouping as the foundation of ethics is bound to be arbitrary
- Moral relativism doesn't provide any way to deal with moral differences between societies

Different Ethical Theories

Consequentialism

This is the ethical theory that most non-religious people think they use every day. It bases morality on the consequences of human actions and not on the actions themselves.

Consequentialism teaches that people should do whatever produces the greatest amount of good consequences.

One famous way of putting this is 'the greatest good for the greatest number of people', a phrase coined by Jeremy Bentham the famous 19th century British Utilitarian and supported by John Stuart Mill (his godson and probably the greatest British philosopher of the Victorian age).

The most common forms of consequentialism are the various versions of utilitarianism, which favour actions that produce the greatest amount of happiness.

Despite its obvious common-sense appeal, consequentialism turns out to be a complicated theory, and doesn't provide a complete solution to all ethical problems.

Two problems with consequentialism are:

- it can lead to the conclusion that some quite dreadful acts are good
- predicting and evaluating the consequences of actions is often very difficult

Non-consequentialism or deontological ethics

Non-consequentialism is concerned with the actions themselves and not with the consequences. It's the theory that people are using when they refer to "the principle of the thing".

It teaches that some acts are right or wrong in themselves, whatever the consequences, and people should act accordingly. One particularly famous deontological ethicist was the 18th century European philosopher Immanuel Kant, who believed that each of us had a duty to obey moral principles that were universally and objectively true (true in each context, without exception and with no reference to consequences of circumstance). For example Kant believed truth telling was always the right thing to do and them lying could never be acceptable, even to save someone's feelings or someone's life.

Virtue ethics

Virtue ethics looks at virtue or moral character, rather than at ethical duties and rules, or the consequences of actions - indeed some philosophers of this school deny that there can be such things as universal ethical rules. Virtue ethics is particularly concerned with the way individuals live their lives, and less concerned in assessing particular actions. It develops the idea of good actions by looking at the way virtuous people express their inner goodness in the things that they do. To put it very simply, virtue ethics teaches that an action is right if and only if it is an action that a virtuous person would do in the same circumstances, and that a virtuous person is someone who has a particularly good character.

The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle was one of the most famous supporters and writers of Virtue Ethics, believing that we should judge a person's character as displayed in their actions over time. We don't judge someone on a single action, but on how they behave over a number of actions.

Situation ethics

Situation ethics rejects prescriptive rules and argues that individual ethical decisions should be made according to the unique situation. Rather than following rules the decision maker should follow a desire to seek the best for the people involved. There are no moral rules or rights - each case is unique and deserves a unique solution.

The most famous recent exponent of Situation Ethics was the former Christian Joseph Fletcher, who believed that all actions should be aimed at promoting selfless love (agape) just as Jesus taught. He believed that it was acceptable to break rules if love was best served by doing so, for example breaking the command not to kill if euthanasia was the best option to stop someone's suffering.

Ethics and ideology

Some philosophers teach that ethics is the codification of political ideology, and that the function of ethics is to state, enforce and preserve particular political beliefs. They usually go on to say that ethics is used by the dominant political elite as a tool to control everyone else. More cynical writers suggest that power elites enforce an ethical code on other people that helps them control those people, but do not apply this code to their own behaviour.