

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 man-

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. It 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.

Comprehension Questions

Ethics: moral principles that govern a person's behaviour or the conducting of an activity.

1. What are the different views about ethics?
2. Can you create your own hypothetical or 'what if' ethical scenario?
3. What is the difference between a deontological approach and a teleological approach to ethics? Use an example for to illustrate the difference further.
4. What are the strengths and weaknesses of a deontological approach to ethics?
5. What are the strengths and weaknesses of a teleological approach to ethics?

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