Ethics

What’s in it for me? Learn what it means to live a more ethical life.

Welcome to the blinks Simon Blackburn’s very short introduction to ethics. You can think of these blinks as a very, very short introduction to ethics. We can’t promise to make you a better person in the next 20 minutes – that’s on you! – but we hope to furnish you with a few fresh ways to think about ethics, which is also known as moral philosophy. Ethics. What is it, and why should we care? Well, we all have strong beliefs about what’s acceptable and what isn’t. Judging another person’s actions as right or wrong, their attitude as contemptible or admirable, or the decisions they make as prudent or reckless is a fundamentally human tendency. You do it; I do it. All day, every day. You might even say that we are inherently ethical animals – because we all tend to be a little judgy. If that’s right – if we are indeed ethical animals – then where do our ideas about right and wrong come from? Are they inbuilt in us, or do we have to learn them? In these blinks, you’ll learn

why you don’t need a god to establish moral laws; whether you’re a deontologist; and that lying isn’t always bad.

Ethics, or moral philosophy

Well, we can observe that we’re not born into an ethical vacuum. We essentially inherit deep-rooted preferences about how we ought to live and behave from our surrounding culture. If you grew up in the United States or Europe, for example, you probably came of age in the ethical climate of liberal individualism, and thereby absorbed some very specific notions about freedom that are different to other parts of the world. These inherited ideas about freedom shape everyone’s thinking and values, no matter where they lie on the political spectrum. But just because we inherit ethical preferences doesn’t mean that our values are completely determined by the ethical climate in which we find ourselves. We also have the power to reflect on and influence that ethical climate. Ethical concerns are essentially preferences about how we should treat each other. These preferences obviously don’t align with those of everyone we encounter. And so: we debate, we critique, or use brute will to shape our ethical environments according to our vision. And when we turn our ethical preferences into formal demands of each other, that’s what you’d call a law. Our ethical environments are so fundamental to our lives that sometimes they become invisible. But we should be careful to not take our societies’ ethical climate for granted, and think through our ethical commitments carefully. After all, many of humanity’s most atrocious deeds were the product of a distorted ethical climate. You could even say that the roads to concentration camps and sweatshops were paved with ethical judgments gone terribly awry. Thinking through our ethical commitments and keeping others accountable is what moral philosophy is all about. It’s an academic tradition over two thousand years old, and continues to be a widely influential and highly active branch of contemporary philosophy. But ethics is hardly just the domain of academic theorists. All kinds of people have the power – and perhaps responsibility – to shape the moral climate! Just think about the Vietnam War as an example. Photo journalists who chronicled the devastating realities of the Vietnam War shaped public opinion far more than any professional philosopher writing on the topic. Still, moral philosophy matters a great deal and is applicable to all humans,

because it helps us examine the ethical concerns that matter so much to us at a deep and very precise level. So, even if you didn't study philosophy in school, ethics is still worth learning about, because it's here that you'll find the tools to think critically about right and wrong, and learn to live a more ethical life.

The thing is, ethics doesn't have the best reputation. Even if we can acknowledge that ethics is important, it's not always something we like to think about. It's thorny, disturbing, and complicated. For one thing, the right course of action isn't always obvious. It's not like the world offers signposts for how we ought to live and behave. And, when it comes to hot-topic issues like abortion, people's ethical judgments are notoriously clouded by emotion. Another reason ethics can be unpleasant to think about is that ethical concerns threaten our comfort levels if we benefit from the status quo. I mean, how would you like it if I pointed out that there's a good chance you're listening to this on a device produced under highly exploitative conditions, possibly even using the labor of enslaved children? Maybe you would get defensive and throw the accusation back at me by asking if my recording device is uncompromised. Or you might argue that individuals are embedded in unjust social structures that we can't control, so it's not fair to moralize about someone's individual consumer choices. Or, if you really prefer to not think about it, you might dismiss me out of hand as a buzzkill or a pessimist. All of these responses are attempts at evading ethical thinking, which is just another way of evading ethical responsibility. There are a whole host of threats to ethical thinking like these, and Simon Blackburn devotes nearly half of his book to skewering them. Because if every time you encounter a difficult moral problem you just throw up your hands and claim that it's all hopeless, you're effectively saying that trying to do good is just for suckers, and that ethics is just a sham! But that would be too easy. That'd be letting ourselves off the hook. And worst of all: it sets us up to be terrible people. So, if we're not ready to give up on ethics, we need to identify the threats and understand the erroneous thinking behind them. Then we'll be well-equipped to cut through the bullshit and do the hard but also crucially important work of treating each other well. So, let's go through those threats.

Three threats to ethics

Three of the most widespread threats you'll encounter are: a godless world, relativism, and the belief that humans are fundamentally selfish creatures. First off, there's a common threat to ethics that's often called the Death of God. This refers to the fact that much of the world – particularly in the West – has become secularized. Most of us now live in societies that are no longer dominated by one religion and one corresponding set of moral codes. In short, God is dead, and his rulebook has been buried with him. Many people view this as a fundamental challenge to ethics because there's no longer any ultimate authority to enforce moral rules. As the very devout Dostoyevksy once said, "If God is dead, everything is permitted." In other words, the perceived threat to ethics is that if not enough people believe that there is a lawgiver, there can be no law. Let's take a somewhat silly hypothetical example. Say that I believe anyone who steals yogurt from the office fridge will burn in hell, but my coworkers don't believe in any kind of afterlife. If that's the case, what's to stop them from helping themselves? And how could I ever trust anyone not to? The break-room fridge becomes a lawless free-for-all. Regardless of whether you believe in God or not, Blackburn claims that it shouldn't matter for participating in an ethical environment. We don't need to look to a supernatural authority to ground our moral principles – we're quite capable of establishing moral principles among ourselves. That's why we have laws, and rights, and courtrooms. We didn't need a god to establish a 30-miles-per-hour speed limit, so why would we need a

god to establish other moral laws? So, theoretically a shared ethical environment (or a shared office fridge) can exist between Christians, atheists, Pastafarians, and all the rest. We don't need one supernatural authority to hold it all together. Of course, this raises the question of just how we can all settle on a shared ethical code if we're coming from such radically different perspectives. The question of finding a shared, universal foundation to ethics has vexed philosophers for millennia – and this takes us right to the second major threat to ethics: the threat posed by relativism. That is, something that seems right in the eyes of one person might appear reprehensible in the eyes of another. Who's to say who's right? Is ethics just everyone thumping at the table and insisting on their own preferences? Or can we base our commitments on something more substantial? The relativist position can basically be summed up by people shrugging their shoulders and saying, "Welp, that's just your opinion!" By pointing out that there's no universally accepted ethical truth, relativists think they're making an argument, but all they're really doing is imposing a conversation-stopper onto any well-intended ethical conversation. But here's the thing: if you spend enough time around relativists, you'll start to notice something. They can be quick to point out that your ethical preference is only an opinion when it's something they disagree with or aren't interested in. But when it comes to an ethical commitment closer to their hearts – whether it's privacy or child abuse or anything that they find important – those same relativists are inclined to make passionate arguments about their pet ethical preferences. The point is, humans are always going to have ethical commitments, whether those commitments are universal or not. Sometimes, those ethical commitments come into conflict – if they didn't, we wouldn't have any need for politics. A dash of relativism can actually be useful in such an instance. It's not only a conversation-stopper. Relativism can help us to imagine another person's point of view or to approach hot button topics with a cool head. And it increases our capacity for tolerance and our willingness to compromise. But what's not helpful is using relativism as an excuse to not bother engaging with others at all. Let's say, for instance, that my wife wants to let guests smoke in the house, and I'm not okay with that. Should I give up on the relationship just because she's, ahem, in the wrong? No! I love my wife! And I also want to have guests over. So, it's important that we talk about our preferences and come up with a compromise that we can both live with. And if it means that in the end I have to hold my nose and let guests hang their cigarettes out the window, then so be it. We don't need to divorce over a cigarette. Relativism makes ethics complicated, but not impossible. Just because there's no one universally accepted ethical truth, that doesn't mean we're doomed to a dog-eat-dog world.

Speaking of animals eating each other, this brings us to the third major threat to ethics – the idea that humans are fundamentally selfish creatures and that we've evolved to be this way. The idea behind this threat is that when humans claim to care about ethical concerns, this is really just a self-righteous cover for what is in fact their own selfish agenda. In a nutshell, this challenge to ethics puts forth that we're "programmed" to perpetuate the species, and any behavior can be interpreted as an expression of this drive. They think that we shouldn't get too precious about our seemingly nicer qualities, like parental love or altruism, because they're just traits that have been selected for the propagation of our species and for the spread of our genetic material. Any so-called ethical action is really just a highfalutin fig leaf for the relentless drive of evolution. Altruistic tendencies evolved only because they're evolutionarily advantageous – all of our actions are for the sake of sex or survival. However, even though this is a widely-held belief, it's quite a limited understanding of human nature. Just think about it: people sacrifice their own self-interest in the name of other values all the time. Parents make sacrifices for their kids; people give their lives for what they perceive to be higher callings. Even if you insist that any action or preference necessarily has a selfish,

survival-enhancing drive underlying it, and that a “pure” form of altruism couldn’t possibly exist, it’s easy to see that ethical activity still has an evolutionary function. We’re all trying to live in a society, right? Principled, altruistic, and unselfish behavior is admired and rewarded in social environments. Ethical activity arguably leads to higher survival chances, so it’s a worthwhile pursuit for that reason alone. Either way, it’s pretty reductive and paints humanity with far too broad a brush to say that we’re fundamentally selfish – so don’t fall prey to this cynical myth. Sure, we’re selfish creatures. But we’re not only selfish. We’re ethical, too!

Three ethical theories

So, we’ve covered some of the main objections to ethics. I hope you’re feeling confident that acting morally is indeed within our sphere of possibility, and that the voice of conscience isn’t just a delusion. But, even if we’re convinced that pursuing ethical action is both possible and worthwhile, you don’t need me to tell you that being good isn’t always easy. It’s not just that it’s fun to be bad – it’s also often tricky to determine what the right thing to do even is. Moral ambiguity is everywhere! That’s where moral philosophy comes into play. A moral philosophy is like a roadmap for determining both our individual ethical obligations on the one hand and the norms and laws that structure our societies on the other. There are basically three main types of ethical theory: deontology, consequentialism, and virtue ethics. Let’s start with deontology. This is an ethical theory that uses rules to determine whether an action is right or wrong. It’s a way of thinking about ethics that emphasizes our duty to follow universal moral rules that apply equally to everyone. One example of a deontologist would be a person who lives their life according to the Ten Commandments. The most famous deontologist, however, was strictly secular. German philosopher Immanuel Kant grounded his theory of ethics in reason rather than divine authority. The core of his moral philosophy was what he called the categorical imperative, which is kind of similar to the golden rule found in many religions, and that we all learn in kindergarten – treat others as you want to be treated. In a nutshell, the categorical imperative demands that one should only ever act according to maxims that could be made into universal laws. Let’s unpack that a bit. We can start to think about the categorical imperative with a mental exercise called the universalization test. That is, if you’re ever unsure about whether a choice you’re about to make is ethical, you can ask yourself, “What if everybody did that?” If the answer is, “Not so great!” – that tells you that the action probably shouldn't be done. This test is very helpful for recognizing when you’re trying to exempt yourself from conduct that you would otherwise expect or hope from other people. When formulating the categorical imperative, as Blackburn puts it, “Kant took the universalization test and ran with it.” For Kant, it’s not just a device that helps you think twice before a difficult decision – it’s actually the foundation of all ethical action, that actions should be in accordance with universal principles. So is the categorical imperative just a dustier name for the good old golden rule? Is it just a drier repackaging of do unto others as you would have them do unto you? Not quite. The categorical imperative is stricter. Kant pointed out that the golden rule leaves room for injustice, and that something with more meat was needed to guide all of our ethical activity. Say you’re a judge about to sentence a violent murderer. If the murderer were to throw the golden rule at you in the courtroom, then you’d be inclined to give him a short sentence, because wouldn’t you want to be treated that way? But if you followed the categorical imperative rather than the golden rule, then you would be bound by duty to give the murderer a fair sentence in proportion to his atrocious crimes. It’s important to stress that for Kant, and for deontologists in general, the moral laws are

considered absolute, which means they apply to everyone equally and in all instances. Kant believed that any wiggle room for interpretation of a law would undermine the ethical system by opening up a space for subjective errors in judgment. That's why moral laws have to be simple and rigid. Say the moral law states "Do not lie." Under a deontological system, it's not enough to simply be guided by the rule not to lie; rather we're bound by duty never to lie under any circumstance. No exceptions. Now, on the one hand, a major benefit of a deontological approach to ethics is that it simplifies our moral decisions by providing us with clear-cut rules for behavior. You don't have to weigh the costs and benefits of every situation; you just follow the rule. But, on the other hand, it does seem like there are clear instances where lying really is the right thing to do. Consider this classic example: If you were facing an axe murderer who demanded to know where your children are hiding, would it be wrong to lie? According to Kant, yes – it would be wrong to lie to the axe murderer. He wrote a whole scathing book about why, if you're curious to dig deeper! For those of you who find deontology too rigid, there's another theory of ethics that might speak to you more. It's called consequentialism, and, as the name suggests, it's the theory that determines whether an action is right or wrong by looking to its consequences. It's what people are talking about when they say that the ends justify the means. If deontology is a moral system based on following rules, then consequentialism is focused on future results. One famous form of consequentialism is utilitarianism, which judges an action based on whether or not it improves the general well-being. A course of action is considered good if it's the one that brings about the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. That means an action that might in itself seem terrible, such as ending a life or starting a war, can be justified if it leads to an overall social benefit. Utilitarianism has many strengths. It was ushered in by social reformers Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, and laid the foundation for a new era of egalitarianism and impartiality. Utilitarianism holds that overall happiness is the sum total of everyone's individual happiness-es coming together, where each person's happiness is worth the same as anyone else's. (This was quite controversial in the 1700s!) It's an idea that's done a lot for social welfare, by providing a theoretical justification for policies that promote overall health and well-being. Now, utilitarianism has its fair share of critics, too. After all, if the happiness of the majority is the supreme good in society, that might not bode well for minorities. Suppose that enslaving a small group of people were to bring the majority even just a bit more happiness; this would be considered good under simple utilitarianism. A utilitarian has to be deaf to the cry of some individuals if it means the masses are relatively happy. But many people find it unjustifiable to sacrifice individuals in an attempt to promote overall happiness. And, if that's how you feel, you might be more of a deontologist. Deontology is, after all, the ethical tradition that led to universally applicable concepts like human rights. So, do we have to choose between getting good results and doing the right thing? Well, other philosophers, like David Hume, have attempted to split the difference and propose a consequentialist system with some deontological elements. And deontologists and consequentialists often agree on the same things in practice; they just come from different moral frameworks. The third major ethical theory – virtue ethics – takes an entirely different approach. Here, the focus is not on doing moral actions, but on developing a moral character. For example, instead of getting hung up on the idea that everything you say has to be true, instead just focus on generally being a more honest person. You might have better results, because honesty becomes more and more of a habit that you don't have to overthink. Virtue ethics is an ancient ethical theory, most commonly associated with Aristotle and other ancient Greek philosophers, but it's had a resurgence in popularity over the last few decades. Originally conceived, virtue ethics was based on the premise that human beings are supposed to lead a certain kind of life– namely, as a virtuous

member of society. In other words, the overall point of being a human is to be a good person. Aristotle believed that humans have the latent potential to develop social virtues that benefit society, like honesty, courage, and patience – but these virtues don't just arise naturally or spontaneously. We all know that we also have a latent potential to be lazy and selfish! So, virtue ethics proposes that we cultivate social virtues through education and practice. It's a mandate to constantly work on our characters by habituating all human activity to point in the direction of justice. A major benefit to virtue ethics is that many people find it a more intuitive approach to ethics than the other two approaches – to simply ask yourself, "What would a good person do in this situation?" rather than try to conform behavior to a rigid rule as a deontologist would, or calculate the consequences of an action in advance, as consequentialism asks of us. However, virtue ethics' critics point out that it doesn't provide the same clarity of good versus bad that you can find under deontology or consequentialism. Virtue ethics also offers a more holistic approach to ethical activity than the other two theories, because it involves our whole lives rather than just individual actions. It can take a whole lifetime to develop a virtuous character, but also, the right kind of society that sets us up for virtuous activity. Aristotle lays out his vision for the ideal society that cultivates virtues in its citizens in his seminal work, Politics – which provides insights into how to improve our ethical environments in addition to our individual characters. Now, virtue ethicists don't have to be solely concerned with virtues, just as deontologists and consequentialists don't have to be solely concerned with rules and results, respectively. The three major approaches to ethics inform and interact with each other, just as you can apply lessons from all three into your daily life. How exactly is up to you!

Final summary

In these blinks, we covered three of the main threats to ethical thinking, and three of the main ethical theories in the Western philosophical tradition. This may have been your first foray into moral philosophy, but by now you know that you're certainly not new to ethics – you've been engaged in an ethical environment your whole life. I hope you feel inspired to set off and explore moral philosophy in greater depth.