

## **What is Ethics?**

Ethics are a system of moral principles and a branch of philosophy which defines what is good for individuals and society.

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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.

### **Approaches to ethics**

Philosophers nowadays tend to divide ethical theories into three areas: metaethics, normative ethics and applied ethics.

- Meta-ethics deals with the nature of moral judgement. It looks at the origins and meaning of ethical principles.
- Normative ethics is concerned with the content of moral judgements and the criteria for what is right or wrong.
- Applied ethics looks at controversial topics like war, animal rights and capital punishment

If ethical theories are to be useful in practice, they need to affect the way human beings behave.

Some philosophers think that ethics does do this. They argue that if a person realises that it would be morally good to do something then it would be irrational for that person not to do it.

But human beings often behave irrationally - they follow their 'gut instinct' even when their head suggests a different course of action.

However, ethics does provide good tools for thinking about moral issues.

### **Ethics can provide a moral map**

Most moral issues get us pretty worked up - think of abortion and euthanasia for starters. Because these are such emotional issues we often let our hearts do the arguing while our brains just go with the flow.

But there's another way of tackling these issues, and that's where philosophers can come in - they offer us ethical rules and principles that enable us to take a cooler view of moral problems.

So ethics provides us with a moral map, a framework that we can use to find our way through difficult issues.

### **Ethics can pinpoint a disagreement**

Using the framework of ethics, two people who are arguing a moral issue can often find that what they disagree about is just one particular part of the issue, and that they broadly agree on everything else.

That can take a lot of heat out of the argument, and sometimes even hint at a way for them to resolve their problem.

But sometimes ethics doesn't provide people with the sort of help that they really want.

### **Ethics doesn't give right answers**

Ethics doesn't always show the right answer to moral problems.

Indeed more and more people think that for many ethical issues there isn't a single right answer - just a set of principles that can be applied to particular cases to give those involved some clear choices.

Some philosophers go further and say that all ethics can do is eliminate confusion and clarify the issues. After that it's up to each individual to come to their own conclusions.

### **Ethics can give several answers**

Many people want there to be a single right answer to ethical questions. They find moral ambiguity hard to live with because they genuinely want to do the 'right' thing, and even if they can't work out what that right thing is, they like the idea that 'somewhere' there is one right answer.

But often there isn't one right answer - there may be several right answers, or just some least worst answers - and the individual must choose between them.

For others moral ambiguity is difficult because it forces them to take responsibility for their own choices and actions, rather than falling back on convenient rules and customs.

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## **Ethics and people**

### **Ethics is about the 'other'**



Ethics is concerned with other people ©

At the heart of ethics is a concern about something or someone other than ourselves and our own desires and self-interest.

Ethics is concerned with other people's interests, with the interests of society, with God's interests, with "ultimate goods", and so on.

So when a person 'thinks ethically' they are giving at least some thought to something beyond themselves.

### **Ethics as source of group strength**

One problem with ethics is the way it's often used as a weapon.

If a group believes that a particular activity is "wrong" it can then use morality as the justification for attacking those who practice that activity.

When people do this, they often see those who they regard as immoral as in some way less human or deserving of respect than themselves; sometimes with tragic consequences.

## **Good people as well as good actions**

Ethics is not only about the morality of particular courses of action, but it's also about the goodness of individuals and what it means to live a good life.

Virtue Ethics is particularly concerned with the moral character of human beings.

## **Searching for the source of right and wrong**

At times in the past some people thought that ethical problems could be solved in one of two ways:

- by discovering what God wanted people to do
- by thinking rigorously about moral principles and problems

If a person did this properly they would be led to the right conclusion.

But now even philosophers are less sure that it's possible to devise a satisfactory and complete theory of ethics - at least not one that leads to conclusions.

Modern thinkers often teach that ethics leads people not to conclusions but to 'decisions'.

In this view, the role of ethics is limited to clarifying 'what's at stake' in particular ethical problems.

Philosophy can help identify the range of ethical methods, conversations and value systems that can be applied to a particular problem. But after these things have been made clear, each person must make their own individual decision as to what to do, and then react appropriately to the consequences.

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## **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.
- Ethical non-realists think that human beings *invent* ethical truths.

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.

One form of ethical realism teaches that ethical properties exist independently of human beings, and that ethical statements give knowledge about the objective world.

To put it another way; the ethical properties of the world and the things in it exist and remain the same, regardless of what people think or feel - or whether people think or feel about them at all.

On the face of it, it [ethical realism] means the view that moral qualities such as wrongness, and likewise moral facts such as the fact that an act was wrong, exist in *rerum natura*, so that, if one says that a certain act was wrong, one is saying that there existed, somehow, somewhere, this quality of wrongness, and that it had to exist there if that act were to be wrong.

**R. M Hare, Essays in Ethical Theory, 1989**

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## **Four ethical 'isms'**

When a person says "murder is bad" what are they doing?

That's the sort of question that only a philosopher would ask, but it's actually a very useful way of getting a clear idea of what's going on when people talk about moral issues.

The different 'isms' regard the person uttering the statement as doing different things.

We can show some of the different things I might be doing when I say 'murder is bad' by rewriting that statement to show what I really mean:

- I might be making a statement about an ethical fact
  - "It is wrong to murder"
  - This is moral realism
- I might be making a statement about my own feelings
  - "I disapprove of murder"
  - This is subjectivism
- I might be expressing my feelings
  - "Down with murder"

- This is emotivism
- I might be giving an instruction or a prohibition
  - "Don't murder people"
- This is prescriptivism

### **Moral realism**

Moral realism is based on the idea that there are real objective moral facts or truths in the universe. Moral statements provide factual information about those truths.

### **Subjectivism**

**Subjectivism** teaches that moral judgments are nothing more than statements of a person's feelings or attitudes, and that ethical statements do not contain factual truths about goodness or badness.

In more detail: subjectivists say that moral statements are *statements about the feelings, attitudes and emotions* that that particular person or group has about a particular issue.

If a person says something is good or bad they are telling us about the positive or negative feelings that they have about that something.

So if someone says 'murder is wrong' they are telling us that they disapprove of murder.

These statements are true if the person does hold the appropriate attitude or have the appropriate feelings. They are false if the person doesn't.

### **Emotivism**

**Emotivism** is the view that moral claims are no more than expressions of approval or disapproval.

This sounds like subjectivism, but in emotivism a moral statement doesn't *provide information about the speaker's feelings* about the topic but *expresses those feelings*.

When an emotivist says "murder is wrong" it's like saying "down with murder" or "murder, yecch!" or just saying "murder" while pulling a horrified face, or making a thumbs-down gesture at the same time as saying "murder is wrong".

So when someone makes a moral judgement they *show* their feelings about something. Some theorists also suggest that in expressing a feeling the

person *gives an instruction* to others about how to act towards the subject matter.

### **Prescriptivism**

Prescriptivists think that ethical statements are instructions or recommendations.

So if I say something is good, I'm recommending you to do it, and if I say something is bad, I'm telling you not to do it.

There is almost always a prescriptive element in any real-world ethical statement: any ethical statement can be reworked (with a bit of effort) into a statement with an 'ought' in it. For example: "lying is wrong" can be rewritten as "people ought not to tell lies".

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### **Where does ethics come from?**

Philosophers have several answers to this question:

- God and religion
- Human conscience and intuition
- a rational moral cost-benefit analysis of actions and their effects
- the example of good human beings
- a desire for the best for people in each unique situation
- political power

#### **God-based ethics - supernaturalism**

**Supernaturalism** makes ethics inseparable from religion. It teaches that the only source of moral rules is God.

So, something is good because God says it is, and the way to lead a good life is to do what God wants.

#### **Intuitionism**

**Intuitionists** think that good and bad are real objective properties that can't be broken down into component parts. Something is good because it's good; its goodness doesn't need justifying or proving.

Intuitionists think that goodness or badness can be detected by adults - they say that human beings have an intuitive moral sense that enables them to detect real moral truths.

They think that basic moral truths of what is good and bad are self-evident to a person who directs their mind towards moral issues.

So good things are the things that a sensible person realises are good if they spend some time pondering the subject.

Don't get confused. For the intuitionist:

- moral truths are not discovered by rational argument
- moral truths are not discovered by having a hunch
- moral truths are not discovered by having a feeling

It's more a sort of moral 'aha' moment - a realisation of the truth.

### **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'.

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.



## **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.

## **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.

## **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.

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## **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



Different cultures have had different attitudes to issues like war ©

### **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

### **Moral somewhere-in-between-ism**

Most non-philosophers think that both of the above theories have some good points and think that

- there are a few absolute ethical rules
- but a lot of ethical rules depend on the culture

## **Virtue ethics**

Virtue ethics is person rather than action based. It looks at the moral character of the person carrying out an action.

### **Character-based ethics**

- A right act is the action a virtuous person would do in the same circumstances.

Virtue ethics is person rather than action based: it looks at the virtue or moral character of the person carrying out an action, rather than at ethical duties and rules, or the consequences of particular actions.

Virtue ethics not only deals with the rightness or wrongness of individual actions, it provides guidance as to the sort of characteristics and behaviours a good person will seek to achieve.

In that way, virtue ethics is concerned with the whole of a person's life, rather than particular episodes or actions.

- A good person is someone who lives virtuously - who possesses and lives the virtues.

It's a useful theory since human beings are often more interested in assessing the character of another person than they are in assessing the goodness or badness of a particular action.

This suggests that the way to build a good society is to help its members to be good people, rather than to use laws and punishments to prevent or deter bad actions.

But it wouldn't be helpful if a person had to be a saint to count as virtuous. For virtue theory to be really useful it needs to suggest only a minimum set of characteristics that a person needs to possess in order to be regarded as virtuous.

...being virtuous is more than having a particular habit of acting, e.g. generosity. Rather, it means having a fundamental set of related virtues that enable a person to live and act morally well.

**James F Keenan, Proposing Cardinal Virtues, Theological Studies, 1995**

## **Principles**

Virtue ethics teaches:

- An action is only right if it is an action that a virtuous person would carry out in the same circumstances.
- A virtuous person is a person who acts virtuously
- A person acts virtuously if they "possess and live the virtues"
- A virtue is a moral characteristic that a person needs to live well.

Most virtue theorists would also insist that the virtuous person is one who acts in a virtuous way as the result of rational thought (rather than, say, instinct).

## **The three questions**

The modern philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre proposed three questions as being at the heart of moral thinking:

- Who am I?
- Who ought I to become?
- How ought I to get there?

## **Lists of the virtues**



What would a virtuous person do? ©

Most virtue theorists say that there is a common set of virtues that all human beings would benefit from, rather than different sets for different sorts of people, and that these virtues are natural to mature human beings - even if they are hard to acquire.

This poses a problem, since lists of virtues from different times in history and different societies show significant differences.

The traditional list of cardinal virtues was:

- Prudence
- Justice
- Fortitude / Bravery
- Temperance

The modern theologian James F Keenan suggests:

- Justice
  - Justice requires us to treat all human beings equally and impartially.
- Fidelity
  - Fidelity requires that we treat people closer to us with special care.
- Self-care
  - We each have a unique responsibility to care for ourselves, affectively, mentally, physically, and spiritually.
- Prudence
  - The prudent person must always consider Justice, Fidelity and Self-care.
  - The prudent person must always look for opportunities to acquire more of the other three virtues

### **Good points of virtue ethics**

- It centres ethics on the person and what it means to be human
- It includes the whole of a person's life

### **Bad points of virtue ethics**

- it doesn't provide clear guidance on what to do in moral dilemmas
- although it does provide general guidance on how to be a good person
- presumably a totally virtuous person would know what to do and we could consider them a suitable role model to guide us
- there is no general agreement on what the virtues are
- and it may be that any list of virtues will be relative to the culture in which it is being drawn up.

## **Duty-based ethics**

Deontological (duty-based) ethics are concerned with what people do, not with the consequences of their actions.

### **About duty-based ethics**

#### **Duty-based or Deontological ethics**

Deontological (duty-based) ethics are concerned with what people do, not with the consequences of their actions.

- Do the right thing.
- Do it because it's the right thing to do.
- Don't do wrong things.
- Avoid them because they are wrong.

Under this form of ethics you can't justify an action by showing that it produced good consequences, which is why it's sometimes called 'non-Consequentialist'.

The word 'deontological' comes from the Greek word *deon*, which means 'duty'.

Duty-based ethics are usually what people are talking about when they refer to 'the principle of the thing'.

Duty-based ethics teaches that some acts are right or wrong because of the sorts of things they are, and people have a duty to act accordingly, regardless of the good or bad consequences that may be produced.

Some kinds of action are wrong or right in themselves, regardless of the consequences.

Deontologists live in a universe of moral rules, such as:

- It is wrong to kill innocent people
- It is wrong to steal
- It is wrong to tell lies
- It is right to keep promises

Someone who follows Duty-based ethics should do the right thing, even if that produces more harm (or less good) than doing the wrong thing:

People have a duty to do the right thing, even if it produces a bad result.

So, for example, the philosopher Kant thought that it would be wrong to tell a lie in order to save a friend from a murderer.

If we compare Deontologists with Consequentialists we can see that Consequentialists begin by considering what things are good, and identify 'right' actions as the ones that produce the maximum of those good things.

Deontologists appear to do it the other way around; they first consider what actions are 'right' and proceed from there. (Actually this is what they do in practice, but it isn't really the starting point of deontological thinking.)

So a person is doing something good if they are doing a morally right action.

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## **Good and bad points**

### **Good points of duty-based ethics**

- emphasises the value of every human being
  - Duty-based ethical systems tend to focus on giving equal respect to all human beings.
  - This provides a basis for human rights - it forces due regard to be given to the interests of a single person even when those are at odds with the interests of a larger group.
- says some acts are always wrong
  - Kantian duty-based ethics says that some things should never be done, no matter what good consequences they produce. This seems to reflect the way some human beings think.

- Rossian duty-based ethics modified this to allow various duties to be balanced, which, it could be argued, is an even better fit to the way we think.
- provides 'certainty'
  - Consequentialist ethical theories bring a degree of uncertainty to ethical decision-making, in that no-one can be certain about what consequences will result from a particular action, because the future is unpredictable.
  - Duty-based ethics don't suffer from this problem because they are concerned with the action itself - if an action is a right action, then a person should do it, if it's a wrong action they shouldn't do it - and providing there is a clear set of moral rules to follow then a person faced with a moral choice should be able to take decisions with reasonable certainty.
  - Of course things aren't that clear cut. Sometimes consequentialist theories can provide a fair degree of certainty, if the consequences are easily predictable.
  - Furthermore, rule-based consequentialism provides people with a set of rules that enable them to take moral decisions based on the sort of act they are contemplating.
- deals with intentions and motives
  - Consequentialist theories don't pay direct attention to whether an act is carried out with good or bad intentions; most people think these are highly relevant to moral judgements.
  - Duty-based ethics can include intention in at least 2 ways...
  - If a person didn't intend to do a particular wrong act - it was an accident perhaps - then from a deontological point of view we might think that they hadn't done anything deserving of criticism. This seems to fit with ordinary thinking about ethical issues.
  - Ethical rules can be framed narrowly so as to include intention.

### **Bad points of duty-based ethics**

- absolutist
  - Duty-based ethics sets absolute rules. The only way of dealing with cases that don't seem to fit is to build a list of exceptions to the rule.
- allows acts that make the world a less good place



- Because duty-based ethics is not interested in the results it can lead to courses of action that produce a reduction in the overall happiness of the world.

- Most people would find this didn't fit with their overall idea of ethics:

...it is hard to believe that it could ever be a duty deliberately to produce less good when we could produce more...

**A C Ewing, The Definition of Good, 1947**

- hard to reconcile conflicting duties
- Duty-based ethics doesn't deal well with the cases where duties are in conflict.

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## **Kantian duty-based ethics**

### **Kantian duty-based ethics**



Immanuel Kant ©

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) was arguably one of the greatest philosophers of all time.

Kant thought that it was possible to develop a consistent moral system by using reason.

If people were to think about this seriously and in a philosophically rigorous manner, Kant taught, they would realise that there were some moral laws that all rational beings had to obey simply because they were rational beings, and this would apply to any rational beings in any universe that might ever exist:

The supreme principle of morality would have an extremely wide scope: one that extended not only to all rational human beings but to any other rational beings who might exist - for example, God, angels, and intelligent extraterrestrials.

## **Samuel J. Kerstein, Kant's Search for the Supreme Principle of Morality, 2002**

Kant taught (rather optimistically) that every rational human being could work this out for themselves and so did not need to depend on God or their community or anything else to discover what was right and what was wrong. Nor did they need to look at the consequences of an act, or who was doing the action.

Although he expressed himself in a philosophical and quite difficult way, Kant believed that he was putting forward something that would help people deal with the moral dilemmas of everyday life, and provide all of us with a useful guide to acting rightly.

### **What is good?**

Although Kantian ethics are usually spoken of in terms of duty and doing the right thing, Kant himself thought that what was good was an essential part of ethics.

Kant asked if there was anything that everybody could rationally agree was always good. The only thing that he thought satisfied this test was a good will:

It is impossible to conceive anything in the world, or even out of it, which can be taken as good without limitation, save only a good will.

### **Immanuel Kant, Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals**

All Kant means is that a good will alone must be good in whatever context it may be found.

It is not good in one context and bad in another.  
It is not good as a means to one end and bad as a means to another.  
It is not good if somebody happens to want it and bad if he doesn't.  
Its goodness is not conditioned by its relation to a context or to an end or to a desire.

### **H J Paton, The Categorical Imperative, 1948 (layout by BBC)**

Other things that we might think of as good are not always good, as it's possible to imagine a context in which they might seem to be morally undesirable.

Kant then pondered what this meant for human conduct. He concluded that only an action done for 'a good will' was a right action, regardless of the consequences.

But what sort of action would this be? Kant taught that an action could only count as the action of a good will if it satisfied the test of the Categorical Imperative.

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## **Kant's Categorical Imperative**

### **The Categorical Imperative**



Immanuel Kant ©

Kant's version of duty-based ethics was based on something that he called 'the categorical imperative' which he intended to be the basis of all other rules (a 'categorical imperative' is a rule that is true in all circumstances.)

The categorical imperative comes in two versions which each emphasise different aspects of the categorical imperative. Kant is clear that each of these versions is merely a different way of expressing the same rule; they are not different rules.

#### **Moral rules must be universalisable**

The first one emphasises the need for moral rules to be universalisable.

Always act in such a way that you can also will that the maxim of your action should become a universal law.

To put this more simply:

Always act in such a way that you would be willing for it to become a general law that everyone else should do the same in the same situation.

This means at least two things:

- if you aren't willing for the ethical rule you claim to be following to be applied equally to everyone - including you - then that rule is not a valid moral rule. I can't claim that something is a valid moral rule and make an exception to it for myself and my family and friends.

So, for example, if I wonder whether I should break a promise, I can test whether this is right by asking myself whether I would want there to be a universal rule that says 'it's OK to break promises'.

Since I don't want there to be a rule that lets people break promises *they* make to *me*, I can conclude that it would be wrong for me to break the promise I have made.

- if the ethical rule you claim to be following cannot logically be made a universal rule, then it is not a valid moral rule.

So, for example, if I were thinking philosophically I might realise that a universal rule that 'it's OK to break promises in order to get one's own way', would mean that no-one would ever believe another person's promise and so all promises would lose their value. Since the existence of promises in society requires the acceptance of their value, the practice of promising would effectively cease to exist. It would no longer be possible to 'break' a promise, let alone get one's own way by doing so.

### **Moral rules must respect human beings**

Kant thought that all human beings should be treated as free and equal members of a shared moral community, and the second version of the categorical imperative reflects this by emphasising the importance of treating people properly. It also acknowledges the relevance of intention in morality.

Act so that you treat humanity, both in your own person and in that of another, always as an end and never merely as a means.

...man and, in general, every rational being exists as an end in himself and not merely as a means to be arbitrarily used by this or that will. In all his actions, whether they are directed to himself or to other rational beings, he must always be regarded at the same time as an end...

### **Immanuel Kant, The Categorical Imperative**

Kant is saying that people should always be treated as valuable - as an end in themselves - and should not just be used in order to achieve something else. They should not be tricked, manipulated or bullied into doing things.

This resonates strongly with disapproving comments such as "he's just using her", and it underpins the idea that "the end can never justify the means".

Here are three examples of treating people as means and not ends:

- treating a person as if they were an inanimate object

- coercing a person to get what you want
- deceiving a person to get what you want

Kant doesn't want to say that people can't be used at all; it may be fine to use a person as long as they are also being treated as an end in themselves.

### **The importance of duty**

Do the right thing for the right reason, because it is the right thing to do.

Kant thought that the only good reason for doing the right thing was because of duty - if you had some other reason (perhaps you didn't commit murder because you were too scared, not because it was your duty not to) then that you would not have acted in a morally good way.

But having another reason as well as duty doesn't stop an action from being right, so long as duty was the 'operational reason' for our action.

If we do something because we know it's our duty, and if duty is the key element in our decision to act, then we have acted rightly, even if we wanted to do the act or were too scared not to do it, or whatever.

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### **Rossian duty-based ethics**

#### **Rossian duty-based ethics**

Kantian ethics seems pretty uncompromising and not really suited to the untidiness of many moral choices that people have to make.

The 20th Century philosopher W. D. Ross [Sir David Ross] (1877-1971) suggested that it would be helpful to look at two kinds of duty:

- Prima facie duties
- Actual duties

#### **Prima facie duties**

- are self-evident and obvious duties (*prima facie* is a Latin expression meaning 'on first appearances' or 'by first instance')
- can be known to be correct if a person thinks about them and understands them:

when we have reached sufficient mental maturity and have given sufficient attention to the proposition it is evident without any need of proof, or of evidence beyond itself

**W D Ross, The Right and the Good, 1930**

- should be promoted, "all things considered"
- can be outweighed by other prima facie duties.

### **Actual duties**

This is the duty people are left with after they have weighed up all the conflicting prima facie duties that apply in a particular case:

the ground of the actual rightness of the act is that, of all acts possible in the circumstances, it is that whose prima facie rightness in the respects in which it is prima facie right most outweighs its prima facie wrongness in any respects in which it is prima facie wrong.

### **W D Ross, The Right and The Good, 1930**

Ross listed seven prima facie duties:

- Fidelity
- Reparation
- Gratitude
- Justice
- Beneficence
- Self-improvement
- Non-maleficence (avoiding actions that do harm)

Calling these 'duties' may be a bit misleading, as they are not so much duties as "features that give us genuine (not merely apparent) moral reason to do certain actions".

Ross later described prima facie duties as "responsibilities to ourselves and to others" and he went on to say that "what we should do (our duty proper [our actual duty]) is determined by the balance of these responsibilities."

### **Problems with the Rossian approach**

Ross's idea still leaves some problems:

- How can we tell which prima facie duties are involved in a particular case?
- How can we compare and rank them in order to arrive at a balance which will guide us as to our actual duty?

Ross thought that people could solve those problems by relying on their intuitions.

## Supernaturalism

This theory makes ethics depend on God. It teaches that the only source of moral rules is God and that something is good because God says it is.

### About supernaturalism

#### Supernaturalism (God-based ethics)

This theory makes ethics depend on God. It teaches that:

- the only source of moral rules is God
- something is good because God says it is
- the way to lead a good life is to do what God wants

#### Can God be the ultimate source of good?



Supernaturalism relies on revelations from God ©  
Throughout history one puzzle has made it difficult to base ethics on God:

Is a thing good because God desires it?

or

Does God desire a thing because it is good?

The Ancient Greek philosopher Plato concluded that God desires a thing *because it is good*. God's desire doesn't make a thing good - the thing would be good regardless of God.

If Plato is right then the supernaturalism theory is pretty unhelpful, because it doesn't reveal what makes something good or bad.

God's desire would be at best a useful way of discovering what is good and what is bad, but wouldn't tell us anything more than that.

And here's another problem:

If God desired something that everyone thinks is bad - would that make it good?

## Atheists and supernaturalism

### Ethical atheists and supernaturalism



How do atheists derive their morals? Photo: Marcelo

Terraza ©

If supernaturalism is true, how can atheists behave in a consistently moral way?

If religion is the only basis of ethics, it would seem that people who have no faith can have no basis for their moral judgements, and nowhere to turn for guidance on how to live.

But atheists do behave in a consistent moral way, so where do such people get their morality from?

And since atheists and believers totally disagree on the foundations underpinning moral rules, it's surely strange that they so often agree on matters of right and wrong - since they have no common basis for moral judgements, any agreement on moral rules must be coincidence.

One response the supernaturalist might offer is that the atheist does derive his or her ethics from God, even though they are unaware of it. The supernaturalist might say that not believing in God does not mean the atheist would have no awareness of a God-based ethics, and hence their agreement can be explained despite the atheist's different beliefs.

### **Constructionism devalues God-based ethics**

Some who are observant followers of a religion accept that God is a human construction and not a supernatural being.

If this is so, then God-based ethics are no different from humanly constructed ethics based on cultural traditions and rituals.



### **Different Gods leads to moral disagreement**

Since there are many different religions, with different understandings of God and different moral codes, God-based ethics is bound to produce moral disagreement.

God-based ethics provides no way of dealing with ethical conflicts between different religions.

### **Fearing God as a basis for good behaviour**

People may follow the rules of God-based ethics because they are fearful of being punished by God in this life or in some afterlife.

Many theologians teach that a fear- and power-based relationship with God is an inappropriate relationship to have with a loving God and leads to a bad spiritual life.

Many theologians and ethicists argue that such a relationship with God provides a bad model for human power and family relationships.

People may follow the rules of God-based ethics simply because they wish to behave in a way that pleases God.

This is a more helpful model for human power and family relationships.

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### **Discovering what is good**

#### **Discovering what is good**



How do we know? ©

Even if people accept that things are good because God desires them they still face the problem of discovering what God desires. Strictly speaking this does not count against Supernaturalism as an intellectual position - it may be just be accepted that moral truths are hard to discover - but it does highlight the difficulties.

### **Discovering God's will**

There are several ways in which believers try to find out God's will in ethical matters:

- reading scripture - both to see what God says, and to find relevant examples
- listening to religious teachers
- prayer and meditation
- seeing what is consistent with God's general advice on how to live
- listening to the inner, God-driven, voice
- discussion with teachers and followers of the religion concerned

Many religious people use a combination of these in their approach to moral problems.

It is accepted by many believers that the ways of discovering God's will set out above don't give *direct* access to God's will, but involve working through intermediaries. Hence the information is passed through social, cultural, religious and psychological filters that can distort it.

Many hold that God's will is only directly known through revelation: God actually communicating his/her will to the person concerned. However, revelation as a source of ethics still presents a problem for certainty: how is the person to know that the revelation they have received has actually come from God?

## **Consequentialism**

Consequentialism says that right or wrong depend on the consequences of an act, and that the more good consequences are produced, the better the act.

### **About consequentialism**

#### **Consequentialism: results-based ethics**

The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy gives a plain and simple definition of consequentialism:

Of all the things a person might do at any given moment, the morally right action is the one with the best overall consequences.

#### **Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Consequentialism**

Consequentialism is based on two principles:

- Whether an act is right or wrong depends only on the results of that act
- The more good consequences an act produces, the better or more right that act

It gives us this guidance when faced with a moral dilemma:

- A person should choose the action that maximises good consequences
- And it gives this general guidance on how to live:

- People should live so as to maximise good consequences
- Different forms of consequentialism differ over what the good thing is that should be maximised.
- **Utilitarianism** states that people should maximise human welfare or well-being (which they used to call 'utility' - hence the name).
  - **Hedonism** states that people should maximise human pleasure.
  - Other forms of consequentialism take a more subtle approach; for example stating that people should maximise the satisfaction of their fully informed and rational preferences.

In practice people don't assess the ethical consequences of every single act (that's called 'act consequentialism') because they don't have the time.

Instead they use ethical rules that are derived from considering the general consequences of particular types of acts. That is called 'rule consequentialism'.

- So, for example, according to rule consequentialism we consider lying to be wrong because we know that in general lying produces bad consequences.
- Results-based ethics produces this important conclusion for ethical thinking:
- No type of act is *inherently* wrong - not even murder - it depends on the result of the act

This far-fetched example may make things clearer:

- Suppose that by killing X, an entirely innocent person, we can save the lives of 10 other innocent people
- A consequentialist would say that killing X is justified because it would result in only 1 person dying, rather than 10 people dying
- A non-consequentialist would say *it is inherently wrong to murder people* and refuse to kill X, even though not killing X leads to the death of 9 more people than killing X

## Utilitarianism



Evaluating each decision would take too long. Photo:

Liz Fagoli ©

The classic form of results-based ethics is called utilitarianism.

This says that the ethically right choice in a given situation is the one that produces the most happiness and the least unhappiness for the largest number of people.

### **The appeal of results-based ethics**

Results-based ethics plays a very large part in everyday life because it is simple and appeals to common sense:

- It seems sensible to base ethics on producing happiness and reducing unhappiness
- It seems sensible to base ethics on the consequences of what we do, since we usually take decisions about what to do by considering what results will be produced
- It *seems* easy to understand and to be based on common sense

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## **Act consequentialism**

### **Act consequentialism**

Act consequentialism looks at every single moral choice anew. It teaches:

- A particular action is morally good only if it produces more overall good than any alternative action.

### **Good points of act consequentialism**

#### **A flexible system**

- Act consequentialism is flexible and can take account of any set of circumstances, however exceptional.

### **Bad points of act consequentialism**

#### **Impractical for real life use**

- while it sounds attractive in theory, it's a very difficult system to apply to real life moral decisions because:
  - every moral decision is a completely separate case that must be fully evaluated
  - individuals must research the consequences of their acts before they can make an ethically sound choice
  - doing such research is often impracticable, and too costly
  - the time taken by such research leads to slow decision-making which may itself have bad consequences, and the bad consequences of delay may outweigh the good consequences of making a perfect decision
- but where a very serious moral choice has to be made, or in unusual circumstances, individuals may well think hard about the consequences of particular moral choices in this way

### **Bad for society**

- some people argue that if everyone adopted act consequentialism it would have bad consequences for society in general
- this is because it would be difficult to predict the moral decisions that other people would make, and this would lead to great uncertainty about how they would behave
- some philosophers also think that it would lead to a collapse of mutual trust in society, as many would fear that prejudice or bias towards family or other groups would more strongly influence moral decisions than if people used general moral rules based on consequentialism
- fortunately the impracticality of act consequentialism as a general moral process means we don't have to worry much about this

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## **Rule consequentialism**

### **Rule consequentialism**

Rule consequentialism bases *moral rules* on their consequences. This removes many of the problems of act consequentialism.

Rule consequentialism teaches:

- Whether acts are good or bad depends on moral rules
- Moral rules are chosen solely on the basis of their consequences

So when an individual has a moral choice to make they can ask themselves if there's an appropriate rule to apply and then apply it.

The rules that should be adopted are the rules that would produce the best results if they were adopted by most people.

Philosophers express this with greater precision:

- an act is right if and only if it results from the internalisation of a set of rules that would maximize good if the overwhelming majority of agents internalised this set of rules

And here's another version:

An action is morally right if and only if it does not violate the set of rules of behaviour whose general acceptance in the community would have the best consequences--that is, at least as good as any rival set of rules or no rules at all.

### **Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Consequentialism**

#### **Good points of rule consequentialism**

##### **Practical and efficient**

- Rule consequentialism gets round the practical problems of act consequentialism because the hard work has been done in deriving the rules; individuals don't generally have to carry out difficult research before they can take action
- And because individuals can shortcut their moral decision-making they are much more likely to make decisions in a quick and timely way

#### **Bad points of rule consequentialism**

##### **Less flexible**

- Because rule consequentialism uses general rules it doesn't always produce the best result in individual cases
- However, those in favour of it argue that it produces more good results considered over a long period than act consequentialism
- One way of dealing with this problem - and one that people use all the time in everyday life - is to apply basic rules, together with a set of variations that cover a wide range of situations. These variations are themselves derived in the same way as the general rules

#### **Other forms of consequentialism**

##### **Negative Consequentialism**

Negative consequentialism is the inverse of ordinary consequentialism. Good actions are the ones that produce the least harm.

- A person should choose the act that does the least amount of harm to the greatest number of people.

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## **Against consequentialism**

### **Against consequentialism**

Consequentialism has both practical and philosophical problems:

#### **Future consequences are difficult to predict**

- it's hard to predict the future consequences of an act
  - in almost every case the most we can do is predict the probability of certain consequences following an act
  - and since my behaviour is based on my assessment of the consequences, should the rightness or wrongness of an act be assessed on what I thought was going to happen or what actually happened?

#### **Measuring and comparing the 'goodness' of consequences is very difficult**

- people don't agree on what should be assessed in calculating good consequences
  - is it happiness, pleasure, satisfaction of desire or something else?
- It's hard to measure and compare the 'goodness' of those consequences
  - how, for example, do you measure happiness?
  - how do you compare a large quantity of happiness that lasts for a few minutes with a gentle satisfaction that lasts for years?
  - how do you measure any 'subjective' quality?
- Choosing different time periods may produce different consequences
  - for example, using cheap energy may produce good short-term economic results, but in the long-term it may produce bad results for global climate

#### **It is easy to bias in favour of particular groups**

- choosing different groups of people may produce different consequences
  - an act that produces a good result for group X may at the same time produce a bad result for group Y, or for society in general

- so the ethical choices people make are likely to be different according to which group they use for their moral calculations
- the most common solution to this problem is to look at the consequences for a large group such as 'society in general'
- alternatively, ethicists can try to look at things from the standpoint of an 'ideal', fully informed and totally neutral observer

### **It ignores things we regard as ethically relevant**

- results-based ethics is only interested in the consequences of an act
- the intentions of the person doing the act are irrelevant
  - so an act with good results done by someone who intended harm is as good as if it was done by someone who intended to do good
- the past actions of the person doing the act are irrelevant
- the character of the person doing the act is irrelevant
- the fairness of the consequences are not directly relevant

And these are things that many think are relevant to ethical judgements.

However, in support of consequentialism it might be argued that many of the things listed above *do* influence the good or bad consequences of an act, particularly when formulating ethical rules, and so they become incorporated in consequentialist ethical thinking; but only through the back door, not directly.

### **It doesn't take account of the 'fairness' of the result**



We cannot predict every outcome of an event ©

Simple forms of consequentialism say that the best action is the one that produces the largest total of happiness.

This ignores the way in which that happiness is shared out and so would seem to approve of acts that make most people happy, and a few people very unhappy, or that make a few people ecstatically happy and leave the majority at best neutral.



It also detracts from the value of individuals and their own interests and projects, other than when those are in line with the interests of the group.

**It can be inconsistent with human rights**

Consider this situation:

A billionaire needs an organ transplant. He says that if he is given the next suitable organ he will fund 1000 hip-replacements a year for 10 years.

Giving him the next available organ means Mr X, who was top of the list, will die - but it also means that thousands of people will be very happy with their new hips.

Consequentialism might be used to argue that Mr X's human rights (and his and his family's happiness) should be ignored, in order to increase the overall amount of human well-being.

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/ethics/introduction/consequentialism\\_1.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/ethics/introduction/consequentialism_1.shtml)