

Chapter 1

An introduction to ethics

Contents of Chapter 1

The big questions in ethics

What is ethics?

Three ways of 'doing' ethics

Normative ethics: teleological and deontological

What do mean when we say something is good?

One of the things that distinguishes humans from other animals is our ability to make moral decisions. We deliberate before making choices. We may feel guilt when we do things that we feel are wrong. We're motivated to take great risks because of what we believe is right. We disagree passionately with each other over how we should live. Humans have a moral dimension.

This book explores how human beings decide what is right and wrong, good and bad. It examines the ways in which different thinkers have tried to define what it means to be a good person. It also investigates some of the most prominent ethical issues of our time.

The big questions in ethics

There are a number of big ethical questions that commonly interest philosophers. You will learn how different philosophers try to answer them, but consider them here for yourself:

- If I do a good thing for a bad reason, does it matter?
- Do ends justify means?
- Do the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few or the one?
- Is what's wrong for you necessarily wrong for me?
- Is an action right or wrong depending on the situation?
- Are we free to make moral choices?
- Is being moral about following rules?

- Should we use our heads or our hearts when deciding what's moral?
- Can we have morals without religion?
- Should I help my father before I help a stranger?
- Are human beings selfish or selfless?
- Should we follow our **consciences**?
- Is ethics a special kind of knowledge or are moral views just personal feelings?
- Is killing an unborn human as immoral as killing a born human being?
- Should people who want to die be helped to die?
- Do animals have rights?
- Is it ever right to fight?
- Is it wrong to use embryos for experimentation?
- Should business think only about profits?

If you're going to study ethics seriously, you must be prepared to examine your views critically and be open to a range of ideas that may be quite different from your own. What you read may challenge your convictions. At the very least, it will require you to re-examine them.

Task

Consider the following scenarios:

- 1 You witness a car crash. The wreckage is burning, but you may be able to save one of the two passengers. To your horror, you realise that one is your father and the other is a famous cancer specialist on the brink of a breakthrough. Who do you save?
- 2 Your mother comes home with an appalling hat and asks you what you think. She's clearly delighted with her purchase. Do you tell the truth?
- 3 You're close to a breakthrough with a new medical treatment, but to complete your work you must carry out some particularly slow and painful experiments on animals. What do you do?
- 4 Your ship goes down and you're lost in the sea with two others, in a life raft. You have no food. Without a supply of food, there's no hope of rescue before you starve to death. Two would survive by eating the third: otherwise, all three will die. What do you do?
- 5 The parents of a car crash victim allow their son's body to be used for transplants, but only if the parts go to white patients. Do you accept their condition?

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- 6 One night in a concentration camp, a boy is raped and some of his uniform is taken away by the rapist. Prisoners who are incorrectly dressed are shot at dawn by the guards. Should he accept his fate or steal from someone else?
- 7 Siamese twins are born, attached at the abdomen and sharing several major organs. If nothing is done, both will die. If the twins are separated, one will die and one will live. What should be done?
- 8 A railway drawbridge operator is closing the bridge for the express train that's about to arrive when he sees his son trapped in the machinery. To close the bridge will kill his son but save the train. To open the bridge will save his son, but the train will not be able to stop in time. What should he do?
- 9 An unattractive man offers to give a million pounds to the charity of your choice if you spend one night with him. What do you do?

What is ethics?

The term **ethics** comes from the Greek word *ethikos*, meaning 'character'. It may be translated as 'custom' or 'usage'. It refers to the customary way to behave in society.

The term **morality** comes from the Latin word *moralis*, and is concerned with which actions are right and which are wrong, rather than the character of the person. Today, the two terms are often used interchangeably.

Ethics is a branch of philosophy concerned with morality. It explores actions and consequences, motives, moral decision-making and human nature. Ethics can be broadly divided in two:

- 1 **Ethical theory**, which covers philosophical systems or methods for making moral decisions or analysing moral statements.
- 2 **Practical, or applied, ethics**, which focuses on debates about specific dilemmas, such as abortion or euthanasia.

Three ways of 'doing' ethics

There are three main ways of 'doing' ethics:

- the **normative** approach
- the **descriptive** approach
- **meta-ethics**

Normative ethics was prevalent until the end of the nineteenth century. It begins by asking what things are good and what things are bad, and what kind of behaviour is right and wrong. It decides how people ought to act, how moral choices should be made and how the rules apply. These decisions may come from an established group or culture, such as the Christian tradition, or they may be based on some philosophical or ideological way of thinking. This is the traditional way of doing ethics. A normative ethical question would be 'Is sex before marriage right?' Many of the theories in this book are normative theories.

Descriptive ethics describes and compares the different ways in which people and societies have answered moral questions. It can be described as moral sociology or moral anthropology. A descriptive ethical question would be 'What do the Christian and Muslim traditions believe about sex before marriage?'

Meta-ethics, sometimes called philosophical ethics, attracts a great deal of interest today. Meta-ethics explores the meaning and function of moral language. What, if anything, do we mean when we use words such as 'good' or 'bad', 'right' or 'wrong'? A meta-ethical question is 'What do we mean when we say that sex before marriage is good?' Theories important to the meta-ethical debate include ethical **naturalism** (definism), **ethical non-naturalism** (intuitionism) and ethical non-cognitivism (emotivism).

Task

Identify the kind of ethical approach that these phrases fit best:

- 1 Adultery is wrong because God's law forbids it.
- 2 When you say euthanasia is wrong, you're only saying you don't like euthanasia.
- 3 In some Muslim communities men may take a number of wives, while in most Christian communities only one wife is permitted.

Now think of a new statement of your own for each ethical approach.

Normative ethics: teleological and deontological

There are two main ethical systems within normative ethics.

Teleological ethics is concerned with the ends or consequences of actions. The word *telos* is Greek for 'end'. Teleological theories, sometimes known as **consequentialist**, hold up the link between the act and the consequence as extremely important in moral decision-making. A teleological theory main-

tains that the consequences of actions determine their moral value. If my action leads to good consequences, it is good in itself (not because of the consequences). Teleological theories of ethics focus on the amount of happiness or well-being that an action produces, which values the consequences of actions.

There are several different teleological theories. To ensure what the consequences are, we need to know what the things, such as happiness, are, and how they are brought about by a noble reason.

Deontological

Deontological theories focus on the intrinsic value of actions, rather than the consequences. Deontologists believe that some actions are intrinsically good or bad, regardless of the consequences. Deontologists are concerned with the moral law, which is a set of rules that governs our actions. Deontologists believe that we should follow the moral law, regardless of the consequences. Deontologists believe that the moral law is based on reason, and that it is universal. Deontologists believe that the moral law is not subject to change, and that it is not influenced by culture or tradition. Deontologists believe that the moral law is a guide to action, and that it is not a set of rules that we should follow blindly. Deontologists believe that the moral law is a guide to action, and that it is not a set of rules that we should follow blindly.

Task

Which statement best describes the teleological approach?

- 1 We should follow the moral law, regardless of the consequences.
- 2 You should follow the moral law, regardless of the consequences.
- 3 Do what is right, regardless of the consequences.
- 4 It's okay to follow the moral law, regardless of the consequences.
- 5 If you follow the moral law, regardless of the consequences.
- 6 Whatever the consequences, follow the moral law.

Now add your own statement.

tains that the rightness or wrongness of an action is decided by the consequences that it produces. If my action causes pain and suffering, then it is bad. If my action causes happiness and **love**, then it is good. The action isn't good in itself (not **intrinsically good**), but good by virtue of the result. Two teleological theories are **utilitarianism**, which values actions that produce the greatest amount of happiness and well-being for the most people, and **situation ethics**, which values actions that produce the most love-filled result.

There are some weaknesses with teleological approaches: How can you be sure what the result will be? Do ends justify all **means**? Aren't there some things, such as rape and the murder of children, that can never be justified by a noble result and simply shouldn't be done?

Deontological ethics is concerned with the nature of the **acts** themselves. Deontologists maintain that acts are right or wrong in themselves (they are intrinsically right or wrong) because of some **absolute** law perhaps laid down by God, or because they go against some **duty** or obligation. A deontologist might say that murder is wrong because the very act of murder is intrinsically evil. Pacifists claim that all physical violence is wrong, and many religious groups maintain that certain acts are inherently sinful. Deontologists have the advantage of being able to take strong moral positions on certain actions, as illustrated by anti-abortion campaigners. They can prevent certain moral boundaries from being crossed. On the other hand, they aren't flexible enough to take into account special circumstances, or culture groups with different religious perspectives on life. Examples of deontological theories investigated in this book are **absolutism**, **natural moral law** and **Kantian ethics**.

Task

Which statement shows teleological thinking and which shows deontological thinking:

- 1 We should permit the abortion because she's too young and too poor to look after the child.
- 2 You should help your mother because it's your duty.
- 3 Do what your father says.
- 4 It's okay to steal if you're starving.
- 5 If you tell her the truth she'll be really upset.
- 6 Whatever you say, just tell the truth.

Now add two statements of your own to each of the two categories.