

Ethical Theories

Most people know what we mean by morally good and bad but very few people can explain what it is that makes some action good or bad. Sometimes people might agree that a particular act is bad but give very different reasons why it is bad. Sometimes two people that a particular act (for example getting drunk) is bad but mean different things by “bad”. For example I might mean that it is bad for your health but not morally bad but a different person might think that it is morally bad because it is a sin.

Over the centuries different people and different societies have come up with different frameworks for deciding these questions. These frameworks can overlap and be complimentary or they might be quite alien to one another. The list below isn't exhaustive but it does cover some of the major ethical viewpoints.

Divine Command Theory: God's Law

In Judaism, Christianity and Islam, good and bad are seen as being actually about obedience or disobedience towards God's law. This theory of ethics is called “Divine Command Theory”. In Divine Command Theory we know what good and bad mean. Of course we still have to find out what it is that God wants us to do and that is not always clear. The bible for example has 10 Commandments but one of the most famous “Thou shalt not commit murder” does not tell us what counts as murder and what does not.

Although all religions offer some moral framework not all religions follow a Divine Command Theory of ethics. Buddhism and Hinduism are good examples of religions that have a sophisticated ethical system but which is not about obeying God's (or several gods') laws.

Eudaimonism: Virtues and leading a Good Life

As well as behaving well or badly maybe it is possible to be a good person (or a bad person) in yourself. A virtuous person is a person who is good in themselves. A virtuous person will do good deeds but that isn't what makes them good they are good already.

“Eudaimon” is a Greek word that means “flourishing” or “happy” (in a special sense). The idea is that by acquiring virtues you will become a well adjusted, fulfilled, happy person. What those virtues are differ from one system to another but often there is an emphasis on good deeds and a balanced lifestyle. Many modern self help books have a Eudaimonistic view of ethics, so did the Greek philosopher Aristotle and Buddhism can also be seen as being Eudaimonistic.

The notion can be summed up by the idea that being a good person is good for you.

Deontology: Rights and Duties

You have a right to a good education; I have a duty to teach you. Deontology is the part of ethics that studies what obligations a person might have. A duty is something you should be doing (or not doing) a right is a set of duties that people have towards you. Rights and duties might arise from other ethical systems. Discussion of rights and duties are often more to do with political ethics or the ethics of work.

Some rights and duties may be things that people have agreed by contract by joining an organisation or living in a particular country. Other rights and duties might be seen as being universal and independent of your circumstances, for example “Human Rights” or duties arising from your religion.

At the heart of this view of ethics is the idea that some acts are right or wrong in themselves regardless of the consequences. In other words you should do your duty regardless of the consequences.

Consequentialism: Values and Consequences

If you have a duty to do something it shouldn't matter what happens once you have done it. A soldier might have a duty to obey orders so if he is told to shoot a civilian by a senior officer he might claim to have acted ethically because he did his duty. Consequentialism looks at ethics differently. A consequentialist cares about ends. If the end result is bad then the act was bad. How do we decide if the end was bad? That depends on your values. If you value human life, acts that lead to people dying are bad.

Consequentialism is a very different view from deontology. In consequentialism ends can justify the means.

Hedonism: Pleasure and Pain

One way of solving the problem of what is meant by "good" and "bad" is to equate them with some other things that are obviously good or bad. Most commonly is the idea that "good" is what is pleasurable and "bad" is what is painful. The term "hedonism" is sometimes used for people who indulge in every pleasure that they can but in ethics it means something more respectable. Hedonism in the ethical sense generally looks at pleasure and pain overall and not just for yourself. So an ethical hedonist would not approve of parents who didn't feed their children because they had spent all their money on champagne.

Altruism versus Egoism: Selfless and Selfish

Altruism

People approve of Mother Theresa, Christians and Muslims admire people who died for their religion (martyrs). My family doesn't like it if I eat all the chocolate brownies myself. Altruism is when you act for somebody else's benefit rather than your own. Altruism is concerned not with duty or consequence but with motive. Selfless motives are seen as being good even if the consequences are bad whereas selfish motives are seen as bad even if the consequences are good.

Egoism

In more recent times this view has come under attack. The economic theory of capitalism stresses that individual "selfish" financial motives can lead to prosperity all round. Egoism is a contrasting view of ethics to altruism. Egoists believe that a person's actions should be determined by that person's own interests.

There are lots of different kinds of egoists. At one level this isn't a theory of ethics at all but a denial that there is any such thing. However many egoists believe that it is in the general good for people to act selfishly so long as they are also acting rationally. This idea is called "rational self interest".

Descriptive Theories

Most theories of ethics are prescriptive. In other words they don't just offer insight into what the nature of morals are they also give guidance on how you should behave. Since the growth of scientific thinking some people have offered descriptive theories of ethics. In other words these are theories that may shed light on what people are doing when they make ethical judgements but they don't (and can't) actually help you make that judgement without some extra input. Below are some examples of descriptive approaches to ethics.

Emotivism: Approval and Disapproval

Emotivism is a theory of ethics that has given up trying to work out what morally good and morally bad might actually mean. Emotivism says that statements about morality don't really mean much at all instead they are just expressions of how a person feels about an issue. For example an emotivist would interpret the statement "Animal testing is unethical" as really meaning "I find the idea of testing animals yucky".

Note that Emotivism is a descriptive theory of ethics. It describes what ethical statements are like but does not give any guidance on how you should behave. Emotivism does NOT say that you SHOULD just follow your feelings when it comes to making moral decisions; it is saying that you really don't have any choice but to follow one feeling or another. Although plausible, Emotivism isn't very helpful.

Social and Psychological Theories

As far as we are aware fish don't agonise over moral dilemmas. Although elephants have emotions they don't seem troubled about the consequences of their actions. Maybe ethics is something to do with being human.

Sociology, anthropology and psychology all can provide interesting insights into ethics. More recently evolutionary biology has also attempted to explain some aspects of human behaviour. For example in all human societies (with a few particularly odd exceptions) incest is regarded as being very wrong. Evolutionary psychology would suggest that this a deep seated instinct that has arisen to protect populations from genetic diseases that would quickly be established if people very closely related had children together.

A branch of mathematics called "Game Theory" has also shown why various examples of "nice" behaviour in people or animals can be in an individual's long term interest.

More generally sociology and anthropology can show why societies need ethical systems so that people can get along together. Unfortunately once again because such theories are descriptive they can't directly help us make moral decisions.