

# Ethics in the Social Sciences – Sample

## Introduction to Morality

### Philosophy and Ethics

Ethics is one of the five branches of the study of philosophy (epistemology, logic, ethics, aesthetics and metaphysics). Ethics doesn't sit quite neatly in here, because we need to understand the nature of things and why people make the decisions they make to be able to understand what we mean by morality (what the right thing to do is).

### Approaches to the Study of Morality

The study of morality is separated into three different forms. The **scientific approach** – the description of what people (what choices do they make, how does society function, can these be observed, can morality be observed as a scientific occurrence). What ought we do to be moral people (**normative**). **Metaethics** also looks at the nature of ethics, how we come up with the idea of what is good or right, what is the nature of these concepts. What we will focus on is what we ought do, or what we should do in order to be moral.

What is the right thing to do? How do we know?

### Definitions of Key Terms

- **Ethical** – a construct, or a system, which we expect people to follow (do we think someone did something in an ethical way), more about what we are doing as opposed to the kind of person we are
- **Unethical** – what we are doing
- **Moral** – someone's character (do we think someone is a moral character)
- **Immoral** – the kind of person we are
- **Good** – values we have about something, we recognise that sometimes when we use this it has no relationship to moral (e.g. that was a good meal)
- **Bad** – see the term "good"
- **Right** – we may say something is the right thing to do (placing value judgements)
- **Wrong** – say something is the wrong thing to do
- **Amoral** – suggestion that someone doesn't have morals (they cannot grasp morality – e.g. we may say a baby doesn't have a concept of morality so it is amoral, but very few people actually are identified with this)
- **Nonmoral** – nonmoral questions, such as that meal was good (nothing to do with values or the concepts of doing something right or wrong)

When we think about ethics, there are core theories we will examine, and they link to ideas of what it is we are trying to achieve when we are trying to figure out what to do. The core questions include:

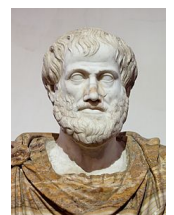
- Do the consequences matter?
- What about the way we act?
- How do I become a moral person?
- Are moral standards the same everywhere?
- Or, are they different depending on the context?

- Do I have the free will to make moral decisions?
- Or, does everything have a cause outside of my control?

For us to make some empirical and objective decisions about what is right and wrong and what we should do in a given situation we need all of the information – this is why we need to think about all of the different theories that have been used in order to make moral decisions.

### What is Morality?

- *What is morality?*
- In order to further define morality, we need to say how it is similar to and different from other areas and non-moral uses of key terms
- **Aesthetics:** ethics like aesthetics is a part of philosophy concerned with **values**. Ethics differ from aesthetics in that it is concerned with **moral** value although moral value and aesthetic value connect and overlap
- **Nonmoral uses of key terms:** good, bad, right and wrong are often used in a non-moral sense e.g. good meal, bad tooth etc. These uses often refer to function. **Aristotle** argued that morality is tied to the function of a human being
- **Manners or etiquette:** manners and etiquette are forms of socially acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. For example, swearing or using foul language is in most contexts considered unacceptable. However, there is no necessary connection between this and immorality. Of course, manners and morals overlap but care is required to distinguish them when there is no obvious connection



### Morality and its Applications

- **To whom or what does morality apply?** Morality may be applied to four areas:
  - **Religion** – morality determined by relation between human being and supernatural being
  - **Nature** – morality determined by relation between human being and nature
  - **Individuality** – morality determined by relation the individual has to him or herself (what I think about myself as an individual)
  - **Society** – morality determined by relation between human being and society
- When understanding what is moral, we need to understand what context it is being applied to/is in
- Most moral systems involve all four of these areas with one being primary
- **Who is morally responsible?** Should only human beings be held morally responsible? Are all animals non-moral?

### Where Does Morality Come From?

- Morality can be considered as having a **subjective** or **objective** origin
- As **objective**, there are three possibility for the origin of value:
  - Values are given by a supernatural being
  - Values are part of the fabric of nature

- Values are part of the “furniture” of the world, independently of human beings
- These possible explanations of the origin of values are expressed in the “supernatural theory”, the theory of “natural law” and “objectivism”
- As **subjective**, the origin of value is related to human beings. Without human beings, subjectivists theorists argue, there would be no value

### Criticisms of Value

**Supernatural theories:** belief based on faith. Diversity of traditions makes it unclear what values are best and why.

**Natural law theories:** so-called “laws of nature” are descriptive. Are there natural **moral** laws i.e. laws that are prescriptive?

**Objectivism:** can something have a value if there is no one there to value it?

**Subjectivism:** are values entirely subjective? Would the world have value without the presence of humans?

- **Synthesis:** values perhaps best viewed as both subjective, objective and emerging out of a context. Thus three variables:
  - **Objective value** – thing of value or thing valued
  - **Subject value** – a conscious being that values
  - **Situational value** – context in which valuing is situated
- Where does value come from?
  - Values might be thought of then as originating in a complex relation among the three variables: an interaction between conscious human beings, things (variously material, emotional, mental) and a specific context

We need people, the context and we need to think about the things that are there – how do I make a decision about the right thing to do. Every single situation can be linked back to these three concepts.

### Customary or Traditional and Reflective Morality

We can separate morality into two forms:

- **Customary or traditional morality:** traditional morality refers to the moral systems handed down through custom from generation to generation. We might call this static morality
  - Our parents have been told how to be moral, and they have passed in onto us, or society has told us how to be moral because it has been traditionally constructed
- **Reflective morality:** reflective morality requires that moral ideas are carefully examined and tested. Traditional morality can become reflective and dynamic when those moral ideas that are simply handed down and accepted are subjected to analysis and criticism
  - Criticising and reflecting on values and ideas on what is right and wrong

### Morality and Law

**Law:** codification of moral values?

Morality and law are not the same although of course they overlap. Law might be thought of as a public codification of morality for a culture, although certain

laws in that system, or even the system itself, might be deemed immoral e.g. apartheid (a system of institutionalised racial segregation and discrimination in South Africa, 1948-1991), the Holocaust. Law is not a necessary attribute of morality although morality may well be thought to be a necessary attribute of law, particularly as law is often deemed to be a reflection of societal values (Head and Mann, 2009).

If we say that morality and law is the same thing, then we give a free pass to all legislation even if it seems outdated, or most of us would say it is completely wrong (e.g. the Holocaust).

### **Morality and Religion**

- Is morality dependent upon religion? Can you be moral and non-religious?
- Morality need not be based exclusively on religion for five reasons:
  - Supernatural existence cannot be proven
  - Non-religious people can be moral
  - Religious foundation for ethics is difficult to establish
  - Which religion would be best ethically?
  - How could it be shown that one religion is best?
- Therefore, there is no necessary connection between ethics and religion

### **Morality and Science**

- This is something that has historically never been possible
- There are arguments that science tells us how we do behave, as opposed to how we ought to behave: neurobiology, psychology etc. however there are some arguments that science can tell us how we ought to behave
  - E.g. paediatricians against corporal punishment (hitting children); data suggests that high levels of employment equate to a happier healthier society etc.
- Arguments against:
  - **David Hume** “no description of the world can tell us how we ought to behave”
  - **Moore’s** naturalistic fallacy
  - **Jerry Fodor** “science is about facts, nor norms ... there couldn’t be a science of the human condition” – perhaps this is an undiscoverable area of science (is what is proposed by some)
- We can never say that this is the right thing to do because it does not happen 100% of the time – this is what is proposed by some

### **Kohlberg’s Theory of Moral Development**

- **Kohlberg’s** Cognitive Theory of Moral Development sets up three distinct levels of moral thinking, and each level is arranged in two stages which are “structured whole”, or organised systems of thought that give rational consistency to moral judgement
  - **Stage One** – the punishment and obedience orientation (occur when we are children)
  - **Stage Two** – the instrumental/relativist orientation (occur when we are children)



- **Stage Three** – the interpersonal concordance or ‘good boy – nice girl’ orientation (linked to what most adults do)
- **Stage Four** – the ‘law and order’ orientation (linked to what most adults do)
- **Stage Five** – the social contract orientation (arguably no-one ever reaches it, or not many people)
- **Stage Six** – the Universal-Ethical-Principle orientation (arguable no-one ever reaches it, or not many people)

### **Why Should Human Beings be Moral?**

- Being Human – the Ethics Centre (formally the St James Ethics Centre)  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VV3eWU4xiPk>
- Why should human beings do what is right?
  - Enlightened self-interest – I will be better off
  - Tradition and law – best to do because some authority says so (e.g. parents, society, government)
  - Shared human needs, goals, desires and objectives
- As a practitioner in the social sciences, how do I do my job properly? To be able to do your job properly, to make working relationships with people, you need to think about and constantly reflect on your ideas of what it means to be a moral person
- **Morality: a working definition.** Morality deals with humans and how they relate to others and the world around them. It deals with how we treat one another so as to promote what is good and right

### **Consequentialism**

Ethics is how we treat other people.

#### **Similarities and Differences Between Consequentialist (Teleological) Theories**

- All theories are concerned with consequences (unlike deontologists who are concerned with the actions themselves, and virtue ethicists who are concerned with developing a moral character)
- Differences in who should benefit from these consequences. Should I benefit? Should the majority of people benefit? – you or me, or the greater good should benefit

#### **Psychological Egoism**

- Falls under scientific category – observing what people do (cannot necessarily tell people how to behave)
- Psychological egoism is a scientific, descriptive theory, and not an ethical one. It is important to acknowledge the differences between how people **DO** act and how they **SHOULD** act
  - We will usually act in our own self-interest, and we can create this conclusion because of what people will do

**Strong psychological** egoism suggests that people always act in their own self-interest, while **weak psychological** egoism suggests people