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INSIGHT GENERAL STUDIES

PART – 1
ETHICS

INTRODUCTION TO ETHICS

Ethical teachings have been an integral part of Indian education system since ages. Our ancient literature is full of lessons on ethics and morality. The process of imparting ethical learning used to commence in the lap of mother because she served the role of first teacher. Parents, kith and kin, peers and neighbours used to play an important role in the process of socialisation of an individual in the past but the life has undergone rapid transformations during the last half a century. Ethics are a requirement for human life. It is our means of deciding a right course of action.

In the past for most people and even for many people today, an objective moral standard that is binding on all people for all times exists. While there might be disagreement on what the standard was, most acknowledged that there was a "right" choice. But in the last half-century, there has been considerable erosion in the idea that a standard exists or is even needed. For many, decisions about what is right and wrong are complete personal and completely subjective: what is right for me may not be right for you. Such thinking asserts that whatever an individual deems morally acceptable is acceptable for that person. To judge that is often considered unacceptably intolerant and such randomness is often justified in the name of liberalism.

By 1960s a situation of vacuum had developed in the context of a standard of behaviour of individuals. Corruption and other white collar crimes increased enormously in the absence of conscientious self-regulation. As the distinction between right and wrong began to blur, the society as well as state began to face various serious challenges. The common suffer most in such an environment because the rich and powerful misuse their resources and authority to fulfil their vested interests at the cost of others. Such challenges have been universal in nature and India is no exception. To overcome such a scenario caused by lack of proper understanding of right and wrong actions, good and evil or the virtue and vice, it is essential that the citizens shall be taught the principles of ethics and morality. The recent changes in UPSC syllabus involving the addition of a GS paper on Ethics, Integrity and Attitude have to be appreciated in this context. All citizens should abide by high standards of ethical behaviour but it is must for civil servants as their actions decide the fate of entire nation.

Individuals are not born with an ability to understand ethical-moral values; these are learned aspect of human behaviour. As individuals mature, their physical, emotional, and cognitive abilities develop and so does their ability to deal with ethical-moral issues. Aristotle, an early Greek thinker who proposed one of the most influential theories of ethical thinking in the West, argued that our moral abilities which he called virtues or morally good habits, develop solely through constant practice and repetition, in the same way, he argued, humans acquire their moral abilities and when they are taught and habituated by their families and communities to think, feel and behave in morally appropriate ways. Such vitally important human values as courage, generosity, self-control, temperance, self-control, sociability, modesty, fairness or justice, are all virtues that he discussed and that he believed were acquired through this kind of habituation. And although in order to develop such values one must spare a lot of his time and effort, once they are acquired virtuous behaviour comes easily and naturally.

One shall have the courage to say no to wrongs and the courage to face the truth. You shall do the right thing without any fear or favour just because it is right. It's the action, not the fruit of the action, that's important. You have to do the right thing. It may not be in your power, may not be in your time, that there'll be any fruit. But that doesn't mean you stop doing the right thing. You may never know what results come from your action. But if you do wrong or fail to stand for what is right, then the consequences of such action could be fatal to entire society and nation. To educate a man in mind and not in morals is to educate a menace to society.

The leaders of thought and of action grope their way forward to a new life, realizing, sometimes dimly, sometimes clear-sightedly, that the life of material gain, whether for a nation or an individual, is of little value, real strength comes from devotion to loftier ideals enshrining fundamental human virtues. Governance is admittedly the weak link in our quest for prosperity and equity. Elimination of corruption is not only a moral imperative but an economic necessity for a nation aspiring to catch up with the rest of the world. Improved governance in the form of non-expropriation, contract enforcement, and decrease in bureaucratic delays and corruption can raise the GDP growth rate significantly. The six perceived governance quality measures, each an aggregate of a number of sub-measures, are: voice and accountability; absence of political instability and violence; government effectiveness; reasonableness of the regulatory burden; the rule of law; and the absence of graft. Of these, the last two are the most directly significant in the context of ethical governance. A democratic republic such as ours represents the most gigantic of all possible social experiments. The success of such a state system the quality of the individual citizen is of supreme importance.

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A BASIC UNDERSTANDING OF ETHICS

Some years ago, sociologist Raymond Baumhart asked business people, "What do ethics mean to you?" Among their replies were the following:

"Ethics has to do with what my feelings tell me is right or wrong."

"Ethics has to do with my religious beliefs."

"Being ethical is doing what the law requires."

"Ethics consists of the standards of behaviour our society accepts."

"I don't know what the word means."

These replies might be typical of our own. The meaning of "ethics" is hard to pin down, and the views many people have about ethics are shaky.

Like Baumhart's first respondent, many people tend to equate ethics with their feelings. But being ethical is clearly not a matter of following one's feelings. A person following his or her feelings may recoil from doing what is right. In fact, feelings frequently deviate from what is ethical.

Nor should one identify ethics with religion. Most religions, of course, advocate high ethical standards. Yet if ethics were confined to religion, then ethics would apply only to religious people. But ethics applies as much to the behaviour of the atheist as to that of the devout religious person. Religion can set high ethical standards and can provide intense motivations for ethical behaviour. Ethics, however, cannot be confined to religion nor is it the same as religion.

Being ethical is also not the same as following the law. The law often incorporates ethical standards to which most citizens subscribe. But laws, like feelings, can deviate from what is ethical. Our own pre-Civil War slavery laws and the old apartheid laws of present-day South Africa are grotesquely obvious examples of laws that deviate from what is ethical.

Finally, being ethical is not the same as doing "whatever society accepts." In any society, most people accept standards that are, in fact, ethical. But standards of behaviour in society can deviate from what is ethical. An entire society can become ethically corrupt. Nazi Germany is a good example of a morally corrupt society.

Moreover, if being ethical were doing "whatever society accepts," then to find out what is ethical, one would have to find out what society accepts. To decide what I should think about abortion, for example, I would have to take a survey of American society and then conform my beliefs to whatever society accepts. But no one ever tries to decide an ethical issue by doing a survey. Further, the lack of social consensus on many issues makes it impossible to equate ethics with whatever society accepts. Some people accept abortion but many others do not. If being ethical were doing whatever society accepts, one would have to find an agreement on issues which does not, in fact, exist.

What, then, is ethics? Ethics is two things. First, ethics refers to well-founded standards of right and wrong that prescribe what humans ought to do, usually in terms of rights, obligations, benefits to society, fairness, or specific virtues. Ethics, for example, refers to those standards that impose the reasonable obligations to refrain from rape, stealing, murder, assault, slander, and fraud. Ethical standards also include those that enjoin virtues of honesty, compassion, and loyalty. And, ethical standards include standards relating to rights, such as the right to life, the right to freedom from injury, and the right to privacy. Such standards are adequate standards of ethics because they are supported by consistent and well-founded reasons.

Secondly, ethics refers to the study and development of one's ethical standards. As mentioned above, feelings, laws, and social norms can deviate from what is ethical. So it is necessary to constantly examine one's

standards to ensure that they are reasonable and well-founded. Ethics also means, then, the continuous effort of studying our own moral beliefs and our moral conduct, and striving to ensure that we, and the institutions we help to shape, live up to standards that are reasonable and solidly-based.

STUDY OF ETHICS

Ethics is the branch of philosophy that involves systematizing, defending, and recommending concepts of right and wrong conduct. The term ethics derives from the Ancient Greek word 'ethikos', which is derived from the word 'ethos' (habit, "custom"). As a branch of philosophy, ethics investigates the questions like "What is the best way for people to live?" and "What actions are right or wrong in particular circumstances?" In practice, ethics seeks to resolve questions related to human conduct, by defining concepts such as good and evil, right and wrong, virtue and vice, justice and crime. Ethics comprise three major areas of study within itself. These are **Meta-ethics, Normative ethics and Applied ethics.**

Metaethics deal with the theoretical meaning and reference of moral propositions, and how their truth values (if any) can be determined. It investigates where our ethical principles come from, and what they mean. Are they merely social inventions? Do they involve more than expressions of our individual emotions? Metaethical answers to these questions focus on the issues of universal truths, the will of God, the role of reason in ethical judgments, and the meaning of ethical terms themselves.

Normative ethics focuses upon the practical means of determining a moral course of action. It takes on a more practical task, which is to arrive at moral standards that regulate right and wrong conduct. This may involve articulating the good habits that we should acquire, the duties that we should follow, or the consequences of our behaviour on others.

Finally, applied ethics concern with what a person is obligated (or permitted) to do in a specific situation or a particular domain of action. It involves examining specific controversial issues, such as abortion, infanticide, animal rights, environmental concerns, homosexuality, capital punishment, or nuclear war. By using the conceptual tools of Metaethics and normative ethics, discussions in applied ethics try to resolve these controversial issues.

The lines of distinction between 'Metaethics', 'Normative ethics', and 'Applied ethics' are often blurry. For example, the issue of abortion is an applied ethical topic since it involves a specific type of controversial behaviour. But it also depends on more general normative principles, such as the right of self-rule and the right to life, which are litmus tests for determining the morality of that procedure. The issue also rests on metaethical issues such as, "where do rights come from?" and "what kind of beings have rights?"

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ESSENCE OF ETHICS

Ethics can be defined as the "Conscience" of an individual, the keeper of the moral standards by which the individual reacts to the world around. Ultimately, it is YOU, the individual, who will chart your ethical course. It is you who must determine right from wrong. It is you who must decide if you'll follow a group mind-set or strive towards a value system based upon your experiences and beliefs

Ethics are a personal set of values used by an individual to guide their actions, and to recognize any obligation. Ethics are not objective, but are subjective to the individual. Ethics are a continuously evolving code of conduct dependent upon circumstances and the life experiences of the individual.

On a whole, ethics are relative to our perception of reality, and are based upon a specific point of view. As such, ethics are not a natural set of values. If this were true, except in the cases of abhorrent behaviour, we as human beings would operate on a more animalistic level. For example, wolves instinctively care for their young and injured. They work as a cooperative group for the good of the pack. If one wolf acts in a manner detrimental to the pack, it is driven away by the others. For the wolves, their moral code is a fundamental part of their nature. But as human beings, moral order is defined by the individual. It begins when children are taught acceptable behaviours based upon societal norms and parental values. These norms and values are used to provide a framework for the development of individual values.

Given that ethics are an individual set of values, they should not be used to make broad statements of right or wrong without allowing for dissension and discussion. Ethics should be used to help each of us define our life so that we live according to the highest ideals that we, as individuals, prescribe to. Ethics, and an adherence to our ideals, are the guidelines we use to judge our actions. It is a form of self-measurement of growth, of commitment to the ideals we strive towards.

Ethics are re-interpreted usually at times of crisis or an internalized change. This happens because a viewpoint has been shown to be inaccurate or when the belief fails to take into consideration a very specific set of circumstances. At such times, the individual should rationally view their beliefs, and make internal inquiries as to the experiences that produced them. Reflection is needed to determine if a new set of values is necessary, or if existing values need only be modified to reflect the situation. Ethics should not be used to pit one set of dogmatic beliefs against another. The divide created by such practices becomes one of rigid adherence to a set of specific values, and teaches intolerance for differences in another's set of values.

According to Solomon ethics means character i.e. how people ought to act. Its basic concepts are the A. individual character ('a good person') and the social rules that govern and limit our conduct ('morality').

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WHAT IS MORALITY?

Ethics ought to be distinguished from morality which refers to human conduct & values. Ethics presupposes the existence of morality. The morality of society is related to its customs and law of society. The morality encompasses the rules of human behaviour/human conduct and values within a particular socio-cultural environment.

Morality refers to the social norms and values that guide both individuals and their interaction with their fellow human beings and communities, and with their environment. In all of these types of interaction there are important values at stake; rules and norms that are to protect these values; duties implied in social roles and positions that can foster these values and further these rules; and human virtues or capabilities that enable us to act accordingly. These moral factors are usually interwoven with religious practices and social power structures.

Morality cannot be legislated but behaviour can be regulated. Judicial decrees may not change the heart, but they can restrain the heartless.

Personal morality is influenced by institutions, public discourse, and the unconscious embodied dispositions gathered from many sources over a lifetime. Thus, people are unconsciously moral most of the time. At times, conflicts occur between the inner morality and either institutional morality, public discourse, or both. At those times a person must stop and employ ethics to reconcile the competing moralities.

When actual moral values, rules and duties are subjected to ethical analysis, their relation to basic human interests shared by people, regardless of their cultural setting, is particularly important. Moral values may change, and moral reasoning asks whether the practices that are traditionally and factually legitimated by religion, law or politics are indeed worthy of recognition. Indeed, the development of ethics in the past century has been characterized by a tendency to revalue and overthrow the moral conventions that have guided the interaction between the sexes, between human beings and animals and between human beings and their environment. A more recent task of ethics is to resist those tendencies of globalization, marketization and technologization that erode both biodiversity and valuable aspects of cultural identity - and may even have effects that threaten human rights. Although these tendencies are often presented as value-neutral, they carry with them hidden assumptions that are potential sources of inequity and abuse.

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DIMENSIONS OF ETHICS

Ethical behaviour is in essence a balancing act of satisfaction of the expectations and demands of various interfacing stakeholders. What constitutes ethical behaviour and what are the sources to determine ethical conduct have been explained differently by different schools of thought. Let us now critically examine of these theories related to the sources or the determinants of ethics.

SUPERNATURALISM (GOD-BASED ETHICS)

This theory believes that the 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?

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?

PROBLEMS WITH THIS APPROACH

Ethical atheists and supernaturalism

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.

Is fearing God 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.

How to discover what is good?

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.

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 (RESULTS-BASED ETHICS)

The Encyclopaedia 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". 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.

PROBLEMS WITH CONSEQUENTIALISM

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 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

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.

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

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

Bad points of act consequentialism

It is 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.

Act consequentialism is 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.

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."

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.

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.

OTHER PROBLEMS WITH 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

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

At times it is very difficult to ensure consistency of behaviour.

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.

Emotivism is no longer a view of ethics that has many supporters. Like subjectivism it teaches that there are no objective moral facts, and that therefore 'murder is wrong' can't be objectively true.

Emotivists teach that Moral statements are meaningless.This means that the first half of the statement 'it was wrong to murder Fred' adds nothing to the non-moral information that Fred has been murdered. Emotivistsemphasise that the Moral statements only express the speaker's feelings about the issue.Later Emotivists added to idea to Emotivism that by expressing the speaker's feelings about a moral issue moral statements may influence another person's thoughts and conduct.

CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF EMOTIVISM

Moral statements are meaningless

In Emotivism a moral statement isn't literally a statement about the speaker's feelings on the topic, but expresses those feelings with emotive force. 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'.

At first sight this seems such a bizarre idea that you might wonder if anyone had ever seriously thought it. One of the great philosophers of the 20th century certainly did:"The presence of an ethical symbol in a proposition adds nothing to its factual content. Thus if I say to someone, 'You acted wrongly in stealing that money,' I am not stating anything more than if I had simply said, 'You stole that money.' In adding that this action is wrong I am not making any further statement about it. I am simply evincing my moral disapproval of it. It is as if I had said, 'You stole that money,' in a peculiar tone of horror, or written it with the addition of some special exclamation marks. The tone, or the exclamation marks, adds nothing to the literal meaning of the sentence. It merely serves to show that the expression of it is attended by certain feelings in the speaker".

The reasons why some philosophers thought this as technical is that they thought that ethical statements could not be converted into statements that could be empirically tested, and thus failed the verifiability criterion of meaning - which meant that they were meaningless.

Emotivism pays close attention to the way in which people use language and acknowledges that a moral judgement expresses the attitude that a person takes on a particular issue. It's like shouting "hurray", or pulling a face and going "ugh".That's why this theory is called Emotivism, because it's based on the emotive effect of moral language.

Moral statements attempt to influence people

Later theories of Emotivism taught that it was about more than just an expression of emotion - the speaker is also trying to have an effect on the person they're talking to.

The American philosopher C. L. Stevenson said that "the major use of ethical judgementsis not to indicate facts, but to create an influence. Instead of merely describing people's interests, they change or intensify them. For instance: When you tell a man that he oughtn't to steal, your object isn't merely to let him know that people disapprove of stealing. You are attempting, rather, to get him to disapprove of it. Your ethical judgment has a quasi-imperative force which, operating through suggestion, and intensified by your tone of voice, readily permits you to begin to influence, to modify, his interests."

So when people disagree about an ethical issue, Emotivism makes it clear that each is trying to persuade the other to adopt their attitude and follow their recommendations as to how to behave, rather than giving information that might be true or false.

Moral judgements express one's personal opinion

Emotivism has become unpopular with philosophers because the theory that led the Emotivists to think that moral statements were meaningless has fallen from favour.Less technically, if expressing moral judgements is really no more than expressing one's personal opinion there doesn't seem any useful basis for arguing about moral judgements.

In practical terms, Emotivism falls down because it isn't very satisfying. Even (most) philosophers think moral

statements are more than just expressions of feeling.And it's perfectly possible to imagine an ethical debate in which neither party has an emotion to express.

Non-philosophers also think there is more to ethics than just the expression of an attitude or an attempt to influence behaviour. They want a better explanation and foundation for shared standards of morality than Emotivism can provide.

EMOTIVISM VERSUS SUBJECTIVISM

This version of emotivism gets round one of subjectivism's biggest problems.

Consider this example:When one subjectivist says lying is bad, they're giving the information that they disapprove of lying. If another subjectivist says lying is good, they're giving the information that they approve of lying. Since, according to the subjectivist view, both are reporting their own personal feelings, there isn't actually anything that they disagree about.But since people do sincerely disagree about moral issues, there must be more going on than pure subjectivism allows, and this is included in Emotivism:

When an Emotivist says lying is bad they're giving the instruction "don't tell lies", while an Emotivist who says lying is good is giving the instruction "do tell lies" - and we can see that there is a clear disagreement between them.

VIRTUE ETHICS/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."

PRINCIPLES VIRTUE ETHICS

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

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.

SUBJECTIVISM (RELATIVISM)

"There ain'tno sin and there ain't no virtue. There's just stuff people do." Subjectivism teaches that there are no objective moral truths out there.There are no objective moral facts. Therefore 'murder is wrong' can't be objectively true.

Many forms of subjectivism go a bit further and teach that moral statements describe how the speaker feels about a particular ethical issue.Moral statements are just factual statements about the attitude the speaker holds on a particular issue. So if I say "Lying is wrong", all I'm doing is telling you that I disapprove of telling lies

Some forms of subjectivism generalise this idea to come up with: "Moral statements are just factual statements about the attitude normal human beings hold on a particular issue".

And this may ultimately lead us to this conclusion about moral truths: "Moral judgements are dependent on the feelings and attitudes of the persons who think about such things".

GOOD POINTS OF SUBJECTIVISM

Reflects the subjective elements of morality: It reflects the close relationship between morality and people's feelings and opinions - indeed it can cope with the contradictory moral views we often find ourselves wrestling with.

Reflects the evaluative elements of moral statements: Moral statements in everyday life make judgements ("lying is wrong"), factual statements ("cats have fur") don't.

Shows that moral judgements communicate dis/approval: It reflects the communication of approval and disapproval that seems to go along with the everyday making of moral statements.

May clarify what people are arguing about: Subjectivism may enable people disagreeing over the rightness or wrongness of some issue to see that the real dispute is not about objective truth but about their own preferences.

Reflects the persuasive intentions behind ethical discussions: Subjectivism may also enable people engaging in moral argument to realise that they are not arguing about objective truths but trying to persuade their opponent to adopt their point of view.

BAD POINTS OF SUBJECTIVISM

The problem with subjectivism is that it seems to imply that moral statements are less significant than most people think they are - this may of course be true without rendering moral statements insignificant.

"If I approve of something, it must be good"

• Subjectivism seems to tell us that moral statements give information only about what we feel about moral issues.

• If the simplest form of subjectivism is true then when a person who genuinely approves of telling lies says "telling lies is good" that moral statement is unarguably true. It would only be untrue if the speaker didn't approve of telling lies.

• So under this theory it seems that all the speaker has to do to prove that lying is good is to show lots of evidence that they do indeed approve of lying - perhaps that they tell lots of lies and feel good about it, indeed are surprised if anyone criticises them for being a liar, and that they often praise other people for telling lies.

• Most people would find this way of approaching ethics somewhat unhelpful, and wouldn't think it reflected the way in which most people talk about ethical issues.

Moral statements seem more than statements about feelings

• By and large if a person says something is wrong we usually get the message that they disapprove of that something, but most of us probably think that the other person is doing more than just telling us about their feelings.

How can we blame people if moral truths are always subjective?

• If moral statements have no objective truth, then how can we blame people for behaving in a way that 'is wrong', i.e. if "murder is wrong" has no objective truth, then how can we justify punishing people for murder?

• One answer is that we can justify punishment for murder on the basis of the objective truth that most normal people in society disapprove of murder. If we do this, we should not pretend that our justification is based on anything other than the majority view.

INTUITIONISM

Intuitionism teaches that there are objective moral truths, and that human beings can find them by using their minds in a particular, intuitive way. Intuitionism teaches three main things:

• There are real objective moral truths that are independent of human beings.

• These are fundamental truths that can't be broken down into parts or defined by reference to anything except other moral truths.

• Human beings can discover these truths by using their minds in a particular, intuitive way.

Intuitionism does not mean that all moral decisions are reached by relying on intuition. Intuition enables the discovery of the basic moral truths, and everyday moral decision-making then involves thinking about the choices available and making moral judgements in an ordinary sort of way.

A leading UK intuitionist was the Cambridge philosopher G E Moore (1873-1954) who set out his ideas in the 1902 book Principia Ethica. "If I am asked, What is good? My answer is that good is good, and that is the end of the matter. Or if I am asked How is good to be defined? My answer is that it cannot be defined, and that is all I have to say about it. But disappointing as these answers may appear, they are of the very last importance.

My point is that good is a simple notion, just as yellow is a simple notion; that, just as you cannot, by any manner of means, explain to anyone who does not already know it, what yellow is, so you cannot explain what good is."

Or to put it at its simplest: 'Good' means 'good' and that's all there is to say about it.

Moore objected to something called 'the naturalistic fallacy', which states that moral truths can be analysed in terms of physical or psychological things which exist in the natural world. Moral truths were moral truths, and that was that.

Moore was a university professor, and his idea of what things were good, such as friendship and the appreciation of beauty, was limited by his quiet and academic life. His writings didn't demonstrate that his theory was likely to help deal with serious ethical dilemmas.

BAD POINTS OF INTUITIONISM

Philosophers object to intuitionism because:
- they don't think that objective moral truths exist.
- they don't think that there is a process of moral intuition.
- there's no way for a person to distinguish between something actually being right and it merely seeming right to that person.
- if intuitionism worked properly, everyone would come to the same moral conclusions, but they don't.

Objective moral truths don't exist

Many philosophers don't think that there are such things as objective moral truths. For them, moral statements are not factual statements about how the world is.

Furthermore, it might be claimed that we could never know the truth, even if it existed objectively, because knowledge requires testing in a properly scientific fashion, and that is not available for moral statements.

Moral intuition doesn't exist

The idea that human beings have something called moral intuition is superficially attractive, but doesn't easily stand up to inspection.

Is it another sense like sight or hearing? Probably not, since the moral truths that moral intuition should detect don't seem to be out in the physical world.

Nor is it a process of reasoning, because intuitionists usually rule that out, too.

Perhaps it shows itself in moral emotions, like feelings of guilt? But although human beings certainly have such feelings, the feelings could be the result of breaking internal mental rules of conduct or breaching cultural rules, rather than of breaking objective moral rules.

Seeming right may not be the same as being right

When an intuitionist ponders a problem the only things they have to work with are their feelings, thoughts and attitudes.

Working with these entirely subjective things the intuitionist arrives at moral intuitions, which he then puts forward as objective truths.

But how does the intuitionist get from the subjective to the objective?

People reach different ethical conclusions

If there are real objective moral truths, then they are presumably the same for everyone. Yet different people come to different conclusions faced with the same ethical problems.

Some people say that these moral truths are 'self-evident', but this just leaves the problem of different things being self-evident to different selves!

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.

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.

KANTIAN DUTY-BASED ETHICS

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.

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.

KANT'S CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE

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.

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.

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.

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.

CONTEXTUALISM (SITUATION ETHICS)

Situation ethics teaches that ethical decisions should follow flexible guidelines rather than absolute rules, and be taken on a case by case basis.In situation ethics, right and wrong depend upon the situation.There are no universal moral rules or rights - each case is unique and deserves a unique solution.

Situation ethics rejects 'prefabricated decisions and prescriptive rules'. It teaches that ethical decisions should follow flexible guidelines rather than absolute rules, and be taken on a case by case basis."...reflective morality demands observation of particular situations, rather than fixed adherence to a priori principles".

So a person who practices situation ethics approaches ethical problems with some general moral principles rather than a rigorous set of ethical laws and is prepared to give up even those principles if doing so will lead to a greater good."Since 'circumstances alter cases', situationism holds that in practice what in some times and places we call right is in other times and places wrong...For example, lying is ordinarily not in the best interest of interpersonal communication and social integrity, but is justifiable nevertheless in certain situations."

Situation ethics was originally devised in a Christian context, but it can easily be applied in a non-religious way.

ELEMENTS OF SITUATION ETHICS

The elements of situation ethics were described by Joseph Fletcher, its leading modern proponent, like this:

Moral judgments are decisions, not conclusions

• Decisions ought to be made situationally, not prescriptively.

• We should seek the well-being of people, rather than love principles.

Only one thing is intrinsically good, namely, love: nothing else

• Love, in this context, means desiring and acting to promote the wellbeing of people

• Nothing is inherently good or evil, except love (personal concern) and its opposite, indifference or actual malice.

• Nothing is good or bad except as it helps or hurts persons.

• The highest good is human welfare and happiness (but not, necessarily, pleasure).

• Whatever is most loving in a situation is right and good—not merely something to be excused as a lesser evil.

• Moral theology seeks to work out love's strategy, and applied ethics devises love's tactics.

Love "wills the neighbour's good" [desires the best for our neighbour] whether we like them or not

• The ultimate norm of Christian decisions is love: nothing else

• The radical obligation of the Christian ethic to love even the enemy implies unmistakably that every neighbour is not a friend and that some are just the opposite.

Love and justice are the same, for justice is love distributed

• Love and justice both require acts of will.

• Love and justice are not properties of actions, they are things that people either do or don't do.

• Love and justice are essentially the same.

- Justice is Christian love using its head—calculating its duties. The Christian love ethic, searching seriously for a social policy, forms a coalition with the utilitarian principle of the 'greatest good of the greatest number.'

The rightness depends on many factors

The rightness of an action does not reside in the act itself but in the loving configuration of the factors in the situation—in the 'elements of a human act' —i.e., its totality of end, means, motive, and foreseeable consequences.

GOOD POINTS OF SITUATION ETHICS

It's personal

- Situation ethics is sensitive to circumstances, context, particularity, and cultural traditions. Every moral decision is required to demonstrate respect for individuals and communities and the things that they regard as valuable.
- This avoids the logical, detached, impersonal ways of thinking that some people think are overemphasised in some other forms of ethics.

It's particular

- Because moral decisions are treated on a case-by-case basis, the decision is always tailored to particular situations.

It's based on doing good

- Situation ethics teaches that right acts are those motivated by the wish to promote the well-being of people.

BAD POINTS OF SITUATION ETHICS

By the 1970s, situation ethics had been roundly rejected as no ethics at all because:

It excludes most universal moral truths

By doing this it seems to remove any possibility of guaranteeing universal human rights, and satisfying human needs for a useful ethical framework for human behaviour.

It's not clear what 'love' means

Although the notion of love used in situation ethics seems attractive, it's pretty vague and can be interpreted in many ways.

It's difficult to implement

Situation ethics seems to be little more than a form of act consequentialism, in that a person can only choose the right thing to do if they consider all the consequences of their possible action, and all the people who may be affected.

It can't produce consistent results

Situation ethics produces a lack of consistency from one situation to the next.

It may be both easier, and more just and loving, to treat similar situations similarly - thus situation ethics should not be treated as a free-for-all, but should look for precedents while continuing to reject rigid ethical rules.

It may approve of 'evil' acts

Situation ethics teaches that particular types of action don't have an inherent moral value - whether they are good or bad depends on the eventual result.

So it seems that situation ethics permits a person to carry out acts that are generally regarded as bad, such as killing and lying, if those acts lead to a sufficiently good result.

This is an uncomfortable conclusion, but one that affects other ethical theories as well. Moreover, it does seem to be accepted in certain situations. As an obvious example, killing people is generally regarded as bad, but is viewed as acceptable in some cases of self-defence.

The popular TV drama 24 regularly brought up this issue with regards to torture. The characters in the drama claimed they were justified in the (sometimes brutal) torture of suspects because the information gained in doing so saved thousands of lives.

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DETERMINANTS OF ETHICS

We all have an image of our better selves-of how we are when we act ethically or are "at our best." We probably also have an image of what an ethical community, an ethical business, an ethical government, or an ethical society should be. Ethics really has to do with all these levels-acting ethically as individuals, creating ethical organizations and governments, and making our society as a whole ethical in the way it treats everyone.

Simply stated, ethics refers to standards of behaviour that tell us how human beings ought to act in the many situations in which they find themselves-as friends, parents, children, citizens, businesspeople, teachers, professionals, and so on.

It is helpful to identify what ethics is NOT:

• Ethics is not the same as feelings. Feelings provide important information for our ethical choices. Some people have highly developed habits that make them feel bad when they do something wrong, but many people feel good even though they are doing something wrong. And often our feelings will tell us it is uncomfortable to do the right thing if it is hard.

• Ethics is not religion. Many people are not religious, but ethics applies to everyone. Most religions do advocate high ethical standards but sometimes do not address all the types of problems we face.

• Ethics is not following the law. A good system of law does incorporate many ethical standards, but law can deviate from what is ethical. Law can become ethically corrupt, as some totalitarian regimes have made it. Law can be a function of power alone and designed to serve the interests of narrow groups. Law may have a difficult time designing or enforcing standards in some important areas, and may be slow to address new problems.

• Ethics is not following culturally accepted norms. Some cultures are quite ethical, but others become corrupt -or blind to certain ethical concerns (as the United States was to slavery before the Civil War). "When in Rome, do as the Romans do" is not a satisfactory ethical standard.

• Ethics is not science. Social and natural science can provide important data to help us make better ethical choices. But science alone does not tell us what we ought to do. Science may provide an explanation for what humans are like. But ethics provides reasons for how humans ought to act. And just because something is scientifically or technologically possible, it may not be ethical to do it.

Why Identifying Ethical Standards is Hard?

There are two fundamental problems in identifying the ethical standards we are to follow:

1. On what do we base our ethical standards?

2. How do those standards get applied to specific situations we face?

If our ethics are not based on feelings, religion, law, accepted social practice, or science, what are they based on? Many philosophers and ethicists have helped us answer this critical question. They have suggested at least five different sources of ethical standards we should use.

FIVE SOURCES OF ETHICAL STANDARDS

THE UTILITARIAN APPROACH

Some ethicists emphasize that the ethical action is the one that provides the most good or does the least harm, or, to put it another way, produces the greatest balance of good over harm. The ethical corporate action, then, is the one that produces the greatest good and does the least harm for all who are affected-customers, employees,