

## **Ethics**

Are you a good person? What does it mean to be good? What is good? Why should I be good? Are they a good person?

These are the kind of questions we will be dealing with today. We are going to be looking at ethics – the philosophy of how we behave and think.

The aim of today is to discover what we mean by good and evil, to determine what defines good and evil and to look at how, or even if, we can measure the good and evil in ourselves and others.

### **Introduction**

The starting point must be to define what ethics are. Are ethics just about determining good and bad? Are they purely in ideal, something philosophers debate about but have no real meaning?

An interesting definition of ethics states that “... ethics is concerned with distinguishing between good and evil in the world, between right and wrong human actions, and between virtuous and nonvirtuous characteristics of people.” This suggests a deep and significant meaning to ethics. That it plays a part in our lives and that we should be concerned with whether we have ethics or not.

Another states that ethics is “... the branch of philosophy concerning morality...” which seems far more clear cut yet far less meaningful in terms of whether we should be concerning ourselves with it or not.

*What are ethics?*

### **What are good and evil?**

This is perhaps the biggest question of all. What do we mean when we say that giving to charity is good and killing people is bad? How are we able to judge actions and deeds? Are we even able to define good and evil?

*What are good and evil?*

There are many schools of thought about these questions. Philosophers have been debating these ideas for centuries and will continue for many more. I will outline a couple of the main answers that have been put forward over the years regarding what good and evil are.

Religious Absolutism – The view that good is defined supernaturally, obedience to this code of conduct is good, disobedience evil.

Hedonism – That an individual must pursue their own desires, regardless of society, good is achieving this, evil is not.

Moral relativism – The idea that good and evil are personally defined, that good is usually what serves society best and evil the opposite.

Nihilism – the idea that there is no objective good and evil, hence no measure can be applied.

*Which (if any) do you think is true for you? Are there any other ideas you can think of?*

### **Objective versus Subjective**

Is good absolute? Is there a list of actions that are always good and vice versa? Are we inherently good or do we learn it?

There are strong arguments for both cases. Followers of the objective path of good and evil argue that some actions are always good e.g. helping others, caring for the elderly etc and that some actions are always bad, for example killing others and abusing children.

Critics also argue that in many cases this doesn't hold true. That good and evil can only be defined in context. Euthanasia is a good example of this.

*Do you think right and wrong are objective or subjective?*

*Are there any examples you can think of?*

## **Conclusion**

So, we have looked at ethics – what they mean to us, how we can define good and evil and whether that definition applies to all acts and deeds or just our own.

What does all this mean? Is this just an academic exercise?

Arthur Dobrin, a Humanist philosopher made these observations about ethics and how they are applied:

Do no harm to the earth, she is your mother.  
Being is more important than having.  
Never promote yourself at another's expense.  
Hold life sacred; treat it with reverence.  
Allow each person the dignity of his or her labour.  
Open your home to the wayfarer.  
Be ready to receive your deepest dreams;  
sometimes they are the speech of unblighted conscience.  
Always make restitutions to the ones you have harmed.  
Never think less of yourself than you are.  
Never think that you are more than another.

*A good code of ethics?*

*Are they subjective or objective?*

*What does ethics now mean to you?*