

## 2 Grouping ethical theories

Philosophers have identified common links between the various ethical theories and have categorised them into groups.

### a) *Absolutist versus relativist*

**Absolutists** believe that there exists a standard of right and wrong that is fully and totally binding on all human beings. Those who are religious may feel that this absolute standard proceeds from the mind and will of a supreme being. Those who are not religious may believe that the standard simply exists.

**Relativists** believe that there is no absolute right or wrong. They do not see morality as imposing a binding obligation on human beings to behave in a particular way. They see morality as the response of human communities to issues of how to behave in relation to each other. There are no absolute rules, but there are norms of behaviour that promote goodwill and happiness or some other desirable objective.

A relativist can say that she finds a certain course of action unjust or morally wrong, but it is difficult for her to conclude that someone else should feel that this action was wrong. To the absolutist, a wrong course of action is something that they are under a binding and absolute obligation *not* to do.

Whereas the absolutist would have to say: 'This is wrong for me and for you and for everyone,' the relativist could say: 'This is wrong for me but may be right for you,' which is something the absolutist could never say.

There is some ambiguity in the terms 'absolutist' and 'relativist' in that they are not always mutually exclusive but can overlap; for example, relativist systems may have an absolutist element. Hence, moral relativists might agree on very basic human values, such as respect for property, even though they may interpret this very differently.

### b) *Subjective versus objective*

In ethics, a theory is described as **subjective** if its truth is dependent on the person's view. This is very different from saying that an ethical theory is relativist, since this describes the range of the truth and does not hold true in all situations.

A theory is described as **objective** if its truth is independent of a person's view. Again, this is very different from saying that an ethical theory is absolutist, since this describes the range of the truth and it holds true in all situations.

It seems natural to link subjectivity with relativism, since both terms imply freedom of choice of the individual: nothing is fixed and immovable. However, there is also a sense in which subjectivity can be linked to absolutism. For example, you might conclude that no ethical theory can be absolutist since our values stem from our own feelings and choices.

However, you may also think that some of those feelings and choices are universal to human beings, and so apply to everyone.

This implies that it is not a contradiction to have an ethical theory that is subjectively grounded but holds to absolute values.

### KEY WORDS

**Absolutist:** an ethical system involving rules that are to be followed by all people at all times, in all circumstances

**Relativist:** an ethical system that has no fixed rules but each action depends on the situation

### KEY QUESTIONS

- Can an ethical theory be absolutist and subjective?
- Can an ethical theory be relativist and objective?

### KEY WORDS

**Subjective:** having its source within the mind; a particular point of view; dependent on the subject

**Objective:** external to the mind; real or true regardless of subject and their point of view

### c) *Deontological versus teleological*

The dilemma of the father facing the terrorist raised questions about the consequences of various actions that could be taken. Indeed, it is often the case that thinking about the consequences of a particular action persuades us whether or not to take that action. Such an approach, that focuses on the consequences, is called a **teleological ethical** theory.

In such theories, the rightness or wrongness of an action is identified by the consequences it produces. If the theory held that the action that best resulted in 'the good of the majority' was the criterion for judging right action, then the right action would be the one that resulted in the most good for the majority. It is the result, not the act itself, that decides the right action to take. This approach is also called **consequentialism**, since it claims that the value of the consequences of our actions is decisive for their moral status as right or wrong.

In **deontological** theories there is a relationship between duty and the morality of human actions. Therefore, deontological ethical theories are concerned with the acts themselves, irrespective of the consequences of those acts. For instance, a deontologist might argue that murder was wrong *whatever* the situation or consequence, and therefore euthanasia was morally wrong.

It is not such things as feelings of happiness, or good for the greatest number, that decide a right action, but rather that certain acts are *intrinsically* right or wrong. These wrong acts go against our duty or obligation.

## 3 What is applied ethics?

**Applied ethics** is the term used to describe the debates that arise when ethical issues are considered in practice. The study of applied ethics is complex and difficult because it is the point at which principles are tested in the real world. Applied ethics often involves the conflicting nature of principles and challenges a person to order and prioritise these principles.

*An ethical dilemma arises when two or more causes of conduct may be justifiable in any given set of circumstances, possibly resulting in diametrically opposed outcomes.*

(Mason and Laurie)

A person making an ethical decision is often driven by deeply held convictions. This is especially the case when a **value judgement** is made to decide whether something is right or wrong. Such convictions are influenced by principles, emotions, different situations, a process of reasoning, cultural influences, the immediate environment and even upbringing. These are all issues to consider at a deeper level.

There is no one uniform approach to dealing with ethical issues. It is interesting to see that there are even slightly different perspectives and emphases when it comes to considering ethical issues. For example, in medical ethics the philosophical writer takes a slightly different approach from the medical stance and the approach of the legal scholar is different again. Compare, for example, the works of Singer, Vardy, Grosch and Wilcockson (philosophy) with those of the General Medical Council, the *British Medical Journal* and Hope (medical) and Mason and Laurie (legal).



### KEY WORDS

**Teleological ethics:** any ethical system that is concerned with consequences of actions; from the Greek, meaning 'end' or 'purpose'

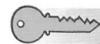
**Consequentialism:** another name for teleological ethics

**Deontological ethics:** any ethical system that is concerned with the act itself rather than the consequences of the act; from the Greek, meaning 'obligation' or 'duty'



### KEY QUESTION

What is the difference between deontological and teleological ethics?



### KEY WORDS

**Applied ethics:** the application of ethical theory to actual problems

**Value judgement:** an assessment that says more about the values of the person making it than about what is actually being assessed

“ KEY QUOTE ”

*Given that we want to regard a newly born baby as a person, and to forbid the killing of it as murder, it seems arbitrary to distinguish between this and the killing of an unborn child almost at full term, and then the argument can be carried back step by step until immediately after conception.*

(Mackie)

We are considering matters of life and death. When it comes to these ethical issues, there are some important factors to take into consideration when debating the apparent rights and wrongs.

No one would argue that the act of abortion is a good thing to do *per se*. That is because there are universal principles to which all rational and sane people would agree. One such principle is that killing is not a good thing. However, it is when we ask the question: ‘In what situation...?’ that the whole area explodes. What about war? What about respecting the rights of another individual? What about protecting another? The list is endless.

It is important to bear in mind that those people that compromise this principle, whether in times of war or in an argument for euthanasia or abortion, are doing so not because they reject the idea that killing is wrong but because they recognise two things:

- the principle that ‘killing is wrong...’ is an ideal that, when applied to the real world, needs further qualification
- sometimes one has to weigh up and prioritise the application of principles in a real situation where conflicts of ideology arise.

There is, therefore, a clear distinction between theory in itself and that same theory in terms of how it unfolds in practice. The classic case is euthanasia, for which the complexities of situations give rise to a plethora of legal and ethical dilemmas.

Jesus is believed to have said, in response to violence: ‘Turn the other cheek.’ Mahatma Gandhi interpreted this literally and founded his ideology of passive resistance through non-violence (*ahimsa*) on such a principle. However, there are always limitations and even Gandhi could not make this a legal principle. Turning the other cheek and forgiveness would not be workable principles for society.

Any individual may be inspired and such principles are wonderful for people to follow as a guide. They are, however, directives addressed to the individual, not regulations for society, and only a fool would reject our legal and judicial system for such principles. Why? Ideally, they are splendid but, in practice, regrettably unworkable as enforced rules or laws.

Applied ethics, then, can be seen as the pursuit of standards that can be applied and that work in practice. It is the search for a solution that offers the workability of a principle that recognises the rights of an individual, that respects deeply held values and principles and thus is able to benefit society as a whole.

It is here that things really get interesting as, once again, the principles and their varying application and prioritisation give way to a complexity of debates.

➔ EXAM TIP

It is important to be able to describe and explain the key facts to do with ethical ideas. However, it is even more important to be able to discuss the implications and questions that the ethical issues raise. This demonstrates both ‘a coherent and well-structured response to the task at a wide range or considerable depth’ and also that you are ‘selecting the most important features for emphasis and clarity; using evidence to explain the key ideas’ (top level 4 descriptor A01).