

How can we know, if at all, that our behaviour is ethical?

People base their ethical behaviour on a predetermined set of morals. These morals may have come from past experience or may have been set through what people believe in, their religious beliefs for example. Throughout history different theories have appeared that base themselves on this question, whether or not our behaviour is ethical and how we can be sure it is. Philosophers have debated this subject and come up with their own reasons as to why a person's behaviour can be judged to be ethical. According to this every person, society or religion has a different idea as to what ethical behaviour is; therefore we have difficulty in judging whether or not the way in which we act is ethical.

An example of differences in ethical behaviour can be found in religion. If we take an extreme Muslim society such as Afghanistan and compare it with a Western country such as Great Britain, major differences can already be seen. What is acceptable and what is not depends entirely on the religion you follow or what one believes in. In Afghanistan, the authorities think that it is acceptable to repress women, to the extent that they have public executions in an arena that was supposed to be used for football matches. This is accepted as a suitable punishment for women and some men when they are found to be opposing the Taleban regime. The West sees this as unethical behaviour, as most people living in places like Great Britain have equal rights and freedom of speech, which are seriously repressed in Afghanistan. One can find differences in ethical behaviour amongst these countries, therefore it is difficult to judge if the way you are behaving is ethical, as this has to be judged upon a number of factors; your religion and the society you live in are examples.

If a person was to base their behaviour on religion to judge whether or not it is ethical. Then they can be said to be acting religiously as well as ethically. If the example of Afghanistan is used again, then the people might accept this form of execution, even though it may seem unethical, because their beliefs in the Muslim religion are stronger than their own personal convictions of what is right and what is wrong. From this we can see that their ethical behaviour is determined by the religious customs of the Muslim society.

There are several ethical theories that have been put forward by different people in the past. The first of which is put forward by Thomas Hobbes, which is an individualists theory, whereby it is argued that humans are all competitive beings who desire to gain an advantage over each other, so they are selfish and that human action is based on emotions rather than reason. The only way to judge whether our behaviour is ethical is through a set of contracts that have been agreed with people, so a sense of mutual agreement might curb the selfishness of human emotions. Thomas Hobbes maintained that morality was a matter of the passions, and from this people can determine if they are acting ethically, as they are able to call one thing good and another thing bad.

Bentham and Mill, however took a more utilitarianist argument. Utilitarianism is the ethical theory by which actions are judged according to their anticipated results. Bentham therefore concluded that whatever was done in a society would be judged to be right or wrong according to whether or not it benefited a majority of its citizens. From this we will be able to know if our behaviour is ethical, if it is able to generate the maximum amount of happiness. There are several problems with this, how can we know that our behaviour will provide the greatest amount of happiness. For example a doctor has the chance to save a mother and child's life or an elderly man's life, the treatment would allow the mother and child to live for a few years as they are both infected by a life threatening disease. With Bentham's argument the greatest amount of happiness would be provided if the mother and child were saved, as they are two rather than one, like the elderly man. But when measured in years of happiness where the elderly man may live for another twenty years, the mother and child will only live for another two and this would mean that the greatest amount of happiness might be provided if the doctor were to save the old man. Although on strict utilitarian grounds the doctor would have to save the mother and child.

Mill wanted to go beyond this argument offered by Bentham, as he understood the problems of Bentham's theory on ethical behaviour. He wanted to shift the emphasis on happiness or pleasure to being a matter of quality rather than quantity. He also distinguishes between the higher pleasures, associated with the mind and lower pleasures, associated with the body. One problem is evident with this sort of thesis, our ethical behaviour can not only be determined by one factor, whether or not we are providing the greatest amount of happiness or pleasure to the people around us and society in general, a whole range of factors need to be taken into account to determine for ourselves if our behaviour is ethical.

There are philosophers who conclude that all humans are selfish and therefore everyone acts selfishly. This would mean that ethical behaviour is determined by the greatest gain that one person can make out of something. An example can be taken in Mother Theresa, who was seen to be truly altruistic but if we were to take this argument and apply it to her, then we can conclude that she could have been acting selfishly. She could have been doing this to grant herself passage into heaven by taking care of so many people, although she may have cared for these people her ultimate aim may have been entrance into heaven. Another example is Ghandi, who was seen to be a freedom fighter and he devoted everything to the cause of Indian independence. Yet again in this case he could be seen to be acting selfishly, maybe trying to gain popularity and the respect of all the people. Although, we might take the case of a criminal who hijacks a store and steals some money and he may see his behaviour as normal as he is making personal gains, acting selfishly. In the end it is human nature to act selfishly but this argument paints a bleak picture, and in the end people do not determine whether their behaviour is ethical by personal gain, as other factors have more influence in what they are doing.

A person can also act unethically but for a good reason. In a typical Western society stealing is seen as not behaving ethically. What for instance would happen if a person was going to die if medicine was not brought to him as fast as possible, and the only way this medicine could be found was by stealing it? The person would have to behave in an unethical way to do a deed that would benefit the person that was about to die. Therefore this person acted unethically to do an ethical deed and he allowed the person who was going to die a chance to live. If the opposite view was taken, a person can do an ethical deed but for the wrong reasons as well. This has already been

discussed to some extent but the main factor in this is self-interest. Another example would be a person handing money to a beggar on the street but only to make himself feel better and look good in front of the people who viewed him doing this.

We can come to the conclusion that it is very difficult to judge whether or not our behaviour is ethical, if it is at all. It just depends on your beliefs and the way you have been brought up. This is where someone picks up their morals and how they view the world, to judge how to treat other people. Motive can be used to judge ethical behaviour, if a person has good motives then this person can be said to be behaving ethical and the opposite applies to a person that has bad motives. This can be applied to anywhere, but it again depends on your own beliefs. War can be used as an example to illustrate this, both sides in a war see themselves as acting with good motives. This would make it difficult to judge which side was acting ethically, depending on which side you supported in this war. People therefore have to judge for themselves if they are acting ethically or not.

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