Unit One: Introduction to Ethics

UNIT INFORMATION

Unit Overview

This unit provides an introduction to the study of ethics and a brief overview of some of the main branches of philosophical thought about ethics. As well as introducing the central ideas that relate to environmental and development ethics and how these two areas of ethical study are interrelated, this unit shows why ethics as a discipline can provide useful tools for clarifying arguments, for understanding a range of viewpoints in a debate, and for justifying one's own ethical positions more clearly. Key conceptual frameworks and some key terms are introduced and explained.

Unit Aims

- To introduce some key terms relating to the study of ethics.
- To introduce some key ethical ideas, principles and frameworks.
- To explain the rationale for studying environmental and development ethics and to examine how these areas of study are interrelated.

Unit Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit, students should be able to:

- define the terms 'philosophy', 'ethics', and 'morality'
- outline the rationale for studying ethics, particularly in relation to environmental and development concerns
- explain the difference between deontological and teleological ethics
- define and briefly explain some of the key terms relating to ethical monism, relativism and pluralism

Unit Interdependencies

This unit provides a concise introduction to the study of ethics. It introduces key ethical terms and concepts that recur throughout the other units of the module. Therefore it is recommended that you study this unit before attempting the other units, as it provides useful knowledge and understanding of those key terms and concepts.

KEY READINGS

Section 1

❖ Traer R (2013) Moral philosophy: an adventure in reasoning. In: *Doing Environmental Ethics*, 2nd edn. Westview Press, Boulder, Colorado, pp. 3–20.

This chapter introduces the field of moral philosophy, from which much scholarly knowledge and understanding of ethics derives. It explains that ethics answers the question, 'How should we live?' The chapter considers some fundamental themes, including ideas about what is 'right' and 'good', and it examines ways of reasoning critically about our feelings. The field of environmental ethics is introduced, but the account presented in this chapter is also relevant to the theme of development ethics. A variety of key terms are introduced and defined in this chapter.

Section 2

❖ Wolf S (1982) Moral saints. *Journal of Philosophy* **79**(8) 419–439.

In this thought-provoking article, Susan Wolf argues that moral perfection, in the sense of moral 'saintliness', is not a particularly rational, good or desirable model of personal well-being toward which people should strive. In doing so, she presents a range of interesting and provocative ideas about normative ethics. In particular, she argues that, at some point, 'we must be willing to raise normative questions from a perspective that is unattached to a commitment to any particular well-ordered system of values.'

Section 3

❖ Traer R (2013) Ethics and science: moral consideration. In: *Doing Environmental Ethics*, 2nd edn. Westview Press, Boulder, Colorado, pp. 21–39.

This chapter considers the relation between ethics and science, focusing on the evolution of scientific knowledge. The problematic area of valuing nature is introduced. The chapter shows that, far from being detached from questions of values and ethics, science plays a key role in those questions, because what we value depends on what we believe and that, in turn, is heavily influenced by science.

FURTHER READINGS

Crocker D (1996) *International Development Ethics*.

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UN (2012) *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.

Available from:
http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/ [Accessed 05 August 2013]

Worldwatch Institute (2012) *State of the World 2012: Moving Toward Sustainable Prosperity*. Worldwatch Institute, Washington DC.

Wraight CD (2011) *Ethics of Trade and Aid: Development, Charity or Waste?* Continuum, London.

MULTIMEDIA

Carnegie Council (2009) *Joel Rosenthal: Pluralism & Ethics*. Video. Duration 4.12 minutes.

Available from:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E6oc9JFUxEU

This video clip, featuring the President of the Carnegie Council, Joel Rosenthal, focuses on ethical pluralism. It addresses the question, 'Where do we draw the line when deciding whose ethics are legitimate?'

LSULife (2007) *What is Ethics?* Video. Duration 1.36 minutes.

Available from:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZIaHxC7BT0A

This short video clip shows a selection of university students attempting to define the term 'ethics'.

TED (2009) *Gordon Brown on Global Ethic vs. National Interest*. Video. Duration 17.03 minutes.

Available from:
http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/en/gordon_brown_on_global_ethic_vs_national_interest.html

This video clip shows the former UK Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, answering questions about the 'global ethic' he called for. The video addresses the question of whether the interests of an individual nation can be reconciled with the greater good of humanity.

1.0 WHY STUDY ETHICS?

Section Overview

The study of ethics belongs primarily within the discipline of philosophy, in the sub-discipline of 'moral philosophy', and so our account begins there. Philosophical study concerns the systematic and rational consideration of human systems of belief. The process of asking and answering questions about belief systems is therefore fundamental to philosophical study – it is not sufficient merely to 'learn' the answers that have been proposed by other philosophers! The branch of philosophy called 'ethics' is concerned with questions concerning how human beings ought to live their lives, and about what is 'right' or 'wrong'. In this section we look at how philosophers attempt to answer such questions in a systematic and rational way. This section also introduces the fields of environmental and development ethics, and consider how these two fields of study are interrelated.

Section Learning Outcomes

By the end of this section, students should be able to:

- define the terms 'philosophy', 'ethics', and 'morality'
- outline the rationale for studying ethics, particularly in relation to environmental and development concerns

1.1 What is 'philosophy'?

What do philosophers do?

> ✍ What do you think philosophers do? How do they spend their time? Spend a few minutes thinking about what you know about philosophers past and present; if possible, try to identify some of the advances in knowledge that they have made. Try to write a brief definition of philosophy. What is the purpose of 'doing' philosophy?

As human beings live their lives, they acquire a wealth of information about the world around them that they use to build up a collection of ideas about the world and their place within it. Those ideas come from a variety of sources. They may come from scientific discoveries, personal experience, traditional beliefs commonly held by people in the society in which they live, and so on. Much of the time people accept those ideas without questioning them; they are relatively 'unconsidered' or 'unexamined'. A philosopher, however, will attempt to scrutinise such ideas about the world to see if they are based on sound evidence. Instead of having a collection of unorganised beliefs and opinions that may be incoherent and self-contradictory, the philosopher believes that a person's views should be carefully considered and organised into a coherent, meaningful, rationally defensible system.

The earliest European philosophers about which we have historical records came from the Greek colonies in Asia Minor (present-day Turkey) and lived in the 6th century BCE. Previously, it is assumed that people accepted a variety of myths and legends that explained the world around them. The early Greek philosophers, however, realised that different societies believed in different mythologies, and that those ideas often conflicted with each other. Those philosophers, who are sometimes referred to as the **natural philosophers**, tried to find rational, coherent ways to explain the natural world and its processes. Different philosophers have had different aims and have been concerned with asking and answering different questions. While some of the questions that philosophers have asked have changed through the centuries, some important questions continue to be asked. Why are we here? How was the world created? How should society be organised? How ought we to live? What is 'right' and 'wrong'? These are some of the questions that have intrigued and occupied philosophers across the ages (see 1.1.1).

1.1.1 The aims of philosophers

'The people who have engaged seriously in philosophising have had varying aims. Some have been religious leaders, like Saint Augustine, and have tried to explain and justify certain religious points of view. Some have been scientists, like René Descartes, who have attempted to interpret the meaning and importance of various scientific discoveries and theories. Others, like John Locke and Karl Marx, have philosophised in order to effect certain changes in the political organisation of society. Many have been interested in justifying or promulgating some set of ideas which they thought might aid mankind [sic]. Others have had no such grandiose purpose, but merely wished to understand certain features of the world in which they lived, and certain beliefs that people held.'

Source: Popkin and Stroll (1969) p. xiv

Who are the philosophers?

✍ Look at the list of names below. How many of these philosophers' names do you recognise? Do you know anything about their ideas or theories? Choose one name and find out some biographical information about that person and some brief details about the nature of their work.

Karl Marx
Saint Augustine
René Descartes
Ludwig Wittgenstein
Martin Heidegger
John Locke
George Berkeley
John Dewey
Thomas Aquinas
Baruch Spinoza
John Stuart Mill
Immanuel Kant

You can see from reading the extract in 1.1.2 that philosophers have asked a wide range of questions and have come from many different backgrounds.

1.1.2 Who are the philosophers?

'The occupations of philosophers have been as varied as their aims. Some have been teachers, often university professors giving courses in philosophy, as in the instance of Thomas Aquinas in the Middle Ages, teaching at the University of Paris, or John Dewey in the 20th century, lecturing at Columbia University, or Martin Heidegger at the University of Freiburg, or Ludwig Wittgenstein at Cambridge University. Others have been leaders of religious movements, often taking an active part in the affairs of their organisations, like St Augustine, who was Bishop of Hippo at the decline of the Roman Empire, or George Berkeley, who was the Bishop of Cloyne in Ireland in the 18th century. Many philosophers have had ordinary occupations, like Baruch Spinoza, who was a lens-grinder by profession. John Locke was a medical doctor; John Stuart Mill was a writer for magazines, and briefly a Member of Parliament. A good many of the most prominent philosophers have been scientists or mathematicians. Some have had careers which kept them far removed from the excitement and crises of everyday life; others were continually occupied in the most active pursuits.'

Source: Popkin and Stroll (1969) pp. xiv—xv

What all these philosophers have in common is that they have attempted to answer their chosen questions by working carefully and systematically through their ideas, convictions, and possible prejudices to arrive at an answer that they believe to be fair and rational. As Wraight (2011 p. 47) explains, philosophers 'like to take problems back to their first principles, to look at the core concepts we employ and to see if they stand up to scrutiny'. While it might seem obvious to many people that, if there is suffering and inequality in the world, we should try to do something to help other people, for instance, philosophers try to find reasoned and rational explanations for why it is our duty to help people who are less fortunate than ourselves.

So, through the study of ethics, you are invited to examine critically your own and others' arguments and intuitions about some important issues, however clear-cut those arguments may seem to be at first glance. As Wraight (2011 p. 48) points out, 'many things that once seemed obvious (like witches having the power to curdle milk and the sun revolving around the earth) no longer do so to most people, in part, because rational individuals took the time to scrutinize them and found them wanting'. The study of ethics is, therefore, just as much concerned with developing the ability to ask and answer questions as it is with 'learning' the answers that other people have suggested to some of the questions posed here. Hopefully, by building up a clearer picture of the building blocks of people's beliefs, values and arguments, 'we can be more confident about our actual moral behaviour in the real world. We might even change our minds about a few things' (Wraight 2011 p. 48).

Remember too that a philosopher is simply someone who looks at the world and tries to find coherent, rational answers to the questions people ask about that world. So you can be a philosopher, too!

1.2 What is ‘ethics’?

What is ‘ethics’ concerned with?

✍ Are you the type of person who usually ‘does the right thing’? How do you know what the ‘right thing’ is?

What do we mean by the term ‘ethics’? Before you read on, take a few moments to write down a definition of what you think the term means.

Now watch the video from La Sierra University ((LSULife 2007), available from the Multimedia listing) and compare your answer with the answers given by the students.

The branch of philosophical study that focuses on ‘ethics’ is concerned with studying and/or building up a coherent set of ‘rules’ or principles by which people ought to live. The theoretical study of ethics is not normally something that many people would regard as being necessary in order for them to conduct their everyday activities. In place of systematically examined ethical frameworks, most people instead carry around a useful set of day-to-day ‘rules of thumb’ that influence and govern their behaviour; commonly, these include rules such as ‘it is wrong to steal’, ‘it is right to help people in need’, and so on.

But sometimes the vicissitudes and complexities of life mean that these simple rules are sometimes put to the test. Consider the idea that it is wrong to kill. Does this mean that capital punishment is wrong? Is it wrong to kill animals? Is killing in self-defence wrong? Is the termination of pregnancy wrong? Is euthanasia wrong? If we try to apply our everyday notions of right and wrong to these questions, straightforward answers are not always forthcoming. We need to examine these questions in more detail; and we need theoretical frameworks that can help us to analyse complex problems and to find rational, coherent solutions to those problems. Whilst some people attempt to do this work individually, for themselves, philosophers attempt to find general answers that can be used by everyone in society.

✍ Think about a significant decision that you have made that had an effect (either for good or bad) on the lives of other people. This could be a decision about changing a job, moving home, responding to a dilemma, helping somebody who was in difficulty, etc.

How did you arrive at your decision? Was your decision based explicitly on ideas of what was right and wrong? Try to examine and record precisely the justifications for your decision. Can you identify any underlying principles or rules which you used to reach your decision?

Examples of such underlying principles or rules might include:

‘I should do the best thing for my career in the long run.’

‘It is OK to tell someone a lie if it prevents someone from being hurt by the truth.’

‘I should always help someone in difficulty.’

Ethics and morality

The terms 'ethics' and 'morality' are not always used consistently and precisely in everyday contexts, and their ordinary meanings do not always correspond with philosophers' use of the terms. **Ethics** is often used in connection with the activities of organisations and with professional codes of conduct: for instance, medical and business ethics, which are often formalised in terms of exhaustive sets of rules or guidelines stating how employees are expected to behave in their workplaces (such as in respect of a duty of care or confidentiality that health-care workers owe to their patients; or the medical ethical principles of beneficence, non-maleficence, respect for autonomy, and justice). **Morality**, on the other hand, is more often used in connection with the ways in which individuals conduct their personal, private lives, often in relation to personal financial probity, lawful conduct and acceptable standards of interpersonal behaviour (including truthfulness, honesty, and sexual propriety).

These 'everyday' uses of the terms 'ethics' and 'morality' are not so much incorrect by philosophical standards, as too limited. The philosopher's interest in the theoretical study of ethics is with the idea of conduct that is right, fair and just, does not cause harm, and that can be applied to a wide variety of cases. For our purposes, each of the terms 'ethics' and 'morality' captures the essence of that idea sufficiently well. In what follows, then, it is not really necessary to over-emphasise the distinction between ethics and morality; here, those terms may be used interchangeably to refer to ideas about how humans ought to act.

Areas of ethical study

There are three broad areas of ethical study:

- **Meta-ethics**, which focuses on the meaning of ethical terms themselves (for instance, 'what is goodness?'), and on questions of how ethical knowledge is obtained (for instance, 'how can I distinguish what is good from what is bad?'), rather than on the more applied question of 'what should I do in a particular situation?'. Meta-ethics is therefore concerned with the nature of ethical properties, statements, attitudes and judgments. Meta-ethics examines such themes as what moral questions mean, and on what basis people can know what is 'true' or 'false'.
- **Normative ethics**, in contrast, is the study of ethical acts. It therefore focuses explicitly on questions of 'what is the right thing to do?' in general. Normative ethics is concerned with questions of what people **ought** to do, and on how people can decide what the 'correct' moral actions to take are.
- **Applied ethics,** which is concerned with how people can achieve moral outcomes in specific situations. Therefore, it is concerned with the philosophical examination of particular – and often complex – issues that involve moral judgments. Areas such as bioethics, environmental ethics, development ethics and business/corporate ethics may be regarded as areas of applied ethics. (The distinction between normative and applied ethics, however, is becoming increasingly blurred.)

The area of meta-ethics is more of a 'pure', abstract or theoretical, field of study, whereas the areas of normative and applied ethics tend to focus more sharply on how ethical considerations relate to human actions in general (in the case of normative ethics) or in particular situations and contexts (in the case of applied ethics). Given that our interest is principally on the study of ethics in relation to environmental and development issues, it is the latter which will provide the most useful insights. Therefore, our focus will be primarily on questions that fall within the areas of normative and applied ethics.

1.3 Moral intuitions and critical reasoning

Moral sentiments and principles

The study of ethics involves reasoning about our feelings. In other words, it involves making sense of and rationalising our intuitions about what is 'right' or 'good'. Almost all people, to a greater or lesser extent, are capable of experiencing feelings of empathy towards others. Empathy provides us with a sense of what others are feeling and may thereby allow us to identify with other people. Empathy therefore gives us what Traer (2013) refers to as our **moral sentiments**; and ethical reasoning about these sentiments gives us our **moral principles**. The integration of these moral sentiments and principles, Traer (2013) argues, is our conscience. Our moral conscience, then, is based on emotions, but should also be supported by reason.

All societies are characterised by their own ethical ideas – expressed in terms of attitudes and beliefs – and their own **customs** (their notions of what is considered customary). Some of those ethics are formalised in the laws and regulations of a society, nation or state. Such customs and laws can influence the consciences and the moral sentiments of those living in a society, as individuals acquire ideas and attitudes from their families and from their wider society. Philosophical ethics, however, asks us to take a step back from these influences and instead to reflect critically on our sentiments and attitudes.

Rationalisation

Studying ethics, then, involves attempting to find valid reasons for the moral arguments that we make. Most people already have general ideas – or what philosophers call 'intuitions' or 'presumptions' – about what they think is 'right' or 'wrong'. But a philosophical approach to ethics requires people to think critically about the moral ideas that they hold, to support or refute those ideas with convincing arguments, and to be able to articulate and explain the reasons and assumptions on which those arguments are based. As Traer (2013) explains, in moral philosophy, an argument is not simply about our beliefs or opinions; instead, it is about the reasons underlying those beliefs or opinions. This means that the real value of discussing and debating ethical questions is not to 'win the argument' or to 'score points' against the other person! It is more important to provide carefully considered arguments to support our ideas, and to allow for rational – and deeper – understanding of the reasons underlying our beliefs, ideas and attitudes. Crucially, this requires careful listening to, analysis of and learning from the arguments that others make.

One common fault with many arguments about what is 'right' or 'wrong' – and one that Traer (2013) highlights – involves what is known as a **rationalisation**. A rationalisation occurs when we use what at first glance seem to be rational or credible motives to cover up our true (and perhaps unconscious) motives. For example, if a landowner seeks to build a plastic recycling plant and states that this is driven by a desire to create local employment opportunities – whereas in fact their true motive is to make a profit – then this is a rationalisation. The landowner is not giving their true reasons for wanting to build the plant. If, however, they argue that they want to make a personal profit **and** create local jobs, then they may be giving two true reasons for their motives.

Types of reasoning

Traer (2013) explains that we can uncover these types of errors in our own and others' arguments by using what he calls 'critical reasoning'. Three forms of critical reasoning that individuals can use to justify their arguments are outlined in 1.3.1.

1.3.1 Three forms of critical reasoning

'**Reasoning by analogy** explains one thing by comparing it to something else that is similar, although also different. In a good analogy, the similarity outweighs the dissimilarity and is clarifying. For instance, animals are like and unlike humans, as humans are also animals. Is the similarity sufficiently strong to support the argument that we should ascribe rights to nonhuman animals as we do to humans?'

'**Deductive reasoning** applies a principle to a situation. For instance, if every person has human rights, and you are a person, then you have human rights like every person.'

'**Inductive reasoning** involves providing evidence to support a hypothesis. The greater the evidence for a hypothesis, the more we may rely on it.' The fact that there is mounting evidence that the burning of fossil fuels is having a detrimental effect on global climate, for example, is used to substantiate the argument that we have a moral duty to reduce carbon emissions.

Source: Traer (2009) p. 8. (emphasis added)

Ethics and religious faith

There is another important argument that people use when making ethical arguments: religious faith. For many people, 'morality and religious faith go hand in hand' (Traer 2009 p. 8). Rather than relying on rational arguments, some people view actions as being right or wrong in terms of whether they are commanded by a god. Some moral philosophers do not view arguments based on religious faith as being rationally defensible. They believe that we can determine through rational reflection what is right and wrong. If a god commands only what is right then, logically, this makes divine commands unnecessary; we are able to know what is right or wrong without relying on any divine commandments, as we can use rational reflection.

However, Traer (2009) argues that a discussion of faith-based arguments is relevant to moral philosophy for several reasons. For a start, people do not always agree on what is right or wrong. It is not therefore clear that we can determine what is right and wrong simply through rational reflection. Additionally, given that so many people in the world **do** look to religion for moral guidance, we should not underestimate the ability of 'the moral teachings of a religious tradition […] to persuade the public to embrace a higher moral standard' (Traer 2009 p. 9). While we may insist that moral principles and decisions should be justified by rational arguments, Traer (2009) argues that consideration of religious arguments should not be excluded from the study of ethics. Whether or not one personally chooses to accept faith-based arguments as valid within ethical discussions is a decision that requires careful consideration.

Testing moral arguments

Critical reasoning is about asking questions whenever anyone gives us a reason to support an argument. What kind of reasoning are they using? If they are using a principle to support their argument (deductive reasoning), then what kind of principle is it? Is the principle rational? If they are providing evidence to support their argument (inductive reasoning) then is the evidence reliable? Have any motives that might be behind their arguments been clarified (ie are they giving rationalisations, not reasons)? Does the conclusion drawn make sense, given the reasons they have given? All of these questions that we ask about peoples' arguments may seem a little onerous and off-putting. With such rigorous criteria, some people may feel that they don't want to make any argument at all, as they are bound to make mistakes in their reasoning! However, as Traer (2013) makes clear, most people already use critical reasoning when they make arguments and question other people's arguments. We have an idea of what we think is right based on our experience (our ethical presumptions), and we explain those ideas to other people based on our feelings (intuitions) and reasons. It is important and useful to develop the ability to test your own arguments and those of others, both to address the dilemmas that occur in our personal lives, our communities and the organisations for which we work.

Wraight (2011) argues that there are three main ways of testing a moral argument. These are outlined in 1.3.2.

1.3.2 Three ways to test a moral argument

(1) **Factual accuracy**. The 18th century philosopher David Hume (1711—1776) argued that we should not derive an 'ought' from an 'is'. This means that we cannot say that something is wrong or right simply based on how things are. This is reasonable, but it does not mean that ethical discussion should be divorced from fact; the accuracy of the factual content of a discussion is very important. Consider the example — one that Wraight (2011) uses — of someone who maintains that giving aid to charities working in Africa is wrong because they believes that 90% of the money donated in fact goes to paying wealthy consultants and NGO workers, and only 10% goes to alleviate poverty. If this person were shown that this was factually incorrect, and that in fact 90% of all donations were used to alleviate poverty, then their moral argument would lose its force.

(2) **Consistency**. Arguments need to be consistent. One can only argue that it is morally wrong to kill one person and yet morally acceptable to kill another, if one can demonstrate that there is a **morally relevant difference** between the two individuals. Wraight (2011) gives the example of the moral argument that debts owed by poorer nations to international lenders should be cancelled. Does this therefore mean that all poor people who owe money to banks should also have their debts cancelled? If you **don't** think that all individual debts should be cancelled but you **do** think that poorer countries' debts should be cancelled, then you have to show that there is a moral difference between the two. Otherwise your arguments are inconsistent.

(3) **Good will.** Wraight (2011) admits that this is the most difficult criterion to quantify. While arguments may be factually correct and consistent, they also need to 'exemplify good will' (Wraight 2011 p. 52). This involves resorting to our intuitions and emotions, which are notoriously difficult to integrate with rigorous theoretical debate.

Source: drawn from Wraight (2011)

1.4 Environmental and development ethics

We have considered what 'philosophy' is, what 'ethics' means, and what it means to look at arguments critically and provide careful reasoning to support our arguments. The types of issues and questions that ethicists look at are, of course, very broad-ranging, and so philosophers tend to specialise in one area of ethics. When philosophers consider how general ethical arguments can be applied to one particular area of peoples' private or public lives that involve moral judgements (such as the areas of development ethics and environmental ethics), we call this **applied ethics**. Many often quite distinct areas of applied ethics have therefore developed, each with their own academic journals, conferences and influential authors.

Development and environmental ethics

Two such areas of applied ethics are of direct concern to us. The first, **development ethics**, emerged as a field of study in the second half of the 20th century. It questions and looks at the ethical implications of ideas such as 'progress' and at the implications of various types of social change. It considers the costs and gains from major socioeconomic changes, and whether those in wealthier countries have a duty to help those in poorer parts of the world. As with most areas of applied ethics, it has a purpose: to 'help in identifying, considering and making ethical choices about societal "development", and in identifying and assessing the explicit and implicit ethical theories' (Gasper 2004 p. xi). In other words, it aims to give clearer understanding of the key issues surrounding socioeconomic development, and to unpick the many hidden assumptions about what is the 'right' or 'good' thing to do. Key issues include social and human rights, poverty reduction, the gap between rich and poor, and planned international intervention by some nations in the development of others.

A second area of applied ethics is **environmental ethics**. Environmental ethics emerged as a separate area of philosophical study during the 1970s. The approaches of environmental philosophers are varied, but most take as their starting point the belief that we are facing a critical point in our relationship with the non-human world, and that in order to avert (or reverse) an ecological crisis, we need to reassess the ways in which we value the non-human world. While not all environmental philosophers suggest that we need a new approach to the ethical values we assign to nature, many varied suggestions have been made as to which alternative frameworks we should use for valuing nature.

These two important areas of applied ethics are central to understanding many important contemporary issues, such as those related to sustainable development, climate change, and environmental management. Issues are also raised by environmental and development ethicists in relation to another important area of applied ethics: corporate ethics (although some would regard business/corporate ethics as a further area of applied ethics in its own right).

1.4.1 provides some examples of the issues that concern both development and environmental ethics.

1.4.1 State of the World 2012

In 1992, governments at the Rio Earth Summit made a historic commitment to sustainable development — development that promotes the maintenance and wellbeing of both people and ecosystems. More than twenty years and several summits later, humanity has never been closer to ecological collapse; one third of humanity lives in poverty; and another 2 billion people are projected to join the human race over the next 40 years. How will we move toward sustainable prosperity equitably shared among all even as our population grows, our cities strain to accommodate more and more people, and our ecological systems decline?

In short, 'sustainable prosperity' would come as a result of ecological regenerative development that enables all human beings to live with their basic needs met, with their dignity acknowledged, and with abundant opportunity to pursue lives of satisfaction and happiness, all without risk of denying others in the present and the future the ability to do the same. This means not just preventing further degradation of Earth's systems, but actively restoring those systems to full health.

Source: Worldwatch Institute (2012)

? Read again 1.4.1 entitled *State of the World 2012*. What issues are raised in the text that relate to development ethics? What issues relate to environmental ethics? Are there any issues which you think would concern both development ethicists and environmental ethicists?

Answer

Whilst at first glance there are some issues which clearly seem to fall within the realm of development ethics (such as the fact that one third of humanity lives in poverty) and others within the realm of environmental ethics (such as the decline of ecological systems), in reality these issues are often closely interrelated and involve consideration of both development and environmental ethics.

Separate fields of study

As outlined in 1.4.2, environmental and development ethics have often been treated more or less separately in the academic literature, and the area of corporate and business ethics has its own literature again (although there are some exceptions to these divisions).

1.4.2 Ring-fencing the environment

'Much environmental thought and ethics, as well as specific academic fields such as green political theory, has fixated on the environment as a ring-fenced and isolated issue. Even discussions of sustainable development tend to focus on its oxymoronic status rather than establishing connections between environmental and social justice. This is often combined with a corresponding assertion that most Western citizens need to engage in considerable material sacrifices in order to achieve a lighter ecological footprint. On the opposing side, environmental sceptics challenge environmentalism by focusing exclusively on the ways in which eco-improvement expenditures could be redeployed in order to promote poverty alleviation, health provision and education services. The battle lines drawn here tend to emphasize the differences between a materialistic conception of development and economic growth as a means to reduce human suffering and a post-materialist conception of a steady-state economy and, in some cases, a transformation to low-impact lifestyles with an improved quality of life.'

Source: Smith and Pangsapa (2008) pp. 1—2

However, if we look at many key contemporary ethical issues, we can clearly see that they are of interest to all three of these areas of ethics. For example, the extent to which we should address patterns of behaviour that affect global climate clearly encompasses questions related to environmental ethics in any number of different ways, from the impact on species to the ability of the environment to sustain human communities. However, also of central concern, are questions that are of key interest to development ethicists such as the global impact of consumption patterns by richer nations, or the fair distribution of global resources.

Viewed from a contemporary understanding of these issues it may seem strange that the two main areas of development and environmental ethics have remained so distinct. However, it is not only academic writers who have traditionally separated these areas; 'environmental protection' and 'social justice' have traditionally been presented as an 'either/or' option in policy circles. 'The environment' has often been seen as an issue to be addressed when the going is good, and only after more important issues such as crime, schooling, poverty, etc have been addressed.

Environmental citizenship

While the separation of these two fields of study is still the case to some extent, the environment as an issue has become an increasingly prominent policy concern in recent years. Statements such as those in 1.4.1, *State of the World 2012,* demonstrate the extent to which issues of environmental protection and social development have become entwined, often under the umbrella of 'sustainable development'. This integration of social and environmental concerns is also reflected in the activities and publications of campaigning groups. Whereas, in the 1980s and

1990s, campaigns were often led by specialist NGOs that tended to focus on either environmental or development issues, grassroots citizen groups are increasingly speaking for themselves in campaigns and the distinctions between 'environmental' or 'social justice' campaigns are becoming blurred (Smith and Pangsapa 2008).

As the arguments in 1.4.3 make clear, in order to understand more fully the ethical debates and issues underlying key contemporary issues, it is important to consider arguments and issues relating to both the environment and development. One term that is sometimes used to refer to this combination of concerns is **environmental citizenship**.

1.4.3 Environmental and social justice

'Right from the start we want to emphasize the importance of recognizing that environmental issues cannot be separated from questions of social justice — that there is no contradiction between addressing environmental issues and social inequalities. These are necessarily complementary issues, not contradictory ones. Even the preservation of wilderness areas and the conservation of transformed and managed landscapes have social implications both in terms of the access to environmental goods of people traditionally excluded from these benefits and the social justice concerns that directly pertain to rural folk and traditional livelihoods that can often be relegated to insignificance by environmental campaigns that some NGOs have initiated without consultation or forethought.'

Source: Smith and Pangsapa (2008) p. 1

Section 1 Self Assessment Questions

Question 1

State what is meant by the term ‘meta-ethics’.

Question 2

State what is meant by the term ‘normative ethics’.

Question 3

State what is meant by the term ‘applied ethics’.

2.0 NORMATIVE ETHICAL TRADITIONS: IDENTIFYING RIGHT AND WRONG

Section Overview

In this section, several key ethical theories from the tradition of Western philosophy are introduced. Normative ethical theories are concerned with ethical action: in other words, with what people 'ought' to do in general. This section provides a brief overview of the main types of normative ethical theories and it introduces key, recurring terms and concepts.

Section Learning Outcomes

By the end of this section, students should be able to:

- explain the difference between deontological and teleological ethics
- identify the main ethical theories within these traditions

2.1 Western ethical theories

Why use ethical theory?

Every day, you probably make dozens or even hundreds of decisions about what could be considered 'ethical' issues. Should I do the washing-up (even though I am tired) so my partner doesn't have to? Should I help my colleague out with getting the report in on time, even though I'd rather leave work early and join my friend for a social meeting? We usually weigh up the rights and wrongs of these small decisions fairly quickly and easily. But it isn't always easy to know what the right or wrong action is. On closer examination, even a question as apparently simple as whether or not to give aid to alleviate poverty may be fraught with difficult issues. On what ethical basis should individuals give money to charity? Is it because we have a duty to give some of our income to help people less fortunate than ourselves? Or is it because we have a duty to uphold other peoples' fundamental human right to live healthy and secure lives? Is it simply that giving money to charity makes us a good person – and, perhaps, allows us to feel better about ourselves? Whatever the reason, is it the consequences of our actions that matter? (For example, is it important to know before we donate money what percentage of our money will go to helping the needy and how much will go to paying consultants or NGO executives?) Or is it purely the **action** itself (in this case, the act of giving) that is intrinsically right?

These questions are a starting point for a brief consideration of the main traditions of Western ethical thought. These types of theories, which are concerned with how we ought to act, belong to the branch of philosophical study called **normative** ethics. (Remember that 'normative' ethical theories are concerned with moral actions, and with how people 'ought' to live their lives.) Whilst some of the terms used here may be new to you, the ideas behind those terms will probably be more familiar. Most of these ideas form the basis of modern-day environmental and development policy, and they are very commonly used as the basis of ethical arguments, often as a result

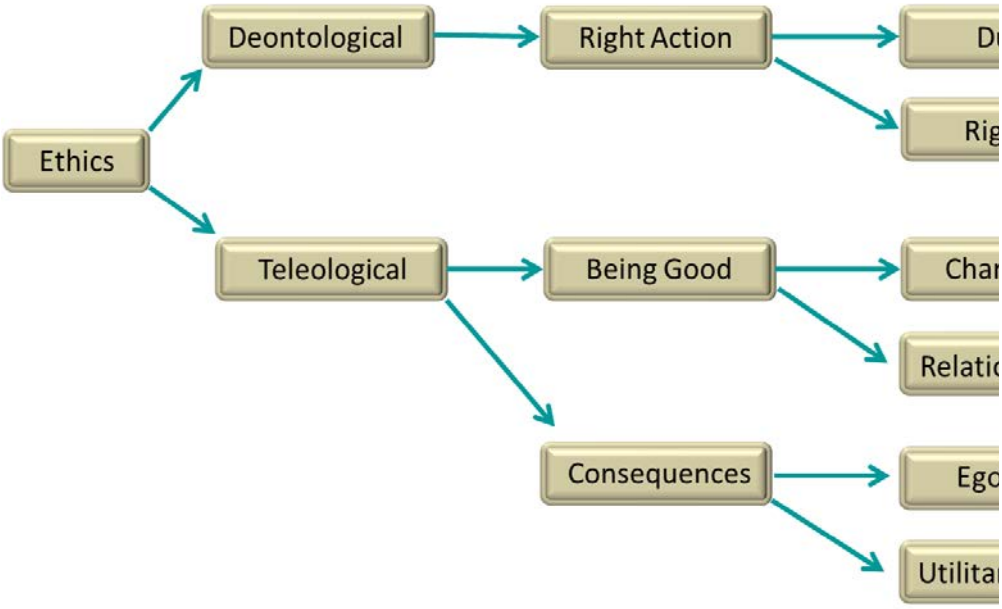
of **deductive reasoning**. When people use deductive reasoning, they are applying a general principle to a particular situation. For instance, a general principle such as 'all people have the right to a clean environment' may be applied more specifically: 'therefore a company should not be allowed to pollute the environment and to endanger the health of local residents'.

By becoming familiar with the main traditions of ethical thought, you will be able to identify clearly how you use these principles when you construct your own arguments. You will also be able to recognise these arguments when they are used by other people. By thinking about the problematic issues surrounding these moral traditions, you can apply these critiques both to your own thinking and the arguments of others. If you are aware of some of the theoretical conflicts between these traditions, and if you can recognise when these ethical principles are being used, this can equip you to spot inconsistencies in the arguments that you or others make.

Ethical paths

Traer (2013) illustrates the task of understanding normative ethical traditions in terms of different paths on a mountain. For example, when people use the words 'duty' and 'rights', they are referring (consciously or otherwise) to theories that are concerned with right action. If, on the other hand, they are discussing our ethics in terms of our 'character' or 'relationships', then they are referring to theories of **being good**. 'Right action' and 'being good' identify different paths on the mountain. If you look at the diagram in 2.1.1, you can see that ethical theories emphasising duty or rights branch off the **right action** path, whereas ethical theories concerning character or relationships diverge from the **being good** path.

2.1.1 Ethical paths in Western philosophy



Source: adapted from Traer (2013) p. 17

The main fork in the path in Western philosophy which Traer (2013) identifies is that between deontological and teleological ethics. These are terms that you may not have come across before. However, do not be too concerned! If you look at the diagram in 2.1.1, most of the words will not be new to you. Most of the philosophical terms used here will become very familiar to you as you progress through the material.

The word **deontological** is derived from the Greek word *deon*, meaning 'duty'. It is concerned with **right** action – in other words, with doing the right thing simply because it is the right thing to do. Deontological theories focus on whether ethical decisions *per se* are right or wrong, regardless of the consequences or intentions of those ethical decisions.

The word **teleological** is derived from two Greek words: *telos*, which means 'purpose' or 'goal'; and *logos*, which refers to 'science' or 'study'. It is concerned with **being good** – in other words, with being a good person with good intentions. Therefore, in contrast to deontological ethics, the teleological ethical traditions concentrate on the purpose of – or the intention behind – human actions. The focus of teleological ethical theories is on what the goal of a given decision is.

2.2 Deontological ethics

Non-consequentialism

All deontological ethics theories are **non-consequentialist**. This means that they place the emphasis on **the decision or action itself** – on the motivations, principles, or ideals underlying the decision or action – rather than being concerned with the outcomes or consequences of that decision or action. This reasoning is founded on the desirability of principle (usually duties or rights) to act in a given situation. The two main non-consequentialist theories are **ethics of duties** and **ethics of rights and justice**. Both of these are rooted in assumptions about universal rights and wrongs and responsibilities. This means that people who promote these types of ethical principles usually believe that they should be applied to everyone, everywhere in the world. If a child in one country has a right to an education, then this means that all children, everyone in the world, should have a right to an education. Examples of these types of principles can be found in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, from which the text in 2.2.1 is taken.

2.2.1 Article 2: The Universal Declaration of Human Rights

'Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty.'

Source: UN (2012)

✍ Read 2.2.1, *Article 2: The Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, once again. Make a list of at least ten rights which you think that all people on the planet have.

Duties

Most people believe that all human beings have some duties to other human beings. Duties can be positive, such as the duty to look after one's children, or negative, such as the duty not to murder another human being. When people use the language of duties, they usually do so in a way that implies that the duty is universal to all human beings (or at least to all adult humans of sound mind). The foundation of theories of duties is the theory developed by the German philosopher, Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). Rather than relying on religion to tell us what our duties are, Kant believed that we can rely on our powers of reason to do so. At the centre of Kant's theory of duty is what he termed **categorical imperatives**. Some actions and decisions are founded on our personal desires. For example, you could say, 'If you want to live in a beautiful house, you ought to work hard'. However, this is not a categorical imperative, as it is based simply on fulfilling our desires. A categorical imperative tells us that we must do something, irrespective of our personal desires: for example, 'You ought to look after your parents'.

A central principle of the categorical imperative is that we should treat people as an **end**, never as a **means to an end**. This means that people should be treated with dignity. Treating someone as a means to an end involves using them as a tool to achieve something else. Buying products made by workers who have been paid unacceptably low wages in order to ensure a cheap price for the goods they produce, is treating the workers as a means to an end and it not fulfilling the duties we have to those workers. Buying guaranteed 'fair trade' products, in contrast, recognises our duty to ensure that the workers who produce our goods earn acceptable wages.

The concept of duty is not only used in terms of secular arguments. The exhortation to 'do to others as you would have them do to you' is a text that is taken from Christian scriptures, but it has parallels in many other religious traditions. Both secular and religious notions of duty give us many duties, such as those to keep promises, to avoid injuring others, to compensate others when we do them harm, to uphold justice, to improve the living conditions of others, etc. Duties are very often closely linked to the notion of rights. When somebody has a right, usually this implies that others have a duty to uphold this right.

✍ Look back at the list of (at least) ten human rights that you wrote for the exercise above. Do you have a duty to uphold any of these rights for anyone else?

Rights

Rights theory is one particular duty-based theory of ethics. A right is a justified claim against another person's behaviour. So rights and duties are related in that the rights of one person imply the duty of someone else to uphold that right. As Traer (2009 p. 103) explains, '[t]he most widely accepted justification for moral rights relies on Kant's deontological argument that we have a duty to treat every person as an end, and not as a means to our ends, because every person is autonomous and rational, and thus has intrinsic worth'.

The concept of individual human rights is fundamental to Western legal systems, and has developed both from the argument that all humans have certain natural rights and from religious notions that rights come from God (Traer 2013). The American Declaration of Independence asserts that 'all men' [sic] are 'endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights' (Traer 2009 p. 104). The 'French revolution proclaimed that the "rights of man" [sic] are natural rights intrinsic to the humanity of each person' (Traer 2009 p. 104). Throughout the 19th century, the justification for rights became more secular, but rights were usually confined to the nation. However, the idea that rights were liberties guaranteed to citizens of a nation was challenged in the 20th century by the realisation that Nazi Germany acted legally under German law when it committed what were later classified as crimes against humanity. The United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 (see 2.2.2) is based on the reasoning that justice and equal treatment of humans ought to be applied universally.

2.2.2 The Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Article 18

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his [sic] religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

Article 19

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

Source: UN (2012)

? Look at Articles 18 and 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 2.2.2. Can you think of any ways in which these two rights could conflict? What duties do you have to uphold these rights for others, if any?

Answer

Example: The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that all humans have the right to freedom of religion. However, if that religion expressly forbids certain viewpoints, then exercising this right can create conflict with another person's right to freedom of expression.

2.3 Teleological ethics

Consequentialism

Consequentialist ethics come from the **teleological** branch of ethical theory. You will remember that teleological theories focus on the goal of the ethical action.

Consequentialist theories are those that base moral judgements on the outcomes of a decision or an action. If the outcomes of an action are considered to be positive, or to give rise to benefits, then that action is held to be morally right. Conversely, if the outcome causes harm, then the action is held to be morally wrong. The judgement of right or wrong depends on the consequences of the decision or action. The two main consequentialist theories considered here are **egoism** and **utilitarianism**.

? What are some of the key differences between consequentialist and deontological ethics?

Answer

Consequentialist ethics judge an action as right or wrong on the basis of the outcome of an action. Deontological ethics hold that that action itself is right or wrong, regardless of the outcome.

Egoism

Egoism is the theory that one's self is, or should be, the motivation for all of our actions. It is worth distinguishing between egoism as a **descriptive argument** (an argument that tells us how the world actually is) and egoism as a **normative argument** (an argument that tells us how the world ought to be). Egoism as a descriptive argument describes human nature as self-centred. In its strongest form, it argues that individuals only ever act in their own self-interest. Even where they appear to be acting in others' interests, descriptive egoism explains that the person is really motivated by their own self-interest disguised by arguments (rationalisations) of 'doing one's duty' or 'helping others'. In fact, our motivation behind doing 'good deeds' may be to make ourselves feel good; to make ourselves look good in the eyes of others; or because we believe that, by helping others, others will help us. Even if we donate money to charity anonymously, we may still only really do this because it makes us feel good about ourselves. In contrast, egoism as a normative argument tells us that we should be acting in our own interests, as this is the only way that overall welfare can be improved. If everyone acts in their own self-interest, then society will become more efficient, which will be in everyone's interest. It is therefore morally right to pursue one's own self-interest.

One of the most famous normative egoists was Adam Smith, one of the pioneers of neo-classical economic theory. He argued that self-interested behaviour is right if it leads to morally acceptable ends. Smith argued that if everyone followed their self-interest, then society as a whole would be improved. (Importantly, he also argued that if egoism led in fact to the worsening of society, then it should be abandoned.) The theory of egoism is at the heart of capitalist arguments that a corporation's sole responsibility is to its shareholders. However, some form of social and environmental responsibility can be consistent with egoism because egoist decisions may address

immediate moral demands by aiming to satisfy long-term self-maximising objectives – of the firm (eg profitability) or the individual (eg philanthropy). While it is an important theory for understanding economic rationality, we do not consider egoism in great depth here. Of more interest is another consequentialist theory: that of utilitarianism.

Utilitarianism

The modern form of the consequentialist theory of **utilitarianism** derives from 19th century British philosophers such as Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, and it has been particularly influential in areas of the world influenced by British culture. Rather than maximise individual welfare, utilitarianism focuses on collective welfare and it identifies goodness with the greatest amount of good for the greatest number of people: the 'greatest happiness principle'. So maximising benefits for the greatest number of people involves net assessments of benefit: utility is the net result of benefits and 'disbenefits' – or costs. Utility has entered modern economics as a key quantitative concept. The concept of trade-offs is specifically embraced and social and environmental cost–benefit analyses are explicit utilitarian tools for assessing the goodness of an action. A simple balance sheet of costs and benefits can be drawn up to assess the overall utility of a decision.

Utilitarianism has three essential elements:

- Whether an action is right or wrong is determined solely by its consequences.
- The value of the consequences of an action is assessed in terms of the amount of happiness or well-being caused.
- In assessing the total happiness caused to a number of people, equal amounts of happiness are to have equal value, no one person's happiness having greater value that another's.

Now read 2.3.1 and consider the question below.

2.3.1 Why preserve biodiversity?

Reason 1: Feeding the world

A mere 20 species provide about 90% of the world population's food. All major food crops, including corn, wheat, and soybeans, depend on the introduction of new strains from the wild to cope with evolving disease and pests. If those strains are lost, the security of our food supply will be threatened. For example, a wild relative of corn called milpilla (*Zea diploperennis*) is exceptionally disease-resistant and is the only perennial in the corn family. If successfully interbred with domestic corn, its genes could boost corn production by billions of dollars. *Zea diploperennis* grows on only one mountain in western Mexico.

Source: NatureServe (2010)

? The text in 2.3.1 is taken from a webpage entitled '*Ten Reasons to Save the Diversity of Life*' [biodiversity]. What are the main arguments given here? What kind of ethical reasoning is being used?

Answer

The argument given to preserve biodiversity is that to do so can have benefits to human survival and economic prosperity. Note that this is not about preserving species being the 'right thing to do', nor about any intrinsic value that a species has in itself. The argument is about the use-value of biodiversity to humans and about the consequences of saving – or of not saving – species from extinction.

Virtue ethics

Another branch of the teleological strand of ethics is that of 'being good'. The most well-known of these ethical theories is **virtue ethics**. Virtue ethics shifts the analytical emphasis away from rule-based decision-making (of deontological ethics) or of the consequences of an action (eg in utilitarianism) towards the ethics of individuals and the ethics of human character. So, for example, where a utilitarian would argue that giving to a charity maximises well-being in society, and a deontologist would argue that we have a duty to help others, a virtue ethicist would point to the fact that helping others displays desirable virtues such as being charitable or benevolent. Other desirable virtues include honesty, courage, friendship, mercy, loyalty, modesty, patience, and so on. The opposite of virtues are vices. These terms are explained in 2.3.2.

2.3.2 Virtues and vices

'[I]t is possible to see the ethical validity or correctness of an action in terms of conformity to certain types of conduct. Instances or patterns of conduct that are ethically right, good and proper are virtues, while those that are wrong, bad or improper are vices. This [...] pattern of ethical evaluation lends itself particularly to expressions of ethical judgement that emphasize the character of the actor, so that not only is the act virtuous, but also the person who reliably acts in virtuous ways.'

Source: FAO (2004) pp. 7–8

✍ Do you could consider yourself to be a 'good person'? What virtues do you generally demonstrate in your actions and in the decisions you take? Do you have many vices?

Whilst the roots for virtue ethics in Western philosophy can be found in the ancient Greek philosophies of Aristotle and Plato, as a theory it fell out of favour for many centuries. However, during the 20th century virtue ethics again became an important area of ethical study. In particular, some philosophers argue that it can overcome some of the criticisms of traditional ethical traditions examined in the next section.

2.4 Limitations of traditional normative theories

This section has provided a brief overview of the normative ethical theories which are influential in ethical thought. The pros and cons of each theory could be examined in much more detail, and further examples of how these theories are used in policy debates and in constructing arguments could be given. Nevertheless, for now, you should have gained a clear enough overview of these theories to understand what some of the key terms refer to, and perhaps also to recognise some of these principles in use.

However, it is useful to look at some general criticisms of these normative ethical theories. The ethical theories presented in this section are from the Western philosophical tradition; they are based on varied assumptions; and together they provide a pragmatic framework for judging right and wrong in decision-making. Yet they have been criticised for being too 'neat and tidy' – and perhaps too contrived or calculating – for the real world. Crane and Matten (2007) sum up the critiques of these theories in five related points. In their view, traditional ethical theories are limited because of the following:

- **They involve a high level of abstraction from reality:** the real world is complex and such a 'principled' approach to resolving day-to-day dilemmas about behaviour is unhelpful and ignores the real-world context of decision-makers.
- **They may be narrow in their application:** the 'reductionist' critique suggests that the focus on one particular aspect of ethics, such as rights or duties, reduces the complexity of ethical issues to one narrow parameter of reality when all are important.
- **They are overly academic:** perhaps the abstraction and narrowness are a reflection of theoreticians who live in a world – perhaps the 'rarefied', 'ivory-tower', academic environment – that gives undue value to the 'wisdom' of such specialists as the arbiters of what is right and wrong and of how to decide between the two.
- **They are inhuman:** again, the principles are enunciated in an impersonal context in which decision-making becomes 'formulaic' and human relations, instincts, and emotions are absent.
- **They involve prescriptive approaches:** the principles and their application suggest that ethical dilemmas can be solved by living by a given set of rules, whereas true decision-making requires a high involvement of individuals and 'ownership' through using their own discretion and judgement.

These objections arise from within a 'global society' that is itself changing in diverse ways. Generally, in Western countries, at least, there are trends away from absolutism and towards flexibility and subjectivity, perhaps towards a more modern – or post-modern – personalised, individualist, and situational ethics. The rise in the popularity of virtue ethics in recent decades has, in part, been a reaction to these criticisms. Alternative cultural paradigms are likely to contribute new insights that may not replace the evolutionary pathway of philosophy started by the ancient Greeks around 2500 years ago, but are likely to influence the patterns of behaviour within international institutions, organisations, and business throughout this century.

Section 2 Self Assessment Questions

Question 4

True or false?

Deductive reasoning involves taking an insight about a particular situation and using it to derive a more general principle.

Question 5

State what is meant by the term ‘deontological’.

Question 6

State what is meant by the term ‘teleological’.

3.0 KEY ETHICAL ISSUES: WHOSE ARGUMENTS COUNT?

Section Overview

In this section, we examine two key issues associated with studying ethics. First, we look briefly at the relationship of ethics with scientific knowledge. Since scientific knowledge has a strong influence on our beliefs which, in turn, influence our values, it is important that we consider the quality of the scientific knowledge upon which we base our arguments. We then move on to consider issues of ethical monism, relativism and pluralism. If we make a moral argument, does that mean that it is simply a rationalisation of our own arguments in our specific situation? Or can we argue that our ethical principles should be adhered to by others? And can one person legitimately use different moral frameworks in different situations? These types of questions form the subject of this section.

Section Learning Outcomes

By the end of this section, students should be able to:

- define the term 'meta-ethics'
- define and briefly explain some of the key terms relating to ethical monism, relativism and pluralism

3.1 Meta-ethics

What is 'meta-ethics'?

The study of **meta-ethics** refers to the nature of ethical terms and concepts and to the attempt to understand the underlying assumptions behind moral theories; therefore, it is the branch of ethics that seeks to understand the nature of ethical properties, statements, attitudes, and judgments. It covers a broad range of questions surrounding how we know what moral truth is (and even if moral truth exists), and how we learn about moral facts. Meta-ethical questions are, by their very nature, abstract. It might seem that they do not necessarily bear much relation to the task of developing practical, decision-making tools. However, some of the issues are very important and relevant to that task and meta-ethics receives some attention here.

If we begin to consider whether or not one should be a just person, for example, then we are very quickly faced with questions about the nature of justice and about what being a 'just' person means. Is justice a human invention? Can we accept that ideas of justice can be different in different societies? Or is the notion of justice an eternal, unchanging concept that should be upheld by everyone, everywhere, and throughout all time? This is not merely an abstract, academic question. The question of whether or not one culture's notion of justice can and should be imposed upon another has historically been – and continues to be – a cause of profound conflict between people.

Ethics and scientific knowledge

The first 'meta-ethical' issue we look at in this section is the relationship between ethics and scientific knowledge. The question of the relationship between how the world 'is' and how the world 'ought' to be is one which philosophers have long considered. Most famously, David Hume (1711–1776) summed this up in what he termed the **naturalistic fallacy**, which suggests that one cannot infer from is to **ought**, nor can one make an inference from scientific observations to ethical arguments. In other words, Hume believed that you cannot say that something is **right** by describing how the world **is**. That many people own and drive a car to work every day does not necessarily imply that these and indeed other people ought to do so, for example.

This is not to say that one cannot and should not use facts when supporting one's arguments. Basing our arguments on sound facts and knowledge about the world is very important, particularly when we are making consequentialist arguments. It is almost impossible in practice to undertake an accurate utilitarian analysis without some form of scientific evidence about the likely outcomes of choosing one action over another. A key example is climate change: if we do not know the likely outcomes of our actions, how can we decide which path of action (or inaction) we should take? And even if we are talking about deontological principles, we need to base our notions of what is right or wrong on fact. We might say that we think it is wrong in principle to change the genetic structure of a tomato by mixing with those of a fish, whatever the consequences. But in order to be able to enter such a debate we need to be informed about what the science involves.

However, we should also be careful when choosing what sort of knowledge we base our arguments on. Scientific knowledge is often seen to predominate over all other forms of knowledge. It is viewed to be objective and, in itself, value free. But is it possible to have objective, value-free knowledge? A full discussion of the production of scientific knowledge is beyond the scope of this section. However, we should always try to be aware of where knowledge comes from, who it is funded by, and for what purpose it has been made public. In other words, we should subject scientific knowledge to the same kind of rational scrutiny which we use for other kinds of ideas and notions.

3.2 Ethical monism, relativism and pluralism

Monism and relativism

So far, you have been introduced to a range of approaches to considering ethical dilemmas. As you have been reading them, you will probably have agreed with a lot of the theories that have been introduced so far. It would seem sensible to take a decision that has the best possible outcome for all concerned (utilitarianism). But, at the same time, you may also believe that there are some universal rights which all humans have (deontology). You probably also do things each day because you think it makes you a good person and not because of any duty or consequences that this action might have (virtue ethics).

It is clear that philosophers propose many different approaches to deciding what action is right or wrong. Which of those approaches is right? How can this be

determined? And, importantly, who should decide which ethic is the correct one to adopt? If it cannot objectively be decided which approach is right, does this mean that the study of ethics is nothing more than a series of different people's opinions? Perhaps they are all right! If so, what happens when the different frameworks reach different conclusions or even conflict?

Such questions can be approached in several ways. Some philosophers argue that it is possible to make objective decisions about our ethics and that identifying one, valid ethical theory should be the main task of philosophers. This position is called **ethical monism**. Others philosophers, in contrast, believe that it is impossible to make such objective ethical judgements and that any decision about which particular ethical approach is 'right' is nothing more than a personal preference, and will depend on people's individual feelings, their cultural and religious background, etc. This position is called **ethical relativism**.

✍ Do you think that you are an ethical monist or an ethical relativist? Do you think there is another option?

A dilemma

Traditional ethical theories (such as deontological theories) are generally absolutist and normative because they reflect a belief in universally applicable moral principles and objective qualities of right and wrong, on which there need be no debate. So, many of the principles we looked at in the previous section are monist. Monism is nice and tidy. It simply asks us to choose one moral framework and to apply it to our ethical decision-making.

But how many of us can call ourselves monists? As you were reading through the ethical theories in the previous section you probably found yourself agreeing with more than one of the theories. Many philosophers have argued that the world is not the neat and tidy place that monists would have it be. People often use a range of ethical frameworks to make their decisions.

So should we argue then for ethical relativism, and say that all ethical frameworks have some validity? If you accept the ethical relativist's argument, this leaves the study of ethics in a difficult position. If we cannot say that our ethical frameworks amount to anything more than personal preference, then we are not left in a very strong position to promote any one ethical decision over another. Development ethicists would have to conclude that whatever a particular culture promoted as right or wrong, was indeed right or wrong for that culture. Environmental ethics would not be able to hope to fulfil its promise of addressing the environmental crisis by promoting forms of decision-making that will protect and conserve the non-human world, as there would be no basis for arguing that people should adopt alternative frameworks for thinking about the natural world. The study of ethics would become nothing more than describing and comparing the ethical arguments. There would be no question of being able to promote one ethical argument over another.

? What would be some of the dangers of devising international development policy on ethical monism? What would some of the dangers be of promoting ethical relativism?

Answer

Ethical monists would be in danger of promoting their particular culture's ideas of right and wrong over other cultures. Ethical relativists would be unable to promote any kind of ideas of right and wrong, which would lead to having to accept any arguments made by (even dubious and/or undemocratically elected) governments in any country.

Ethical pluralism

We are not adopting a monist approach to ethics here. You are not expected to be able to argue that one of the ethical traditions introduced in the previous section is better than the others in all situations. However, neither do we argue that all ethical arguments are equally valid. An alternative to the rigidity of ethical monism and the 'anything goes' attitude of ethical relativism is **ethical pluralism** (see 3.2.1).

3.2.1 Ethical pluralism

'Pluralism is an alternative to monism **and** to relativism. Rejecting the monist view that there is only one correct answer in ethics, pluralists also reject the relativist claim that there can be no right answer. Instead, moral pluralists maintain that there is a plurality of moral truths that cannot (perhaps unfortunately) be reconciled into a single principle. According to monists, this posture is the same as relativism.'

Source: DesJardins (2006) pp. 262—263)

DesJardins argues that that we are probably asking too much of ethics if we expect one, single, correct answer to every moral dilemma we face. While science and mathematics usually seek or require – and sometimes even provide – certainty and unambiguous answers, it may not be appropriate to expect the same of ethics. But this, he argues, does not mean that we have to abandon rationality. While mathematics may (usually) be able to give us a single, unequivocally correct answer, even sciences such as medicine do not always give one answer; there may be a number of valid ways to interpret a test or to treat a certain condition. Two different but equally competent doctors may therefore prescribe slightly different treatments. However, this does not mean that **all** treatments are equally valid. There is a big difference, DesJardins (2006 p. 264) points out, 'between a good physician and a quack'.

In the context of environmental ethics, DesJardins (2006) argues out that, while there are large areas of disagreement, there are a number of areas where strong consensus does exist between environmental ethicists. For example, almost all agree that the narrow approach to environmental valuation within classical economics and the preference utilitarianism that forms the backbone of many environmental policy decisions should be rejected. While different approaches give different answers to explain why it is wrong, it is agreed that valuing the environment solely in terms of a human resource for short-term economic gain is not acceptable, given the limitations and fragility of natural ecosystems.

Intrapersonal pluralism

Ethical pluralism is the acceptance that there may be more than one correct moral framework that we can use. However, it differs from relativism in that it does not accept that **all** frameworks are equal – morality, according to a pluralist, does **not** simply come down to personal preference. It is possible to make rational judgements between various frameworks and to judge some to be better than others.

The debate over whether ethicists should be searching for one single unified moral framework (as moral monists believe) or whether a range of frameworks can be useful to us (as moral pluralists believe) has become quite heated, and the argument is complicated by there being several different forms of moral pluralism. Here, we make only a single distinction between two broad types of pluralism. The first question that we will consider is whether **one person** can legitimately use different ethical frameworks to make different decisions. This is called **intrapersonal pluralism**. Can we use Kantian deontology to make one ethical decision and then use virtue ethics to make another? The second question is whether it is acceptable for **different people**, or **different cultures**, to use different systems of ethics. This is the question of **interpersonal pluralism**. While the arguments surrounding the pluralism debate are rather complex, the question of whether we can acceptably follow more than one ethical theory is, nevertheless, important to consider.

? Consider the type of moral pluralism described above. Do you think we can use different moral theories for different relationships? Think about the ethical decisions that you take. Do you use different ethical frameworks for different decisions? Do you sometimes defend your answers using rights theory, for example, and at other times use utilitarian reasoning?

First we are going to consider **intrapersonal pluralism**. J Baird Callicott is an environmental philosopher who argues against adopting moral pluralism. Read 3.2.2 and consider his arguments.

3.2.2 Callicott's characterisation of pluralism

'Moral pluralism, crudely characterized — I hope not crudely caricatured — invites us to adopt one theory to steer a course in our relations with friends and neighbours, another to define our obligations to fellow citizens, a third to clarify our duties to more distantly related people, a fourth to express the concern we have for future generations, a fifth to govern our relationship with nonhuman animals, a sixth to bring plants within the purview of morals, a seventh to tell us how to treat the elemental environment, an eighth to cover species, ecosystems, and other environmental collectives, and perhaps a ninth to explain our obligations to the planet, Gaia, as a whole and organically unified living thing.'

Source: Callicott (1990) p. 104

Callicott (1990) argues that this type of inconsistency ends up frustrating individuals. Mature moral agents need one system, he believes. Otherwise, what do we do when these principles overlap and contradict? Pluralists suggest that we prioritise our

ethics, use our intuition, moral tastes, and sensitivities to work out which to follow. But Callicott (1990) argues that individuals cannot play 'metaphysical musical chairs': we cannot be utilitarians one minute, and then slip into Kantianism the next. We cannot live with constant self-contradiction.

Furthermore, Callicott (1990) believes that pluralism can allow unscrupulous or weak moral agents to choose principles that favour their own advantage.

> *'With a variety of theories at our disposal, each indicating different, inconsistent, or contradictory courses of action, we may be tempted to espouse the one that seems most convenient or self-serving in the circumstances.'*

Source: Callicott (1990) p. 110–111

✍ Has your opinion of pluralism changed? Do you think that Callicott's arguments are valid? Does an individual need one, unified theory to cover all the ethical decisions that they make in order to be consistent?

Interpersonal pluralism

You may have reached the conclusion that, in order to be consistent, an individual cannot play 'metaphysical musical chairs' and select different ethical frameworks to justify different moral decisions as they please. You may agree with Callicott (1990) that an individual needs one coherent moral framework that is not contradictory. Or, alternatively, you may think that it is acceptable for different ethical theories to be used for different relationships or in different areas of life.

Whatever your answer, these questions relate to intrapersonal pluralism – the theory that one individual person can rationally follow more than one ethical theory. Here, in contrast, we consider a slightly different question. Even if we say that a person should follow only one, unified ethical theory, does this mean that **everyone** in the world should follow this theory? In other words, is there only one, morally correct theory to follow, or can we consistently argue that what is right for me does not necessarily have to be right for everyone, everywhere in the world? If you believe that we can argue the latter, then you are an **interpersonal pluralist**.

✍ (a) Make a list of the different ethical frameworks that have been suggested so far in the unit.

(b) In terms of the decisions that you have had to make, which framework(s) best fit(s) the kind of decisions you have taken?

(c) Now consider this list again. Having studied the unit so far, is there an ethical framework that you would like to adopt as an alternative to the framework(s) that you identified in your answer above?

(d) Would you recommend that ethical framework to anyone else? Why (not)?

(e) If your answer to (d) is 'yes', what arguments would you use?

However, before we accept pluralism as a useful compromise, we should think very carefully about the consequences. What would happen if different people followed different ethical frameworks within a society? Could some people potentially lose out? For example, if one person follows a deep ecology ethic, but their neighbour follows an anthropocentric utilitarian ethic, there is likely to be conflict between them. How do we deal with these conflicts? How do we decide who is right or wrong?

Whatever the answers to these questions may be, pluralists point out that interpersonal pluralism is what, in fact, we encounter particularly in today's multicultural societies. Then again, why is it that people coming from different societies should have different ideas about the environment and should use different ethical frameworks?

Taking a pluralist approach clearly has its difficulties. However, when we look at development and environmental policies, it will often be the case that there is not one clearly 'correct' decision to take and numerous incorrect ones. Moreover, each decision will probably result in an outcome where some people gain and some people suffer. Not all of these options will be equally good or bad. Examining the ethical issues behind each option can help us to make clearer decisions – and can hopefully ensure that we choose one of the better options.

Section 3 Self Assessment Questions

Question 7

Match the following terms to the statements (a) to (d).

(i) Ethical monism

(ii) Ethical relativism

(iii) Interpersonal pluralism

(iv) Intrapersonal pluralism

(a) It is acceptable for an individual to use different ethical theories to make decisions in different circumstances. However, this is not to say that all ethical frameworks and decisions are equally valid.

(b) It is not possible to make judgements between different ethical frameworks – the study of ethics is merely the study of personal preference.

(c) Environmental ethics is the search for one unified moral theory that, if followed, can help us to address the environmental crisis we are currently facing.

(d) Moral decision-making is not a matter of personal preference, and as individuals we should be consistent in the ethical choices that we make. However, different people and different cultures are free to follow different moral frameworks.

Question 8

Write a short paragraph defending ethical monism.

Question 9

Write a short paragraph defending ethical pluralism.

UNIT SUMMARY

This unit has introduced some of the key terms relating to the study of ethics, and some of the key ethical ideas, principles and frameworks that have emerged from this interesting field of study. Hopefully, you will now have an appreciation of the diversity of this field and an awareness of some of the ways in which ethical theories are used and applied. In particular, you should have an understanding of the rationale for studying two areas of applied ethics – environmental and development ethics – and of some of the ways in which these areas of study are interrelated. It is important and valuable to have an understanding of the key terms, branches and approaches of ethical theory in order to develop more nuanced and sophisticated ideas about what is 'right' and 'wrong' in these important areas of life.

UNIT SELF ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

Question 1

Ethical judgements that are based on the outcome of a decision or action are called:

(a) Naturalistic

(b) Consequentialist

(c) Deontological

(d) Non-consequentialist

Question 2

The ethical approach that seeks the greatest good for the greatest number of people is called:

(a) Utilitarianism

(b) Virtue ethics

(c) Ethical pluralism

(d) Egoism

Question 3

The ethical approach that states that what is right for one person is not necessarily right for everyone is called:

(a) Rationalisation

(b) Intrapersonal pluralism

(c) Utilitarianism

(d) Interpersonal pluralism

KEY TERMS AND CONCEPTS

deontology	a branch of normative ethical theory which regards actions, rather than the consequences of actions, as right or wrong
egoism	a doctrine that individual interest is either the motive of all conscious action or is the valid end of all actions
ethics	an 'ethic' is a theory which can be applied to tell us whether our actions are right or wrong. 'Ethics' also refers to the study of ethical theory
ethical relativism	the belief that it is not possible to identify universal theories which determine what is right or wrong. Instead, the 'rightness' or 'wrongness' of an action is relative to its particular circumstance and location
morality	the (ethical) rightness or wrongness of something
rationalisation	a term, used by Traer (2013), to refer to covering up our true or subconscious motives with what appear to be rational motives
teleology	a theory of morality that derives what is right from the end of consequences of an action
utilitarianism	the normative ethical theory which judges actions as being right or wrong on the basis of their consequences. Right actions are those whose consequences increase the total amount of happiness: they lead to the greatest good for the greatest number of people
virtue ethics	the normative ethical theory that holds that actions that are right are those which a virtuous person would perform. In this view, 'virtue' is a more basic concept than 'rightness'