

## What is Ethics?

Part of what makes humans unique is our freedom to determine how we'll act.

Whenever we make a choice, it was possible for us to have made a different one. The Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard captures this sense when he describes standing on the edge of a cliff. The only thing that prevents us from falling into the void is us – our choice to do otherwise.

Ethics is only possible because we can act against our nature, based on our conscience. It stops us from simply describing what is likely to happen, and allows us to make judgements about what should happen. Of all the ways you might act, which is the best? Of all the possibilities, which one should you bring into reality? That's the question ethics seeks to answer.

Of course you can only answer that question if you dare to ask it. It's comfortable, safe and pretty common to do what's always been done – pass responsibility onto others or stick with the status quo. Ethics asks us to take responsibility for our beliefs and our actions, and live a life that's our own.

### How do you decide?

Ethics isn't the only way to define what the 'best' decision might look like. Some might see it as the one that advances their own goals and interests, or makes the most money. Others may focus on what's likely to be the most popular choice.

At the heart of these is a nugget of ethics, but each is a distraction from the questions that matter most. Ethics defines the best option as the one which best achieves what is good, right and consistent with the nature of the things in question. At The Ethics Centre, we refer to these as 'values', 'principles' and 'purpose'.

**Values tell us what's good – they're the things we strive for, desire and seek to protect.**

**Principles tell us what's right – outlining how we may or may not achieve our values.**

**Purpose is your reason for being – it gives life to your values and principles.**

Ethics is the process of questioning, discovering and defending our values, principles and purpose. It's about finding out who we are and staying true to that in the face of temptations, challenges and uncertainty. It's not always fun and it's hardly ever easy, but if we commit to it, we set ourselves up to make decisions we can stand by, building a life that's truly our own and a future we want to be a part of.

## Questions to guide you.

There is no ready-made way to deal with ethical challenges. They require us to respond to specific circumstances and relationships as well as the various ethical considerations – purpose, values and principles – at play.

Still, there are a few questions you can ask that can help crystallise the ethical issues for you.

### 1. Would I be happy for this decision to be headlining the news tomorrow?

This is known as the Sunlight Test. Imagine if your decision – and the reasons you made it – were public knowledge. What if the people you most admire knew what you'd done and why? Do you think you'd be able to defend yourself? Would other people agree, or at least understand, why you did what you did?

Note – it's the 'don't be ashamed' test not the 'don't get caught' test.

### 2. Is there an ethical non-negotiable at play?

Is there a rule that any reasonable person should apply to this situation regardless of the consequences? Some rules are unbreakable, even when the stakes are high. For instance, we should never act in ways that undermine the equality and dignity of all people – ourselves included. The rules are often associated with duties – some of which we create ourselves, like when we make a promise.

### 3. Will my action make the world a better place?

We often think about ethics in terms of consequences. 'The greatest good for the greatest number' is a maxim many people recognise and accept. Consequences are an important part of ethical decisions, but are they everything?

We should be aware of what we're sacrificing when trying to bring about good consequences. Are we violating an important principle? Are we compromising our own values? If so, have we considered these facts when balancing harms and benefits?

### 4. What would happen if everybody did this?

Would you be happy if your reason for action was used by everyone in the same circumstance? If not, then what makes you so special? Most ethical frameworks suggest the right decision for one person should be right for everybody in the same position. A lot of unethical behaviour arises from people making special exceptions for themselves. This test helps us be sure we're willing to hold ourselves to the same standards we hold others to.

### 5. What will this do to my character or the character of my organisation?

Many people believe that our decisions shape our character and vice versa. That is, we can't lie and cheat without becoming a fraudulent liar. For instance, if we're a liar we'll tend to lie more often.

Think about whether your action is establishing a habit either for you or your organisation. Is it a good habit (virtue) or a bad one (vice)? If I cut corners on a work job today am I developing a habit of laziness that may affect my future work?

6. Is this consistent with my values and principles?

Plenty of people and organisations are happy to tell you what they stand for – but do they walk the talk? Are my actions reflecting my ethical beliefs? Most ethical systems have no time for hypocrisy.

Answering these questions doesn't guarantee everyone will accept our decision. Moral disagreement is extremely common. But even the answer to our question doesn't achieve universal approval, the way in which we reach those answers matters. Ethics allows us to explore these questions in a way that is sincere, rational, competent and honest.