

# Ethics in Theory and in Practice

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# What are 'ethics' and 'morals'?

- The terms 'ethics' and 'morals' derive from Greek and Latin words that mean 'customs'.
- In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle studies the question of what habits reasonable people want to encourage in citizens.
- Cicero introduced philosophical discussion to the Romans. He translated 'ethics' as 'morals'.

# Authority vs Choice

- Are we commanded to act ethically or are ethical decisions made as a result of choice?
- What supports the authority we follow?
- Must ethical choice be rational?
- If being ethical is just following the demands of our society, why should these be rational?
- Are authorities given their position as a result of rational deliberation?

# Divine origins

- Is some divine being the source of good?
- This seems assumed in the Old Testament.
- If the divine is the *origin* of good then the concept of good simply represents a demand.
  - Praise of divine goodness is *meaningful* only if we have an understanding of what good is that goes beyond mere obedience to commands. (Plato)  
Otherwise the praise counts for nothing.
- If social standards determine how we behave, this seems to raise a similar problem. What makes these the right standards to adopt?

# Social mammals

- Mammals can live in small groups, like tigers, or in vast herds, like bison. But humans and their near relatives, live in family groups; members succour and protect others in their group.
- Morality may be thus be founded on empathy.
  - When we empathise with another, our brains experience or model what the other feels. If I see know you and see you in pain, I will feel the pain and be moved to help you.
- Neuroscience has now discovered the brain mechanisms that underlie empathy.

# Safe societies

- From a biological point of view, social animals benefit from the protection of the group.
- But this means that some individuals suffer for the sake of others.
- We may be naturally predisposed to this, but if so, it seems that other-directed behaviour does not always serve our own interests.

# Ideas about social behaviour

- When humans began to reflect on their moral behaviour, they considered many aspects.
  - What actions count as desirable behaviour?
  - What kinds of actions should be avoided?
  - What is a good life for a person to lead?
  - Should people do what others want them to do?
  - Do people who act as others want live good lives?
- Theories give us ways to justify answers to questions like these.

# Some standard questions

- What is the good?
- What makes something good?
- Is pleasure *a* good ? *the* good?
- What is happiness?
- Who counts as a good person?
- Are good people happy?
- How can we live well together?



# The revival of classical learning

- During the middle ages, Arabs translated some works of Aristotle into Arabic and in Spain these works were then translated into Latin.
- In 1453, Constantinople fell to the Ottomans. many Greeks fled the city and brought manuscripts to Italy, especially to Florence.
- Before this, other manuscripts had made their way to the west, but now there was a flood.

# Relativism?

- If we are moral simply because of instinctive empathetic behaviour, does this mean that what seems right to us depends only on what our society says is right?
- Here is Plato's reply to this suggestion:
  - Suppose you hold that truth is relative. Now you encounter someone whose society believes in an absolute standard of truth. You must take this view as correct if it depends on the society. But then you have to accept that relativism is not correct!