## Ethics

**Is there such a thing as moral knowledge?** Does the rightness or wrongness of an action depend on the situation? Are all moral opinions equally valid? Is there such a thing as a moral fact?

One thing often said to distinguish humans from other animals is morality. A key question in ethical discussions in TOK is therefore whether we can really know whether something is moral. What is peculiar about moral values is that they seem to embody obligations for action.

An example of a key area of discussion in ethics is the issue of moral rules. There is disagreement about whether being moral is about following rules, not least because some would question whether moral rules really exist at all. There is also debate about whether moral rules should ever be broken, and if so, in what circumstances. Other key areas of discussion include the issue of whether humans are essentially altruistic or selfish, or whether the consequences of, or motivation for, an action is the location of moral value.

### Knowledge framework

- Morality is often regarded as concerned with praiseworthy or blameworthy reasons for action
- Ethics more generally concerned with answering the question “what should one do?”
- Moral values seem to be distinct from other sorts of value in that they produce obligations to action
- An ethical viewpoint seems to imply that the individual takes the interests of others into consideration as well as his or her own

### Scope/applications

- Categories: acts that are prohibited, permitted or required
- “What should one do?” might be a different question than “what is one morally obliged to do?”
- General requirement for ethical judgments to be universalizable—so they have a public dimension almost by definition
- Rights seem to be goods that the group is obliged to provide for the individual—so each right claimed carries a corresponding obligation
- Moral language contains a built-in requirement for action

### Concepts/language

- Taking an ethical framework as a starting point and reasoning from general principles to a specific situation
- Extracting morally significant aspects using reason from the perception of the current situation
- Ethical principles can be refined by checking them against our moral intuitions
- Our moral intuitions can be refined by checking them against ethical principles
- Consequentialist ethics requires imagining consequences of an action and evaluating them

### Methodology

- The nature of ethical thought might have changed somewhat from that held by Greek thinkers of the fourth century BCE
- Perhaps the emphasis now is less on virtues and more on rights

### Historical development

- Moral obligations require action, so morality impacts on the individual
- Why should living a moral life matter?
- Is living a moral life a question of having the right character?
- One might be guided by emotion and intuition, but moral judgments seem to be more than simple expressions of personal preference
**Knowledge questions**

- In what sense can ethics be regarded as a system of knowledge?
- How are conflicts between different ethical systems resolved?
- To what extent might lack of knowledge be an excuse for unethical conduct?
- To what extent might possession of knowledge carry with it moral obligations?
- Do people act against their own interests?
- Do moral truths exist?
- Why be moral?

**Examples of possible topics of study**

- Emotion and reason in ethics
- Ethical dilemmas
- Ethical theories (for example, utilitarianism, virtue ethics, Kantian ethics)
- Ethical language

*Figure 16*