

RIGHT AND WRONG

Many people think of morality as a set of rules that requires us to perform certain actions and refrain from others. However, what happens when two rules contradict each other? Knowing the right thing to do is not always as simple as following a rule – raising a question over the nature of moral authority. The nature of this authority is one of the central questions of ethics.

Aristotle believed that ethics only starts with rules. He argued that conflicts between rules force us to think for ourselves, and it is just this exercise of “right reason” that constitutes morality. However, by denying moral rules, he was not claiming that we cannot have “rules of thumb”, or guidelines on how to behave. His point was simply that rules can never be absolute, or eternally binding.

However, many philosophers disagree with Aristotle. Some believe that morality is a collection of rules that is embedded in human nature. Immanuel Kant, for example, believed that morality is governed by categorical imperatives, or universally binding rules that are arrived at by rational thought. For Kant, the moral value of an action should thus be judged in terms of its motive, or whether or not it flows from the moral law. The utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham also believed in rules, even arguing that only one is required: that we act in a way that maximizes the happiness of the greatest number of people. And so, for utilitarians, the morality of an action is not a question of its motive, but rather its consequences in the world.

Others philosophers follow David Hume, who argued that reason is the “slave of the passions”. By this he meant that a moral act is simply one that brings about a desired state of affairs. According to this tradition, to say “lying is wrong” is another way of saying “I don’t like lying”, for morality is simply an expression of personal preference, which cannot therefore be rationally justified. Philosophers who hold this view regard emotion, rather than reason, as the basis for moral decisions and actions.

One thing that most philosophers agree on is that morals are a matter of choice. Unlike the laws of physics, moral rules can be broken, but they can only be broken freely. Someone who steals, for example, is only acting immorally if they freely choose to steal: if they feel compelled to steal, then we tend to judge them differently – perhaps as being in need of help. For this reason, determinism – the idea that our behaviour is fixed by the laws of nature – renders morality void. As Jean-Paul Sartre argued, it is our ability to act freely that makes us moral agents.

Contemporary moral philosophy falls into two broad categories: first- and second-order ethics. First-order ethics involves thinking about specific moral problems. These include whether human cloning is morally acceptable, whether animals have rights, and whether the law should permit assisted suicide. Second-order ethics is more general, and involves thinking about the nature of morality: whether it is a system of rules, whether or not we have free will, and whether we can justifiably claim to know right from wrong – or even that right and wrong really exist.





Rules and principles

Some philosophers believe that we need to follow rules to make moral decisions. Others argue that there are no moral rules and we can only make moral decisions by assessing our particular situation.

To follow or not to follow rules?

Most people are brought up to see rules as central to deciding what is right and wrong. The moral rules that children are taught give them a framework for how they should always behave. Young children need this framework because they cannot yet reason for themselves. However, as children grow older, experience tells them that it is difficult to apply inflexible rules to specific situations. They will encounter situations in which one moral rule conflicts with another, or where following a moral rule

could have dire consequences. There must, therefore, be more to morality than the rules we are taught as children. Philosophers disagree about whether morality can consist of rules. Aristotle said that making a moral decision is not always a matter of applying a rule, and that often we instead have to exercise reason and judgement. Rules are only helpful up to a point because most moral judgements are affected by the situation in which they are made.

Moral particularism and moral generalism

One theory, moral particularism, goes further. It states that there are no moral principles because every moral judgement depends on the context in which it is made. No two contexts are the same, so every moral decision must be made on its own merits. The philosopher Jonathan Dancy (1946–) is the best-known advocate of moral particularism. Dancy argues that morality cannot be governed by rules because all reasons for performing an action or not performing an action depend on the context in which we might perform an action.

Philosophers who reject moral particularism are called moral generalists. They believe that

morality is a matter of following rules, but not necessarily the inflexible rules that children were brought up on. They offer more general rules that can more easily be adapted to specific situations. The utilitarian view that we should do whatever produces the greatest happiness of the greatest number (see pp.186–87) is an example of a rule that a moral generalist would accept. Another example is the golden rule, or the idea that we should treat other people the way that we would like to be treated. Moral generalists might apply rules such as these when they are faced with a moral dilemma.

Moral dilemmas

In everyday life, we often encounter moral dilemmas: specific situations that bring the general moral rules that we have been taught as children into conflict with each other. For example, we might have been taught that we should always be loyal and should always tell the truth, but there are many situations in which telling the truth would mean being disloyal to someone. When faced with a moral dilemma, a moral particularist would make a moral decision based only on the context of the situation. A moral generalist would still follow rules, but these rules are more flexible than the rules that children are taught.

THE GOLDEN RULE

The golden rule is the principle of treating other people the way we would like to be treated, or the idea that we should “do as we would be done by”. This rule cannot give us specific instructions for making a moral decision. In order to follow it, we need to decide how we would like to be treated in a particular situation, and what course of action would involve treating other people the way we would like to be treated. It is not a rule that can be taught to children because they are not yet able to reason for themselves. But it is a rule that can help moral generalists in the case of a moral dilemma.



MORAL PARTICULARISM

Moral particularists believe that we cannot use general rules to make a moral decision in a particular context. They would argue that our reasons for acting or not acting always depend on the situation that we are in, and that we can therefore only make moral decisions by assessing that situation.

MORAL GENERALISM

Moral generalists believe that moral rules can help us make moral decisions. But moral generalists follow rules, such as the golden rule (see box), which can be more easily adapted to particular situations than the rules that children are taught.

“Morality can get along perfectly well without principles.”

Jonathan Dancy,
Ethics Without Principles (2004)

LOYALTY

TRUTH

Ethics and the law

The laws that apply in a particular country or region, the “laws of the land”, are rules that everyone knows they must follow. Such rules govern our behaviour and must not be broken.

Law of the land

Ignorance of the law of the land is not permitted as a defence against breaking these laws. This means that laws must be publicised in such a way that it is reasonable to expect everyone to know what they are. But what relation do the fundamental rules of morality, if they exist, have to the rules that make up the law of the land?

It is obvious that the rules of morality and the law of the land are different. We know this because laws are not always fair, and those that are unjust may be rejected. For example, many countries are currently questioning whether or not to allow assisted suicide. To do so would be to

challenge existing laws that prohibit the taking of life. If some laws should not be passed, and other laws should be passed, then morality somehow determines the law of the land. But if morality determines these laws, what determines morality?

Some philosophers believe that the moral rules we should follow are those we were taught in childhood; others believe in different moral rules; while others believe there are no moral rules at all. But who is right?

Moral knowledge

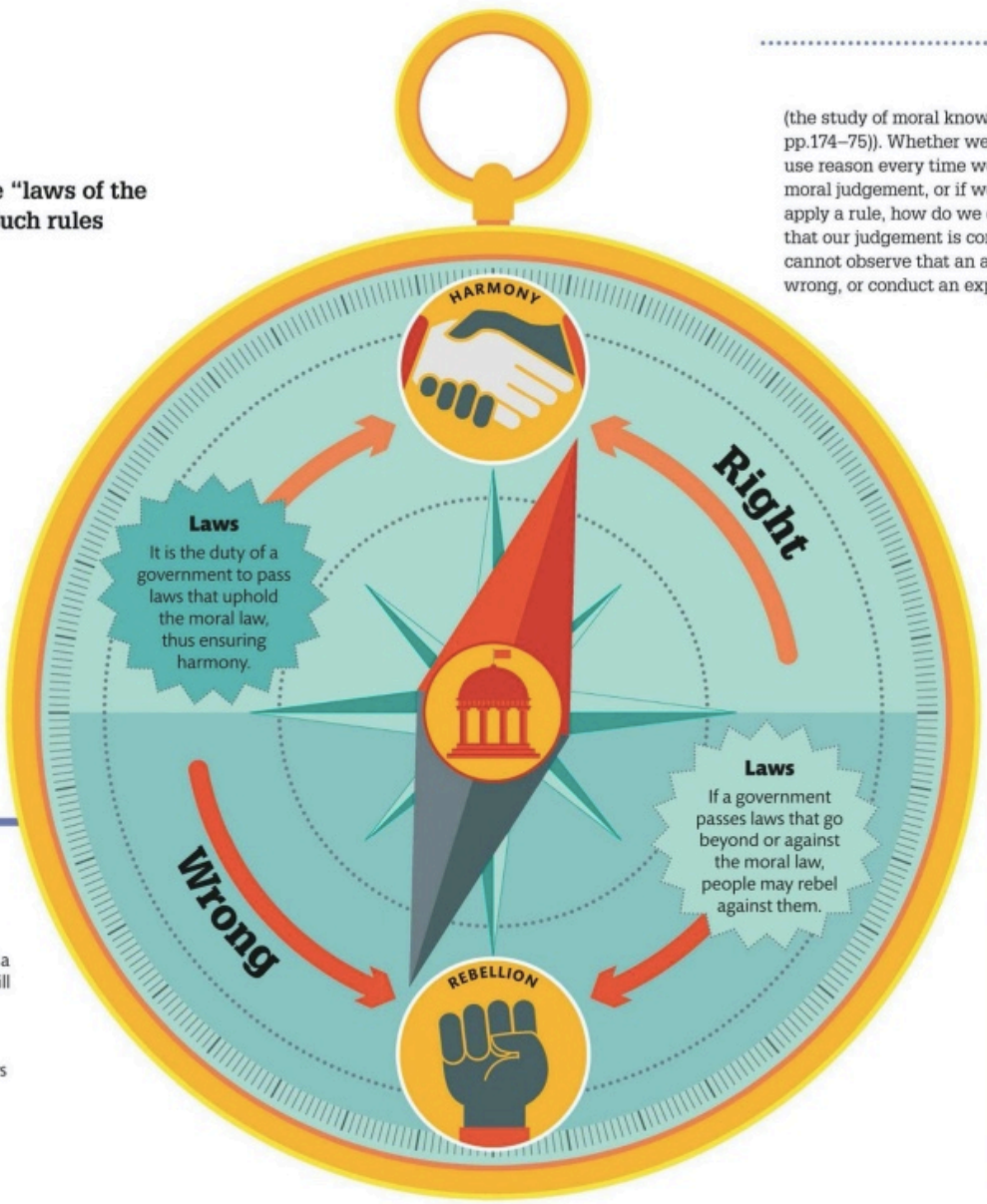
Working out which moral rules to follow, if any, and how to do so, is a question of moral epistemology

NEED TO KNOW

- › **Moral epistemology** is the study of our knowledge of moral rules or facts
- › **Moral particularism** is a theory that suggests there are no moral principles because every moral judgement is affected by the context in which it is made, and no two contexts are the same
- › **Moral generalism** is the belief that morality is a matter of following rules, but not necessarily the rules learned in childhood

Moral compass

The philosopher John Locke believed that the moral law has priority (in terms of time and importance) over the law of the land, and argued that it is the duty of a government to introduce the laws that will uphold the “moral law”, but never those that go further than the moral law (in introducing restrictions not justified by the moral law). He thought that if the laws passed by a government strayed too far from the moral law, this would justify rebellion against that government.



(the study of moral knowledge (see pp.174–75)). Whether we have to use reason every time we make a moral judgement, or if we have to apply a rule, how do we ensure that our judgement is correct? We cannot observe that an action is wrong, or conduct an experiment to

tell us whether or not it is wrong, so science will not help. Some philosophers say we have a special intuition that allows us to “see” moral truth. Others argue that we acquire moral knowledge through our actions over time, building a moral sense from our experience.

“The end of law is not to abolish or restrain, but to preserve and enlarge freedom.”

John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government* (1690)

FIGHTING INJUSTICE

People have a tendency to rebel when faced with a law they believe to be unjust. In the UK in the 1980s there were riots when the government tried to introduce a system of local taxation that many people felt was unfair. In the US in the 2000s, rebellion was threatened when people began to believe that black people were less protected by the law than white people. It seems many people believe rebellion is justified if the law of the land strays too far from the moral law.

BLACK LIVES MATTER is a movement that campaigns against the unequal treatment of black people.