

Introduction to Social Ethics

1. **What** is social ethics and how is it approached?

Ethics is a large field that can be divided into three branches: applied ethics, meta-ethics, and normative ethics. Meta-ethics and normative ethics are both theoretical. Meta-ethics is concerned with investigating whether or not morality exists (i.e. whether or not the words "right" and "wrong" describe objective reality); on the assumption that it does, normative ethics is concerned with how to make moral decisions (i.e. how to decide which actions are right and wrong). Unlike these first two branches of ethics, applied ethics is practical; it takes normative ethical theories and puts them into practice in real-world situations. One of these is how to treat different human beings in society, which can be referred to as social ethics (although this term is not widely used).



American Independence: a process inspired by Enlightenment ideas about equality.

During the Enlightenment (c. 1637-1800), a third way of interpreting the principle of equality arose: moral equality. Combined with the first two interpretations, moral equality requires numerically equal or proportionally equal treatment of all human beings despite differences in characteristics. This third interpretation influenced the post-Enlightenment approach to social ethics, which is the idea that all human beings are equal (by virtue of being human); this development undermined the arguments for characteristic-based discrimination (e.g. sexism).

2. **How** do the approaches to social ethics work?

Pre-Enlightenment: the pre-Enlightenment approach relies on the belief that characteristic-based differences between human beings (e.g. gender, race, and ability) are sufficient to justify different treatment of different human beings despite the fact they are all members of the same species. This approach satisfies the first two interpretations of the principle of equality, because it involves treating all members of a characteristic-based category equally. For example, the pre-Enlightenment approach allows all men to be treated one way and all women to be treated another way, as long as all men are treated equally among themselves and all women are treated equally among themselves. This approach to social ethics can be used to justify discrimination (e.g. sexism, racism, and ableism); however, most people consider this ethically unacceptable. One of the reasons discrimination was accepted in the past is that most people did not accept human beings are fundamentally equal based on their species membership.

Applied Ethics

A branch of ethics concerned with how to put ethical theories into practice in real-world situations.

Social Ethics

A branch of applied ethics concerned with the moral status of human beings in society and how they should interact with one another.

The way different human beings are treated in society is influenced by the principle of equality, which is a philosophical principle famously formulated by Aristotle (384–322 BCE); he claimed logic requires human beings to, "Treat like cases as like." When applied to social ethics, there are different ways of interpreting this principle. The first, numerical equality, requires equal treatment of similar human beings; and the second, proportional equality, allows different treatment of similar human beings to achieve equality between them. These two interpretations of the principle of equality influenced the pre-Enlightenment approach to social ethics, which is the idea that human beings are not equal and can be discriminated between, but should be treated the same way if they share certain characteristics (e.g. gender, race, and ability).

Sexism

The act of discriminating between human beings because of their gender.

Racism

The act of discriminating between human beings because of their race.

Ableism

The act of discriminating between human beings because of their ability.

Post-Enlightenment: the post-Enlightenment approach relies on the belief that characteristic-based differences between human beings (e.g. gender, race, and ability) are not sufficient to justify different treatment of different human beings. This approach satisfies the third interpretation of the principle of equality, because it involves treating all human beings equally (either numerically or proportionally). Consequently, it cannot be used to justify discrimination, because characteristic-based differences between human beings are considered insignificant compared with the similarity of species membership. Although this approach is beneficial for all human beings, it is still a form of discrimination (i.e. speciesism) that animal rights activists oppose.

Speciesism

The act of discriminating between different species despite their equal interests.

3. Why are social ethics and its approaches important?

In brief, social ethics and their approaches are very important, because they affect how human beings are treated in society. People who adopt the pre-Enlightenment approach to social ethics can use it to justify types of discrimination like sexism, racism, and ableism (among many others). Although the development of the post-Enlightenment approach to social ethics means most human beings consider characteristic-based discrimination to be ethically unacceptable, the pre-Enlightenment approach continues to exert considerable influence over the way some people think. Ultimately, it is this approach that justified sexism, racism, and ableism in many societies, and its legacy includes institutionalised forms of these types of discrimination. Nevertheless, it is important to remember the post-Enlightenment approach to social ethics still results in a type of discrimination (i.e. speciesism), which some ethicists argue is the cause of most issues in animal ethics.

George Thinks

Ultimately, this course is about issues in social ethics, like sexism, racism, and ableism, so you may consider it a little odd that I've opened it up with an introduction on the principle of equality. The reason I have, is because this principle is fundamental to all these issues (and many more), and is controversial enough to merit serious consideration at the outset. I'm a committed supporter of the post-Enlightenment consensus; however, plenty of people continue to peddle the pre-Enlightenment approach to social ethics for complex and unexpected reasons. For example, feminists seeking equality between men and women support the unqualified right to abortion as a means of establishing equal control over their bodies; however, disability rights activists seeking equality between the able-bodied and disabled do not support this right, because it leads to the disproportionate abortion of unborn children with disabilities. As I hope you can see, although interpreting the principle of equality is difficult enough, applying it can be even more challenging; so, please, get to grips with it before going any further!

