

Issues in Social Ethics

1. **What** are the key issues in social ethics?

In order for most societies to function, it is necessary for them to discriminate between their members for various justifiable reasons. For example, most human beings consider it justifiable to discriminate between adults and children in issuing driving licences. Nevertheless, the practice of discrimination can lead to unfair and unjustifiable types of discrimination, and these are generally the instances that give rise to issues. Although there are several key issues in this branch of applied ethics, three of the most important are sexism, racism, and ableism.

Sexism: the issue of discriminating between human beings because of their gender, and providing different treatment on this basis. One infamous example of sexism is women's suffrage, which is the term for women's right to vote. Historically, this right was denied to women in most Western societies until the twentieth century, which prevented their interests from being properly represented. Another infamous example is the gender pay gap, which continues to disadvantage women around the world.



A public bench: in the United States, racial segregation was legal until 1964.

Racism: the issue of discriminating between human beings because of their race, and providing different treatment on this basis. Infamous examples of racism include slavery in the United States, which denied most black people the right to freedom, and Jim Crow laws, which were used to oppress black people after the abolition of slavery.

Ableism: the issue of discriminating between human beings because of their ability, and providing different treatment on this basis. The most infamous example of ableism was committed by the Nazi regime, which killed thousands of disabled adults and children; although appalling, some people even campaigned for similar practices in the United States.

2. **How** are the key issues in social ethics approached?

The key issues in social ethics are approached in two different ways: some people adopt the pre-Enlightenment approach and some people adopt the post-Enlightenment approach. Today, the pre-Enlightenment approach is largely derided; however, its legacy has left a lasting impression on various Western societies. Consequently, discrimination between human beings persists in some places, even though it is unfair and unjustifiable. Additionally, the pre-Enlightenment approach aims to achieve either numerical equality or proportional equality; numerical equality involves providing exactly equal treatment to all members of society, whereas proportional equality involves providing different treatment to members of society with the aim of achieving equality between them. This framework has been inherited by the post-Enlightenment approach, but is integral to its predecessor.

Pre-Enlightenment: before the Enlightenment (c. 1637-1800), most Western societies did not consider their members to be equal to one another. Consequently, this approach means that members of society are only entitled to the same treatment (either numerical equality or proportional equality) as others who share similar characteristics with them (like gender, race, and ability).

Post-Enlightenment: after the Enlightenment, most Western societies became inspired by the idea of moral equality, and began to maintain that every human being is entitled to the same treatment (either numerical equality or proportional equality) regardless of characteristics. Importantly, this approach means no group of people should receive more rights than any other.



The United States Capitol: a national symbol designed to embody Enlightenment ideals.

3. **Why** are the approaches to the key issues in social ethics important?

The approaches to sexism, racism, and ableism are important for several reasons, many of which are obvious. Arguably most importantly, the approaches influence what societies look like, and whether or not they are the sorts of places in which everyone receives fair treatment. Although the Enlightenment happened hundreds of years ago, many societies still do not reflect some of its important lessons. This is because the pre-Enlightenment approach to social ethics, and the notions of numerical equality and proportional equality, go back to antiquity. Western societies waited thousands of years before Enlightenment ideals found national form, like those embodied in the Declaration of Independence. Today, the United States does not appear as concerned with equality as it once was; instead, countries like Sweden seem to lead the way in addressing issues of prejudice and discrimination.

Nevertheless, the key issues in social ethics are important for other reasons as well. First, the issues in social ethics are ubiquitous, they affect huge numbers of people in societies around the world, and lead to widespread prejudice and discrimination. Second, the issues in social ethics are underestimated, because the far-reaching consequences of unequal treatment are often ignored. Numerous social problems, from mental health crises to sluggish economic growth, have been associated with the unequal treatment of people within societies. Finally, the issues in social ethics are unfair. Problems like sexism, racism, and ableism reveal that societies must improve their treatment of certain groups of people if they are to satisfy the principle of equality. In brief, the approaches are important because there are several potential responses to social issues and the problems they address are significant.

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We're discriminating creatures. In this context, I don't mean it pejoratively; what I mean is that we discriminate between things in our environment in order to survive. One of my favourite examples is our ability to discriminate between the lethal coral snake and harmless milk snake, which look almost identical. I think it's entirely possible we have an innate capacity for discrimination, and a natural tendency to engage in it. You don't have to agree, of course, but against this background I think it's easier to understand why social issues are so rampant. Many people claim that we're taught to be racist, but in-group favouritism, a phenomenon where one year-old babies appear to show a preference for playmates of the same ethnicity, suggests the issue is probably more complex.

None of this is meant to defend or justify social issues like sexism, racism, and ableism, only to offer a reason for why hundreds of years after the Enlightenment most societies still find it difficult to live up to its ideals. Following Peter Singer (b. 1946), I think it's impossible to establish that human beings have any meaningful differences in interests based on their characteristics; consequently, to satisfy the principle of equality, they should all be treated the same (either numerically or proportionally). Actually accepting this is easier said than done though, because it would mean radically changing much about our societies, from maternity leave to single sex schools; this process is underway, as it has been for hundreds of years, it just grinds slowly.

