

Debates in Social Ethics

1. **What** are the debates in social ethics?

The most important debates in social ethics go beyond those involved in social issues, like sexism, racism, and ableism. This does not mean that these social issues are less important, but that responses to them rely upon the outcomes of ethical debates at a deeper level. Fundamentally, it is the answers to these deeper level debates that dictate whether people adopt a traditional pre-Enlightenment approach to social ethics, effectively downplaying the importance of equality, or a progressive post-Enlightenment approach to social ethics, which prioritises equality as an ethical principle of primary importance. Three of the most important debates in social ethics are outlined below.

Principle: one very important debate is about whether or not equality is a fundamental ethical principle that applies to all human beings because of their humanity. This debate is of central importance because it affects how societies perceive the issue of equality between people, and the extent to which they prioritise it as an objective to be achieved.

Type: another debate in social ethics is about the type of equality that societies should seek to achieve. This debate influences whether societies attempt to pursue equality of opportunity, which ensures people access to the same life chances, or equality of outcome, which ensures people the same income and wealth by death (or some other milestone).

Application: a more practical debate in social ethics is about the application of either equality of opportunity or equality of outcome within society. Some people argue that societies should adopt policies that redress (i.e. compensate for) historical inequalities, whilst other people argue that societies should not adopt such policies.

Equality of Opportunity

A state of fairness in which all human beings in a society have access to the same life chances.

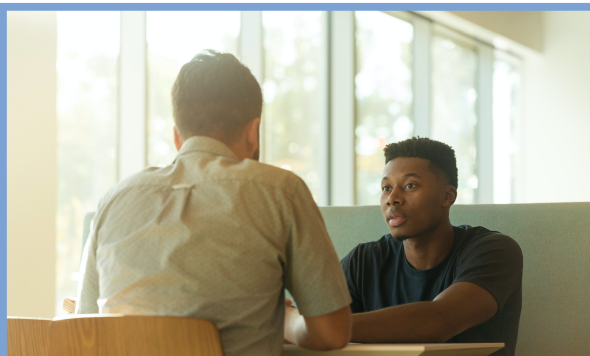
Equality of Outcome

A state of fairness in which all human beings in a society have the same income and wealth.

2. **How** do the debates in social ethics work?

Principle: ultimately, in most modern societies, the debate over whether or not the principle of equality should be applied to all human beings because of their humanity is closed. Although the ancient Greeks did not accept that being human entitled all human beings to equal treatment, the idea that societies should not discriminate between people based on characteristics (e.g. sex, race, and ability) has been generally accepted since the Enlightenment (in theory, at least, if not always in practice).

Type: the debate about type concerns how the principle of equality should be interpreted, based on the conclusion that it is worth promoting in the first place. In brief, societies must decide whether to promote equality of opportunity, which aims to provide people with access to the same life chances, or equality of outcome, which aims to provide people with the same income and wealth. Generally, in most societies the pursuit of equality of opportunity is perceived as more desirable, because it allows people to benefit from hard work and good decisions.



An interview: positive discrimination can help redress historical inequalities.

Application: the debate about application is different from the debates about principle and type. The former is a debate in applied ethics, whilst the latter are debates in meta-ethics and normative ethics. On the assumption that the principle of equality is worth promoting and people can agree on its interpretation, debates about application attempt to decide appropriate social policies. One of the most controversial areas of disagreement here is about whether or not societies should implement policies that attempt to redress historical inequalities. For example, positive discrimination (or affirmative action) requires employers to hire black candidates if they are equally well qualified to white candidates when competing for jobs. This policy attempts to compensate for historical discrimination against black people in many job markets.

3. **Why** are the debates in social ethics important?

The debates in social ethics are important for several reasons. Arguably the most important is the effect they have on societies around the world and what they are like to live in. Societies that downplay the importance of the principle of equality tend towards libertarianism (e.g. classical Athens, and Switzerland), whilst societies that promote equality of outcome tend towards totalitarianism to a greater or lesser extent (e.g. Cuba, and North Korea). Generally, equality of opportunity is promoted to some degree by most societies on Earth; however, the precise degree is dictated by the given society's tolerance for curtailing personal freedoms in pursuit of equality. Beyond this, the debates are important because they help to clarify the confusing key terms and concepts behind social ethics, and because they are consequential: they effect every human being in every society on Earth. Finally, they reveal some counter-intuitive findings, like the fact that greater equality does not always lead to greater happiness, because it increasingly involves sacrificing personal freedoms.



Cuba: a country that promotes equality of outcome by restricting personal freedoms.

George Thinks

The debates in social ethics aren't so much about issues like sexism, racism, and ableism, as they are about the fundamental values behind our responses to them. People who prioritise personal responsibility in ethical decision-making are going to find it difficult to jump on the equality bandwagon. This is why libertarians are largely unconcerned with equality: some people are smarter and harder working than others. It shouldn't be the place of the state to come along and redistribute the benefits that more industrious and intelligent members of society receive as a result of their own endeavours. So you see, support for a seemingly sensible principle like personal responsibility can actually come into considerable conflict with equality.

But there's absolutely no doubt whatsoever that some inequalities in society exist without having anything to do with how hard people work or how intelligent they are. Is it really fair that some people start life with so few opportunities, whilst others receive an abundance; and, if it isn't, why should we allow those who have benefited from blind chance to reap all its rewards? This is the counter-argument to the libertarian world view; most people agree to some degree or another, but the question then becomes to what extent society should intervene to level the playing field. These are the tensions that people are required to keep in balance when sensibly debating social ethics, and there are no easy answers (as you may have already guessed)!

