

Ethics

Applied Ethics

Social Ethics

Information Booklet

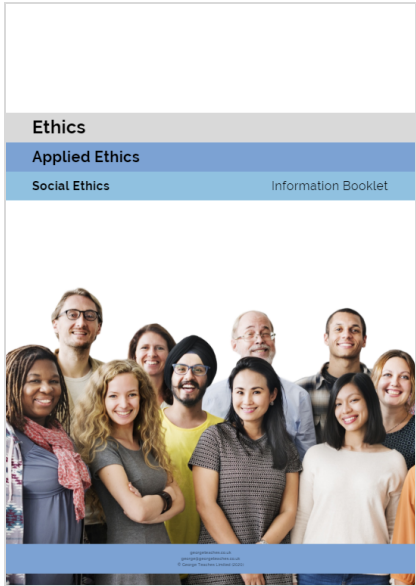


Preface

This information booklet is all about social ethics. It surveys the important elements of this complex and ever evolving branch of applied ethics, including significant concepts and issues (like sexism, racism, and ableism), the ideas of well-known thinkers (like Martin Luther King Jr and Joni Eareckson Tada), and debates in social ethics. Additionally, it covers the legal, social, and religious perspectives (in Christianity and Judaism) on the various issues arising from them. It is an introductory text, but it provides useful pointers throughout for those interested in further independent study.

This information booklet follows the video lessons available at George Teaches, and is designed for use in conjunction with them. It is accompanied by worksheets that can be completed online or by hand, which are also available in a single work booklet. Additional materials on Martin Luther King Jr and Joni Eareckson Tada can be accessed online, which comprehensively summarise their famous works on social ethics. Throughout this information booklet, key questions are used as subtitles, key terms are highlighted in separate boxes, and brief reflections are offered under the heading, "George Thinks".

I am deeply indebted to my colleagues and students for the production of this publication, which has been inspired by their desire for more extensive and holistic resources for teaching and learning about ethics. At all times, I have attempted to produce material that covers popular and important content, but is not confined by the straitjacket of any particular curriculum or specification. Consequently, whilst this covers all of the relevant content for social ethics at A Level, it goes far beyond. My earnest hope is that it is capable of both supporting students of all abilities and challenging the most able to embark upon their own self-directed enquiries. Above all, it is my sincerest wish that it proves beneficial to both your teaching and your learning of environmental ethics, be you teacher or student (or, as I am, be you both).



George

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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!



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.

George Thinks

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.



Martin Luther King Jr on Racism

1. **Who** was Martin Luther King Jr and what are his key ideas on racism?

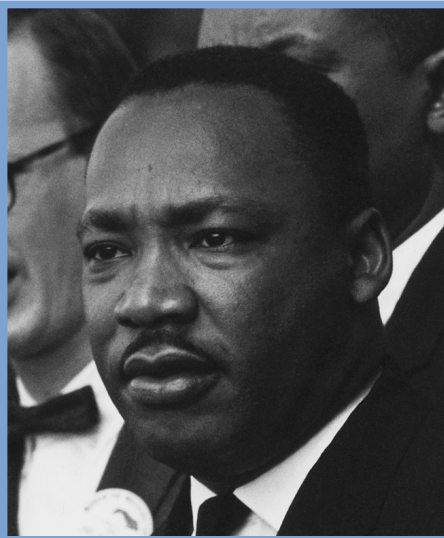
Martin Luther King Jr (1929-1968) was an American Christian pastor and leader of the Civil Rights Movement. In 1948, he received a BA in sociology from Morehouse College, before following his father into the Church by graduating with a BDiv from Crozer Theological Seminary. Alongside preaching, Martin Luther King Jr continued his studies; he received a PhD from Boston University in 1955, and led the Montgomery bus boycott in the same year. The boycott was eventually successful and propelled Martin Luther King Jr to national prominence. During the following decade, he founded and presided over the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which organised numerous mass nonviolent protests against racial discrimination in the Southern United States. This activity culminated in the March on Washington in 1963 and Martin Luther King Jr's receipt of a Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. In 1967, he published his last book before his assassination in 1968, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* Here he outlined several ideas about racism and how to eradicate it, including the three listed below.

Racism is extremely deep-rooted for numerous reasons: slavery has left a legacy of racial discrimination in the United States. Slavery was accepted by the Founding Fathers and justified by businesses, churches, and universities; consequently, white Americans are still ambivalent about racism.

Racism is possible to overcome through nonviolent protest: despite the deep-rooted nature of racism, it is possible to eradicate through mass nonviolent protest. Importantly, violent protest will never be successful, because it will only amplify the white backlash against increasing racial equality.

Racism is connected to economic exploitation and poverty: racism is difficult to eradicate because it is connected to economic exploitation and poverty, which means black Americans are often trapped in poor and powerless communities. Ending poverty promises to help many white Americans and eradicate racism.

2. **How** do Martin Luther King Jr's key ideas on racism work?



Martin Luther King Jr

Martin Luther King Jr's key ideas form an argument that calls for mass nonviolent protest in order to eradicate racial discrimination. Additionally, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* introduces a new idea about the concrete measures that the Civil Rights Movement should campaign for. Instead of attempting to eradicate racial discrimination by protesting for legal change, Martin Luther King Jr argued that the Civil Rights Movement should protest for the eradication of poverty.

Racism is extremely deep-rooted for numerous reasons: Martin Luther King Jr's first key idea is that racism is especially ingrained in the United States. He claimed that some white Americans believe it is a superficial phenomenon; however, he argued that this opinion is mistaken. According to Martin Luther King Jr, racism is deep-rooted in the United States because it was instituted and protected from the birth of the American nation through the practice of slavery. Several Founding Fathers were slave owners (e.g. George Washington), and various institutions attempted to rationalise the practice; consequently, white Americans became ambivalent to the injustice of racism.

Racism is possible to overcome through nonviolent protest: Martin Luther King Jr's second key idea is that mass nonviolent protest is the only method capable of applying the pressure required to eradicate racism. He strongly disagreed with the violent methods of the Black Power movement, and claimed that they only intensified the white backlash against increasing racial equality. Nevertheless, Martin Luther King Jr did not believe that nonviolent protest should be passive; he argued against patiently waiting for progress, and encouraged ordinary black Americans (rather than the pastors, lawyers, and lobbyists who were historically the loudest advocates for change) to participate more actively in Civil Rights Movement campaigns. Additionally, Martin Luther King Jr argued that protesters are corrupted by violent action; given the suffering that black Americans have endured at the hands of white Americans, they should not seek to emulate such brutal or barbaric behaviour in achieving racial equality.

Racism is connected to economic exploitation and poverty: when Martin Luther King Jr introduced his third key idea, it was startlingly original and miles ahead of its time. He argued that racism is interconnected with economic exploitation and poverty, because black Americans found themselves trapped in poor communities after being freed from slavery; so, eradicating racism will require ending poverty. Martin Luther King Jr condemned the fact that an accounting error in the Vietnam War budget (\$10 billion) cost five times more than the annual budget for antipoverty programmes (\$2 billion). He questioned whether it was morally right that the city with the highest average income on Earth (i.e. Chicago) did not provide its black inhabitants with access to decent education, healthcare, or employment opportunities. Martin Luther King Jr claimed that campaigning for a guaranteed income (i.e. universal basic income) would lead to the eradication of poverty for all Americans and the end of racism.

3. **Why** are Martin Luther King Jr's key ideas on racism important?

They build on other mass nonviolent protest movements: Martin Luther King Jr's ideas are opportune, because they build on the successful methods of other activists (e.g. Mahatma Gandhi in India). He was convinced about the power of nonviolent protest because of its success in different places during recent history.

They frame the social issue of racism optimistically: unlike the leaders of the Black Power movement, Martin Luther King Jr was hopeful that integration and racial equality would be achieved. His optimistic message attracted numerous white American allies and mobilised ordinary black citizens.



The March on Washington: an example of a mass nonviolent protest.

They are bold and original: additionally, Martin Luther King Jr's key ideas are novel. The argument that racism can be rooted out by the payment of a guaranteed income to all American citizens, whilst simultaneously ending poverty, is an imaginative solution to a pair of significant social issues. *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* is a studious analysis of racial discrimination, but it also uses this analysis to create a road map out of the divisive environment created by the conflict between the Black Power movement and white backlash.

George Thinks

Martin Luther King Jr is a global icon, and his tireless campaigns against racial discrimination are still used as sources of inspiration by civil rights activists organising protests today. Obviously, his incredible work leading the Civil Rights Movement in its fight against racism remains his most lasting and tangible legacy; however, his concern with poverty (regardless of the race it inflicts) was prophetic. Today, the various inequalities created by the material disparity between rich and poor are astonishingly pronounced.

Although Martin Luther King Jr advocated for the introduction of a guaranteed income, this doesn't mean he was a communist (a fact he took pains to point out). His motivation was the fact he couldn't work out why black Americans hadn't flourished after liberation in quite the way they'd hoped to, and he concluded that they'd remained poor due to a whole host of social factors that perpetuated racism. His basic insight seems to be this: in societies where people's share in the blessings of life are fairly similar, discrimination can't survive.



Joni Eareckson Tada on Ableism

1. **Who** is Joni Eareckson Tada and what are her key ideas on ableism?

Joni Eareckson Tada (b. 1949) is an American disability rights advocate, author, and evangelical Christian. In 1967, at the age of 17, she suffered a horrific diving accident that left her paralysed from the shoulders down. She spent several years undergoing physical therapy and occupational therapy designed to provide her with a measure of independence, during which she learned how to draw and paint by mouth. In 1974, Barbara Walters interviewed her on The Today Show, covering her art, disability, and Christian faith; this appearance sparked considerable interest in her story, and she published her autobiographical work, *Joni: An Unforgettable Story*, in 1976. This introduces various ideas about accepting disability, living with disabled people, and Christian faith; among these are some of her thoughts on ableism, which are outlined below. Since the 1970s, Joni Eareckson Tada has increasingly dedicated her life to supporting the disabled and spreading the gospel of Jesus: in 1979, she founded Joni and Friends, which runs the International Disability Center and the Wheels for the World initiative.

Ableism is part of mainstream culture in most societies: most cultures perceive disability only negatively, which means they are intrinsically ableist. The standard that most societies set for self-worth does not include disability, which can erode the self-esteem of disabled people who try to meet this standard.

Ableism is exacerbated by its ability to hide in plain sight: in some cases, ableism is perpetuated because the disabled victims are abused behind closed doors in institutions; in other cases, ableism is perpetuated by displays of awkwardness or ignorance around disabled people, or by open displays of pity.

Ableism is based on incorrect assumptions about quality of life: many people believe that the quality of life of a disabled person is necessarily diminished because of his or her disability; however, disabled people repeatedly demonstrate that they lead lives full of happiness, purpose, and opportunity.

2. **How** do Joni Eareckson Tada's key ideas on ableism work?



Joni Eareckson Tada

Joni Eareckson Tada's key ideas form a strong argument against ableism in all its forms. However, it is not presented as an academic thesis; instead, it is presented as an autobiographical account of her lived experience. In *Joni: An Unforgettable Story*, she reveals the cultural biases of mainstream society, the various ways in which ableism hides in plain sight, and the intellectually lazy assumption that disabled people necessarily lead lower quality lives. What makes it such an enjoyable read is that she achieves all this by example.

Ableism is part of mainstream culture in most societies: Joni Eareckson Tada's first key idea is that ableism is an intrinsic aspect of most cultures. She reflects on this at numerous points in *Joni: An Unforgettable Story*, but most memorably in conversation with her longtime friend and fellow Christian, Steve Estes, who accuses her of undermining her self-esteem by trying to meet society's standard for self-worth. Steve Estes points out that this standard is unachievable, even for athletic and healthy people without disabilities, and that trying to meet it will make her miserable. Instead, Joni Eareckson Tada commits to finding self-worth by trying to meet God's standard for her.

Ableism is exacerbated by its ability to hide in plain sight: Joni Eareckson Tada's second key idea is that ableism is everywhere, and part of the problem is that it is so widely accepted. Of course, this argument is made about other forms of discrimination; however, none appear to persist as brazenly in modern society. This is a contentious claim, and it is never explicitly stated; however, she relays various instances that illustrate this idea. One is a horrific incident in which a nurse at a violently flipped her Stryker frame and badly injured her arm; Joni Eareckson Tada makes clear that she believed this happened because she is disabled and was helpless at the time, and it is difficult to imagine a black person or a woman being treated so violently in a medical setting because of their gender or race. Likewise, she relays an incident where a woman approached her in a shop and poured pity on her because of her disability; it is hard to believe this would happen to a woman or black person today without comment.

Ableism is based on incorrect assumptions about quality of life: this key idea may appear obvious today, but it certainly was not in the 1960s, when Joni Eareckson Tada suffered her life-changing diving accident; nevertheless, some people still accept the intellectually lazy assumption that disabled people necessarily live lower quality lives. Joni Eareckson Tada puts the lie to this, by demonstrating what a rich and fulfilling life she has led herself. Although the first half of *Joni: An Unforgettable Story* is dedicated to her accident, rehabilitation, and struggles with recurring depression and the contemplation of suicide, the second half is considerably more hopeful. It focuses on the strengthening of her faith and the discovery of her purpose: supporting the disabled and spreading the gospel of Jesus. She relays the numerous opportunities this has given her, including her appearance on *The Today Show*, and shows by example that people living with disabilities can find more happiness than those living without them.

3. **Why** are Joni Eareckson Tada's key ideas on ableism important?

They encourage improved treatment of disabled people: Joni Eareckson Tada's key ideas are presented with considerable emotional power, and move people to treat the disabled with greater compassion, dignity, and humanity. She presents ableist behaviour as a problem that must be urgently addressed.

They portray disability as a potential opportunity: at the end of *Joni: An Unforgettable Story*, Joni Eareckson Tada refers to her paralysis as a God-given blessing that prevented her from drifting passively through life. She inspires disabled people to discover the opportunities created by their conditions.



The Today Show: the television show that launched Joni Eareckson Tada's mission.

They are responses resulting from deep reflection: additionally, Joni Eareckson Tada's key ideas are introspective and personal. The argument against ableism that she implicitly articulates throughout *Joni: An Unforgettable Story* is based on experience rather than explicitly grounded in ethical principles. This makes the force of her argument surprisingly powerful, because it is not framed as an academic thesis; instead she shows the consequences of ableism and reveals its unfounded assumptions by doing what they suggest she cannot.

George Thinks

I've already alluded to this, but *Joni: An Unforgettable Story* is an amazing read, because it's such a deep, reflective, and searching exploration of accepting disability and living with the disabled. It will not be for everyone, because it's so intimately interwoven with the story of Joni Eareckson Tada's developing Christian faith; however, it powerfully reveals how challenges can be overcome and purpose can be found, even with a profoundly life-changing disability like paralysis. Above all, this is a story that sticks with you, and serves as a reminder that we should all treat people living with disability with the same humanity that we treat people who aren't. A recurring theme is Joni Eareckson Tada's fervent wish to be included in all the activities of her friends and family, engaged with as an equal, and judged on her merits as a person (rather than a disabled person). This strength of character and stoicism shines through, and makes for a remarkable read.



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.

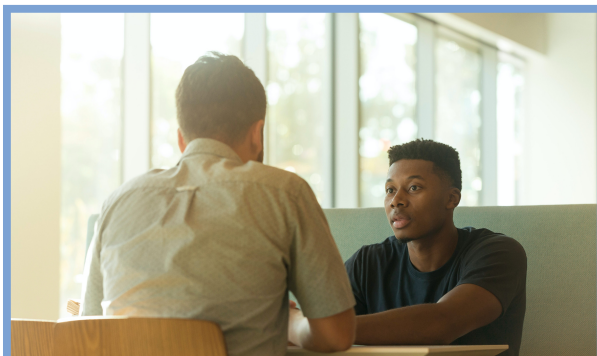
Equality of Outcome

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)!



Legal and Social Perspectives in Social Ethics

1. **What** are the legal and social perspectives in social ethics?

Perspectives are viewpoints, and both the British legal system and its representatives, and the people of the United Kingdom, have different perspectives on social ethics. There is considerable variation within these two perspectives; however, there are also enough similarities to support some general observations about them. Generally, both the legal perspective and the social perspective reveal concern for the equal treatment of all human beings within British society; however, over recent history, it is the public rather than successive governments that appear to have advocated for change with the greatest urgency.



The Palace of Westminster: where new laws are enacted in the United Kingdom.

Legal perspective: the attitude towards the principle of equality adopted by the national legal system and its representatives. This perspective is manifested in a number of Acts of Parliament, including the Sex Discrimination Act, the Race Relations Act, and the Equality Act, although there are many others, because social ethics is an area of considerable political activity and concern.

Social perspective: the attitude towards the principle of equality adopted by the people (especially those who are active members of protest movements). This perspective is manifested in social activism, including the Ford sewing machinists strike, George Floyd protests, and disability rights protests, as well as others that address different social issues.

2. **How** do the legal and social perspectives in social ethics work?

Since the Second World War in the United Kingdom, the legal perspective in social ethics has tended towards the promotion of greater equality between British people; however, this process has been largely reactive, sometimes in response to specific protests. The legal perspective is relatively traditional, which means that it generally seeks to preserve the status quo unless public opinion clearly supports change.

Sex Discrimination Act: enacted in 1975, this act was designed to prohibit discrimination between human beings because of their sex or marital status. It built upon the Equal Pay Act of 1970, and was repealed by the enactment of the Equality Act of 2010.

Race Relations Act: enacted in 1965, this act was designed to prohibit discrimination between human beings in public places because of their race. It was tabled in response to the Bristol Bus Boycott of 1963, in which the Bristol Omnibus Company was boycotted for its racist policies.

Equality Act: enacted in 2010, this act was designed to prohibit several different types of discrimination by combining and extending various acts (including both the Sex Discrimination Act and the Race Relations Act). It protects most people from discrimination.

Just like the legal perspective, the social perspective in social ethics has tended towards the promotion of greater equality between British people; however, arguably, it has been the perspective that has driven this change. The social perspective is relatively progressive, which means that it generally seeks to effect change rather than preserve the status quo.

Ford sewing machinists strike: held in June 1968, it involved a successful strike by women sewing machinists over unequal pay at Ford Dagenham. It paved the way for both the Equal Pay Act of 1970 and the Sex Discrimination Act of 1975. Despite its small scale it was highly effective.

George Floyd protests: held in May and June 2020, they involved large protests across the United Kingdom against racism and police brutality. They were motivated by the police killing of George Floyd, and initiated nationwide action against institutional racism and implicit stereotyping

Disability rights protests: held throughout the early 1990s, they involved protests against discrimination between human beings because of ability, which was both legal and widely practised at the time. They led to the Disability Discrimination Act of 1995.

3. **Why** are the legal and social perspectives in social ethics important?

The legal and social perspectives in social ethics govern how the principle of equality is applied in society; consequently, they are incredibly important to what the United Kingdom looks and feels like. Generally, the legal perspective is considered the most important, because it has the force of law; however, this does not always mean it leads to the most significant change. For example, the Equality Act is considered to be highly effective because it is well enforced; however, many people considered the Race Relations Act a failure because it was poorly enforced. Contrastingly, the social perspective can be very powerful even though it is often advanced on a smaller scale. For example, the Ford sewing machinists strike ultimately led to two Acts of Parliament (the Equal Pay Act and the Sex Discrimination Act) even though it only involved a handful of female employees. Beyond this, both perspectives are important because they are complementary, insofar as they support one another, and because they address an especially central and changeable area of applied ethics.



The George Floyd protests: British citizens protesting against institutional racism.

George Thinks

In many ways, this is a really difficult topic to write about, because it's deeply subjective. I'm of the opinion that successive British governments have been largely reactive to protests against social issues like sexism, racism, and ableism, but obviously not everyone will share my point of view. You'll come to your own conclusions, no doubt, but I see most legal changes in the area of social ethics arising in response to public pressure; this is why I've described the legal and social perspectives as being complementary, because I think the former is very much driven by the latter. In brief, protesters who champion social equality are highly proactive, and in many cases it appears their activities really do lead to legal change.

This is different to other areas of British life. For example, a wide-ranging equivalent of the Equality Act hasn't been passed in the area of either animal ethics or environmental ethics. In these areas, there doesn't seem to be the same degree of agreement between activists and legislators. Whilst it's difficult to know exactly why this is, the proof of the pudding is in the sheer volume of legislation on social issues that has been passed since the Second World War. In brief, the principle of equality (and especially its expression as equality of opportunity) seems to be something that almost everyone supports; and, whilst some critics claim progress has been slow, we do seem to be heading overwhelmingly in one direction.



Religious Perspectives in Social Ethics

1. **What** are the religious perspectives in social ethics?

There are numerous religious perspectives in social ethics. Among them, the Judeo-Christian perspective is of particular importance, because of its influence over the development of Western ethics. Christianity and Judaism share some common scriptures, most notably what Jews call "the Hebrew Bible" or "Tanakh" and Christians call "the Old Testament". These scriptures are open to different interpretations about how human beings should treat one another in society, and are heavily influenced by two key ideas: the idea of equality before God and the idea of the sanctity of life.



A newborn child: Christians believe all human life is sacred, including disabled life.

Equality before God: the Christian belief that all human beings are equal to one another in the eyes of God. Christians support this belief by referencing Bible verses like Galatians 3:28, which states "All of you are one in Christ Jesus." However, some passages (e.g. 1 Corinthians 12:33-35) suggest that human beings should be treated differently based on their gender in some cases.

Sanctity of life: the Christian belief that all human life is precious and holy, because it is God-given. Christians support this belief by referencing Bible verses like Exodus 4:11, which implies that God creates every human being with a purpose (including disabled people). Other verses, like Romans 5:3-5 and Galatians 6:2, state that Christians should help and respect people who are suffering.

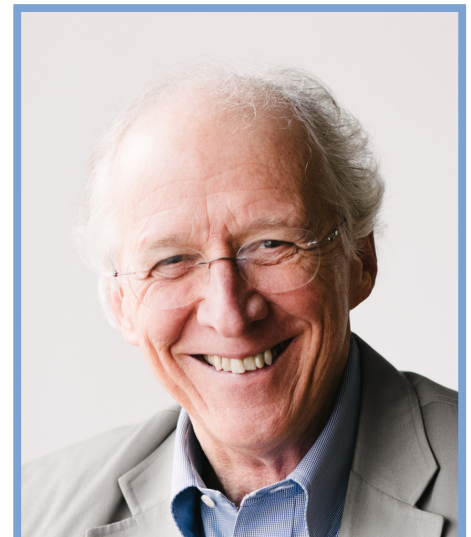
2. **How** do the religious perspectives in social ethics work?

The religious perspectives in social ethics are many and varied. Even among Christians, differing interpretations of the Bible lead to widely diverging approaches to social issues. Today, sexism, racism, and ableism are strongly opposed by most Christians; however, this opposition is not uniform for numerous reasons.

Sexism: the Religious Society of Friends (i.e. Quakers) and the United Methodist Churches support egalitarianism, which means that men and women are able to fulfil the same roles in religious practice. However, some denominations, including the Catholic Church and some Baptist churches support complementarianism, which means that some roles are not open to women (e.g. roles in the priesthood). Catholic and Baptist theologians, like John Piper (b. 1946), justify complementarianism by emphasising the gender of the Twelve Apostles and passages from the Bible that support this perspective.

Racism: the Bible was written at a time when slavery was acceptable, so there is no Biblical prohibition against it. Nevertheless, today slavery is almost universally acknowledged as unacceptable, along with all types of racism. Christianity reflects this perspective, and most churches are committed to fighting racism. In particular, the Anglican Communion has redoubled its efforts to eradicate institutional racism, with the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby (b. 1956), saying, "I'm ashamed of our history and I'm ashamed of our failure," and committing the Church of England to stronger action.

Ableism: most churches are committed to fighting ableism; however, this perspective is inspired by the Christian belief in the sanctity of life as much as the idea of equality before God. The Catholic Church considers some disabilities to be blessings, and Pope Francis (b. 1936) has declared, "People with disabilities are a gift for the family." Importantly, the strong anti-abortion stance of the Catholic Church means that Catholics resist abortion on any grounds (including the identification of a severe disability during pregnancy). Some Protestant churches (e.g. some Methodist churches) accept abortion of severely disabled unborn children, which is necessarily ableist.



John Piper

3. **Why** are the religious perspectives in social ethics important?

One significant reason why the religious perspectives in social ethics are important is because there are so many religious people on Earth. Today, there are approximately 2.2 billion Christians alive (28 percent of the world population), of whom 85 million belong to the Anglican Communion, and 1.3 billion belong to the Catholic Church. The numbers involved mean religious leaders are incredibly powerful, and their views have a significant effect on how religious people behave towards others in society. Importantly, the Catholic Church extends throughout the Americas, Australia, Europe, and sub-Saharan Africa; its complementarianist perspective on sexism may influence how fast discrimination based on gender is eradicated in these parts of the world.

Beyond this, the religious perspectives in social ethics are important for reasons that are already familiar. First, social issues affect everyone around the world on a daily basis, and religious perspectives are central to how religious people respond to them. Additionally, even though religions often appear inflexible, religious perspectives do change over time, and the direction of such change has a tremendous impact on how billions of religious people address social issues. Finally, religious perspectives are incredibly complex; unlike well written laws, scriptures are open to a wide range of interpretations, which means denominations often diverge from one another in their perspectives in social ethics.

George Thinks

Religion often gets a bad wrap in developed societies, especially within social circles that have a high concentration of atheists. When you consider the Christian perspective on the social issue of sexism, it's easy to see why some people lazily assume religion is a malign force in the world; certainly, it's very difficult to argue that complementarianism isn't an intrinsically sexist perspective. Of course, I understand the Catholic Church maintains that men and women are held in equal esteem by God; however, denying women admission to the priesthood is difficult to describe as equal treatment. As usual, I know you won't necessarily see eye to eye with me, but I'm attempting to be as honest as I can in explaining how things appear to me.

However, and this is where I think things become more interesting, the very perspective that opens the Catholic Church up to the charge of sexism is the same one that protects unborn Catholics from a particularly controversial act of ableism: abortion on the basis of disability. Killing an unborn human being because he or she is disabled is necessarily discriminatory, and many disabled people strongly and understandably disagree with the practice. It is the Catholic Church's belief in the sanctity of life and strong anti-abortion position that precipitates its extensive protection of disabled people; and, in many ways, it's an incredibly progressive champion of disability rights as a consequence of its deeply conservative views on the role of women.



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