

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 It built upon the Equal Pay Act of 1970, and was repealed by the enactment of the Equality Act of 2010.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.

