

ETHICAL FRAMEWORKS

Based on 'Ethical frameworks' by Michael Reiss in the *Salters-Nuffield Advanced Biology AS Students' book published by Heinemann. (See Topic 2 'Genes and health'.)*

What is right and what is wrong?

How should we decide in life what is right and what is wrong? For example, should we always tell the truth? Can we ever justify turning down a request for help? For instance, should a woman have an abortion if she finds that her unborn baby has cystic fibrosis?

All of us have **moral** views about these and other matters. For example, you might hold that lying and abortion are always wrong, and helping people always right. But in order to maintain that something is **ethically** acceptable or unacceptable, you must be able to provide a reasonable explanation as to *why* that is the case.

There is no one universally accepted way of deciding whether something is ethically acceptable or not. What there are instead are a number of **ethical frameworks** each of which allows you to work out whether a particular action would be right or wrong if you accept the ethical principles on which the framework is based. Usually you get the same answer whichever framework you adopt. But not always! This is why perfectly thoughtful, kind and intelligent people sometimes disagree completely about whether a particular course of action is justified or not.

Here are four widely used ethical frameworks. Students should find these of value when considering various issues such as genetic screening and abortion.

1 Rights and duties

Most of us tend to feel that there are certain human **rights** that should always be permitted. For example, we talk about the right to life, the right to a fair trial and the right to freedom of speech. Certain countries, for example the USA, have some of these rights enshrined in their constitutions.

If you have a right to something, then I may have particular **duties** towards you. For example, suppose that you are a six-month-old baby with a right to life and I am your parent. I have a duty to feed you, wash you, keep you warm and so on. If I don't fulfil these duties, I am failing to carry out my responsibilities and the police or social services may intervene.

But where do rights come from? Some people with a religious faith find them in the teachings of their religion. For example the ten commandments in the Jewish scriptures talk about not stealing, not murdering, telling the truth and so on.

But nowadays, of course, many people, indeed in the UK most people, have little or no religious faith. So where can they – perhaps you – find rights? The simplest answer is that rights are social conventions built up over thousands of years. If you want to live in a society you have more or less got to abide by its conventions.

2 Maximising the amount of good in the world

Perhaps the simplest ethical framework says that each of us should do whatever **maximises the amount of good in the world**. For example, should I tell the truth? Usually yes, as telling lies often ends up making people unhappy, and unhappiness is not a good. But sometimes telling the truth can lead to more unhappiness. If your friend asks you if you like the present they have just given you and you don't, would you tell the truth? Most of us would tell a 'white lie', not wanting to harm their feelings.

This ethical approach is known as **utilitarianism**. Notice that utilitarians have no moral absolutes. A utilitarian would hesitate to state that anything is always right or always wrong. There might be circumstances in which something normally right (e.g. keeping a promise) would be wrong, and there might be circumstances when something normally wrong (e.g. killing someone) would be right.

3 Making decisions for yourself

One of the key things about being a human is that we can make our own decisions. There was, for example, a time when doctors simply told their patients what was best for them. Now, though, there has been a strong move towards enabling patients to act **autonomously**. People act autonomously when they make up their own mind about something. If you have ever had an operation, you will probably have signed a consent form. The thinking behind this is that it isn't good for a surgeon to be allowed to operate on you unless you have given **informed consent**.

Of course, it is perfectly possible autonomously to decide to be absolutely selfish! Autonomy clearly isn't the only good in the world. A utilitarian would say we need to weigh the benefits of someone acting autonomously with any costs of them doing so. Only if the overall benefits are greater than the overall costs is autonomy desirable. Someone who believes in rights and duties might say that each of us has a right to act autonomously, but also has a duty to take account of the effects of our actions on others.

4 Leading a virtuous life

A final approach is one of the oldest. This holds that the good life (in every sense of the term) consists of acting **virtuously**. This may sound rather old-fashioned, but consider the virtues that you might wish a good teacher/lecturer to have. She or he might be understanding, able to get you to learn what you want/need to learn, and believe in treating students fairly.

Traditionally the seven virtues were said to be **justice**, **prudence** (i.e. wisdom), **temperance** (i.e. acting in moderation), **fortitude** (i.e. courage), **faith**, **hope** and **charity**. Precisely what leading a virtuous life means can vary. Think about the virtues you might like to see in a parent, a doctor and a girl- / boyfriend. What would be the virtuous course of action for a couple whose unborn baby has cystic fibrosis?