

KEY CONCEPT: ETHICS

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Concept origins

A part of moral philosophy, ethics may be understood as ‘the attempt to formulate codes and principles of moral **behaviour**’ (Honderich, 1995, p.586). Discussion can be traced back to the fifth century BC, when the Greek Sophists propounded ethical relativism, arguing morality was only a social construction useful for a better life. Subsequent Greek philosophy, particularly that emanating from Plato (380BC) and Aristotle (350BC), radically challenged these views. In *The Republic*, for example, Plato (380BC) argued that a good life consists of harmony of the soul, each of its supposed parts (reason, spirit and appetite) performing its ‘proper’ function, with traditional virtues being part of this balanced economy. Seen as conducive to happiness and development, the moral life is—Plato argues—the best life. Relatedly, Plato argued that the just **society** was a direct extension of the proper functioning of its constituent parts. These arguments would ultimately influence the emergence of **functionalism** and in Britain the development of the highly flawed ‘**Tripartite**’ system, following the 1944 Education Act.

Current status and usage

Skipping forward over the intervening two millennia of ethical thinking (see MacIntyre, 1998, for an accessible introduction) since Plato, the second half of the twentieth century witnessed a substantial return to and development of classic ethical theorising. Arguing for the universalisability of ethical pronouncements, R.M. Hare (1981) saw this as entailing a variety of utilitarianism (an ethical theory, which crudely speaking argues the morally justified act is that which produces the greatest happiness for the greatest number). In his theory of justice, John Rawls

(1999) proposed basing its principles on a notional contract (a contractarian theory); collective assent here offered some security of individual interests from the potential risks of utilitarianism. The relevance of such views for educational policies and practices (e.g., around **inclusion**, **exclusion**, **pastoral welfare** issues, **diversity**, **performativity**, the **curriculum**, and possibilities of **pedagogy**) is significant. The rise of medical ethics and bio-ethics, which address ethical questions in the biological sciences, medical research and health **care**, has reinvigorated the broader discipline and had profound effects on practice among the medical **professions**. Questions raised therein (e.g., confidentiality and trust in the doctor–patient relationship, problems of paternalism and choice, and the allocation of resources) have influenced analogous debates in education (Haynes, 1999, 2015) and other human sciences. Applied ethics has exercised a similarly invigorating function (Singer, 1986), debating vital questions from the justifiability of war, through **special educational needs**, up to debates on racial and sexual **equality**. The penetration of ethics into routine educational practice is particularly formalised in relation to research (Brooks *et al.*, 2014).



Ethics permeates education in multiple ways, from its very concept, through its functions, **curriculum** and methods, to its **politics** (Peters, 1966; Haynes, 2015; Arthur *et al.*, 2016). All involve controversial topics. With education commonly regarded as being as much about initiation, socialisation, and the transmission of cultural values, as it may be about imparting content knowledge, essentially ethical questions immediately arise about what counts as a good life, one's **relationships** to others and more broadly to **society**, the correctness of actions, etc. With responses to such questions often drawing on Plato's (380BC) ideas, much of the ethical discussion in education has had a strong **functionalist** bent. This supports existing **power** relations, adjusting people to set positions in society, where each performs their 'proper' function, this 'harmony' being equated to the good life. Of course, such perspectives can be criticised as conservative orthodoxies or **discourses of hegemony** (Gramsci, 1971; Hoerder, 2014) that support a select powerful few while limiting social mobility for many. Progressive—**alternative education**—approaches, classically associated with Rousseau (1762) and Dewey (1897, 1899, 1916), propose

more **child-centred** educational regimes, emphasising **liberal** varieties of ethical naturalism. While such approaches are problematic (apart from for a select few) in developed market economies, later proposals that emphasise the development of personal **autonomy** (Callan, 1988, 1994), well-being and **care** (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 2002, 2013) have wider though still contested applicability. Often threaded throughout the curriculum, in England these initiatives are perhaps most visible in PSHE. Given the dominance of normative approaches in education, two further ethical initiatives may be noted here: the widespread use of student **behaviour** contracts and analogous codes of conduct for staff. Arising out of Hobbesian-type views (Hobbes, 1651) that depict self-interest and the pursuit of power as typifying human nature, the excesses of which are held in check through forms of social contract and state power, akin to contractarian views (Rawls, 1999), these encourage and police behaviour if not always actual values.



As is evident in even a brief consideration of the history of ethics, much of the territory is disputed. With secular theorising dominating **mainstream** ethical debate in Western academic contexts, its ideas (e.g., promoting **autonomy** rather than custom) can sit uncomfortably at times with both religious education and diverse **ethnic** and cultural traditions. The position is further complicated with histories of **colonialism**, with control being often sustained through narratives of greater ethical, cultural and intellectual virtue, as much as through force. Internalisation of such narratives (Fanon, 1952), perpetuates and problematises ethical **identity** and integrity. In post-colonial and multi-cultural contexts addressing such effects is vital, especially given the weight of evidence of racialised bias (Mac an Ghaill, 1988; Andrews, 2013), which can contaminate ethical sense. This engagement promotes empathy and can deepen understanding of the ethical dimensions of **diversity**, identity and **race** issues. Similar arguments pertain to the insidious role of patriarchy and its negative **gender**-related effects, especially on women and girls.



As a disciplinary concept, ethics is primarily a branch of philosophy. Yet, as seen above, ideas from other areas, such as sociology, **politics**, post-colonial theory, **gender** studies and psychology, may all also legitimately critique its arguments. This **interdisciplinary** process is usefully illustrated in the evolution of thinking about the ethics of **care**. The neo-Piagetian psychological studies of moral development by Kohlberg (1984; Kohlberg and Hersh, 1977), suggested a three-level model of its evolution (termed pre-conventional, conventional and

post-conventional morality), culminating in a rarely attained ethical outlook incorporating abstract reasoned self-chosen principles on individual rights and justice. Among the various critiques of this work, Gilligan (1982) challenged the skewed (all-male) nature of Kohlberg's initial sample and what she perceived as the devaluation of traditional female virtues around contextual caring and relational qualities. The latter observations would prove more influential, inaugurating an ethics of care perspective in addition to Kohlberg's emphasis on justice. Hume (1751) had, of course, previously emphasised the crucial role of sympathy or fellow-feeling in the promotion of ethical action, but Gilligan's work gave this a gender emphasis. This was substantively taken up by Noddings (2002, 2013), who positions **care** as an educational goal and as a foundation for pedagogic practice. Although rather **essentialist** in flavour and potentially reinforcing of traditional gender roles, such an ethic may usefully inform **education research**, promoting in particular the importance of the researcher-participant relationship (Brooks *et al.*, 2014).

Questions to consider

1. What is the 'good life' and is it attainable through education?
2. Ethics may be seen as a constraint on action. Is this justified and if so why?
3. Which three ethical principles are most important in conducting educational research?
4. Can ethics be distinguished from ideological forms of social control and, if so, how and why?
5. Do we need ethics?

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