

RELIGIOUS STUDIES · Y4-Y6

Secular Ethics

How people decide right and wrong without religion

Key vocabulary

1

Secular

Not connected to any religion.

2

Ethics

Working out what is right and wrong, and how we should act.

3

Morality

What we believe is right or wrong, good or bad.

4

Empathy

Understanding and sharing how someone else feels.

5

Conscience

The inner voice that tells you what feels right or wrong.

6

Consequence

What happens as a result of an action.

7

Virtue

A good quality in a person — like honesty, kindness, or courage.

8

The Golden Rule

'Treat others how you'd want to be treated.' Found in almost every religious and non-religious moral tradition.



How to decide right and wrong

Different ethical frameworks

- Look at the consequences. If an action helps people more than it hurts them, it's probably right. (This is called 'consequentialism'.)
- Look at the rules. Some actions are right or wrong in themselves, regardless of consequences. Lying is wrong even if the lie helps someone. (This is called 'deontology'.)
- Look at the character. A good action is what a kind, honest, courageous person would do. Be the kind of person who acts well, and the right actions will follow. (This is called 'virtue ethics'.)
- Most thoughtful people use a mix of all three.
- Religious ethics often uses similar reasoning — believers also think about consequences, follow rules, and try to be virtuous.
- The disagreement between religious and secular ethics is mostly about WHERE the rules come from — from God, or from human reason.

Where do our moral feelings come from?

Without religion, why do we care?

- Empathy — humans naturally feel what others feel. We don't like seeing someone in pain.
- Cooperation — humans evolved to live in groups. Groups that cooperate survive better than groups that don't.
- Reciprocity — if we help others, they help us back. Selfish people get excluded.
- Fairness — even very young children react against unfair situations, before being taught to.
- Reason — we can think about what would happen if everyone behaved a certain way.
- Conscience — most people feel something that tells them when they've done wrong.
- Secular ethicists say: these things come from our nature as social creatures. They don't need a god to exist.
- Religious ethicists say: these things come from being made in God's image. They are God's gift to humans.



- Both views can lead to similar actions in everyday life.

What secular ethics can't tell us, and what it can

Secular ethics is not a complete answer to every moral question. Hard cases exist — should we tell a difficult truth that will hurt someone? Should we keep a promise that was made unwisely? Different ethical frameworks disagree, and so do thoughtful people. What secular ethics CAN tell us is that we can think carefully, listen to others, and try to do what reduces suffering and increases flourishing — without needing to base our reasoning on religious authority. Most religious traditions also use similar reasoning alongside their religious teachings. The Buddhist precept 'do not harm living beings,' the Christian 'love your neighbour,' the Jewish 'tikkun olam' (repairing the world), and the humanist 'reduce suffering' can all motivate the same actions. People disagree about where moral feelings come from. They often agree on what those feelings ask of us.

