

Ethics

Philosophers use the terms “morality” and “ethics” to refer to how people should act. A moral act or an ethical act is the right thing to do. An immoral or unethical act is wrong. Questions about how to act, then, are also questions about good and bad.

The field of ethics is as vital a philosophical area today as it was for the ancient Greeks. From the Ten Commandments to genetic cloning, issues of morality and ethics concern not only people who think about these things for a living, but also everyday, ordinary people like you. Should judicial punishments be meted out based on someone’s personal circumstances? Or regardless of differing situations, are there ideal standards and judgments that can be handed out across the board? Are people born with traits that cause them to act differently—maybe even immorally by some standards—than others? Philosophers approach these and other questions of morality based on their assumptions about reality and their priorities as philosophers.

In This Chapter

- The group vs. the individual
- Western individualism
- Confucius and The Way
- Responding to convention

Individualism vs. Collectivism

Some of the most influential guidelines for how to act were set down by the Chinese philosopher Confucius around 500 B.C.E. In fact, Confucius's philosophy was centered on the idea of acting right. He thought about being and knowing, too, but these issues weren't as important to him as one's relationships with other people and the world as a whole. That's one reason for starting with him in this chapter.

Confucian Order

Confucius taught that people should act in accordance with what he called "the Way." The Way is the harmonious unfolding of life, especially—as far as Confucius was concerned—social life. If your actions are in harmony with the rest of society, then they are moral actions and you are a good person. Society, to Confucius, is like music. All the different parts should work together.

According to Confucius, whether your actions fit in with society depends on what everyone else is doing. You are not alone, but are deeply connected to your group. Other people, then, determine how you should act. For Confucius, it is terribly important to fit in, no matter who you are.

Confucius also recognized that people can fill various roles in society. Not only did people perform different jobs, but some people were more important than others in making society work harmoniously. When Confucius taught that we should act in harmony with society, he was thinking of a society that is hierarchical—a society in which people occupy different levels of importance, from the peasant farmers to the rulers.



FASCINATING FACT

Confucius has been widely revered as a religious figure like Moses, Jesus, Muhammed, or the Buddha, even though his philosophy is strictly secular in the sense that it makes practical recommendations for behavior without referring to God or to an afterlife.

For a peasant to act like a ruler would make for an inharmonious situation, sort of like if the drummer in an orchestra tried to play the part of the violinist, or the trumpet player stopped playing and began conducting. How to act right, then, depends on how you fit in with the rest of the group. By understanding how your group works, you can figure out how to "play your part."

Culture and Ethics

Confucian philosophy, with its emphasis on social harmony, has been tremendously influential for centuries. The belief that social harmony is more important than individual desires is at work in many Asian cultures today. This belief helps explain the success of communism in China. It also helps explain the focus on teamwork found in Japanese auto manufacturing and other companies.

This is not to say that all Asians read Confucius. But Confucius's ideas are in step with a broad spectrum of Eastern culture, just as Judeo-Christianity plays a major role in Western thinking, even for people who don't consider themselves religious. In general, traditional Western philosophy has focused less heavily than Eastern thought on society for its own sake. Western thought tends to be more preoccupied with the individual. As a result, people in the West tend to be more *individualistic*; they tend to think about themselves as free, independent individuals rather than as holding sharply defined social positions. People in the East, on the other hand, are more *collectivistic* in general; they tend to think of themselves in terms of their relationships with others.



Lexicon

Individualism is the view that individual rights and freedoms should form the basis of society.

Collectivism is the view that the stability of society is more important than individual rights and freedoms.

Individualism



Collectivism



A number of philosophers have thought about individualism. One of them is nineteenth-century French political philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville. De Tocqueville said that individualism is especially prominent in the United States where there is a democratic political system.

Democratic values like “freedom” and “equality” reflect Western individualism. These values suggest that people should be able to do what they want and not worry too much about what society expects them to do. This means they don’t try to look to other people to figure out how to “play their part,” but instead look inside themselves to find what they want. They also look at rules that they think should apply equally to everybody.

Competition

The downside of individualism is that individualists sometimes forget how important other people are in their lives. We all need help from other people whether we realize it or not, even if we think we are independent. Say, for example, a person becomes successful partly because of opportunities resulting from personal connections. If this person is an individualist, she is likely to overlook the social connections involved and take the full credit for her success.

Not only might this person be ungrateful, she is likely to be unsympathetic toward people who don’t have the right connections themselves. Individualists tend to look at those who are unsuccessful as being at fault for their lack of success. When they see a homeless or an unemployed person, they don’t say to themselves, “That person needs more help”—they say “That person should have tried harder to succeed.”

This is only one of the problems with individualism. Another is that it encourages people to be competitive rather than cooperative. Individualists tend to be out for themselves, often at the expense of others.

Still, this doesn’t mean that it’s always better to emphasize the good of society over the good of the individual. In China there is a serious problem with people being exploited—made to work long, hard hours for very little pay. The state benefits from their efforts, but would you want to live in a society in which you had to sacrifice your freedom for the good of the state?

Western Individualism

A number of factors have promoted individualism in the West over the centuries:

- Western religion focuses on the individual’s relationship to God.
- Western philosophy from Plato to the seventeenth century focuses on the individual’s relationship to ideal truths.
- Western science has largely focused on the individual’s relationship to physical laws of nature.

- Western capitalism has focused on the individual as an economic unit.
- American democracy sees all individuals as equal and free rather than connected to each other in any specific way.

All these things can work together as a set of blinders that keep people from seeing the importance of society for its own sake.

Religion and Individualism

Western individualism has partly to do with the influence of the major Western religions and their emphasis on the individual's relationship with God. By stressing the importance of the individual's responsibilities to God, Western religion has downplayed the role of society.

In fact, society is seen as a bad thing in many stories in the Bible. Egyptian society enslaved the Israelites. Then, during their exodus, the Israelites were punished after they set up a bad society centered around a false god. Society in the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah was so evil that these towns were destroyed by the hand of God.

Religious dissatisfaction with society and its teachings didn't stop there. Jesus criticized the Pharisees and the Philistines who relied too heavily on conventional thinking and focused "on the letter of the law" rather than on its spirit. He also warned that family ties could get in the way of finding the right path.

Centuries later, the Christian bishops in Constantinople rejected the directives of the Church in Rome and split off to form the Eastern Orthodox Church. Later still, the Protestants split off from the Church, believing that it had lost touch with God's intentions. The point is that when ways of thinking become conventional, people in the West often react against the convention by stressing the importance of the individual.



REALITY CHECK

Westerners aren't completely individualistic. Plenty of people in the Western world believe that strong family ties are more important than individual accomplishment *per se*, including many Greeks, Latinos, and Italians.

Later, many philosophers came to feel that religion in general exerted social pressures that enslaved people's minds. All this suggests that it's always possible to find things wrong with the ideas that hold society together. For centuries, religious thinkers and other philosophers in the West have tried to find a solution to human problems by looking beyond society—at God, at the natural world, and at the individual.

Ontology and Individualism

Western individualism also has to do with the tendency in lots of Western philosophies to focus on *being* first, and *acting* second.

When Plato and his followers, for example, thought about how people should relate to each other, they used their ideal notions of the world as a measuring stick for behavior. Ideas about God can have the same effect on individualism as ideas about being. If you believe you are, first and foremost, accountable to God or to an ideal reality for your actions, then you will be less likely to focus directly on how your actions affect other people. St. Thomas Aquinas is one religious philosopher who emphasized the dependency of human action not on society but on divine truth.



FASCINATING FACT

St. Thomas Aquinas said, "Human law is law only by virtue of its accordance with right reason, and by this it is clear that it flows from Eternal law. In so far as it deviates from right reason, it is called an unjust law and in such a case, it is no law at all, but rather an assertion of violence."

Aquinas's words, "Human law is law only by virtue of its accordance with right reason, and by this it is clear that it flows from Eternal law," suggest that "eternal laws" and "right reason" exist independently of human society. People who think this way do not consciously look to others for clues about how they should act, but look instead to their own ideals.

Science and Individualism

Eventually, the philosophical views of Plato and Aquinas gave way to a more scientific, empirical way of thinking, while the seeds of individualism continued to grow. Empirical science has helped to promote individualism in the West by marginalizing the role of society and spotlighting the individual. Science replaces the divine, eternal laws described by Aquinas with natural, physical laws. These laws are supposed to be understood "objectively"—independently of society and of the people who make it up.

Capitalism and Individualism

Finally, the economic practice known as capitalism—buying and selling in a free open market—also promotes individualism. Before capitalism, people filled preestablished roles in a feudal society. What you did depended on what your parents did, and you inherited their *estate*, which included their station in life as well as their possessions. There was almost no social mobility.

In a capitalist society, anyone can make money by buying and selling things or services, so there is a lot of social mobility—people can improve their situation as individuals or lose what they had to begin with more easily than they can in collective economic systems. The fact that most people in the West have to go out and make money to earn their livelihood has encouraged them to think of themselves as independent, free individuals.

All these ideas behind the philosophy of individualism have influenced Western culture in its thinking about how to act. They help explain why so many Westerners believe that each person should pretty much take care of himself and leave everyone else to take care of themselves in turn. Individualism, though, is not the only kind of Western philosophy. What's more, there is room even within individualism for many different philosophies about how to act.

Some Philosophical Alternatives to Convention

The choice between individualism and collectivism has a lot to do with how you feel about social convention. Confucius believed social convention was vitally important. He associated it with what he called the *Tao*, or “the Way.” Other philosophers have come up with a variety of attitudes toward the issue.

Is social convention helpful or harmful? Here are different ways philosophers recommend dealing with the question:

- **Confucius.** Follow it for the sake of a harmonious society.
- **Plato.** Figure out whether it corresponds to ideal forms of virtue.
- **Descartes and the rationalists.** Disregard it and obey reason.
- **Locke and the empiricists.** Agree to follow most of it in order to avoid trouble.
- **Kant and the idealists.** Decide which conventions should be universally valid and obey them.
- **Kierkegaard and the existentialists.** Look through it to the real you.
- **Marx.** Figure out how it promotes the forces of production and rebel against it.
- **Foucault and the post-structuralists.** Keep struggling with it; there's no way to escape its power.

So far we've looked at some key issues within the three main branches of philosophy in order to get an overview. The remaining chapters talk about particular philosophies—from ancient Greece, India, and China up to the present.

The Least You Need to Know

- Confucius based his ethical philosophy on the idea of social harmony and emphasis on our relationships with others.
- People of the East tend to be more collectivistic than Westerners, who generally tend to be more individualistic.
- In the West, religion, philosophy, science, capitalism, and democracy have all promoted individualism.