

You may be moral, but are you ethical?

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The words morality and ethics are often used interchangeably, but there are times when they should be viewed differently. To understand ethics, a good starting point is with the concept of *other*. It is when we imagine ourselves in another person's situation that we begin to sense the meaning to others of justice, equity, truth, or fairness.

Although *moral* thought and actions often resemble ethical thinking, morality is more often influenced by customs, mores, and taboos within a particular society, group or culture. Consequently actions that seem moral to one group may be considered immoral by another. Practices such as honour killing, denial of medically approved blood transfusions for children, and ceremonies of exorcism are occasionally accepted as moral customs by some religious groups although these practices are viewed as immoral by other religions. The concept, within some religious groups, that they are especially favoured by God may seem strange, immoral, or abhorrent to those of other religions. Such a clash of views can result in disagreements among competing religions and, in extreme cases, may even become the spark holy wars.

Of course, different views of morality may also occur among secular groups. For example, different moral practices may be the product of ethnic origin, financial status, occupation, educational background, and other secular groups.

Ethics, on the other hand, embraces broader principles of right thinking and correct behaviour being guided by concepts of justice, equity, fairness, and the pursuit of truth. Ethical leadership is often provided by philosophers, statesmen (or stateswomen) or by religious leaders who take a broader, more universal view of ethical issues.

The "golden rule" is shared by most of the world's major religions. In Christian terms, the golden rule instructs adherents to think and act toward others in the way they themselves wish to be treated. The golden rule is stated in slightly different words within each religion, but it is an ethical principle that encourages followers to view the whole of humanity as one family. It promotes acceptance of others regardless of differences in race, culture, religion or language.

Regarding ethical principles, secular philosophers, from Aristotle to more recent thinkers, arrive at conclusions similar to the golden rule. For example, the utilitarian concept, the humanist view, and pragmatist philosophy require us, in ethical decisions, to consider the needs of others. Immanuel Kant stated his view of the golden rule in secular language when he advised those who would be ethical to consider the needs of others. His test for ethical behaviour was to ask whether the intended action would be acceptable behaviour for all others in similar situations. That is, he believed that any action, to be ethically worthy, must be universally applicable.

Imagine a caring mother watching her child at play. She notices behaviour which she believes is unethical. She has seen her son push a younger child, causing her to fall down and cry. Instead of physically punishing her child, the mother encourages him to think of others by asking how he would feel if he had been knocked down like his playmate and how his playmate must now feel. By asking these questions, she is pointing her child in an ethical direction. Her questions, if considered seriously, introduce her son to the principle of the golden rule.

In their use of the golden rule, a secular utilitarian will consider which actions lead to the greatest happiness for the greatest number; the pragmatist will strive to be rational and think about the likely consequences of his or her action; the humanist will consider each individual, striving to accept the worth and dignity of all. The follower of Kant will ask whether his or her action would be ethical if everyone else were to act in a similar manner. The Christian will ask, "Is the way I am about to treat another the way I want to be treated?"

There is some irony in the fact that when we encourage people to think of *others*, the golden rule requires them to acknowledge their *own* feelings. But when people put themselves into another's situation they become aware of how the *other* feels. And that is the way ethics works best.