

How do we tell right from wrong?

Often we are advised to do the right thing, but how do we know what is right and what is wrong? Being right can mean knowing the answer to a maths question, but being morally right is a different concept altogether. From the start of our lives we have been told, taught and shown what is (morally) correct. Through religion, education and opinion, our minds have been influenced to judge right from wrong without thought. Maybe what we think is right may seem wrong to others. For example: many atheists will disagree with religious views which state right and wrong whilst I may disagree with what my teachers and parents say. What is right, what is wrong?

In the words of Garner and Rosen, for us to separate right from wrong, we must ask ourselves three questions, the first of which is: 'What do the words right and wrong actually mean?' Secondly: 'Who believes that an action is right or wrong; some people or a lot of people?' Finally, from the previous questions, we can answer the last: 'How do we know what is right and wrong?'

It is hard to define both words as they have multiple meanings. It depends on the individual's perspective. Within the context of my investigation, my view is that to be 'right' is to be 'morally correct.' Therefore, to be 'wrong' is the opposite of 'right'; being 'morally incorrect'. But, as previously mentioned, this definition is my own, and not necessarily the public view.

This brings to mind the second question: 'Who believes that an action is right or wrong?' This is a matter of societal opinion. In my opinion, for an action to be 'right' it must be identified as correct by a large amount of people. Yet society has produced conflict over what is right and what is wrong. The human population has seen conflict with regards to religion and tradition.

Though religion can cause conflict it is a fundamental piece in finding the best action. From my research, I have found out that most religions have rules, for example: the Christians have the Ten Commandments. These rules specify the correct ways of living life. Not only do religions have rules, but also scriptures and books, such as the Bible, Quran and the Torah etc. They tell stories of good deeds and wrongdoings foretelling the end result of certain activities. Every week at church services/prayers, religious believers are guided through life to do the best thing possible (according to the religion) in any situation. Religion is a key factor from which we can discover right from wrong.

But, we ought to decide the right actions by our traditions and past normalities. For example, if you believe in evolution, people were originally meat-eating animals. Doesn't this mean that we should continue to eat meat? On the contrary, some vegetarians don't eat meat because they are against killing animals. Vegetarians decide right and wrong by looking at whether their actions lead to a poor aftermath. Our traditions are shaped by what our ancestors have done but people go against tradition because they believe the 'Outcome Rule.' Though one side of the argument says that because it leads to a better end situation it is right, another goes against it. So this also tells us that opinion is divided across the globe.

Yet, without religious or traditional guidance, how do we understand what is 'morally' correct? I believe that separating right and wrong is a matter of opinion. Our opinions come from past experiences. Through our experiences we learn which deeds produced the best results. We pass on our experiences to others and they, from that, perceive what is correct. 'Common-Sense' comes from knowledge of our mistakes in the past. Doing the right thing is also a matter of common-sense. In spite of this, it is hard to distinguish whether common-sense exists; there may be no such thing as common-sense.

If we cannot tell what is 'common sense' how can we determine whether our actions are good or bad? I feel that we should choose our actions by the consequent outcomes that come with it. For example, bullying. When you bully someone you also hurt them. This can cause damage internally as well as externally; the outcome that follows is poor therefore we may presume that bullying is a wrongdoing. Laws and rules often restrict what we do. Many would take laws out of the picture because it is obvious that all of the rules have been set to convey the public opinion on what they feel is right and wrong. However, often laws are set because it prevents poor end results and damaging situations arising. This supports the idea that outcomes are the key factor in our perceptions. We as people in society also follow laws which as we now know are created by judging consequences and outcomes.

We choose our actions by looking at the end result, usually the end result for ourselves. We want ourselves to gain the best possible outcome through an action. For example, if a murderer knocks on your door seeking your friend, would you lie and say he is out or tell the truth and say he's in? If you lie, there is still the possibility of him dying. If you tell the truth, then your friend is certain to die. If you lie, and your friend is murdered, then you are held responsible as your lie led to his death. But, if you tell the truth, the responsibility is your friend as he shouldn't have come to your house in the first place. So though we look at outcomes. We usually look at the outcomes for ourselves.

After knowing the aftermath, we usually turn towards our own conscience. But, our conscience is also influenced, not by what the outcome is, but by how the outcome is

achieved. For example, if there was a train which was about to hit five workers and the only way to save them was to throw a heavy man down in order to save the five workers leaving the heavy man dead, what would you do? In this scenario, the outcome is better if you throw the man down as you sacrifice one life for five. Nonetheless, most people dislike the idea of killing a man by throwing him to block a train as they feel that this is a brutal way to achieve a better outcome.

Our consciences are also controlled by biases, desperation and our location. For example, if you saw a baby struggling in a nearby lake, you would save him/her. You would also save him/her if your shoes, costing £100, were ruined. But, why save the baby if with £100 you could save another life by giving to charity. People still feel that it would be better to save the baby because you were very close to him/her. But no-one believes that it would be the same, if you let the baby sink and save another life elsewhere. This shows how our minds are shaped through our location and our desperation.

To answer the question: 'How do we tell right from wrong', I asked myself the three questions that Garner and Rosen asked about ethics. But instead of asking about ethics, I asked about each of the suggestions mentioned: Religion, Tradition, Looking at Outcomes, Biases, Opinions and our Location. After asking the following questions, I found that the 'Outcomes Theory' answers the questions the best. By saying, 'Outcomes Theory', I mean to judge whether an action is right or wrong by looking at whether the end result (outcome) is good or bad. The answer to the first question, 'What does it (outcomes) mean?' the answer was 'a conclusion reached through logical thinking.' 'Logical thinking' suggests finding the best/ right way. Question number two: 'How many people believe that we should find right and wrong by looking at the end situation?' Well, though not calculated, I assume a lot of people use the 'Outcome' theory as almost everything based on this topic is linked with looking at the aftermath. An example would be found in Religion. People believe in religion as it helps them. Religion teaches us to do certain actions as it will lead to a better future/aftermath. So the third question is answered by using a simple statement: 'For an action to be right, the end result must be good.'