How do we decide what is right and what is wrong?

Ethics is about how we decide what is right and what is wrong.

Feelings or Facts
We often have a gut feeling about what is right and wrong even if we have not thought through the issues. This gut feeling is a result of our genes, culture, upbringing and experiences and may point us in the right direction. But we need facts as well which may contradict our gut feelings. Facts are never value free but are essential in making ethical decisions.

Principles or Practical outcomes
If there are absolute standards of right and wrong then we should be able to discern the principles behind them. This approach to morality is called the *deontological* approach" and is the basis of Immanuel Kant's system of ethics. For Kant, doing what is right is about doing one's duty.

Whatever those principles are:
- They take no account of the consequences of the actions.
- They may conflict with other principles.

The alternative is to make decisions based upon outcome: "Consequential Ethics". Utilitarianism is the most common form and is based upon the assumption that the ultimate aim of all human activity is happiness. We should choose the course of action which will bring about the *greatest happiness of the greatest number* of those affected.

The problems with this theory:
- It is impossible to predict the consequences of our actions.
- It is impossible to compare the happiness of different people.
- The theory can justify what we may regard as immoral acts.
- 'Happiness' can now be had by drugs.
- Breaks down trust between people.

Casuistry or Character
We often want to be flexible in our ethical decision. In 'Situation Ethics' rules are guidelines which are modified in the particular situations. People come first and the only foundation is love.

The problems with this approach are:
- A loving motive can lead to a bad action.
- It is not easy to determine the consequences of a loving action.
- There is great danger of judging a situation selfishly.
- There is the danger of crossing boundaries which then become acceptable to cross.

So, instead of asking the question "What should I *do*?", we could ask the question, 'What sort of person do I want to *be*?'. This is the realm of Virtue Ethics. When we talk about the formation of character, we can talk about particular virtues which are qualities of the character.

Virtue ethics starts with **Plato** who listed what he thought were the most important virtues, called the Cardinal Virtues: Courage, Temperance (instincts properly controlled), Practical wisdom and Justice. To be virtuous is to have these virtues in the right balance. All the virtues would come into play when making decisions.

Aristotle added to Plato's ideas the idea that humans have a goal in life. That goal is human flourishing or fulfilment. This was developed by **St Thomas Aquinas** and recently by philosopher **Alasdair MacIntyre**.

Is it possible to agree a common ground for ethics?

Is ethics a matter of convention? But we need norms about telling the truth, about standards restraining violence and killing, about regulations concerning sexual expression… Societies agree about a large number of values, especially if we ask the marginalised: happiness is preferable to misery, dignity better than humiliation.

Tolerance of other ethical systems often seen as good but should we be tolerant of "societies that tolerate widow-burning, or enforce female genital mutilation or systematically deny education and other rights to women"? (Blackburn, p21). Blackburn states that "There must be a course between the soggy sands of relativism and the cold rocks of dogmatism." (p26).

Alasdair MacIntyre tries to recover the moral tradition by going back to Aristotle and provide an idea of a meaningful life. Perhaps we can all agree that ethics concerns what serves our mutual flourishing or well-being.

Christianity and many religions can give people a vision and goal of goodness in a way that both acts as a constraint over behaviour and an incentive to work for the well-being of all.

Bibliography

Blackburn, Simon (2001) *Ethics: A Very Short Introduction*. OUP