

# WHAT MAKES SOMETHING RIGHT OR WRONG?

Some people believe that what is right and wrong never varies from situation to situation and that it can be expressed in constant and unchanging commandments.

They often look to religious texts or authorities to discover what they think a god wants them to do.

A humanist view of morality is different.

Humanists do not look to any god for rules but think carefully for themselves about what might be the best way to live.

This approach means we have always to be empathetic and think about the effects of our choices on the happiness or suffering of the people (or sometimes other animals) concerned.

We have to respect the rights and wishes of those involved, trying to find the kindest course of action or the option that will do the least harm.

We have to consider carefully the particular situation we find ourselves in and not just take any rule or commandment for granted.

We have to weigh up the evidence we have available to us about what the probable consequences of our actions will be.

This way of thinking about what we should do is explicitly based on reason, experience, and empathy and respect for others, rather than on tradition or deference to authority.

It might sound hard but luckily most of us do it most of the time without really thinking about it.

Morality is not something that comes from outside of human beings, gifted to us by an external force like a god.

When we look at our closest relatives in the animal world, we see the same basic tendencies we recognise in ourselves – affection, cooperation, all the behaviour needed to live in groups and thrive.

It is clear that our social instincts form the basis of morality and that they are a natural part of humanity.

Of course that is not the end of the story.

The long experience of tens of thousands of years of human beings living in communities has developed and refined our morality and we are all the lucky inheritors of that hard work.

But it does not mean that there are not people who do harm, or make bad choices.

But ultimately, morality comes from us, not from any god. It is to do with people, with individual goodwill and social responsibility; it is about not being completely selfish, about kindness and consideration towards others.

Ideas of freedom, justice, happiness, equality, fairness and all the other values we may live by are human inventions, and we can be proud of that, as we strive to live up to them.

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# WHAT SHOULD WE THINK ABOUT DEATH?

One thing we can be sure of is that we will die.  
Everybody will.

Some people do not like the thought of this and don't accept it. They prefer to think that death is not the end of us but that we might live on, perhaps in another life on earth, or in another place where people are rewarded or punished.

But wanting something to be true is not the same as it being true.

And there is no evidence to support the idea that our minds could survive the end of our bodies.

What sense could we make of the things that we value – love, experiences, communication, achievements, the warmth of the sun on our face – if we were disembodied?

And if life were eternal, wouldn't it lose much of what gives it shape, structure, meaning and purpose?

Think about reading a good book or eating a delicious cake. These may be great pleasures, but one of the things that makes them pleasures is that they come to an end. A book that went on and on forever and a cake that you never stopped eating would both soon lose their appeal.

Death is a natural part of life.

It makes sense for us to try not to be afraid of this but instead to come to terms with it.

Then we can focus on finding meaning and purpose in the here and now, making the most of the one life we know we have and helping others to do the same, choosing good over evil without the expectation of reward in some other place.

When we do die, we will live on in the work we have done and in the memories of the other people whose lives we have been part of.

Our bodies will break up and become part again of the cycle of nature. The atoms that form us now will go on to form other things – trees and birds, flowers and butterflies.

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# HOW CAN I BE HAPPY?

Some people believe that there is one single 'meaning of life'.

They think that the universe was created for a purpose and that human beings are part of some larger cosmic plan. They think our meaning comes from being part of this plan and is written into the universe waiting to be discovered.

A humanist view of meaning in life is different.

Humanists do not see that there is any obvious purpose to the universe, but that it is a natural phenomenon with no design behind it. Meaning is not something out there waiting to be discovered, but something that we create in our own lives.

And although this vast and incredibly old universe was not created for us, all of us are connected to something bigger than ourselves, whether it is family and community, a tradition stretching into the past, an idea or cause looking forward to the future, or the beautiful wider natural world on which we were born and our species evolved.

This way of thinking means that there is not just one big 'meaning of life' but that every person will have many different meanings in their life.

Each one of us is unique and our different personalities depend on a complex mixture of influences from our parents, our environment and our connections. They change with experience and changing circumstances.

There are no simple recipes for living that are applicable to all people. We have different tastes and preferences, different priorities and goals.

One person may like drawing, walking in the woods and caring for their grandchildren, another may like cooking, watching soap operas, savouring a favourite wine or a new food.

We may find meaning through our family, our career, making a commitment to an artistic project or a political reform, in simple pleasures such as gardening, in hobbies, or in a thousand other ways giving rein to our creativity or our curiosity, our intellectual capacities or our emotional life.

The time to be happy is now and the way to find meaning in life is to get on and live it – as fully and as well as we can.

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# HOW DO WE KNOW WHAT'S TRUE?

Ever since human beings have been capable of thought, we have asked big questions about how the world around us works.

Some people have thought that there is another reality beyond the one we can perceive through our normal senses – a supernatural world where there might be ghosts and goblins, gods and demons. They have thought that knowledge can come from this source – from supernatural revelations, prophetic visions or divinely inspired books.

Others have thought that the way to learn is by observing the world around us carefully and in detail, forming ideas about why things behave as they do, testing those ideas through experiments, refining them in the light of experience, then testing them again.

Out of all the various methods that people have tried to use to find out how the world works, observation, experimentation and the testing of theories against evidence has the best track-record.

Prophets have predicted the end of the world on many occasions, but we are still here.

Ancient holy books contain a description of the universe which has turned out to be totally inaccurate.

If asked to choose between taking a medicine prescribed by a doctor whose methods are based on experiment and one who has selected medicine for you based on his visions, you will probably not choose the medicine from the vision.

We may never know everything.

But the testing of theories against evidence has proved itself again and again to be a reliable way to gain any knowledge about how the world around us works. Through science we have cured deadly diseases, created amazing technologies, and learned things about the universe that fill us with wonder.

When we want to know what's true and what is false, there is no better method.

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