

The glossary lists terms in alphabetical order

The nature of our society

The sort of ethical issues you will be considering come up in the context of a certain kind of society. Terms such as democracy, liberal society, common values, plural, multicultural and diversity are used in describing this kind of society (some of these terms also identify features which may be positively valued). In one society there may be many communities. Globalisation and market choice are also very relevant.

Moral concepts and values for individuals and citizens

In any society individuals have their own preferences about their way of life, and they have values which may be formulated in a variety of ways: e.g. individuals may see morality in terms of rules and principles, and may recognise duties, obligations, responsibilities, and rights. Some values are especially relevant in the discussion of public issues, e.g. justice, freedom, equality and human rights. In a plural society, tolerance and respect are especially important, and people should be treated in such a way that they can retain their self-respect.

Philosophical issues

The status of these values is sometimes questioned. Are they objective, or just subjective, or relative to cultures? (One meaning of the term ethics is the area of philosophy which tackles questions like these.)

Politics

Citizens have views on public issues. It is a feature of democracy that public policy must take public opinion into account. The most general term for the way this is done is politics; the means by which this is done, in addition to political parties competing for votes in elections, includes pressure groups and the media. While government has considerable power, it only has the authority to make decisions within the rule of law.

Political decision-making

At a political level, issues will often be decided in terms of consequences, especially where there is an end or goal to be achieved. The desirability of certain consequences may be seen in terms of the common good, or the public interest, or the promotion of the public good. However, other values – such as those mentioned above – may limit the extent to which issues can be decided just in terms of the most effective means of achieving ends. What would be best for the people as a whole may go against the rights – including civil rights and welfare rights – of individuals. So how to draw the line between private and public becomes very important, and is controversial.

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Authority

The right to tell others what to do. In a **democratic** system, individuals (e.g. judges, government ministers) can only have authority within the **rule of law**. Authority is different from **power** or influence; a multinational company might have a lot of influence over whether GMO crops are to be grown, but has no authority to make decisions about this.

Citizen

To be a citizen is to have recognised status as a member of a political community

A 'political community' means one society organized under one **government** and set of **laws**: in the modern world that is usually a nation-state such as Britain or India; but it might also be a wider unit such as the European Union.

'Recognised status' means that just living in a particular territory does not make you a citizen – that status has to be formally recognised within the law. The status of citizen involves certain **rights** and **responsibilities**. The rights include both **civil rights** and **welfare rights**; the responsibilities, at a minimum, include respecting the **rule of law** and the **rights** of others, but they may also include participating with others in working for the **common good**.

Civil rights

This term covers a variety of **rights** relating to legal and political processes. Some of these – e.g. the right to vote in elections of a particular country – are rights which only the citizens of that country have. Others, such as the right not to be arrested and imprisoned without proper legal process, apply to anyone whether they are a citizen or not.

Common good

The common good is not just what is good for each member of society, but what they can all recognise as being good for society as a whole (but exactly what is for the common good may be **controversial**, because a policy which benefits most people

will not necessarily benefit every single individual). For example, a certain farming policy might bring some benefit to almost everyone in the population, but for the farmers themselves the benefit might be outweighed by their losses.

Common values

Common values are shared beliefs about what is right or wrong, good or bad. Talking about common values does not mean that we share all such beliefs; having some values in common is compatible with **diversity** and **pluralism** about others.

Community

A group of people who are counted as a group because of some common factor – which may be simply living in the same area, or sharing certain beliefs, or sharing an ethnic background, or just being citizens of the same society.

Consequences

The results or effects of something (a policy, an action, or a natural event). Consequences may be predictable or unpredictable; e.g. we can say a lot about the consequences of using fossil fuels or using renewable energy, but choosing to use one or the other may also have consequences we cannot predict.

Controversial

A question is controversial when conflicting positions about it can be, and are, held and argued for.

(It must be possible for *some argument* to be made on both sides; you do not make the shape of the Earth controversial just by *saying* 'the Earth is flat'; but it was a controversial question once; the rights and wrongs of organic and chemical farming are controversial now.)

Democracy

A political system in which people have a say in who forms the government. This is a very minimal definition; many people would say that genuine democracy is a political system in which people really can make a difference to what happens to them in all sorts of **public** issues.

Diversity

Diversity is basically another word for difference, but it often particularly refers to the existence of different cultures and religions which involve different ways of life and ways of making sense of the world, and often different values.

Duty

Something you *must* do, because some set of principles or laws. See also **obligation**.

Ends

See **goals**

Equality

As a **value** or **principle**, this is the idea that everyone should be treated equally unless there are good reasons for making distinctions. For example, if there were a public policy of compulsory vaccination, exceptions should not be made unless there is a good argument for exempting people in certain categories; and then everyone within a category should still be treated equally.

Ethics

See **morals**

Freedom

Freedom is the lack of constraints that would prevent you from doing what you decide or wish to do. There are many different sorts of constraints which can limit your freedom – physical barriers (i.e. a prison cell), laws, your own sense of what is right, particular promises or commitments you may have made to others. Constraints are sometimes put on freedom for the sake of other values; e.g. the usual freedom of farmers to transport their livestock was curtailed during the foot-and-mouth crisis.

Globalisation

This term refers to the increasing tendency in the modern world for what happens in one country to affect what happens in others. This can include cultural trends and the **consequences** of industrial processes. The way pollution can spread across national boundaries is a common example. Because of globalisation, much of the activity of **politics** goes on at an international level.

Goals

A goal, or an end, is something that is aimed at; means are what is done to achieve the end. Saying 'the end justifies the means' is saying that it is OK to do something because the importance of the end outweighs any objections there may be to the means.

Some people think that certain means could never be justified however good the end.

Government

The government of a country is the body which has the **authority** to decide how public policy is to be carried out. In a **democracy**, the government only has this authority because **citizens** have voted for it.

Human rights

Rights which all human beings have, independently of any rights conferred by membership of a particular nation, community or group.

Justice

The state of affairs in which everyone has – or is not prevented from getting – what they should have. Since 'what they should have' is open to interpretation – e.g. 'what they need' or 'what they deserve' or 'what they have a right to' – this general notion of justice leaves room for controversy over exactly what justice demands.

Liberal society

A society in which people, on the whole, have the **freedom** to live as they wish provided they do not do harm to others or violate their **rights**.

Market choice

This refers to people exercising their **preferences** through choosing out of a range of alternatives which producers or providers make available. The same issue may be treated partly as a matter of **public policy** and partly as a matter for market choice. For example, people may be able to vote for a party which proposes to support organic farming through subsidies, as a matter of public policy; but people can also exercise influence by their choices as consumers in the market. Increasingly, governments have made it a matter of policy to let individual preferences count through market choice.

Media

A general term for the channels (especially the press and broadcasting) through which information and opinions are disseminated to the general public. See also **public opinion**.

Morals/ morality

There is no consistent distinction in English between 'morals', 'morality' and 'ethics'. However, roughly, 'morals' often refer to the beliefs of an individual or a cultural group about what is right and wrong. 'Morality' often refers to a system of rules and principles about what is right and wrong, which is thought to be objective rather than subjective; e.g. we might think that the way someone acts goes against morality, not just against his own morals.

'Ethics' often refer to rules, principles and moral problems recognised by a particular professional group or applying to a particular context, as in 'environmental ethics'. Ethics can also refer to the theories and processes by which we try to decide on issues of right and wrong or good and bad, and to the branch of philosophy which analyses moral language and moral issues.

Multicultural society

A society containing a **diversity** of cultures, which are ways of life involving beliefs and values which sometimes (not always) go with membership of an ethnic or religious group. For issues concerning citizenship and ethical debate on public issues, diversity of **values** (including moral beliefs) may be the most important aspect of a multicultural society.

Obligation

- (i) Like **duty**, something you *must* do, because of some set of principles or laws.
- (ii) Something you must do because of a particular commitment or undertaking; e.g. you can put yourself under an obligation by making a promise

Objective

A question has an objective answer when there is a correct answer to it which can be established through some generally recognised means.

For example, most mathematical and scientific questions are objective (we believe there is a correct answer, even if it has not yet been established). Questions of personal taste and preference are not objective (e.g. whether tea tastes better with or without sugar).

For many moral questions, there is dispute over whether they are objective or not; that is partly why they are so **controversial**.

Plural society/pluralism

A plural society is one in which there is a **diversity of values**, as well as of religions, lifestyles and so on. A plural society does not have to be **multicultural**, or multi-faith, or multi-ethnic; there is some diversity of values in any society in the modern world.

Pluralism is a system in which it is possible for people to live together with mutual **respect** and **tolerance** while retaining their diversity of values.

Political party

An organised group, broadly sharing certain political **principles** and **values** and positions on matters of **public policy**, which campaigns for public support and votes. In a **democracy** the **government** is usually formed by the party which has gained most votes in an election.

Politics

The processes and activities by which societies make decisions on matters of **public policy**. Different political systems (e.g. **democracy** and others) distribute the **power** to make decisions in different ways.

Power

In the political, not physical, sense, power is the capacity to influence what other people do or decide. In a **democracy**, ideally, everyone has some power over matters of **public policy**, since everyone can express a view, try to persuade others, and so on. In practice, some people (e.g. politicians) always have more power than others.

Pressure group

An organised group which exists to influence **public opinion** and **government** on a particular issue.

Preferences

What people want (more than they want something else). The term is usually used for what people want *for themselves*; so people's preferences, and what they think *should* be done (perhaps as a matter of **principle**) can be two different things.

For example, a parent's *preference* could be that her own child should not be vaccinated though other people's children are; but as a matter of *principle* she might think that all children should be vaccinated.

People's preferences can make a difference both through political processes such as voting, and also through **market choice**.

Principles

Principles are broad considerations (within morality or law) which we should take into account at all times (such as '**respect for persons**' or '**justice**') but which do not by themselves tell us what to do or not do in a particular situation. (So principles are usually more general and leave more room for interpretation than rules.)

Private

An issue is a private matter (not a **public** concern) when it affects no one but particular individuals. This does not make it at all easy to see where to draw the line between **public** and private; so that is a **controversial** issue.

Public

What is rightly the concern of people in general, not just particular individuals. The line between public and **private** is **controversial** because people can argue over whether the actions or beliefs of a person (whether a parent beats his or her child; whether he or she believes in democracy) are of any concern to other members of society.

Public good

The public good is much the same as the common good or the public interest, but the idea is sometimes used in a more technical way: something is a **public good** if it cannot be provided for particular

individuals (as a **private** good) without being provided for everyone (in a society). A common example is clean air: roughly speaking, if anyone has it, everyone has it (within a geographical area). Television sets are not a public good; some people can have them without everyone having them.

Public interest

A matter of public interest is something which affects or is of concern to the public (whether something is a matter of public interest, or is just a **private** concern of individuals, can be **controversial**) Something is **in the public interest** if it benefits all or at least most people (in a society).

Public opinion

The views of the general public in their capacity as citizens (as distinct from the views of members of **political parties** and **pressure groups**). There is an important relationship between the **media** and public opinion since the media both influences public opinion and claims to report it.

Public policy

Policy made (usually by **government**) on behalf of the whole society on some matter of **public interest**.

Relative

A matter is relative when any position depends on a particular point of view or set of assumptions. For example, certain expectations about behaviour may be relative to a cultural tradition. (If a view is relative to particular individuals, this is equivalent to 'subjective'). Whether moral views are always relative in some way is **controversial**.

Respect for persons

To have respect for persons is to recognise the basic worth and hence the **rights** of every person; to treat people with respect is to treat them as persons who have their own life to lead and their own point of view, not purely as 'numbers' or as a means to someone else's ends.

(In this sense, we can respect everyone; but we may also respect particular individuals in the sense of looking up to them for some particular quality or achievement.) See also **self-respect**.

Responsibilities

'Responsibilities' refer to particular duties or obligations towards others, or more generally to aspects of our lives in which we must act *responsibly*, i.e. within the limits set by the rights and interests of others, and taking into account the **consequences** of our actions.

The **responsibilities** we have as citizens include not just refraining from violating the **rights** of others, but also participating with fellow citizens in pursuing the **common good**.

Rights

Rights are entitlements to be treated in a particular way. When you have a right, someone else has the **duty** or **obligation** or **responsibility** to respect that right.

The rights of **citizens** are rights which people have in relation to the **government** and **laws** of their nation, e.g. to participate in elections in the country of which they are citizens (but not in other countries).

(Sometimes it is said that we only have **rights** if we also accept **responsibilities**. This is true about adults because they can recognise their responsibilities; but babies can have rights, and there is a **controversial** questions about whether animals can have rights.)

In many respects, adults have a right to be left alone if they want to be, provided they are not infringing anyone else's rights. By appealing to their individual rights, people may try to block measures which are in the public interest. Also, an appeal to the public interest may be used to justify overriding people's rights in special circumstances. For example, appeals to rights and to the public interest would probably be on opposite sides in an argument over a compulsory immunisation programme.

Rule of law

Refers to a system within which what we are free to do or not free to do is determined, not by the arbitrary decision of particular persons, but by laws which are made in advance, publicly known, and subject to change through recognised processes.

(So this is a feature of **democracy** but not of a military dictatorship.) We can recognise the value of the rule of law without agreeing with every particular law.

Self-respect

We have self-respect when we respect ourselves as we should respect others; that is, we recognise that we have the same basic worth and rights as everyone else.

Subjective

A question is subjective when any answer to it depends on personal taste or opinion, and there is no way of establishing an answer through generally-recognised means. See also **relative**.

Tolerance (or toleration)

Acceptance of another's values (and their attempts to live according to their values) even when one disagrees with them. You may tolerate what you disapprove of because, you recognise that your own beliefs could be mistaken, or because you recognise that in a liberal society everyone has the **right** to their own beliefs and way of life; or because you put positive value on **diversity**. The limits to toleration are **controversial**; we may have a **responsibility** not to tolerate behaviour which violates the **rights** of others.

Values

Our values are our beliefs – which will not necessarily be spelt out in words – about what is good rather than bad, or right rather than wrong, or important rather than unimportant.

Welfare rights

These are rights to receive some benefit, such as health care or education. These are usually rights against the government (local or national). For example, if you have a right to a hospital bed, in the end it is the government which has the responsibility to see that you get it. Non-citizens of a particular country do not usually have the same welfare rights as citizens. Adults are usually free to decide whether to exercise their rights or not, e.g. I do not have to go to a doctor if I don't want to. But for children, compulsory measures (e.g. education or certain medical procedures) may be advocated as a way of protecting their welfare rights.