

# What is ethics? How do we know what is right and wrong?

## Key facts

- Throughout history, people have wondered how to live a good life.
- The name given to people's principles or views about right and wrong is morality.
- Some people believe that morality is innate or inbuilt in us. Others believe that morality is something that we acquire through life as a result of our experiences.
- Nietzsche thought that the death of God should have dramatic consequences for how humans live. If God does not exist then it makes no sense to follow his rules or ideas.
- Jeremy Bentham did not believe that God decided what actions are good or bad. What decides whether an action is good or bad is whether it creates pleasure for people.
- If an action creates the greatest pleasure for the majority of people then it is deemed a good action.
- Bentham devised the hedonic calculus to help measure the amount of pleasure or pain an action created.
- Philippa Foot disagreed that we should be looking towards consequences to help us decide whether an action is good or bad. Why are some things ok in some situations but not others?

## Key Vocabulary

**Absolutism** – the view that certain actions are inherently good or bad.

**Altruism** – Selfless actions done without thought or expectation of a reward.

**Artificial intelligence** – computer systems that are able to carry out tasks normally done by humans.

**The banality of evil** – A phrase used by Hannah Arendt to describe how evil can result from ordinary thoughtless behaviour.

**Dualism** – the belief that humans have both a body and another separate, immaterial part, such as a mind or soul.

**Ethics** – the philosophical study of right and wrong.

**Hedonic calculus** – Jeremy Bentham's way of calculating which actions are right and wrong.

**Holocaust** – The killing of six million Jews by

the Nazis.

**Materialism** – the belief that the only thing that exists is physical matter and the movement of this matter.

**Morality** – ideas or principles about what is right and wrong.

**Relativism** – the view that whether an action is good or bad depends on the situation.

**Thought experiment** – a mental test in which people think through consequences of different actions, often in scenarios that can't be tested in real life.

**Utilitarianism** – the theory that the best action in any situation is the one which creates the greatest amount of good for the greatest number.

**The will to power** – term used by Nietzsche to describe a natural human desire for strength and power.

## Key people

**Hannah Arendt** – 20<sup>th</sup> century German philosopher who attended the trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961 and wrote about 'the banality of evil'.

**Jeremy Bentham** – 18<sup>th</sup> century English philosopher, regarded as the founder of utilitarianism, who argued that pleasure and pain are the same as good and bad.

**Philippa Foot** – 20<sup>th</sup> century English philosopher who designed the runaway train thought experiment in 1967.

**John Locke** – 17<sup>th</sup> century English philosopher who argued when we are born, our mind is like a blank slate (tabula rasa)

**John Stuart Mill** – 19<sup>th</sup> century English philosopher who developed utilitarianism by arguing that the quality of pleasure or pain produced is more important than the quantity.

**Friedrich Nietzsche** – 19<sup>th</sup> century German atheist who expressed his belief that humans no longer needed the idea of God by saying "God is dead".

**Robert Nozick** – 20<sup>th</sup> century American philosopher who used the example of an imaginary 'experience machine' to show humans value more than simply pleasure.