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Ethics and happiness

Dr Iain Law from the Department of Philosophy discusses his research on ethics, happiness and doing the 'right thing'.

Title: **Ethics and happiness (/schools/ptr/departments/philosophy/research/videos/iain-law-research.aspx)** Duration: 3.12 mins

My name's Iain Law, I'm a Senior Lecturer at the University of Birmingham in the Philosophy department.

I've been here about ten years now. Most of my research concerns ethics and moral philosophy. There are three main questions I've been interested in over the last ten years.

First there's this question of, 'what makes the right thing to do the right thing'? The question of 'doing right'. And there are various answers to that question and I have some views about that. It's related also to the the question of what it is to be a 'good person'. So, some people think that those two questions line up very neatly; you're a good person if you do the right thing. But some people have suggested in the last 30 years that things might not be as straightforward and easy as that, because if you worry too much about doing the right thing, you might strangely not actually be a good person.

The third area that I'm interested in is the question of living a happy life, or living a good life, which again some people connect with the other two. Aristotle famously thinks to be happy is to be good, and the good person does the right thing. But others have suggested its not as easy as that and it's quite difficult to specify what counts as real happiness - this is an area of huge debate in philosophy and in other fields at the moment. So I'm interested in those three questions: doing the right thing, being a good person and living a happy life, and then how they intersect with each other.

The research I've done into happiness and wellbeing has led me into the further area of research which is the philosophy of health and disease. Defining health and identifying what actually counts as being healthy, living a healthy life is no less difficult than defining happiness. So we all know that we want to be healthy and we want to be happy, but its quite difficult sometimes to specify exactly what that consists of. It's much more controversial than you might think it would be. And that's something that I've been working on in recent years with a colleague of mine.

That's then led on to an interest in certain sorts of disease, especially mental diseases, depression in particular which strangely links back to the issue of what it is to be a good person because when you are depressed you don't act in the way you normally would. You aren't motivated to do the things you feel you should be motivated to do. And that might mean or it might appear to me that you're not as good a person as you should be and question arises of whether people who are depressed are in some way lacking in virtue. And that's something that I've published some stuff on as well.

So, I have this vague sense that all the questions I work on link up together and make some sort of sense I just haven't identified what that sense is yet! But I'm persuing them all independently in the hop that they will one day come together into something which makes good sense.

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