Four ethical 'isms'

When a person says "murder is bad" what are they doing? That's the sort of question that only a philosopher would ask, but it's actually a very useful way of

getting a clear idea of what's going on when people talk about moral issues.

The different 'isms' regard the person uttering the statement as doing different things.

We can show some of the different things I might be doing when I say 'murder is bad' by rewriting that statement to show what I really mean:

I might be making a statement about an ethical fact

* "It is wrong to murder" - This is moral realism.*

I might be making a statement about my own feelings

* "I disapprove of murder" - This is subjectivism.*

I might be expressing my feelings

* "Down with murder" - This is emotivism.*

I might be giving an instruction or a prohibition

* "Don't murder people" - This is prescriptivism.*

**1. Moral realism:**

Moral realism is based on the idea that there are real objective moral facts or truths in the universe. Moral statements provide factual information about those truths.

**2. Subjectivism**

Subjectivism teaches that moral judgments are nothing more than statements of a person's feelings or attitudes, and that ethical statements do not contain factual truths about goodness or badness. In more detail: subjectivists say that moral statements are statements about the feelings, attitudes and emotions that that particular person or group has about a particular issue. If a person says something is good or bad they are telling us about the positive or negative feelings that they have about that something. So if someone says 'murder is wrong' they are telling us that they disapprove of murder. These statements are true if the person does hold the appropriate attitude or have the appropriate feelings. They are false if the person doesn't.

**3. Emotivism**

Emotivism is the view that moral claims are no more than expressions of approval or disapproval. This sounds like subjectivism, but in emotivism a moral statement doesn't provide information about the speaker's feelings about the topic but expresses those feelings. When an emotivist says "murder is wrong" it's like saying "down with murder" or "murder, yecch!"or just saying "murder" while pulling a horrified face, or making a thumbs-down gesture at the same time as saying "murder is wrong". So when someone makes a moral judgement they show their feelings about something. Some theorists also suggest that in expressing a feeling the person gives an instruction to others about how to act towards the subject matter.

**4. Prescriptivism:**

Prescriptivists think that ethical statements are instructions or recommendations.

So if I say something is good, I'm recommending you to do it, and if I say something is bad, I'm telling you not to do it. There is almost always a prescriptive element in any real-world ethical statement: any ethical statement can be reworked (with a bit of effort) into a statement with an 'ought' in it. For example: "lying is wrong" can be rewritten as "people ought not to tell lies."

**Where does ethics come from?**

Philosophers have several answers to this question:

1. God and religion
2. Human conscience and intuition
3. A rational moral cost-benefit analysis of actions and their effects
4. The example of good human beings.
5. A desire for the best for people in each unique situation
6. Political power

1. **God-based ethics - supernaturalism**

Supernaturalism makes ethics inseparable from religion. It teaches that the only source of moral rules is God. So, something is good because God says it is, and the way to lead a good life is to do what God wants.

2. **Intuitionism**

Intuitionists think that good and bad are real objective properties that can't be broken down into component parts. Something is good because it's good; its goodness doesn't need justifying or proving. Intuitionists think that goodness or badness can be detected by adults - they say that human beings

have an intuitive moral sense that enables them to detect real moral truths.

They think that basic moral truths of what is good and bad are self-evident to a person who directs their mind towards moral issues. So good things are the things that a sensible person realizes are good if they spend some time pondering the subject. Don't get confused. For the intuitionist:

 moral truths are not discovered by rational argument.

 moral truths are not discovered by having a hunch.

 moral truths are not discovered by having a feeling.

It's more a sort of moral 'aha' moment - a realization of the truth.

3. **Consequentialism:**

This is the ethical theory that most non-religious people think they use every day. It bases morality on the consequences of human actions and not on the actions themselves. Consequentialism teaches that people should do whatever produces the greatest amount of good consequences. One famous way of putting this is 'the greatest good for the greatest number of people'. The most common forms of consequentialism are the various versions of utilitarianism, which favor actions that produce the greatest amount of happiness. Despite its obvious common-sense appeal, consequentialism turns out to be a complicated theory, and doesn't provide a complete solution to all ethical problems. Two problems with consequentialism are:

 it can lead to the conclusion that some quite dreadful acts are good.

 predicting and evaluating the consequences of actions is often very difficult.

**Non-consequentialism or deontological ethics:**

Non-consequentialism is concerned with the actions themselves and not with the consequences. It's the theory that people are using when they refer to "the principle of the thing." It teaches that some acts are right or wrong in themselves, whatever the consequences, and people should act accordingly.

4. **Virtue ethics:**

Virtue ethics looks at virtue or moral character, rather than at ethical duties and rules, or the consequences of actions - indeed some philosophers of this school deny that there can be such things as universal ethical rules. Virtue ethics is particularly concerned with the way individuals live their lives, and less concerned in assessing particular actions. It develops the idea of good actions by looking at the way virtuous people express their inner goodness in the things that they do. To put it very simply, virtue ethics teaches that an action is right if and only if it is an action that a virtuous person would do in the same circumstances, and that a virtuous person is someone who has a particularly good character.

5. **Situation ethics:**

Situation ethics rejects prescriptive rules and argues that individual ethical decisions should be made according to the unique situation. Rather than following rules the decision maker should follow a desire to seek the best for the people

involved. There are no moral rules or rights - each case is unique and deserves a unique solution.

6. **Ethics and ideology:**

Some philosophers teach that ethics is the codification of political ideology, and that the function of ethics is to state, enforce and preserve particular political beliefs.

They usually go on to say that ethics is used by the dominant political elite as a tool to control everyone else. More cynical writers suggest that power elites enforce an ethical code on other people that helps them control those people, but do not apply this code to their own behavior.