

# Talking about Ethics

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People find it difficult to talk about ethics – they see ethics as being about being told what to do. So ethics is about oppressive institutions with a long list of rules. Enter the churches. Ethics has become tied up with the long escape from institutional religion. In fact, moral agency (and we are all moral agents) is not about keeping a long list of rules, but is about something deeper – about who we are as people, that is our moral character.

The important thing, therefore, is the formation of moral character. People of moral character, i.e. people who are virtuous, are more likely to make the right decision. Of course, virtue and moral character may sound boring, but actually they are about dealing with different others, about being generous, and so on.

Religious communities and virtuous people within them can help in the formation of moral character. And, of course, sometimes religious communities can be highly oppressive places that wound people and so on.

We can see in the biblical texts the challenge of relating to the different other. And different answers are come to – rejection, inclusion, killing, living with, exclusion, generosity. And there are struggles within the texts. Nevertheless, the face of the other is a constant challenge. Good fiction brings this challenge too. All great novels give us insight into the workings of human otherness. Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* shows us why we shouldn't commit murder, and what it might do to us. Reading fiction provides a morally safe environment in which to experience dangerous and destructive emotions. We can experience feelings of anger, resentment, jealousy, murderousness and so on through fictional others but we are spared the real life consequences. And in entering into these fictional worlds the possibility of moral growth may become more real.

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