What Is Ethics?

We are discussing no small matter, but how we ought to live.

Socrates in Plato’s Republic

What is it to be a moral person? What is the nature of morality, and why do we need it? What is the good, and how will I know it? Are moral principles absolute or simply relative to social groups or individual decision? Is it in my interest to be moral? Is it sometimes in my best interest to act immorally? What is the relationship between morality and religion? What is the relationship between morality and law? What is the relationship between morality and etiquette?

These are some of the questions that we will be examining in this chapter. We want to know how we should live.

The terms moral and ethics come from Latin and Greek, respectively (mores and ethos), deriving their meaning from the idea of custom. Although philosophers sometimes distinguish these terms—morality referring to the customs, principles, and practices of a people or culture, and ethics referring to the whole domain of morality and moral philosophy—I shall use them interchangeably in this book, using the context to make any differences clear.

Moral philosophy refers to the systematic endeavor to understand moral concepts and justify moral principles and theories. It undertakes to analyze such concepts as “right,” “wrong,” “permissible,” “ought,” “good,” and “evil” in their moral contexts. Moral philosophy seeks to establish principles of right behavior that may serve as action guides for individuals and groups. It investigates which values and virtues are paramount to the worthwhile life or society. It builds and scrutinizes arguments in ethical theories, and it seeks to discover valid principles (e.g., “Never kill innocent human beings”) and the relationship between those principles (e.g., “Does saving a life in some situations constitute a valid reason for breaking a promise?”).

Morality as Compared with Other Normative Subjects

Moral precepts are concerned with norms—not with what is but with what ought to be. How should I live my life? What is the right thing to do in this situation? Should one always tell the truth? Do I have a duty to report a student whom I have seen
cheating in class or a co-worker whom I have seen stealing office supplies? Should I tell my friend that his spouse is having an affair? Is pre-marital sex morally permissible? Ought a woman ever to have an abortion? Should we permit the cloning of human beings? Morality has a distinct action guiding or normative aspect, an aspect it shares with other practical institutions, such as religion, law, and etiquette.

Moral behavior, as defined by a given religion, is often held to be essential to the practice of that religion. But neither the practices nor precepts of morality should be identified with religion. The practice of morality need not be motivated by religious considerations. And moral precepts need not be grounded in revelation or divine authority—as religious teachings invariably are. The most salient characteristic of ethics—by which I mean both philosophical morality (or morality, as I will simply refer to it) and moral philosophy—is that it is grounded in reason and human experience.

To use a spatial metaphor, secular ethics is horizontal, omitting a vertical or transcendental dimension. Religious ethics has a vertical dimension, being grounded in revelation or divine authority, though generally using reason to supplement or complement revelation. These two differing orientations will often generate different moral principles and standards of evaluation, but they need not. Some versions of religious ethics that posit God’s revelation of the moral law in nature or conscience hold that reason can discover what is right or wrong even apart from divine revelation.

Morality is also closely related to law, and some people equate the two practices. Many laws are instituted to promote well-being (i.e., resolve conflicts of interest and/or promote social harmony), just as morality does, but ethics may judge that some laws are immoral without denying that they are valid laws. For example, laws may permit slavery or irrelevant discrimination against people on the basis of race or sex. A Catholic or an anti-abortion advocate may believe that the laws permitting abortion are immoral.

In the television series *Ethics in America* (PBS, 1989), James Neal, a trial lawyer, was asked what he would do if he discovered that his client had committed a murder for which another man had been convicted and would soon be executed. Mr. Neal said that he had a legal obligation to keep this information confidential and that if he divulged it, he would be disbarred. It is arguable that he has a moral obligation that overrides his legal obligation and that demands he take action to protect the innocent man from being executed.

Furthermore, there are some aspects of morality that are not covered by law. For example, it is generally agreed that lying is usually immoral, but there is no general law against it (except under special conditions, such as in cases of perjury or falsifying income tax returns). Sometimes college newspapers publish advertisements for “research assistance,” where it is known in advance that the companies will aid and abet plagiarism. The publishing of such research paper ads is legal, but it is doubtful whether it is morally correct. In 1963, 39 people in Queens, New York, watched from their apartments for some forty-five minutes as a man beat and stabbed to death a woman, Kitty Genovese, and did nothing to intervene, not even call the police. These people broke no law, but they were very likely morally culpable for not calling the police or shouting at the assailant.

There is one other major difference between law and morality. In 1351, King Edward of England promulgated a law against treason that made it a crime merely to
think homicidal thoughts about the king. But, alas, the law could not be enforced, for no tribunal can search the heart and fathom the intentions of the mind. It is true that \textit{intention}, such as malice aforethought, plays a role in the legal process in determining the legal character of the act, once the act has been committed. But preemptive punishment for people presumed to have bad intentions is illegal. If malicious intentions (called in law \textit{mens rea}) were criminally illegal, would we not all deserve imprisonment? Even if it were possible to detect intentions, when should the punishment be administered? As soon as the subject has the intention? But how do we know that he will not change his mind? Furthermore, is there not a continuum between imagining some harm to X, wishing a harm to X, desiring a harm to X, and intending a harm to X?

Although it is impractical to have laws against bad intentions, these intentions are still bad, still morally wrong. Suppose I plan to push Uncle Charlie off a 1000-foot cliff when we next hike together in order to inherit his wealth but never have a chance to do it (e.g., Uncle Charlie breaks his leg and forswears hiking). Although I have not committed a crime, I have committed a moral wrong. Law generally aims at setting an important but minimal framework in a society of plural values.

Finally, law differs from morality in that there are physical and financial sanctions (e.g., imprisonment and fines) enforcing the law but only the sanctions of conscience and reputation enforcing morality.

Morality also differs from etiquette, which concerns form and style rather than the essence of social existence. Etiquette determines what is polite behavior rather than what is right behavior in a deeper sense. It represents society’s decisions about how we are to dress, greet one another, eat, celebrate festivals, dispose of the dead, express gratitude and appreciation, and, in general, carry out social transactions. Whether we greet each other with a handshake, a bow, a hug, or a kiss on the cheek; or uncover our heads in holy places (as males do in Christian churches) or cover them (as females do in Catholic churches and males do in synagogues) will differ in different social systems; none of these rituals has any moral superiority.

People in Russia wear their wedding rings on the third finger of their right hand, whereas we wear them on our left hands. People in England hold their fork in their left hand when they eat, whereas people in other countries hold it in their right hand or in whichever hand a person feels like holding it; people in India typically eat without a fork at all, using the forefingers of their right hand for conveying food from their plate to their mouth.

Polite manners grace our social existence, but they are not what social existence is about. They help social transactions to flow smoothly but are not the substance of those transactions.

At the same time, it can be immoral to disregard or flout etiquette. Whether to shake hands when greeting a person for the first time or put one’s hands together and forward as one bows, as people in India do, is a matter of cultural decision; but once the custom is adopted, the practice takes on the importance of a moral rule, subsumed under the wider principle of Show Respect to People. Similarly, there is no moral necessity of wearing clothes, but we have adopted the custom partly to keep us warm in colder climates and partly out of modesty. But there is nothing wrong with nudists who decide to live together naked in nudist colonies. But, it may well be the case that people running nude in classrooms, stores, and along the road would constitute
offensive, or morally insensitive, behavior. Recently, there was a scandal on the beaches of South India where American tourists swam in bikinis, shocking the more modest Indians. There was nothing immoral in itself about wearing bikinis, but given the cultural context, the Americans, in willfully violating etiquette, were guilty of moral impropriety.

Law, etiquette, and religion are all important institutions, but each has limitations. The limitation of the law is that you can’t have a law against every social malady nor can you enforce every desirable rule. The limitation of etiquette is that it doesn’t get to the heart of what is of vital importance for personal and social existence. Whether or not one eats with one’s fingers pales in significance compared with the importance of being honest or trustworthy or just. Etiquette is a cultural invention, but morality claims to be a discovery.

The limitation of the religious injunction is that it rests on authority, and we are not always sure of or in agreement about the credentials of the authority, nor on how the authority would rule in ambiguous or new cases. Since religion is not founded on reason but on revelation, you cannot use reason to convince someone who does not share your religious views that your view is the right one. I hasten to add that, when moral differences are caused by fundamental moral principles, it is unlikely that philosophical reasoning will settle the matter. Often, however, our moral differences turn out to be rooted in worldviews, not moral principles. For example, the antiabortionist and pro-choice advocates often agree that it is wrong to kill innocent persons but differ on the facts. The antiabortionist may hold a religious view stating that the fetus has an eternal soul and thus possesses a right to life, whereas the pro-choice advocate may deny that anyone has souls and hold that only self-conscious, rational beings have rights to life.

Table 1 may characterize the relationship between ethics, religion, etiquette, and law.

In summary, morality distinguishes itself from law and etiquette by going deeper into the essence of rational existence. It distinguishes itself from religion in that it seeks reasons, rather than authority, to justify its principles. The central purpose of moral philosophy is to secure valid principles of conduct and values that can be instrumental in guiding human actions and producing good character. As such, it is the most important activity known to humans, because it has to do with how we are to live.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1</th>
<th>The Relationship Between Ethics, Religion, Etiquette, and Law</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SUBJECT</td>
<td>NORMATIVE DISJUNCTS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethics</td>
<td>Right, wrong, or permissible —as defined by conscience or reason</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>Right, wrong (sin), or permissible— as defined by religious authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law</td>
<td>Legal and illegal—as defined by a judicial body</td>
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<tr>
<td>Etiquette</td>
<td>Proper and improper—as defined by culture</td>
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Domains of Ethical Assessment

It might seem at this point that ethics concerns itself entirely with rules of conduct based solely on an evaluation of acts. However, the situation is more complicated than this. There are four domains of ethical assessment:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DOMAIN</th>
<th>EVALUATIVE TERMS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Action, the act</td>
<td>Right, wrong, obligatory, permissible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Consequences</td>
<td>Good, bad, indifferent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Character</td>
<td>Virtuous, vicious, neutral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Motive</td>
<td>Good will, evil will, neutral</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Let's examine each of these domains.

- **Right (permissible)**
  - **Obligatory**
  - **Neutral**
  - **Superogatory**

- **Wrong (not permissible)**

**Types of Action.** The most common distinction may be the classification of actions as right and wrong, but the term *right* is ambiguous. Sometimes it means “obligatory” (as in “the right act”), but sometimes it means permissible (as in “a right act”). Usually, philosophers define *right* as permissible, including under that category what is obligatory.

1. A **right act** is an act that is permissible for you to do. It may be either (a) optional or (b) obligatory.
   a. An *optional act* is neither obligatory nor wrong to do. It is not your duty to do it, nor is it your duty not to do it. Neither doing it nor not doing it would be wrong.
   b. An *obligatory act* is one morality requires you to do; it is not permissible for you to refrain from doing it. That is, it would be wrong not to do it.

2. A **wrong act** is one that you have an obligation, or a duty, to refrain from doing. It is an act you ought not to do. It is not permissible to do it.

Let us briefly illustrate these concepts. The act of lying is generally seen as a wrong type of act (prohibited), whereas telling the truth is generally seen as obligatory. But some acts do not seem to be either obligatory or wrong. Whether you decide to take a course in art history or English literature or whether you write your friend a letter with a pencil or a pen seems morally neutral. Either is permissible. Whether you listen to pop music or classical music is not usually considered morally significant. Listening to both is allowed, and neither is obligatory. A decision to marry or remain single is of great moral significance. (It is, after all, an important decision about how to live one’s life.) The decision reached, however, is usually considered to be morally neutral or optional. Under most circumstances, to marry (or not to marry) is thought to be neither obligatory nor wrong but permissible.
Within the range of permissible acts is the notion of *supererogatory* or highly altruistic acts. These acts are not required or obligatory; they are acts that exceed what morality requires, going "beyond the call of duty." You may have an obligation to give a donation to help people in dire need, but you are probably not obliged to sell your car, let alone become destitute, in order to help them.

Theories that place the emphasis on the nature of the act are called *deontological* (from the Greek word for duty). These theories hold that there is something inherently right or good about such acts as truth-telling and promise keeping and something inherently wrong or bad about such acts as lying and promise breaking. Illustrations of deontological ethics include the Ten Commandments, found in the Bible (Exodus 20); natural law ethics, such as is found in the Roman Catholic Church; and Immanuel Kant’s theory of the Categorical Imperative, which we discuss below.

**Consequences.** Lying is generally seen as wrong and telling the truth is generally seen as right. But consider this situation. You are hiding in your home an innocent Jewish woman named Sarah, who is fleeing Nazi officers. When the Nazis knock on your door and you open it, they ask if Sarah is in your house. What should you do? Should you tell the truth or lie? Those who say that morality has something to do with consequences of actions would prescribe lying as the morally right thing to do. Those who deny that we should look at the consequences when considering what to do when there is a clear and absolute rule of action will say that we should either keep silent or tell the truth. When no other rule is at stake, of course, the rule-oriented ethicist will allow the foreseeable consequences to determine a course of action. Theories that focus primarily on consequences in determining moral rightness and wrongness are called *teleological* ethical theories (from the Greek *telos*, meaning goal-directed). The most famous of these theories is Utilitarianism, set forth by Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), which enjoins us to do the act that is most likely to have the best consequences: do that act which will produce the greatest happiness for the greatest number. We will discuss Utilitarianism below.

**Character.** Whereas some ethical theories emphasize principles of action in themselves and some emphasize principles involving consequences of action, other theories, such as Aristotle’s ethics, emphasize character or virtue. According to Aristotle, it is most important to develop virtuous character, for if and only if we have good people can we ensure habitual right action. Although it may be helpful to have action-guiding rules, what is vital is the empowerment of character to do good. Many people know that cheating or gossiping or overindulging in food or alcohol is wrong, but they are incapable of doing what is right. The virtuous person may not be consciously following the moral law when he or she does what is right and good. Although the virtues are not central to other types of moral theories, most do view the virtues as important. Most reasonable people, whatever their notions about ethics, would judge that the people who watched as Kitty Genovese was murdered lacked good character. Different moral systems emphasize different virtues and to different degrees.

**Motive.** Finally, virtually all ethical systems, but especially Kant’s system, accept the relevance of *motive*. It is important to the full assessment of any action that the intention of the agent be taken into account. Two acts may be identical, but one be judged morally culpable and the other excusable. Consider John’s pushing Joan off a ledge, causing her to break her leg. In situation (A), he is angry and intends to harm her, but
in situation (B) he sees a knife flying in her direction and intends to save her life. In (A) what he did was clearly wrong, whereas in (B) he did the right thing. On the other hand, two acts may have opposite results but be equally good judged on the basis of intention. For example, two soldiers may try to cross the enemy lines to communicate with an allied force, but one gets captured through no fault of his own and the other succeeds. In a full moral description of any act, motive will be taken into consideration as a relevant factor.

**The Purposes of Morality**

What is the role of morality in human existence? I believe that morality is necessary to stave off social chaos, what Thomas Hobbes called a “state of nature” wherein life becomes “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short,” a “war of all against all,” a lose-lose situation. It is a set of rules that if followed by nearly everyone will promote the flourishing of nearly everyone. These rules restrict our freedom but only to promote greater freedom and well-being. Specifically, morality has these five purposes:

1. To keep society from falling apart
2. To ameliorate human suffering
3. To promote human flourishing
4. To resolve conflicts of interest in just and orderly ways
5. To assign praise and blame, reward and punishment, and guilt

None of these is the sole purpose of morality—but each of them is part of a comprehensive purpose, which enables us to live a good life in a just society. The first purpose, “keeping society from falling apart,” is a necessary but not sufficient condition for a good society, for a tyrant could keep the society together through oppression. Likewise, the second purpose, ameliorating suffering, is a vital component—one of the reasons we cooperate with one another is to come to one another’s aid in time of need—but this is not the sole aim of society or morality. The third goal, promoting human flourishing, signifies enabling people to reach their potential, to live happily; it may be as central to morality as any of the five purposes, but even here, we would not want happiness at any price. Suppose the price we had to pay for our happiness was treating other people unjustly. One thinks of Ursula LeGuin’s short story “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas,” which describes the town Omelas in which the flourishing of the community is dependent on the torturing of a child. People with a sensitive conscience walk away from such “happiness.” We would reject such a social arrangement as morally incomplete—hence the fourth goal, justice. Yet justice isn’t the whole of morality either. We could imagine two different social arrangements, equally fair, but in which one went beyond mere justice and promoted high altruism, thereby making people more fulfilled. Finally, morality has the function of holding people responsible for their actions, of assigning praise and blame in accordance with the springs of our actions.

Imagine what society would be if everyone or nearly everyone did whatever he or she pleased without obeying moral rules. I make a promise to you to help you with your philosophy homework tomorrow if you fix my car today. You believe me so you fix my car, but you are deeply angry when I laugh at you on the morrow when I drive
away to the beach instead of helping you with your homework. Or you loan me money but I run off with it. Or I lie to you or harm you when it is in my interest, or even kill you when I feel the urge.

Parents would abandon children and spouses would betray each other whenever it was convenient. Under such circumstances society would break down. No one would have an incentive to help anyone else because reciprocity (a moral principle) would not be recognized. Great suffering would go largely unameliorated and, certainly, people would not be very happy. We would not flourish or reach our highest potential.

Once while visiting a city in the former Soviet Union, I rented a fifth floor apartment in which the stairwell lacked lighting. It was difficult navigating stairs at night in complete darkness. I inquired as to why there were no lightbulbs in the stairwells, only to be told that the residents stole them, believing that if they did not take them, their neighbors would. Absent a dominant authority, the social contract had been eroded and everyone had to struggle alone in the darkness.

We need moral rules to guide our actions in ways that light up our paths and prevent and reduce suffering; enhance human well-being (and animal well-being?); allow us to resolve our conflicts of interests according to recognizably fair rules; and allow us to assign responsibility for actions, so that we can praise and blame, reward and punish, people according to how their actions reflect moral principles.

Even though these five purposes are related, they are not identical; different moral theories emphasize different purposes and in different ways. Utilitarianism fastens on human flourishing and the amelioration of suffering, whereas contractual systems rooted in rational self-interest accent the role of resolving conflicts of interest. Contractualism, such as set forth by Thomas Hobbes, emphasizes the first (survival purpose) and fourth purpose: to resolve conflicts of interest in just and orderly ways. A complete moral theory would include a place for each of these purposes. Its goal would be to internalize the rules that promote these principles in each person’s life, producing the virtuous person—someone who is “a jewel that shines in [morality’s] own light,” to paraphrase Kant. The goal of morality is to create happy and virtuous people, the kind that create flourishing communities. That’s why it is the most important subject on earth.

In this book we will discuss how and to what extent this classical idea of morality is applicable to environmental concerns. There are some philosophers who believe that this historic pattern is too heavily anthropocentric and atomistic; a biocentric or sentient-based ethic must replace it if we are adequately to account for environmental concerns. Others believe that this classical account is adequate for environmental concerns. We must expand the circle of concern to include animals and our relationship with ecosystems, but we need not change any fundamental principle. Integrity, justice, ameliorating of suffering, and promoting of happiness are eternal principles, but they must be extended to cover animals and our relationship to the environment. Environmentalism raises a higher consciousness, but it is not fundamentally discontinuous with sound classical ethical thinking.

Which of these views of classical ethics is correct will be a major question throughout this work. But there is one basic question to which we must attend before we can have any intelligent discussion of ethics at all—ethical relativism. Are moral principles objectively and universally valid, or are they simply valid relative to culture or individual choice?
Study Questions

1. Illustrate the difference between ethics, law, religion, and etiquette. How are these concepts related? Do you think any one of law, religion, or etiquette is more important than morality in guiding human action? Explain your answer.

2. Discuss the four domains of morality. Which domains are more crucial than others? Or do you think they are all equally important? Explain your answer.

3. What are the purposes of morality? Which ones seem more important than others? Do you agree that these are the central purposes? Are there others.

4. Based on what you know now, do you think that environmental concerns force us to radically revise our understanding of morality, to merely extend it, or neither.

For Further Reading


Notes

1. The term normative means seeking to make certain types of behavior a norm or a standard in society. Webster's Collegiate Dictionary defines it as “of, relating or conforming to, or prescribing norms or standards.”

2. A sanction is a mechanism for social control, used to enforce society's standards. It may consist in rewards or punishment, praise or blame, and approbation or disapprobation.

3. Although Americans pride themselves on tolerance, pluralism, and awareness of other cultures, custom and etiquette can be—even among people from similar backgrounds—a bone of contention. A friend of mine, John, tells of an experience early in his marriage. He and his wife, Gwen, were hosting their first Thanksgiving meal. He had been used to small celebrations with his immediate family, whereas his wife had been used to grand celebrations. He writes, “I had been asked to carve, something I had never done before, but I was willing. I put on an apron, entered the kitchen, and attached the bird with as much artistry as I could muster. And what reward did I get? [My wife] burst into tears. In her family the turkey is brought to the table, laid before the [father], grace is said, and then he carves! ‘So I fail patriarchy,’ I hollered later. ‘What do you expect?’”