



Ethics

What is 'Ethics'?¹

Ethics (from Greek *ethos* 'character' or 'custom') is one of many studies of human conduct (others are anthropology, psychology etc). **Ethics** is concerned with what we ought to do, not what we do. Ethics *prescribes* rather than *describes*. The word **morality** (from Latin, *mores* – habits or traditions) is often used interchangeably with 'ethics.' Ethics is sometimes called **Moral Philosophy**.

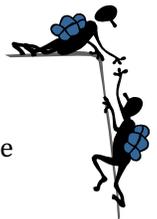
Meta-ethics is the study of why we should be ethical at all. **Normative ethics** is the study of ethical theories. Whether ethics has any meaning is a question for meta-ethics. Whether a particular ethical theory is any good is a question for normative ethics. Normative ethics is sometimes called prescriptive or applied ethics. A set of ethical principles is an **ethical system**.

A theory that upholds an ethical system is an **ethical doctrine**. An ethical system may entail one or more ethical doctrines. Specific systems of applied ethics have emerged during the 20th century to cover particular domains of conduct, such as **business ethics** and **medical ethics**.

What makes an action good or bad? We use the term good in many ways: 'That was a really good meal' or 'I'm feeling good today.' 'Good' in ethics means 'morally good.' How do we determine what is 'morally good?' The answer depends on who is answering. Moral reasoning is not the same for everyone. Moral authority comes from many sources: ourselves, parents, the Bible, Koran and more.

Why do We Need Ethics?

We constantly face ethical decisions. Socrates claimed **the unexamined life is not worth living**. We live in a web of interconnectedness. No action can be viewed in isolation from its effects on others. Not just to those near, but also to those distant. By deciding what to buy, we affect ourselves, the shop we buy from, the prosperity of the people, company and country where it was made. In 21st century it is increasingly apparent that our decisions affect the global climate and the survival of future generations.



Examples of commonplace ethical issues:

- ◆ Consuming products produced in exploitive labour conditions
- ◆ Bullying someone because you are in a bad mood
- ◆ Treating animals badly, e.g. intensive or cruel farming practices
- ◆ Deliberately wasting water when there is a shortage
- ◆ Credit card fraud

Are these ethical issues?

- ◆ Finding a wallet and not trying to return it
- ◆ Receiving too much change at the check-out and not giving it back
- ◆ Not contributing to the needy if we are well-off
- ◆ Not speaking up if we learn of an injustice
- ◆ Not helping someone in need because we do not want to 'be involved'

Is ethics just about what we do? Or is it also about what we *don't do*? Is ethics about how we treat people we know? Or is it about how we treat others we don't know? What is the limit of our ethical consciousness? *For whom and what am I responsible?* What do you think?

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¹ 'Ethics' as used here is singular, as it refers to the discipline of 'Ethics.'