

ETHICS

Introduction

The study of ethics belongs primarily within the discipline of philosophy; in the sub-discipline of 'moral philosophy'. Philosophical study concerns the systematic and rational consideration of human systems of belief. The process of asking and answering questions about belief systems is therefore fundamental to philosophical study. It is not sufficient merely to 'learn' the answers that have been proposed by other philosophers. The branch of philosophy called 'ethics' is concerned with questions concerning how human beings ought to live their lives, and about what is 'right' or 'wrong'.

Meaning of Ethics

Etymologically ethics is derived from Greek word *ethos* which mean conduct/character/custom.

Ethics for Greeks had the content of the character. One is good in his/her character. How one carries out him/herself around.

Ethics therefore is the science of conduct. Philosophers term ethics as a normative science. This is because it is interested in norms. Conduct is a voluntary action which we undertake after making a choice. Meaning that there is freedom and due to this there is responsibility. Responsibility is moral accountability; it brings about blame and condemnation. This is opposed to law.

Ethics is related to law in this sense, what ethics condemns, the law takes over to punish. The meaning of the term conduct can be distinguished from the closely behaviour. Social sciences such as anthropology, psychology and sociology pay much attention to human behaviour. This behaviour is activities which human beings engage in such as reading, writing, going to war etc.

Ethics is also interested in human behaviour but not in all behaviour but in conduct in which human being make choice. When there is coercion, then there is no choice and responsibility is lessened. The term conduct might be called moral behaviour. Moral here does not necessarily imply good behaviour but a behaviour resulting from a moral choice.

Ethics therefore is a branch of philosophy that study the goodness and badness of a human act. It is the study of morals, values, beliefs, norms and principles that direct actions as being right or wrong.

Ethics and morality

The terms ‘ethics’ and ‘morality’ are not always used consistently and precisely in everyday contexts, and their ordinary meanings do not always correspond with philosophers’ use of the terms. **Ethics** is often used in connection with the activities of organisations and with professional codes of conduct: for instance, medical and business ethics, which are often formalised in terms of exhaustive sets of rules or guidelines stating how employees are expected to behave in their workplaces (such as in respect of a duty of care or confidentiality that health-care workers owe to their patients; or the medical ethical principles of beneficence, non-maleficence, respect for autonomy, and justice). **Morality**, on the other hand, is more often used in connection with the ways in which individuals conduct their personal, private lives, often in relation to personal financial probity, lawful conduct and acceptable standards of interpersonal behaviour (including truthfulness, honesty, and sexual propriety).

These ‘everyday’ uses of the terms ‘ethics’ and ‘morality’ are not so much incorrect by philosophical standards, as too limited. The philosopher’s interest in the theoretical study of ethics is with the idea of conduct that is right, fair and just, does not cause harm, and that can be applied to a wide variety of cases. For our purposes, each of the terms ‘ethics’ and ‘morality’ captures the essence of that idea sufficiently well. In what follows, then, it is not really necessary to over-emphasise the distinction between ethics and morality; here, those terms may be used interchangeably to refer to ideas about how humans ought to act.

What is required in ethical thinking?

1. To make decisions based on reason rather than emotions.
2. Decisions should have facts which have evidences.
3. Good ethical thinking should not appeal to what people generally think.
4. Make decisions which are morally right. Do not base on situations or circumstances.

Branches of Ethics

1. Descriptive ethics

This tries to understand and describe “how the world is”.

It does factual investigation of moral standards.

Describes moral praxis (moral opinions, attitudes and actions) up through history and today, i.e. historians, sociologists, psychologists.

2. Normative ethics

This is interested in “how the world should be”

It does the systematic investigation of moral standards (norms and values) with the purpose of clarifying how they are to be understood, justified, interpreted and applied on moral issues this is the interest of philosophers and theologians.

An example

Factual claim: “The Chinese government is allowing its people less freedom of speech than the Norwegian government”.

This claim can be verified through observation.

Ethical claim: “The Chinese government should allow its people more freedom of speech than it currently does”.

This claim cannot be verified through observation. Instead, it must be justified by good moral reasons.

Normative ethics will attempt to answer questions like:

What actions and decisions are right or wrong from an ethical point of view?

What makes an action or a decision morally right or wrong or good or bad?

How should we organise basic social institutions (political, legal economic), and how should such institutions distribute benefits and burdens (rights, duties, opportunities and resources) among affected parties?

Questions of justice (e.g., what is a fair distribution of benefits and burdens in society?)

Political philosophy

Normative ethics is concerned with:

The moral assessments of a person’s character or character traits (e.g., honesty, generosity)

Assessments of motives and intentions behind acts

Assessments of moral and legal responsibility

It therefore focuses explicitly on questions of ‘what is the right thing to do?’ in general. Normative ethics is concerned with questions of what people ought to do, and on how people can decide what the ‘correct’ moral actions to take are.

3. Meta-ethics is the study of ethical terms, statements and judgements.

It analyses the language, concepts and methods of reasoning in ethics. It addresses the meaning of ethical terms such as right, duty, obligation, justification, morality, responsibility.

It is concerned with:

- Moral epistemology (how is moral knowledge possible?)
- Investigates whether morality is subjective or objective, relative or non-relative, and whether it has a rational or an emotional basis.
- Meta-ethics focuses on the meaning of ethical terms themselves (for instance, ‘what is goodness?’), and on questions of how ethical knowledge is obtained (for instance, ‘how can I distinguish what is good from what is bad?’), rather than on the more applied question of ‘what should I do in a particular situation?’ Meta-ethics is therefore concerned with the nature of ethical properties, statements, attitudes and judgments. Meta-ethics examines such themes as what moral questions mean, and on what basis people can know what is ‘true’ or ‘false’.

4. Applied ethics is a part of normative ethics that focus on particular fields

It is interested in the philosophical examination, from a moral standpoint, of particular issues in private and public life that are matters of moral judgment.

It is concerned with how people can achieve moral outcomes in specific situations. Therefore, it is concerned with the philosophical examination of particular and often complex issues that involve moral judgments. Areas such as bioethics, environmental ethics, development ethics and business/corporate ethics, animal ethics, Intergenerational ethics, Climate ethics, and Computer ethics may be regarded as areas of applied ethics. The distinction between normative and applied ethics, however, is becoming increasingly blurred.

Significance of ethics to life

1. Ethical values serve as a guiding force for individuals to make decisions.
2. Ethics help individuals to understand the consequences of their actions.
3. It provides a framework for ethical decision-making.
4. Significance of ethics extends across all aspects of life, especially in guiding people's conduct.
5. It guides individuals in navigating complex situations and dilemmas of life.
6. It assists in ensuring that all choices are aligned with moral principles.
7. Helps in building strong and healthy relationships based on mutual respect and trust.