

# A Basic Introduction to Frameworks for Ethical Decision Making

**Moral judgments and moral concerns are unavoidable.** In fact, non-action, or trying to remain neutral is also a moral judgment. Our concern with morality centers around questions of how we ought to live -- what kind of actions in our life are right or wrong to take?

Think of that question as the framework for the study of ethics and morals. There are other related issues that fall also within the purview of our discussion: what makes a good person? what virtues or traits define a person of good moral character? how should we act in particular situations? what are the grounds for moral or ethical standards? If you think back to Classical Rhetoric you'll remember that such concerns about character, virtues, and the good life were central to Greeks and Romans.

Before going further we should make a simple distinction between ethics and morals. Most often these terms are used interchangeably in popular culture. However, it might help us to think about them thusly: **1) Morality refers to a set of umbrella or overarching beliefs that tells us how to live a good life. Philosophers also refer to morals as conduct in place (situation), 2) ethics refers to a secondary reflection on the efficacy, appropriateness, and adequacy of our moral beliefs.** Simply put, morality refers to our conduct or standards of conduct, and ethics refers to the study of those standards of conduct. The reason we spend so much time on issues of ethics is to develop better discernment about morality, to improve our moral understanding, and thus our life (this kind of inquiry also leads us to reflect on what will harm our moral life).

The study of ethics is usually divided into three main areas:

1. **Descriptive Ethics:** description of our moral conduct.
2. **Normative Ethics:** establishment of norms, expectations, and systems to guide our moral conduct. Think of Hippocrates' oath, "primum non nocere" (first, do no harm). How do we arrive at moral standards that govern our behavior? What systems do we rely upon? The Golden Rule is a great example of a normative belief. Traditionally you will read about three main strategies or approaches: 1) **virtue ethics**, the development of good virtue, or character that helps us lead a good life, 2) **consequentialist ethics** helps us understand moral behavior by examining the consequences (outcomes) of our actions. If the consequences of my actions are good, beneficial, or more favorable than not, then my actions are morally appropriate. Three main subdivisions come up: *ethical egoism* (an action is morally right if the outcomes are better than not for the person performing the action) *ethical altruism* (an action is morally right if the outcomes are better than not for everyone else except the agent), and *utilitarianism* (an action is morally right if the outcomes are better than not for everyone. 3) **duty-based ethics, also called deontological ethics**, base morality in foundational principles, and/or obligations. Deontological ethics are often also called non-consequentialist because they do not depend on the consequences of the action undertaken (again, they are based on duty, obligation, foundational principles that show us the way).
3. **Metaethics:** a philosophical formal study of the whole project of ethics, including meaning and origin of ethical concepts and thinking. Some central questions: does morality exist independently of humans? What is the basis for moral judgments? Here we can study egoism vs altruism, differences in male and female morality, emotion vs. reason, and so forth.

As it is to be expected, there is no one single perspective that provides the answers to the questions we pose about morality and ethics. Some scholars see morality and ethics from the point of view of virtue or character. Others see morality as a universal law that we must follow (often contrasted with ethics as situational). Buddhist ethics, for instance, start with acceptance of a common situation of suffering for all beings that requires compassion as the central value. The Golden Rule is encapsulated in the phrase: do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

Moreover, there are many perspectives on how to judge or evaluate moral and ethical decisions. For example some people render moral and ethical decisions based on the consequences of actions. Others see right conduct and duty regardless of situation as taking precedence over outcomes or goals. You're probably familiar with the perspective

that holds that there is a rational, universal and correct moral standard for all, always, everywhere. Still others consider decisions that increase pleasure as the norm, while some folks think actions that maximize the greater good for all are best.

Interesting no? Quite so. But what about religion? Most people don't make a distinction between religion and ethics (or morality). But, as you will read in the **Ethics Glossary** below, "Theists have no special insight into ethics over atheists. Correct ethical answers are those with the best reasons." In other words, religion does not necessarily provide you with an advantage in terms of discerning or deciding what is ethically or morally correct. It might very well do the opposite (witness 9/11 or the burning of "witches"). What religion does is provide you with a specific standpoint and set of guidelines from which you can or are expected to decide if you are a believer. But you don't necessarily need religion in order to lead a moral life.

So, with so much uncertainty, how can we arrive at good moral judgments? **First, remember that uncertainty does not mean you cannot act ethically.** Moreover, we should not allow our philosophical pondering to paralyze us about making sound moral judgments based on our values and good critical thinking. Consider ethics as an affirmation of personal responsibility for your life and the consequences of your actions (for all living beings, for the environment, etc.). Seek to understand on what basis moral actions are undertaken. Here are a few common understandings:

- **Religious/Divinely Inspired:** God/Allah/My Deity says... or, do as the scriptures command (the Bible, the Koran, etc. says).
- **Character/Virtue:** A good person has certain specific characteristics and acts in particular ways.
- **Duty/Conduct:** You must do the right thing always.
- **Utilitarian:** What will make the world a better place? What maximizes benefits for all?
- **Justice:** What is fair? The just are only just until they commit an injustice...
- **Conscience:** What does your conscience tell you?
- **Egoism:** Look out for #1.
- **Rights/Respect:** Treat others as you would want to be treated. People have certain rights.

Moreover, when confronted with particular situations you might want to at least consider some basic framework for discerning what the issues are, what facts are salient, what alternative courses of actions exist and what are their potential consequences. At the very least we should consider the following sets of questions (the source for this set of questions is the **Markkula Center for Applied Ethics at Santa Clara University**

<http://www.scu.edu/ethics/practicing/decision/framework.html>):

#### *Recognize a Moral Issue*

- Is there something wrong personally, interpersonally, or socially? Is there conflict that could be damaging to people? to animals or the environment? to institutions? to society?
- Does the issue go deeper than legal or institutional concerns? What does it do to people as persons who have dignity, rights, and hopes for a better life together?

#### *Get The Facts*

- What are the relevant facts of the case?
- What individuals and groups have an important stake in the outcome?
- What is at stake for each? Do some have a greater stake because they have a special need (e.g., those who are poor or excluded) or because we have special obligations to them? Are there other important stakeholders in addition to those directly involved?
- What are the options for acting? Have all the relevant persons and groups been consulted? If you showed your list of options to someone you respect, what would that person say?

#### *Evaluate The Alternative Actions From Various Moral Perspectives*

- Which option will produce the most good and do the least harm ?
- Which option respects the rights and dignity of all stakeholders? Even if not everyone gets all they want, will everyone still be treated fairly ?

- Which option would promote the common good and help all participate more fully in the goods we share as a society, as a community, as a company, as a family?
- Which option would enable the deepening or development of those virtues or character traits that we value as individuals? as a profession? as a society?

### *Make A Decision*

After taking into account the two questions below

- Considering these perspectives, which of the options is the right thing to do?
- If you told someone you respect why you chose this option, what would that person say?

### *Act, Then Reflect On The Decision Later*

- How did it turn out for all concerned?
- If you had to do it over again, what, if anything, would you do differently?

This last point on reflection is critical. As our conversation regarding the dropping of the atomic bomb in Hiroshima and Nagasaki shows us, ethical reflection requires courage. We must face the consequences of our actions honestly.

### **Ethical Traps**

Finally, beware of these ethical traps

1. **False Necessity Trap:** Fooling ourselves into thinking that we are doing what we must do, that we have no other choice.
2. **Relative Filth:** Our actions look good when compared against the behavior of others. So, I only took three cookies, other people took the whole jar. The boss takes most afternoons off to play golf so what's a little fudging of the numbers in my expense account?
3. **Rationalization:** Trying to explain away unethical actions by finding excuses for them.
4. **Self-Deception:** Lying to ourselves. What's worse, believing those lies. For instance, I know I did much better in that speech than the teacher thinks. I might never have taken a class in public speaking but I know I'm great at it. It's in my personality.
5. **The Ends Justify the Means:** Self-explanatory. Beware of unethical means to achieve desired goals. Chances are you will engage in self-deception, rationalization, and the other traps listed here in order to explain away unethical actions.

*(These ethical traps were adapted from: Mary Ellen Guffey, Business Communication: Process and Product, 3rd ed. (South-Western College Publishing, 2000))*

# Ethics Glossary

Here's an abbreviated but rather helpful ethics glossary that I found at the [Bentley College Philosophy Resources site](#).

**Categorical Imperative** is Immanuel Kant's (1724-1804) famous term for an unconditional moral command in contrast to a conditional one that depends on an "if." This categorical duty refers to what ought to be and was expressed by Kant in three different but interrelated ways. First, the Principle of Universality states: "Act only on that maxim (rule) whereby thou canst at the same time will that it should become a universal law." The second is the Principle of Treating Humanity as Ends in Themselves: "So act as to treat humanity, whether in thine own person or in that of any other, in every case as an end withal, never as means only." The third formulation of the categorical imperative is the Principle of Moral Autonomy: Kant said that although a rational person of good will "is only under obligation to act in conformity with his own will," it is "a will which by the purpose of nature prescribes universal laws."

**Deontological Ethics**, from the Greek "deon" meaning duty, applies to a family of ethical theories that give moral priority to right means of conduct over good goals or consequences. Some actions, policies or traits are inherently right or wrong without regard to their consequences for human welfare. A good end does not justify a wrong means. Contrasted with Teleological Ethics (consequentialism), this duty-based type of moral reasoning is often referred to as "Non-consequentialism."

**Descriptive Ethics** is an impartial or neutral description of the values and moral conduct practiced by individuals, groups or societies. As a scientific description of what is, it has nothing to do with what ought to be, that is, with Normative Ethics.

**Duty** is an obligation to act in a certain manner for moral reasons.

**Ethical Objectivism** (sometimes called Absolutism) is the view of such thinkers as Aristotle, Kant and utilitarians such as Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill who believe there is a rationally correct moral standard that holds for everyone, everywhere, every time. Ethical Relativism is the denial of ethical objectivism.

**Ethical Egoism** is a teleological cost-benefit analysis in which one maximizes the expected net (good minus bad) long-range consequences only for one's own happiness (self-interest or well being) or that of one's reference group such as a family or corporation. This theory is also called Enlightened Self-interest or Prudentialism.

**Ethical Relativism** is the view that moral behavior varies among individuals, groups and cultures (cultural relativism). Since there is no universal standard of morality, there is no rational way to decide who is correct. Ethical Objectivism is the denial of ethical relativism.

**Ethics**, derived from the Greek "ethos" meaning "way of life," is a branch of philosophy that studies and recommends the fundamental principles and basic concepts of what is considered morally good and bad, right and wrong in human conduct. Some would also include in ethics how we ought to interact with nature and animals. Different areas of ethics such as business, law, or medicine are simply ethics associated with these specific kinds of activity.

**Golden Rule** is the biblical injunction to do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Some version of the golden rule is found in many world religions.

**Good** is defined in various ways, but usually includes whatever is pleasurable, desirable, has worth, value, or satisfies some interest, preference, or need. Aristotle distinguished between intrinsic and extrinsic goods. Intrinsic goods are those valued for themselves alone such as health and happiness. Extrinsic or instrumental goods are desirable for the sake of something else, such as money or tools.

**Hedonism** is the theory that asserts that pleasure (happiness) is the highest good (summon bonum). Psychological Hedonism supports the descriptive thesis that everyone always, as a matter of fact, seeks only one's own pleasure. **Ethical Hedonism** is a normative theory that says everyone ought always to seek only one's own pleasure.

**Justice** is divided into different kinds. Aristotle said it basically means to give people what is due them. What is due them is the debatable issue. Various areas of what is due people can be divided into the following four kinds of justice. First, "**Substantive Justice**" calls for as much equal and compatible freedom as possible, such as those freedoms (rights) essential for protecting and developing one's potentialities and destiny. Second, "**Procedural Justice**" demands impartial and consistent treatment, equal opportunity and fair rules with due process. Next, "**Distributive Justice**" refers to fairness in dispensing society's benefits and burdens in a manner that provides for dignity and subsistence for all citizens. Finally, "**Compensatory Justice**" involves reparations for previous wrongs.

**Moral Point of View** means that in arriving at moral decisions one is willing, for example, to use reason in the careful pursuit of relevant facts and principles and to treat all persons affected with respect as having special dignity and worth.

**Morality**, or morals, refers to observable conduct and behavior patterns actually practiced in a society. Many people speak of morals and ethics interchangeably. When a difference is made by philosophers, morality and morals refer to conduct in place, while terms such as ethical and ethics refer to the study of moral conduct or to a normative system of ideal conduct.

**Normative Ethics**, as contrasted with **Descriptive Ethics**, recommends and defends norms, principles or standards that ought to be followed for the best moral way to live.

**Obligation** is something that one ought to do or not do for moral reasons such as keeping just laws, promises, or respecting the rights of others.

**Psychological Egoism** is a descriptive theory that maintains that as a matter of fact human beings are only capable of acting for their own self-interest. Since everyone is innately selfish, it is humanly impossible to care about anyone except oneself. So-called benevolent acts are only disguised forms of self-love, such as seeking power, recognition, or ways of feeling good about one's self.

**Religion and Ethics** are often assumed to be inseparable. In one of Plato's dialogues, the *Euthyphro*, Socrates asks a question that gives two opposing views of the relation between religion and ethics: "Is conduct right because the gods command it (Theory A), or do the gods command it because it is right (Theory B)?" Theory A may be called the "Divine Command Theory." Whatever God commands or forbids is morally right simply because God wills it. In contrast, Theory B is often referred to as the "Theory of Natural Law." Something is not right or wrong just because God says so. God says so because it is part of the natural order and purpose of things which human reason can discover. **Theists have no special insight into ethics over atheists. Correct ethical answers are those with the best reasons.**

**Responsibility** is the obligation to do what is morally right and to be accountable for one's actions.

**Rights** pertain to things for which a person has a just claim, an entitlement of individuals which society should honor and protect.

**Social Contract Theory** of ethics is an attempt to justify the legitimacy of governments and their legal and moral restrictions. It is reasonable to assume that people would agree, if asked, to give up some of their individual freedom for the collective long-term security of an orderly government. This agreement is called a "Social Contract." The moral assumption is that if you agree to live in a society and accept its benefits, you also implicitly agree and are morally bound to abide by its just laws. Contractarian theorists include Hobbes, Rousseau, Locke, and Rawls.

**Teleological Ethics**, from the Greek "telos" means goal, end or purpose, gives moral priority to good ends and consequences of human conduct over the means or process by which they are obtained. No behavior is inherently right or wrong. Right means are determined solely by their consequences. Contrasted with Deontological Ethics

(non-consequentialism), the test of all moral laws, duties and rights depends solely on their ability to achieve good ends. Ethics is a kind of moral cost/benefit analysis to discover whatever option maximizes the net expectable good (good minus bad). **Contemporary writers call this type of moral reasoning "Consequentialism."**

**Utilitarianism**, a teleological ethical theory that holds that the principle of utility, the greatest good for the greatest number and/or for all concerned, is the one supreme moral principle that ought to be applied to the consequences of all our ethical decisions. The "Good" is defined differently by utilitarians. Act and Rule Utilitarianism are two versions that distinguish between whether the principle of utility should be applied to acts or rules.

**Value** is whatever has worth or is considered desirable. It is what we prize, esteem, take an interest in or attempt to acquire.

**Virtues** are predispositions, tendencies, motives, sentiments or habitual attitudes to act in specific moral ways. Kant defines virtues as "duties firmly settled in the character." For example, four classic Greek virtues include wisdom, courage, self-control, and justice. Biblical virtues include faith, hope, and love. The emphasis on virtues supplements rule-centered ethics by highlighting the importance of motives and personal character.