

ETHICS *overview*

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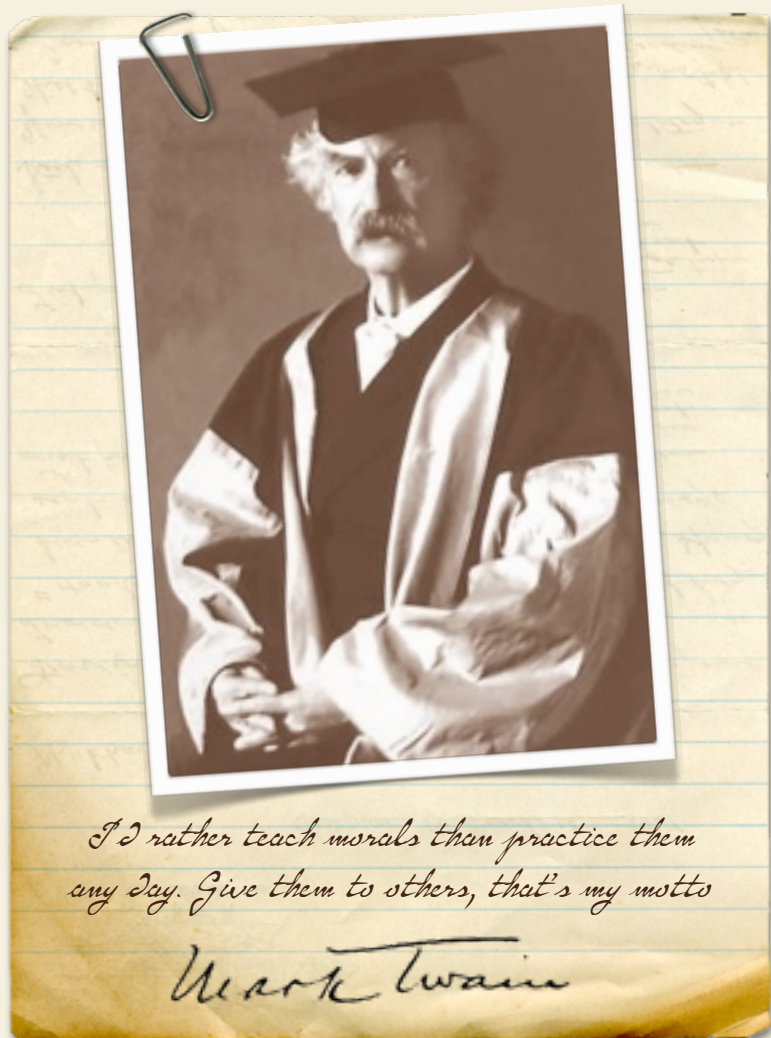
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Ethics is a general term for what is often described as the “science of morality.”

- In philosophy, ethical behavior is that which is “good.”
- The Western tradition of ethics is sometimes called [moral philosophy](#).
- This is one of the three major branches of philosophy, alongside metaphysics (a branch of philosophy concerned with giving a general and fundamental account of the way the world is.) and epistemology (The study of what is meant by “knowledge”).

“Always do right.
That will gratify some
of the people, and
astonish the rest.”
—Mark Twain



Ethics can be divided into several categories

DESCRIPTIVE ETHICS

Simply involves describing how people behave and/or what sorts of moral standards they claim to follow.

Descriptive ethics will include research from the fields of anthropology, psychology, sociology and history in order to determine what people do or have believed about moral norms.

Descriptive ethics is sometimes referred to as comparative ethics because so much activity can involve comparing ethical systems:

- comparing the ethics of the past to the present,
- comparing the ethics of one society to another
- and comparing the ethics which people claim to follow with the actual rules of conduct which do describe their actions.

Descriptive ethics asks two basic questions:

- What do people claim as their moral norms?
- How do people actually behave when it comes to moral problems?



METAETHICS

Investigates where our ethical principles come from, and what they mean.

- Are they merely social inventions?
- Do they involve more than expressions of our individual emotions?

It is a philosophical study of

- the meaning, nature and methodology of moral judgments and terms,
- relations between moral concepts,
- the correct ways of arguing about moral issues, similarities and differences between various normative systems like morality, religion, law, etiquette, aesthetics, the judgments of taste, etc.

NORMATIVE ETHICS

Takes on the task of arriving at moral standards that regulate right and wrong conduct.

This may involve articulating the good habits that we should acquire, the duties that we should follow, or the consequences of our behavior on others.

Normative ethics is concerned with classifying actions as right and wrong without bias, as opposed to applied ethics.

APPLIED ETHICS

Involves examining specific controversial issues, such as abortion, infanticide, animal rights, environmental concerns, homosexuality, capital punishment, or nuclear war.

By using the conceptual tools of metaethics and normative ethics, discussions in applied ethics try to resolve these controversial issues.

The lines of distinction between metaethics, normative ethics, and applied ethics are often blurry.

For example, the issue of abortion is an applied ethical topic since it involves a specific type of controversial behavior.

But it also depends on more general normative principles, such as the right of self-rule and the right to life, which are litmus tests for determining the morality of that procedure.

The issue also rests on meta-ethical issues such as, "where do rights come from?" and "what kind of beings have rights?"



Approaches to Ethics

ON WHAT BASIS DO WE MAKE MORAL DECISIONS?

- [Divine Command Theories](#)
- Ethics of [Conscience](#)
- Ethical Egoism
- The Ethics of Duty
- The Ethics of Respect
- The Ethics of Rights
- Utilitarianism
- The Ethics of Justice
- Virtue Ethics

DIVINE COMMAND THEORIES

- Being good is equivalent to doing whatever the Bible—or the Qur'an or some other sacred text or source of revelation—tells you to do.
- “What is right” equals “What God tells me to do.”

THE ETHICS OF CONSCIENCE

- Conscience tells us what is right or wrong
- Often has a religious source
- May be founded in a notion of human nature
- Is often negative in character, telling us what is not right
- Sometimes takes the form of an insect.

ETHICAL EGOISM

- Says the only person to look out for is yourself

- Exemplified Ayn Rand's “The Ethics of Selfishness”
- Well known for her novels, especially *Atlas Shrugged*

THE ETHICS OF DUTY

Begins with the conviction that ethics is about doing what is right, about doing your duty.

Duty may be determined by:

- Reason
 - Kant: Do what any rational agent should do
- Professional role
 - A physician's duty to care for the sick

- Social role
 - A parent's duty to care for his or her children

THE ETHICS OF RESPECT

- Human interactions should be governed by rules of respect
- What counts as respect can vary from one culture to another
- What is it that merits respect?

THE ETHICS OF RIGHTS

- The most influential moral notion of the past two centuries
- Established minimal conditions of human decency

UTILITARIANISM

- Seeks to reduce suffering and increase pleasure or happiness
- Demands a high degree of self-sacrifice—we must consider the consequences for everyone.
- Utilitarians claim the purpose of morality is to make the world a better place.

THE ETHICS OF JUSTICE

- Begins early in the family with fairness to all family members
- What is fair for one should be fair for all.
- Treating people equally may not mean treating them the same.



Approaches to Ethics II

THE ETHICS OF CHARACTER

- Seeks to develop individual character
- Assumes good persons will make good decisions
- Developed by Plato and Aristotle
- Provides a way of integrating all the theories

NORMATIVE PRINCIPLES IN APPLIED ETHICS

The following principles are the ones most commonly appealed to in applied ethical discussions:

- Personal benefit: acknowledge the extent to which an action produces beneficial consequences for the individual in question.
- Social benefit: acknowledge the extent to which an action produces beneficial consequences for society.
- Principle of benevolence: help those in need.
- Principle of paternalism: assist others in pursuing their best interests when they cannot do so themselves.
- Principle of harm: do not harm others.
- Principle of honesty: do not deceive others.
- Principle of lawfulness: do not violate the law.

- Principle of autonomy: acknowledge a person's freedom over his/her actions or physical body.
- Principle of justice: acknowledge a person's right to due process, fair compensation for harm done, and fair distribution of benefits.
- Rights: acknowledge a person's rights to life, information, privacy, free expression, and safety.

These principles represent a spectrum of traditional normative principles and are derived from both consequentialist and duty-based approaches.

The first two principles, personal benefit and social benefit, are consequentialist since they appeal to the consequences of an action as it affects the individual or society.

The remaining principles are duty-based. The principles of benevolence, paternalism, harm, honesty, and lawfulness are based on duties we have toward others.

The principles of autonomy, justice, and the various rights are based on moral rights.

