

Introduction to Ethics

Introduction to Ethics – Study Notes

1. What Is Ethics?

Aspect	Description
Definition	The systematic study of what is right and wrong, good and bad, in human conduct.
Purpose	Provides a framework for evaluating actions, decisions, and policies; guides personal behavior and social institutions.
Scope	Individual morality, professional conduct, public policy, global issues (e.g., climate justice).

2. Major Branches of Ethics

Branch	Focus	Key Questions
Normative Ethics	How we <i>should</i> act; establishes moral standards.	What principles determine right?handed actions?
Meta?Ethics	Nature of moral language and concepts.	Are moral claims objective or subjective? What does “good” mean?
Applied Ethics	Practical application of ethical theory to concrete problems.	How should we handle medical consent, AI bias, or environmental policy?
Descriptive Ethics	Empirical study of people’s moral beliefs and practices.	What moral values do different cultures actually hold?

3. Classic Ethical Theories

Theory	Core Idea	Strengths	Common Criticisms
Utilitarianism (Bentham, Mill)	Maximize overall happiness or utility.	Simple, outcome?oriented, impartial.	Hard to measure happiness; can justify harmful means.
Deontology (Kant)	Duty?based; actions are right if they follow universal moral rules.	Respects individual rights; emphasizes intention.	Rigid; may produce conflicting duties.

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Virtue Ethics (Aristotle)	Focus on character and flourishing (eudaimonia).	Emphasizes moral development; contextual sensitivity.	Lacks clear decision? procedure; depends on cultural notions of virtue.
Contractualism (Rawls, Scanlon)	Moral principles arise from a fair agreement among rational agents.	Highlights justice and reciprocity.	Abstract; may ignore consequences.
Care Ethics (Gilligan)	Moral reasoning rooted in relationships, empathy, and responsibility.	Highlights interdependence; counters overly abstract theories.	May struggle with impartiality in larger social contexts.

4. Key Concepts & Vocabulary

Term	Meaning
Moral Relativism	The view that moral judgments are true or false only relative to a cultural or individual standpoint.
Moral Absolutism	The belief that some moral principles are universally binding, regardless of context.
Consequentialism	Ethical theories that judge actions by their outcomes (e.g., utilitarianism).
Non? consequentialism	Theories that evaluate actions based on intrinsic properties (e.g., deontology).
Autonomy	Respect for individuals' capacity to make informed, self?directed choices.
Beneficence	The duty to promote the well?being of others.
Non?maleficence	The obligation to avoid causing harm.
Justice	Fair distribution of benefits, burdens, and rights.
Rights	Entitlements that protect individuals against infringement.

5. The Ethical Decision?Making Process

1. **Identify the Problem** – Clarify the moral issue and the stakeholders involved.
2. **Gather Relevant Facts** – Obtain accurate information about the situation.
3. **Determine Applicable Principles** – Refer to ethical theories, professional codes, or laws