

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 conduct, professional practice, public policy, and global issues.

2. Major Branches of Ethics

Branch	Focus	Key Questions
Normative Ethics	How we <i>should</i> act; develops moral standards.	What actions are morally right? What duties do we have?
Meta-Ethics	Nature of moral language and reasoning.	What does “good” mean? Are moral truths objective or subjective?
Applied Ethics	Practical application of moral principles.	How do we resolve ethical dilemmas in medicine, business, environment, etc.?
Descriptive (or Comparative) Ethics	Empirical study of moral beliefs across cultures.	How do different societies conceive of right and wrong?

3. Classic Ethical Theories

Theory	Core Idea	Strengths	Common Criticisms
Consequentialism (e.g., Utilitarianism)	Moral value of an action = its outcomes.	Simple decision rule; emphasizes welfare.	May justify harmful means; difficult to predict all consequences.
Deontology (Kantian)	Actions are right if they follow universal moral rules.	Respects individual rights; clear duties.	Can be rigid; conflicts between duties are problematic.

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Theory	Core Idea	Strengths	Common Criticisms
Virtue Ethics (Aristotelian)	Moral life is about developing good character traits.	Focuses on personal growth; contextual sensitivity.	Lacks concrete decision? procedures; cultural variation in virtues.
Care Ethics	Moral reasoning rooted in relationships and empathy.	Highlights interdependence; values emotional insight.	May struggle with impartiality; less developed formal structure.
Contractualism	Morality arises from mutually agreed principles.	Emphasizes fairness and reciprocity.	Requires agreement on “reasonable” persons; may ignore consequences.

4. Fundamental Moral Concepts

Concept	Explanation
Duty	Obligation to act (or refrain) based on moral law or rule.
Rights	Claims or entitlements individuals possess, often protected by law.
Justice	Fair distribution of benefits and burdens; includes distributive, procedural, and restorative dimensions.
Beneficence	Actively promoting the well?being of others.
Non?maleficence	Avoiding harm; “do no harm.”
Autonomy	Respect for individuals’ capacity to make informed choices.
Utility	Maximizing overall happiness or welfare (central to utilitarianism).

5. Ethical Decision?Making Framework (Step?by?Step)

1. **Identify the Facts** – Gather all relevant information about the situation.
2. **Recognize the Ethical Issue** – Pinpoint the moral conflict or dilemma.
3. **Determine the Stakeholders** – List who will be affected and how.
4. **Apply Ethical Principles** – Use one or more of the major theories or concepts (e.g., respect for autonomy, beneficence).

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5. **Explore Alternatives** – Generate possible courses of action and evaluate their consequences.
6. **Make a Decision** – Choose the option that best aligns with the chosen ethical framework.

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