

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, and how people ought to act.
Purpose	Provides a framework for evaluating actions, policies, and character; guides personal conduct and social institutions.
Scope	Individual behavior, professional practice, public policy, global issues (e.g., climate justice).
Key Question	<i>What should I do?</i> (normative) vs. <i>What do people actually do?</i> (descriptive).

2. Major Branches of Ethics

Branch	Focus	Typical Questions
Meta-ethics	Nature of moral language and properties	Are moral statements truth-apt? What is the meaning of “good”?
Normative ethics	Principles that determine right action	Which moral theories best justify actions?
Applied ethics	Practical application of moral principles	How should we handle bioethical dilemmas, AI, business conduct?
Descriptive ethics	Empirical study of moral beliefs	How do cultures differ in moral judgments?

3. Core Moral Theories (Normative Ethics)

Theory	Central Idea	Strengths	Common Criticisms
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Consequentialism (e.g., Utilitarianism)	Morality judged by outcomes; maximize overall good.	Clear decision rule; aligns with common intuition about results.	May sacrifice individual rights; hard to predict consequences.
Deontology (Kantian)	Duties and rules determine rightness; act according to universalizable maxims.	Respects autonomy and rights; provides firm moral boundaries.	Can be rigid; conflicts between duties are unresolved.
Virtue Ethics (Aristotelian)	Focus on character traits; aim for eudaimonia (flourishing).	Emphasizes moral development; context? sensitive.	Lacks concrete action? guidance; depends on cultural notions of "virtue."
Care Ethics	Moral significance of relationships and empathy.	Highlights interdependence; addresses gender bias in traditional theories.	May be seen as too particularistic; less clear universal principles.
Contractarianism	Morality arises from mutually beneficial agreements (social contract).	Explains basis of law and cooperation.	Assumes rational agreement; may ignore power imbalances.

4. Fundamental Ethical Concepts

Concept	Explanation
Moral Right vs. Moral Good	<i>Right</i> concerns duties/obligations; <i>good</i> concerns overall value or happiness.
Autonomy	Respect for individuals' capacity to make informed choices.
Beneficence	Actively promoting others' welfare.
Non-maleficence	Avoiding harm (the "do no harm" principle).
Justice	Fair distribution of benefits and burdens; includes equality, equity, and rights.
Rights	Claims or entitlements individuals possess (e.g., freedom of speech).
Moral Responsibility	Accountability for actions and their consequences.

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5. Ethical Decision-Making Framework

1. **Identify the problem** – Clarify the moral issue and stakeholders.
2. **Gather relevant facts** – Distinguish facts from values or assumptions.
3. **Determine applicable principles** – Choose one or more ethical theories or codes (e.g., professional codes).
4. **Consider alternatives** –