**Ethics** is two things. First, ethics refers to well-founded standards of right and wrong that prescribe what humans ought to do, usually in terms of rights, obligations, benefits to society, fairness, or specific virtues. Ethics, for example, refers to those standards that impose the reasonable obligations to refrain from rape, stealing, murder, assault, slander, and fraud. Ethical standards also include those that enjoin virtues of honesty, compassion, and loyalty. And, ethical standards include standards relating to rights, such as the right to life, the right to freedom from injury, and the right to privacy. Such standards are adequate standards of ethics because they are supported by consistent and well-founded reasons.

Secondly, ethics refers to the study and development of one's ethical standards. As mentioned above, feelings, laws, and social norms can deviate from what is ethical. So it is necessary to constantly examine one's standards to ensure that they are reasonable and well-founded. Ethics also means, then, the continuous effort of studying our own moral beliefs and our moral conduct, and striving to ensure that we, and the institutions we help to shape, live up to standards that are reasonable and solidly-based.

## Virtue ethics is arguably the oldest ethical theory in the world, with origins in Ancient Greece.

It defines good actions as ones that display embody virtuous character traits, like courage, loyalty, or wisdom. A virtue itself is a disposition to act, think and feel in certain ways. Bad actions display the opposite and are informed by vices, such as cowardice, treachery, and ignorance.

For [Aristotle](https://ethics.org.au/big-thinker-aristotle/), ethics was a key element of human flourishing because it taught people how to differentiate between virtues and vices. By encouraging examination, more people could live a life dedicated to developing virtues.

It’s one thing to know what’s right, but it’s another to actually do it. How did Aristotle advise us to live our virtues?

By acting as though we already have them.

### Excellence as habit

Aristotle explained that both virtues and vices are acquired by repetition. If we routinely overindulge a sweet tooth, we develop a vice — gluttony. If we repeatedly allow others to serve themselves dinner before us, we develop a virtue – selflessness.

Virtue ethics suggests treating our character as a lifelong project, one that has the capacity to truly change who we are. The goal is not to form virtues that mean we act ethically without thinking, but to form virtues that help us see the world clearly and make better judgments as a result.

In a pinch, remember: vices distort, virtues examine.

A quote most of the internet attributes to Aristotle succinctly reads: “We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit”.

Though he didn’t actually say this, it’s a good indication of what virtue ethics stands for. We can thank American philosopher, Will Durant, for the neat summary.

Utilitarianism is a prominent perspective on ethics, one that is well aligned with economics and the free-market outlook that has come to dominate much current thinking about business, management, and economics. Jeremy Bentham is often considered the founder of utilitarianism, though John Stuart Mill (who wrote On Liberty and Utilitarianism) and others promoted it as a guide to what is good. Utilitarianism emphasizes not rules but results. An action (or set of actions) is generally deemed good or right if it maximizes happiness or pleasure throughout society. Originally intended as a guide for legislators charged with seeking the greatest good for society, the utilitarian outlook may also be practiced individually and by corporations.

the utilitarian principle holds that an action is right if and only if the sum of utilities produced by that action is greater than the sum of utilities from any other possible act.

1. Failing to come up with lots of options that seem reasonable and then choosing the one that has the greatest benefit for the greatest number. Often, a decision maker seizes on one or two alternatives without thinking carefully about other courses of action. If the alternative does more good than harm, the decision maker assumes it’s ethically okay.
2. Assuming that the greatest good for you or your company is in fact the greatest good for all—that is, looking at situations subjectively or with your own interests primarily in mind.
3. Underestimating the costs of a certain decision to you or your company. The now-classic Ford Pinto case demonstrates how Ford Motor Company executives drastically underestimated the legal costs of not correcting a feature on their Pinto models that they knew could cause death or injury. General Motors was often taken to task by juries that came to understand that the company would not recall or repair known and dangerous defects because it seemed more profitable not to. In 2010, Toyota learned the same lesson.
4. Underestimating the cost or harm of a certain decision to someone else or some other group of people.
5. Favoring short-term benefits, even though the long-term costs are greater.
6. Assuming that all values can be reduced to money. In comparing the risks to human health or safety against, say, the risks of job or profit losses, cost-benefit analyses will often try to compare apples to oranges and put arbitrary numerical values on human health and safety.

**Rules and Duty: Deontology Deontology is an ethical theory that says actions are good or bad according to a clear set of rules.** From an ethical perspective, personhood creates a range of rights and obligations because every person has inherent dignity – something that is fundamental to and is held in equal measure by each and every person.

## Deontologists require us to follow universal rules we give to ourselves. These rules must be in accordance with reason – in particular, they must be logically consistent and not give rise to contradictions. It’s worth mentioning that deontology is often seen as being strongly opposed to [consequentialism](http://www.ethics.org.au/on-ethics/blog/february-2016/ethics-explainer-consequentialism). This is because in emphasising the intention to act in accordance with our duties, deontology believes the consequences of our actions have no ethical relevance at all – a similar sentiment to that captured in the phrase “Let justice be done, though the heavens may fall”. The appeal of deontology lies in its consistency. By applying ethical duties to all people in all situations the theory is readily applied to most practical situations. By focussing on a person’s intentions, it also places ethics entirely within our control – we can’t always control or predict the outcomes of our actions, but we are in complete control of our intentions. Others criticise deontology for being inflexible. By ignoring what’s at stake in terms of consequences, some say it misses a serious element of ethical decision-making. De-emphasising consequences has other implications too – can it make us guilty of ‘crimes of omission’? Kant, for example, argued it would be unethical to lie about the location of our friend, even to a person trying to murder them! For many, this seems intuitively false.

Its name comes from the Greek word *deon*, meaning duty. Actions that align with these rules are ethical, while actions that don’t aren’t. This ethical theory is most closely associated with German philosopher, [Immanuel Kant.](https://ethics.org.au/big-thinker-immanuel-kant/)

In contrast to the utilitarian perspective, the deontological view presented in the writings of Immanuel Kant purports that having a moral intent and following the right rules is a better path to ethical conduct than achieving the right results. A deontologist like Kant is likely to believe that ethical action arises from doing one’s duty and that duties are defined by rational thought.

Kantian ethicists would answer that your chosen course of action should be a universal one—a course of action that would be good for all persons at all times. There are two requirements for a rule of action to be universal: consistency and reversibility. Consider reversibility: if you make a decision as though you didn’t know what role or position you would have after the decision, you would more likely make an impartial one—you would more likely choose a course of action that would be most fair to all concerned, not just you. Again, deontology requires that we put duty first, act rationally, and give moral weight to the inherent equality of all human beings.

Finally, we should note that the well-known Golden Rule, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” emphasizes the easier of the two universalizing requirements: practicing reversibility

# Social Justice Theory and Social Contract Theory Social justice theorists worry about “distributive justice”—that is, what is the fair way to distribute goods among a group of people?

## Social contract theories see the relationship of power between state and citizen as a consensual exchange. It is legitimate only if given freely to the state by its citizens and explains why the state has duties to its citizens and vice versa.

if the social contract is a real contract – just like your employment contract – people could be free not to accept the terms. If a person didn’t agree they should give some of their income to the state they should be able to decline to pay tax and as a result, opt out of state-funded hospitals, education, and all the rest.

Like other contracts, withdrawing comes with penalties – so citizens who decide to stop paying taxes may still be subject to punishment.

Other problems arise when the social contract is looked at through a feminist perspective. Historically, social contract theories, like the ones proposed by Hobbes and Locke, say that (legitimate) state authority comes from the consent of free and equal citizens.

In Pateman’s words the social contract is first and foremost a ‘sexual contract’ that keeps women in a subordinate role. The structural subordination of women that props up the classic social contract theory is inherently unjust.

The inherent injustice of social contract theory is further highlighted by those critics that believe individual citizens are forced to opt in to the social contract. Instead of being given a choice, they are just lumped together in a political system which they, as individuals, have little chance to control.

Even the most dedicated free-market capitalist will often admit the need for some government and some forms of welfare—Social Security, Medicare, assistance to flood-stricken areas, help for AIDs patients—along with some public goods (such as defense, education, highways, parks, and support of key industries affecting national security).

People who do not see the need for public goods (including laws, court systems, and the government goods and services just cited) often question why there needs to be a government at all. One response might be, “Without government, there would be no corporations.” Thomas Hobbes believed that people in a “state of nature” would rationally choose to have some form of government. He called this the social contract, where people give up certain rights to government in exchange for security and common benefits.

1. If you have a right of free expression, the government has a duty to respect that right but can put reasonable limits on it. For example, you can legally say whatever you want about the US president, but you can’t get away with threatening the president’s life. Even if your criticisms are strong and insistent, you have the right (and our government has the duty to protect your right) to speak freely. In Singapore during the 1990s, even indirect criticisms—mere hints—of the political leadership were enough to land you in jail or at least silence you with a libel suit.
2. Rights and duties exist not only between people and their governments but also between individuals. Your right to be free from physical assault is protected by the law in most states, and when someone walks up to you and punches you in the nose, your rights—as set forth in the positive law of your state—have been violated. Thus other people have a duty to respect your rights and to not punch you in the nose.
3. Your right in legal terms is only as good as your society’s willingness to provide legal remedies through the courts and political institutions of society.

A distinction between basic rights and nonbasic rights may also be important. Basic rights may include such fundamental elements as food, water, shelter, and physical safety. Another distinction is between positive rights (the right to bear arms, the right to vote, the right of privacy) and negative rights (the right to be free from unreasonable searches and seizures, the right to be free of cruel or unusual punishments). Yet another is between economic or social rights (adequate food, work, and environment) and political or civic rights (the right to vote, the right to equal protection of the laws, the right to due process).

## Consequentialism is a theory that says whether something is good or bad depends on its outcomes.

An action that brings about more benefit than harm is good, while an action that causes more harm than benefit is not. The most famous version of this theory is utilitarianism.

Although there are references to this idea in the works of ancient philosopher Epicurus, it’s closely associated with English philosopher Jeremy Bentham.

Bentham’s theory of utilitarianism focussed on which actions were most likely to make people happy. If happiness was the experience of pleasure without pain, the most ethical actions were ones that caused the most possible happiness and the least possible pain.

He even developed a calculator to work out which actions were better or worse – the ‘felicific calculus’. Because it counted every person’s pleasure or pain as the same, regardless of age, wealth, race, etc. utilitarianism could be seen as a radically egalitarian philosophy.

Consequentialism is an attractive ethical approach because it provides clear and practical guidance – at least in situations where outcomes are easy to predict. The theory is also impartial. By asking us to maximise benefit for the largest number of people (or, for Peter Singer and other preference utilitarians, creatures who have preferences), we set aside our personal biases and self-interest to benefit others.

One problem with the theory is that it can be hard to measure different benefits to decide which one is morally preferable. Is it better to give my money to charity or spend it studying medicine so I can save lives? Many forms of consequentialism have been proposed that attempt to deal with the issue of comparing moral value.

The other concern people express is the tendency of consequentialism to use ‘ends justify the means’ logic. If all we are concerned with is getting good outcomes, this can seem to justify harming some people in order to benefit others. Is it ethical to allow some people to suffer so more people can live well?

Virtue theory, or virtue ethics, has received increasing attention over the past twenty years, particularly in contrast to utilitarian and deontological approaches to ethics. Virtue theory emphasizes the value of virtuous qualities rather than formal rules or useful results. Aristotle is often recognized as the first philosopher to advocate the ethical value of certain qualities, or virtues, in a person’s character.

Aristotle believed that all activity was aimed at some goal or perceived good and that there must be some ranking that we do among those goals or goods. Happiness may be our ultimate goal, but what does that mean, exactly? Aristotle rejected wealth, pleasure, and fame and embraced reason as the distinguishing feature of humans, as opposed to other species. And since a human is a reasoning animal, happiness must be associated with reason. Thus happiness is living according to the active (rather than passive) use of reason. The use of reason leads to excellence, and so happiness can be defined as the active, rational pursuit of personal excellence, or virtue.

Aristotle named fourteen virtues: (1) courage, particularly in battle; (2) temperance, or moderation in eating and drinking; (3) liberality, or spending money well; (4) magnificence, or living well; (5) pride, or taking pleasure in accomplishments and stature; (6) high-mindedness, or concern with the noble rather than the petty; (7) unnamed virtue, which is halfway between ambition and total lack of effort; (8) gentleness, or concern for others; (9) truthfulness; (10) wit, or pleasure in group discussions; (11) friendliness, or pleasure in personal conduct; (12) modesty, or pleasure in personal conduct; (13) righteous indignation, or getting angry at the right things and in the right amounts; and (14) justice.

Among the virtues, are any especially important? Studies from the Josephson Institute of Ethics in Marina del Rey, California, have identified six core values in our society, values that almost everyone agrees are important to them. When asked what values people hold dear, what values they wish to be known by, and what values they wish others would exhibit in their actions, six values consistently turn up: (1) trustworthiness, (2) respect, (3) responsibility, (4) fairness, (5) caring, and (6) citizenship.

 Instead, virtue ethicists advocate the cultivation of wisdom and character that people can use to internalize basic ethical principles from which they can determine the ethical course of action in particular situations. Virtue ethicists tend to see ethical principles as being inherent in the world and as being discoverable by means of rational reflection and disciplined living.

What unites the various forms of virtue ethics is the focus on moral education to cultivate moral wisdom, discernment, and character in the belief that ethical virtue will manifest in ethical actions.

Eudaimonia is not momentary pleasure but enduring contentment—not just a good day but a good life. Human flourishing means acting in ways that cause your essential human nature to achieve its most excellent form of expression. Aristotle held that a good life of lasting contentment can be gained only by a life of virtue—a life lived with both phrónesis, or “practical wisdom,” and aretē, or “excellence.” Aristotle defines human good as the activity of the soul in accordance with virtue, and wrote in the Nicomachean Ethics that

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Too Little** | **Mean (Virtue)** | **Too Much** |
| Cowardice | Bravery | Foolhardiness |
| Stinginess | Generosity | Profligacy |
| Self-ridicule | Confidence | Boastfulness |
| Apathy | Calmness | Short-Temperedness |

Virtues such as temperance, courage, and truthfulness become increasingly a part of our actions the more we intend to do them and the more we practice doing them. The truly virtuous person:

* Knows what she or he is doing.
* Chooses a virtuous act for its own sake.
* Chooses as a result of a settled moral state.
* Chooses gladly and easily.

## OBJECTIONS TO VIRTUE ETHICS

There are two main objections to virtue ethics as an ethical system: its vagueness and its relativism.

First, virtue ethics is too vague and subjective, and does not produce explicit rules for moral conduct that can tell us how to act in specific circumstances. When facing ethical dilemmas, we feel better if we have a clear answer about what to do. Virtue ethics offers general ideals rather than definitive commands.

Second, there are different cultural definitions of human flourishing and virtue. All human cultures have ethical values, but values vary across cultures. So how can we decide which set of virtues is right? Even within a culture, two people will have different views about what the virtues are, and when and how they apply. Because virtue ethics gives us no specific commands for how to act, each person is left to himself or herself to decide how to act. Virtue ethics is too relative to be a helpful ethical theory.

Ethical relativism is a concern. If ethics means anything, it has to have some objective basis and cannot be left entirely up to arbitrary whim. Virtue ethicists are aware of this danger and would respond to it that virtue ethics is based on objective realities of the world and human nature. The virtues are manifestations of how things are, or should be, outside of cultural or individual subjectivity. Different cultures differ on how ethical virtues should be applied, but every culture values fundamental virtues such as honesty, benevolence, courage, and justice. Differences in how cultures apply virtues may reflect objective differences in their circumstances. When we interact with another culture, those differences do need to be dealt with, but saying our culture is completely right and the other culture wrong is not a helpful approach. Individuals similarly face the burden of needing to determine how best to apply the virtues, and needing to deal with conflicts with others over how they think is best to apply the virtues. But is this not similar to the decisions we have to make in all aspects of our lives?