

ETHICS

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1 Overview

Ethics can be defined as the set of actions and behaviors that individuals engage in (whether within society or "*outside*" of it) that guide them in their lives and contribute to (or demolish *so to speak*) the establishment (or dismantling) of the foundations and principles of society. The philosophy of ethics studies these actions and values in an attempt to understand the nature of **good** and **evil**.

2 Branches

Ethics can generally be divided into two main branches:

- **Normative Ethics:** This branch attempts to answer ethical questions (such as eating animals, euthanasia, etc.) in general terms: how to act and why. Some of the most important philosophers in this field include **Immanuel Kant**, **John Stuart Mill**, and **Aristotle**.
- **Metaethics:** This branch attempts to answer "*non-moral*" questions about ethics (meaning it does not concern itself with determining whether a particular action is good/ethical or not). Instead, it seeks to explore the essence of ethics itself (e.g., what constitutes a right or wrong action in itself? Do ethical principles even exist?). Some of the most influential philosophers in this field include **G.E. Moore**, **J.L. Mackie**, and **A.J. Ayer**.

Normative Ethics

Normative ethics can also be divided into two subcategories (one overarching the other, so to speak):

- **Applied Ethics:** This includes any aspect of our daily lives where ethics is applied (e.g., political ethics, environmental ethics, etc.). However, the question that arises is: **On what basis do we determine whether an action is ethical or not?** In other words, what moral framework do we rely on to make ethical judgments? This is where the higher category of

applied ethics comes in:

- **Moral Theories:** These establish the fundamental rules and standards for determining whether an action is ethical or not. Some of the most important moral theories include:

Utilitarianism/Consequentialism: States that the moral value of an action is determined by its consequences.

Deontology: Focuses on the inherent rightness or wrongness of an action itself, regardless of its consequences.

Virtue Ethics: Emphasizes the cultivation of virtuous character traits (such as courage, justice) and embodying them in one's life.

Contractarianism: Suggests that ethical principles arise from hypothetical/social contracts agreed upon by members of society to regulate social interactions.

2.1 Metaethics

As previously mentioned, this branch deals with fundamental questions regarding ethics, including:

- **Moral Epistemology:** Explores how we acquire knowledge about ethical values and principles, as well as the justification for believing in ethical statements.
- **Moral Semantics:** Focuses on the linguistic structures related to ethics and how words and statements interact with the structure of language and socio-cultural contexts. In other words, it investigates why ethical terms mean what they mean.
- **Moral Metaphysics:** A branch of metaphysics that examines the nature of ethics itself, questioning the existence of ethical principles and whether objective moral standards exist at all.