

Since the primary aim of this class is to assess ethical ideas, it will be handy to have some notion of what is meant by ethics or morality. Defining ethics is a notoriously difficult task. It is not, however, an impossible task. In fact, if we are careful about how we proceed we should be able to arrive at a definition that most people can accept. This may seem naïve, but I think it is not. We simply need to be careful and precise in the way we lay out the question we are asking. It is easy to confuse the question “what is ethics?” which asks for a definition of the term “ethics” with a different question “what do you think is ethical?” The latter question is a question about what set of things you find moral or immoral, while the former question is simply a question about what the *definition* of ethics is.

Any good definition will do a number of different things. First it will allow us to distinguish what belongs in the class we are defining. Second it will rule out the things that don’t belong in that class of things. To see what I mean here let’s look at an analogy. Suppose I ask you what the definition of chair is, and you tell me that chairs are things you sit on. This definition, while it does get something right about chairs (we do use chairs for sitting) is not a good one because it is too broad. It includes couches and benches and love seats too. We want to know what chairs are, not all these other things. So one thing we are looking for in a good definition of ethics is an account of what kinds of things (where things can include actions or emotions or other non-physical sorts of things) are part of the concept that ethics refers to and what sorts of things are not. One mistake it is easy to make at this point is to think that the question about the definition of ethics is really a question about what you think is ethical and what you think is not. But the question of the definition of ethics is a question about what ethics is, not about what people find ethical and what they do not find ethical. *That* is a different question.

This is an easy mistake to make, because we often use the phrase “what is your definition of ethics” to mean something like “what do you take to be morally right or wrong?” or “what defines what is morally right and morally wrong for you?” But, while the language of these questions is closely related to the question “what is the definition of ethics?” it is a decidedly different question.

You might, though, think that answering the first question is just answering the second one, but this, really, is not so. In fact, you and I might have very different ethical views in regard to the second question (what do you take to be moral/immoral), but this does not imply we have a different definition of ethics in the former sense. In fact, it presumes that we have something like a common understanding of what morality IS, since we may argue about what turns out to be moral and what turns out not to be, but we DON’T think we are talking about two completely different things. If you and I have a different definition of “chair” then we think we are not even talking about the same thing when we disagree about our definition. If you think, for instance, that a chair is something that is fun to sit on, and I think that a chair is an article of furniture designed for one person to sit on, we will not be talking about the same thing really at all. Some objects might fit into both categories. If I have fun sitting on a chair in a bar, then that fits the first definition, and, since the thing I am sitting on is an article of furniture designed for a single individual, it will fit the second. On the other hand I might have fun sitting on a bench that is part of a large amusement park ride. This particular object would fit

the first definition, but it would not fit the second definition. This object, then, is not a chair under one definition, but it is under the other.

So let's look at ethics in light of this analogy again. If you and I disagree about whether it is morally permissible to tell white lies in order to avoid making people feel bad, we disagree about what is right and wrong, but we do not disagree about whether this is a moral question. That is much more like disagreeing about what kind of chair we like best in our analogy, than it is like disagreeing about what the definition of a chair is. We agree that the question about white lies is a moral question, but not on whether it is ok to tell white lies. I may hold that it is, and you may hold that it isn't but that disagreement is not a disagreement about what morality is, but a disagreement about what actions are moral and which are not. Again, the language here is confusing, since questions about what is moral in the sense of what is permissible (or obligatory or restricted) can look, if we are not careful, like a question about the definition of morality. In a sense it is, since we can be said to be asking a question that we can reasonably phrase as a question about how YOU define right and wrong. You and I can disagree on that, while we still agree on what kinds of questions count as moral and which do not.

We, then, are looking for a definition of ethics that does not presume any particular perspective on which actions are right or wrong, or even on which principles are the foundation for right and wrong actions. You and I can disagree on any number of these questions and still agree that we are talking about the same thing. Just as you and I can disagree on whether white lies are permissible and still agree that the question is an ethical one, so you and I can disagree on whether society is what determines right and wrong and still agree that the question is a moral question. Whether society (or culture) determines what the moral rules are, is, in fact, a very important question, and one that we will be discussing at some length in this class. But this is not a question of definition in the sense that we are discussing definition here. If I take it to be the case that morality is grounded in the will of God, for instance, I cannot hold that society or culture grounds morality, since, presumably, God would require that all persons do the same thing, no matter what their culture (strictly speaking this is not necessary—God could require one thing of one culture and something different (and inconsistent) of other cultures. But this is still a different view than cultural relativism, since relativism holds that the source of right and wrong is one's culture, not God, even if God gives persons contradictory demands, so the point is the same. We have a disagreement about what determines what the moral rules are, but we don't disagree that our disagreement is a moral disagreement). I may take morality to be universal and you may not, but we still agree that these are *moral* questions, even if they are the broadest kind of moral question.

What I hope is that this discussion helps us get clear about what we are asking when we are asking the question "what is the definition of ethics." But this discussion has not helped actually answer that question. Instead, I have tried to provide an explanation that helps frame what the question actually is, and to distinguish it from other questions closely related to it, but importantly different than it. But what, then, is the definition of ethics? What we are looking for here is a

definition that is reasonably uncontroversial to the parties involved, no matter what their views might be about which actions turn out to be right and which actions turn out to be wrong.

Already, if you have been paying attention, we have something of a suggestion about at least one of the criterion for the definition. Ethics, by almost everyone's lights, has something to do with right and wrong. Will that end the discussion? Could we just take ethics to be what our notions of right and wrong are? Then our definition of ethics would be something like "ethics is the part of our life that has to do with what is right and wrong (permissible and impermissible)" Or "The domain of human living that governs right and wrong is ethics." There is a handy name for any kind of activity that is associated with obligation and restriction in this way: Normative. Any kind of rule driven activity is a normative activity, so we might say that ethics is the normative part of our lives.

Notice that this new definition does not presume that abortion, for instance is either right or wrong. It may well be that it is one or the other, but the definition does not presume that. Both pro-life and pro-choice persons can accept this definition. Where they disagree is over whether abortion itself is one of those things that are wrong, not over whether the question of whether it is wrong is even an ethical question, which all sides would agree it is. So in that sense a definition that simply says that ethics is normative is superior to our previous attempts. Those attempts ruled out views that were clearly ethical views (even if you think they were the wrong ethical views). In that sense those definitions were too narrow. They presumed that getting ethics right is part of what the definition of the discipline of ethics is. But this was a mistake in the way the definition was framed. We have solved that problem by taking out specific information about what generates the moral rules and what those moral rules are. Once we drop that information we just have the rules (the normative) as part of our definition.

However, This definition, for all its benefits, may not be enough. On one way of using the phrase "it is wrong to . . ." wrong can mean things that have nothing to do with ethics. Therefore, what we are allowed to do and what we are not allowed to do (what we are restricted from doing) is not always ethical. For instance, when I was rather young, my mother used to tell me not to wear stripes with plaids. Now I don't know whether this is really a general rule of fashion, but if it is we seem to have here a kind of rule that has little to do with ethics (at least it seems not to in the minds of most people). That is to say that there seem to be parts of our lives that are rule governed, but that are not ethical. This means that simply saying that ethics is the domain of our lives that has to do with what we ought to do and what we ought not to do is not enough to include in our definition of ethics. If we leave the definition at that, we will, by almost everyone's way of thinking, be including too much in our definition of ethics. This new definition, then, is too broad. What we need to do is narrow down what we are talking about. We are clearly talking about a part of our lives that has to do with right and wrong, good and bad, but which part? Not the part that has to do with personal aesthetics and fashion, presumably. Which normative part of our lives is the ethical part?

It will not be completely uncontroversial to claim this, but most of the parties will probably agree that the rules that are ethical (the normative part of our lives

that is the ethical part) is the part of our lives that has to do with the way we treat other people. If this is right then a good working definition of ethics would be something like: the normative domain that has to do with the treatment of other people. This definition works fairly well and is more or less uncontroversial. It is not entirely uncontroversial, but it will work as a good starting point. Notice this about the definition: it will not be necessary to decide what particular actions end up being right and wrong, nor do we need to decide what grounds the rules for what is right and wrong, what the foundation for those rules turn out to be. I could believe that the rules are determined by society and you could believe that there are universal rules that everyone must follow regardless of the culture they were raised in, but we both could agree on this definition of ethics.

When we talk about ethics, we usually presume that we know what we are talking about and this definition allows us to talk together and agree we are talking about the same thing, without agreeing on what particular actions turn out to be right and wrong and on what principles ground the rules for what count as right and wrong action. That is what a good definition of ethics should do.