Ethics is defined in opposition to morality. Morality is a personal or societal perspective on rules of conduct, while ethics is a more rational framework to evaluate conduct. We study ethics because we need to be able to figure out the best (as a society) way to do things, and when pushing boundaries or encountering new situations there may be no precedent to rely on. That, combined with “common sense” being an insufficient argument, requires we learn ethical perspectives to direct us instead.

The difference between a good ethical theory and a bad one is that good theory supports persuasive, logical arguments. Examples of bad ethical theory are subjective relativism, cultural relativism, divine command, and ethical egoism. Examples of good ethical theory are Kantianism, act/rule utilitarianism, social contract theory, and virtue ethics.

Subjective relativism espouses that as there are no universal standards to measure against, only subjective experience matters and each perspective of what is best is valid. This fails as an ethical framework because it blurs the line between opinion and rule. Arguments on what rule to use are pointless as the theory demands each person decide for themselves.

Cultural relativism is similar to subjective relativism but replaces personal perspective with a cultural one. This can vary from place to place or (in the same place) from time to time. While it is important to keep different social contexts in mind, from an ethical perspective the fact that cultures differ in values doesn’t mean that they ought to. Arguing about which cultural perspective to use is similarly circular to subjective relativism.

Divine command theory defines good actions as those aligned with a particular deity and bad actions as those in conflict with it. This fails as an ethical theory as it demands obedience, fails as formal rhetoric, and existing holy text does not directly solve modern moral problems.

Ethical egoism is the “best of the worst” ethical framework. It states that each person should behave with complete self-interest and only concern themselves with their own self-benefit. While it does provide a framework for discussing rules outside of someone’s personal morality, it fails to resolve interpersonal conflict, causes blatant immoral behavior, and is directly opposed to ethics by definition.

Kantianism formalizes the golden rule with the categorical imperative: that you should act according to rules you believe all should follow. While there is sometimes no way to resolve conflict between two rules and is generally inflexible, it provides an external moral framework to compare oneself against and holds everyone to the same standard.

Act or Rule utilitarianism states that an act or rule is good if the benefits to society it grants outweighs the detriments it causes. They ignore intent and means and focus entirely on calculating outcomes. While having to do utilitarian math for every problem is too much work and calculating outcomes is often a fuzzy problem, it is a comprehensive and practical framework.

Social contract theory is related to cultural relativism, but has tried to strip out the features of relativism. It claims that an ethical framework should provide rights equally, and when not able to should provide rights that provide the greatest benefit to the least advantaged and provide everyone a fair opportunity to achieve.

Virtue ethics tries to reintroduce emotional and communal perspectives back into an ethical framework. Similar to Kantianism, it states a right act as something a virtuous person would do in the same circumstances. While it should not be used to guide policy, it brings back relevant components of morality into the ethical framework.