**ETHICS OVERVIEW**

Ethics and morality are related terms. Ethics is often applied by popular connotation, to right and wrong in the business or professional world, morality to ones’ personal life. Dictionary definitions don’t distinguish clearly between ethics and morality. “Ethics is the study of morality’s effect on conduct, the study of moral standards and how they affect conduct.”

(Encarta World English Dictionary).

Ethics, then, may be viewed as the study of morality—the practice of right and wrong. It can be imprecise, however, and a cause of moral impotence if we press these emphases too far. One cannot properly say, "I am an ethical person, but not very moral." What hurts oneself, another, the community, or the world is wrong. At least most of us, when we get to thinking about it, are inclined to agree that what helps is moral; all that inflicts injury (of any kind) is wrong. Further thought forces us to make exceptions for remedial action that hurts. But in a general way, we seem forced to agree: all that tears apart the human fabric, destroys harmony, injures human dignity, and limits growth is wrong. Healing and reconciliation, the promotion of growth and service—in individuals or communities—are right and good. Albert Schweitzer is known for his guiding principle expressed in Civilization and Ethics (1949): Ethics, too, (is) nothing but reverence for life. This is what gives me the fundamental principle of morality, namely, that good consists in maintaining, promoting, and enhancing life, and that destroying, injuring, and limiting life are evil.

Ethics and morality are part of many fields of human thought: philosophy, literature, theology, social sciences, economics, politics and more. Ethics and morality have to do with good and evil. Part of the discussion involves the relationship of morals to truth, beauty and happiness. The Greeks (through their art and Playwrights, and especially in Plato and Aristotle) made “the good” the most important thing in life. Rigorous intellectual effort is needed in pursuit of the good, and to know good is to see truth and to do good. Religious systems all see the moral life as the good life and the true purpose of human life—and tend to bring love (loving relationships) into the equation.

Thinking about ethics and acting ethically are obviously related, but can, under the pressures of life and human weaknesses, get separated. There is a widely held view that without religion there would be no ethics. Yet atheists and agnostics are often highly ethical. What reasons do they have for living ethical lives? Could they simply be compassionate and sympathetic people who do not like to see others suffer? Or is it, as some philosophers have argued, that when we properly understand our interests, we will see that it really is in our interests to act ethically?

The great ethical debate centers on the ultimate standard of right and wrong. In pluralistic societies and in a global village, it becomes important for us to understand various perspectives and principles of moral choice and behavior. On what bases, for instance, can the world judge suicide bombers to be wrong in taking innocent lives? How does this differ, and most think it does, from the killing of combatants or innocents in war? How is the hierarchy of good and bad moral values different in different cultures and subcultures—religious and secular? Why are private ethical issues more important to some; social ethics more important to others?

The complications of ethics lie in cultural assumptions and the complexity of human life and society. We often deal with the lesser of evils and the higher of goods in situations that are more gray than "black and white." Today’s world adds a great challenge to our consideration of ethics: it has become a matter of human survival, whether we think of the AIDS crisis, terrorism, a nuclear holocaust, or the environmental survival of the planet itself. Famed survivor of the concentration camps, Elie Wiesel, provides this wisdom from his experience: I have learned two lessons in my life: first, there are no sufficient literary, psychological, or historical answers to human tragedy, only moral ones. Second, just as despair can come to one another only through human beings, hope, too, can be given to one only by other human beings.

**Ethics and Morality**

What are they?

The terms ethics and morality are often used interchangeably - indeed, they usually can mean the same thing, and in casual conversation there isn't a problem with switching between one and the other. However, there is a distinction between them in philosophy.

Strictly speaking, morality is used to refer to what we would call moral standards and moral conduct while ethics is used to refer to the formal **study** of those standards and conduct. For this reason, the study of ethics is also often called "moral philosophy." Here are some examples of statements which express moral judgments:

1. Dumping chemicals in the rivers is wrong and ought to be banned. 2. Its wrong that our company is trying to avoid the regulations and it should stop.

3. He's a bad person - he never treats people well and doesn't seem to respect anyone.

As seen in the above examples, moral judgments tend to be characterized by words like ought, should, good and bad. However, the mere appearance of such words does not mean that we automatically have a statement about morals. For example:

4. Most Americans believe that racism is wrong.

5. Picasso was a bad painter.

6. If you want to get home quickly, you should take the bus.

None of the above is moral judgments, although example #4 does describe the moral judgments made by others. Example #5 is an aesthetic judgment while #6 is simply a prudential statement explaining how to achieve some goal.

Another important feature of morality is that it serves as a guide for people's actions. Because of this, it is necessary to point out that moral judgments are made about those actions which involve **choice**. It is only when people have possible alternatives to their actions that we conclude those actions are either morally good or morally bad. Morals involve much more serious aspects of how we behave and how we treat others. What this means is that failure to follow the dominant morals will result in a much harsher reaction from others - examples of this would include discrimination, physical abuse and theft.

Another important distinction in morality is that between standards, conduct and character. When we form a moral judgment, we are employing moral **standards** - principles against which we compare what we see in order to form a conclusion. Such judgments might be about particular conduct, which includes a person's actions, or it might be about a person's character, which includes their attitudes and beliefs. Ethics, on the other hand, involves the **study** of those standards and judgments which people create.

**Ethics and Morality: Who Cares?**

Does any of this really matter?

Why be concerned with moral theories and distinctions between different types of moral theories? Why bother with some of the difficult questions which are raised in metaethics? Everyone is brought up with some sort of moral system, and it usually works out fairly well - isn't that enough? What's the point of bothering further?

The point is that the "conventional" or "customary" morality which people are brought up with is something those people too rarely thinks about very carefully. Following a moral system blindly and without reflection is not a method likely to result in a very moral person. Moreover, if this person is suddenly faced with people from a different culture who have a very different moral system, it won't be possible to handle it very well. The most likely results will be extreme dogmatism, deep disillusionment, or even the abandonment of morality entirely.

However, once a person does begin to reflect upon a moral system and look more closely at its premises and inferences, then we are now in the realm of ethics. Indeed, the very process of moral growth requires such reflection and the attempt to find a path between extreme dogmatism and extreme skepticism. Both moral maturity and moral autonomy require that a person can reach moral conclusions on their own - and just as importantly, explain and justify those moral decisions in a reasonable manner.

That is why it is important for people to be able to reason about their moral beliefs and moral positions. Such reasoning requires, first, an understanding about howto reason and use logic, and second, an understanding about how morality and moral systems work. These are the sorts of skills and information which a person needs in order reach a level of moral autonomy sufficient to make them independent and functional.

Ethics assumes that the standards exist and seeks to describe them, evaluate them, or evaluate the premises upon which those standards exist. This is where the field of ethics is broken down into Descriptive Ethics, Normative Ethics and Analytic Ethics (also called Metaethics).

**Descriptive Ethics**

What are our ethical values?

The category of descriptive ethics is the easiest to understand - it simply involves describinghow people behave and/or what sorts of moral standards they claim to follow. Descriptive ethics incorporates research from the fields of anthropology, psychology, sociology and history as part of the process of understanding what people do or have believed about moral norms.

Anthropologists and sociologists can provide us with all sorts of information about how societies past and present have structured moral standards and how they have expected people to behave. Psychologists can study how a person's conscience develops and how that person goes about actually making moral choices in real or hypothetical situations. Descriptive ethics also studies the codes of conduct created by professional organizations to regulate the conduct of members.

Descriptive ethics is sometimes referred to as comparative ethics because so much activity can involve comparing ethical systems: comparing the ethics of the past to the present, comparing the ethics of one society to another and comparing the ethics which people claim to follow with the actual rules of conduct which do describe their actions.

Strictly speaking, then, descriptive ethics is not entirely a field within philosophy - rather, it is more a specialty which involves many different fields within the social sciences. It is not designed to provide guidance to people in making moral decisions, nor is it designed to evaluate the reasonableness of moral norms. Nevertheless, actual work in moral philosophy cannot proceed very far without the knowledge gained from descriptive ethics. In short, descriptive ethics asks these two questions:

1. What do people claim as their moral norms?

2. How do people actually behave when it comes to moral problems?

**Normative Ethics**

What moral standards should we use?

The category of normative ethics is also relatively easy to understand - it involves creating or evaluating moral standards. Thus, it is an attempt to figure out what people shoulddo or whether their current moral behavior is reasonable. Traditionally, most of the field of moral philosophy has involved normative ethics - there are few philosophers out there who haven't tried their hand at explaining what they think people should do and why.

This process involves examining the moral standards people currently use in order to determine if they are justifiable, as well as attempting to construct new moral standards which might be better. In either case, the philosopher is critically investigating the nature and grounds of moral standards, moral principles, moral rules, and moral conduct.

The category of normative ethics also includes the entire field of Applied Ethics. This field is the attempt to take insights from the work of philosophers and theologians and apply them to real-world situations. For example, bioethics is an important and growing aspect of applied ethics which involves people working out the most moral decisions regarding issues like organ transplants, genetic engineering, cloning, etc.

An issue falls under the category of applied ethics whenever:

1. There is general disagreement about the correct course of action. 2. The choice involved is a specifically moral choice.

The first characteristic means that there must be some actual debate in which different groups take opposing positions for what they consider good reasons. Thus, abortion is a question of applied ethics in which people can analyze the facts and values involved and arrive at some sort of conclusion backed by arguments. On the other hand, deliberately placing a poison in the water supply is not a question of applied ethics because there is no general debate over whether or not such an action is wrong.

The second characteristic requires, obviously, that applied ethics only be involved when we are facing moral choices. Not every controversial issue is also a moral issue - for example, traffic laws and zoning codes may be the basis for heated debate, but they rarely turn on questions of fundamental moral values.

The ultimate goal of all of this is to show how it might be possible to develop a consistent and reasonable system of moral rules which are valid for all "moral agents." Philosophers often speak of "moral agents": a moral agent is any being capable of understanding and acting upon some moral rule. Thus, it isn't simply enough to answer a moral question, like "Is abortion wrong?" - instead, normative ethics is involved with demonstrating that this and other questions can be answered with consistency and in the context of some general moral principles or rules.

In short, normative ethics addresses questions like the following:

What should be our moral obligations? What is Right and what is Wrong? What should be our moral values? What is Good and what is Evil?

**Analytic Ethics (Metaethics)**

Evaluating our premises

The category of analytic ethics, also often referred to as metaethics, is perhaps the most difficult of the three to understand. In fact, some philosophers disagree as to whether or not it should be considered an independent pursuit, arguing that it should instead be included under Normative Ethics.

Basically, meta ethics involves reasoning about the presuppositions behind the moral systems developed under the category of normative ethics. Whenever a moral system is created, it is based upon certain premises about reality, human nature, values, etc. Metaethics is all about questioning the validity of those premises and arguing that perhaps we don't really know what we are talking about after all.

Analytic ethics asks quite a lot of questions, including:

How are moral judgments even possible? Why be moral at all? Do moral values exist objectively or only subjectively? Are moral values relative to something, like culture or individuals? Can morality exist independently of religion? Do people have a free will which would make moral judgments possible?

**Deontological, Teleological and Virtue Ethics**

Types of Ethical Systems

Normative ethical systems can generally be broken down into three categories: deontological, teleological and virtue ethics. The first two are considered deontic or action-based theories of morality because they focus entirely upon the actions which a person performs. When actions are judged morally right based upon their consequences, we have teleological or consequentialist ethical theory. When actions are judged morally right based upon how well they conform to some set of duties, we have a deontological ethical theory. Whereas these first two systems focus on the question "What should I do?" the third asks an entirely different question: "What sort of person should I be?" With this we have a virtue-based ethical theory - it doesn't judge actions as right or wrong but rather the character of the person doing the actions. The person, in turn, makes moral decisions based upon which actions would make one a good person.

**Deontology and Ethics** Deontological moral systems are characterized primarily by a focus upon adherence to independent moral rules or duties. Thus, in order to make the correct moral choices, we simply have to understand what our moral duties are and what correct rules exist which regulate those duties. When we follow our duty, we are behaving morally. When we fail to follow our duty, we are behaving immorally.

**Teleology and Ethics** Teleological moral systems are characterized primarily by a focus on the consequences which any action might have (for that reason, they are often referred to as consequentalist moral systems, and both terms are used here). Thus, in order to make correct moral choices, we have to have some understanding of what will result from our choices. When we make choices which result in the correct consequences, then we are acting morally; when we make choices which result in the incorrect consequences, then we are acting immorally.

**Virtue Ethics** Virtue-based ethical theories place much less emphasis on which rules people should follow and instead focus on helping people develop good character traits, such as kindness and generosity. These character traits will, in turn, allow a person to make the correct decisions later on in life. Virtue theorists also emphasize the need for people to learn how to break bad habits of character, like greed or anger. These are called vices and stand in the way of becoming a good person.