# What is Ethics?

In this lesson, we’ll take a look at the basic concepts of philosophical ethics, using examples from film, books, and TV shows. These will provide a baseline for future studies various areas of philosophy and ethics. Some questions we’ll consider include:

1. What is ethics? What is the difference between descriptive and normative ethics?
2. What’s wrong with identifying ethics with the law? With the majority opinion? With your feelings?
3. What is the relationship between ethics and religion?
4. What’s wrong with saying that God’s approval *makes* certain actions right or wrong?

## What is Ethics?

**What Exactly is Ethics? Ethics** can loosely be defined as either (1) having behavior that accords with the moral standards of right and wrong behavior (“Cindy is a very ethical person”), and (2) the study of these moral standards. While we’ll explore a number of different approaches to ethics in this lesson, they share in common the idea that ethics requires that we treat other people as our equals, and that harming others for selfish reasons is generally wrong. So, for example, the so-called **Golden Rule** (“treat others as you would like to be treated”) found in many religious and philosophical traditions is one expression of this basic idea. As we’ll discover, however, making this somewhat vague and ambiguous notion precise can be more difficult than one might expect. However, it’s an issue of immense practical importance, since ethical issues pervade our lives at nearly every level: as friends, employees, managers, consumers, children, parents, citizens, etc.

**What is the Difference Between Descriptive and Normative Ethics?** When thinking about ethical issues, it’s important to distinguish between **descriptive ethics** and **normative ethics.** Descriptive ethics (also called *comparative ethics)* studies the way that different cultures, people, and cultures actually behave. Normative ethics, by contrast, studies how we ought to behave (or which moral standards are correct). Disciplines such as sociology, political science, psychology often study descriptive ethics, while **philosophy** often studies normative ethics. Of course, there is often considerable overlap between the two, since we are often trying to both describe our current behavior and think of ways of improving it. Within normative ethics, there is a further distinction between **theoretical ethics** and **applied ethics** (or **practical ethics**)**.** Theoretical ethics studies the general ethical principles that explain and justify our ethical decisions at a deep level, while applied ethics deals with moral questions that arise in specific contexts, such as those that arise in medicine, business, engineering, etc.Finally, ethics includes the study of **metaethics,** which reflects on the methods and concepts of the study of ethics.

Figure 1 The study of ethics is broken down into a number of specific areas.

## Some things Ethics is NOT

In order to better understand what exactly ethics is, it will help to clarify some things that it is commonly confused with:

1. Doing the ethically right thing is NOT the same thing as following the law.
2. Doing the ethically right thing is NOT doing whatever the majority of people approve of.
3. Doing the ethically right thing is NOT doing whatever you “feel” is right.

These are all understandable confusions; however, they can also cause problems (in real life, not just philosophy class!) if one isn’t aware of them. With that in mind, let’s dive in.

**What is the Difference Between “Ethical” and “Legal”?** Many of our laws closely correspond to our ethical norms. So, for example, nearly all societies have laws forbidding things such as murder, theft, child abuse, and so on. In areas such as business and medical law, one can also find laws protecting the rights of consumers and patients, laws governing the appropriate behavioral of professionals. With this in mind, it can be tempting to think something like the following: “So long as I am following the law, I am behaving ethically!” or, conversely “If I don’t follow the law, then I must be behaving unethically.” However, this way of thinking about ethics doesn’t hold up under scrutiny.

First, some laws are themselves immoral, and the ethical thing to do would be to try to change them. So, for example, the U.S. has had laws that legalized slavery and discrimination, that gave husbands the right to beat their wives, that forbade women from voting, or that criminalized homosexuality. We now widely recognize that these laws are immoral, and that the people who fought to change the laws were doing the ethical thing. It’s highly plausible that we will eventually come to see some of our current laws as being flawed in just the same way.Moreover, the fact that a majority of people *voted* for these laws doesn’t necessarily make them morally OK. If 51% of people voted for a law that made it OK to take away all of the property of the other 49%, for instance, this would clearly be immoral.

Second, even in a relatively well-designed legal system, the class of immoral actions will be bigger than the class of strictly illegal ones. So, for example, it isn’t usually a *crime* to lie to one’s friends or family members, or to withhold information from them. Most of us would nevertheless agree that this is immoral. This same sort of thing holds in the professional world, as well. So, for example, there are a variety of laws and policies in place that prohibit medical staff from lying to patients, or managers from forcing employees to do dangerous work. However, none of these laws will be perfect: highly motivated people will always be able to find some “loophole” that will allow them to exploit others for their own benefit.

**So, maybe ethics is just whatever the majority of people approve of (in my country, my company, etc.)?** The **cultural relativist** idea that the rightness and wrongness of actions is determined by whatever the people in a certain happen to think would certainly make ethics a whole lot easier. However, it faces problems similar to those faced by identifying morality with the law: majorities can (and have) done terrible things to minorities. They’ve enslaved them, tortured them, committed genocide, and so on. The mere fact that 51% of people agreed didn’t make these things OK. The most forms of cultural relativism also entail obviously absurd consequences: e.g., that Hitler was behaving in a morally *good* way, while Martin Luther King was behaving in a morally *bad* way. While more complex versions of these views may avoid some of these problems, but they do so mainly by taking on many elements of the ethical theories we’ll be studying later in the class.

**Isn’t “Doing What is Ethical” Simply “Doing What I Feel is Right?”** In contrast to the cultural relativist, the **moral subjectivist** holds that the rightness/wrongness of an action is *entirely determined* by the feelings of the person who is doing it. So, for example, the reason that murder is wrong is that the thought of murdering somebody makes me *feel bad.* This view also has significant problems that lead most ethicists to reject it.After all, while our feelings can often help guide our judgements about right and wrong, this isn’t always the case. So, for example, many of us find it quite easy to get angry when someone else treats *us* (or someone we care about) unfairly. Similarly, most humans experience anxiety, regret, and guilt when they feel they have done something wrong, especially if they worry this will be uncovered. These sorts of emotions certainly shouldn’t be ignored. However, one also needs to recognize that these emotions can mislead us, since our emotional responses are highly influenced by our upbringing and culture, are often made in the absence of good evidence, and can be much more “selfish” than we sometimes realize. So, for example, many slave owners felt perfectly fine owning slaves since all their family, friends, coreligionists, etc. thought it was fine; they had massively false beliefs about people of other races; and admitting it was morally wrong would have meant making economic sacrifices. In the end, you should especially careful about “trusting your feelings” in the following sorts of issues:

1. Ethical issues where there is a disagreement between your group and another group, such as different religions, political parties, business groups (e.g., management vs. labor; medical staff vs. patients), and so on.
2. Ethical issues whose solution depends on matters of fact that you don’t actually know much about,
3. Ethical issues that bear directly on your own self-interest—where you have good reason to “want” a certain answer to be true.

In these cases, you should do your best to put aside your feelings, and try to offer reasons that might convince an impartial observer of the correctness of your position. This might involve making substantive revisions to your own position. As a rule of thumb, try to remember that *feeling strongly* something is true doesn’t entail having good *evidence* that it is true. When thinking about ethics, it’s the latter we need to focus on.

**Why Study Ethics?** Much of the study of ethics is based on the assumption that you already care about behaving ethically toward others in some broad sense, and you simply want to improve your ability to deal with ethical issues. The study of philosophical ethics provides a variety of tools to help you do this, including a survey of ethical theories, an introduction to some important ethical problems, and some perspectives on why it’s often tough for us to do the right thing, even when we know what it is. We’ll also spend quite a bit of time thinking about how work through ethical issues with other people, and identifying some of the roadblocks to reaching agreement. On the other hand, this class won’t have much to offer to someone who cares *only* about his or her own self-interest (and who truly doesn’t care about others). Thankfully, such people are few and far between. We’ll return later in the class to what might be said about these cases.

## Case Study: Ethical Issues in Star Wars

For those who haven’t the movie *Star Wars,* the plot involves the struggle of a group of rebels (led by Luke Skywalker) against an “evil empire” represented by the villainous character of Darth Vader. As matter of descriptive ethics, we might say that Darth Vader’s ethics allows for such things as blowing up planets full of civilians to intimidate his enemies. We might also study how popular these actions were among the more general populace (“85% of Storm Troopers agree that this was the right thing to do!”). As a matter of normative ethics, however, doing these sorts of thing is clearly wrong, regardless of how the populace feels about them. Among other things, this seems to be a case of terrorism*,* which involves killing innocent civilians in order tocause widespread fear and terror. The question, “Is it morally OK to us terroristic methods to win a war?” is a question of applied ethics. By contrast, a question of theoretical ethics might be “What general ethical standard *should* Darth Vader be using to make his decisions—should he try to maximize the well-being of all citizens (utilitarianism), follow the rules taught to him in Jedi school (deontology), or try his best to act like Obi Wan Kenobi (virtue ethics)?

When *Star Wars* begins, Darth Vader seems to be what philosophers generally call an **ethical egoist.** An ethical egoist believes that a given action is morally OK just in the case that it serves their own self-interest in the long-run. Ethical egoists, for example, will be nice to people when they think they can benefit from this, and will generally obey laws to avoid punishment. However, if they see a benefit from treating others horribly (and if they think they can get away with it), they have no qualms about doing so. Darth Vader, in contrast to most real-world ethical egoists (who have to “hide” this fact about themselves), is pretty open about all of this—he wants lots of power, and the best way for him to get it is to embrace the “Dark Side” of the force.

Darth Vader also brings out the distinction between the law and ethics, since everything that Darth Vader is “legal” (at least in the sense that the Emperor ordered him to do it). Moreover, the “back story” reveals that this situation originally arose as a result of democratic processes, when the elected senators voted to give the Emperor these powers. Just as in real life, however, the mere fact that his actions were legal does not make them moral. Similarly, the fact that the actions of the rebels are technically “illegal” does not make them immoral. This isn’t to say, of course, that the law isn’t morally relevant, or that one isn’t (sometimes) morally obligated to obey laws with which one disagrees. The point is rather that the relationship between morality and legality is a complex one, and that we need to be careful to avoid confusing the two.

Just as Darth Vader shows us the danger of identifying legality with morality, he also shows us the danger of “just trust your feelings” when it comes to ethical issues. There is no reason to think, for example, that Darth Vader’s feelings of anger, rage, or desire for dominance are any less real (or any less powerful) than the heroes’ desires for freedom, love, or safety. While Darth Vader is fictional, the same point might be made with real world examples, such as serial killers, who presumably have very strong feelings about wanting to kill people (in fact, these feelings were so strong, they lead them to risk arrest in order to satisfy them). Moreover, the problem is not limited to the few extreme cases, since nearly *everyone* experiences the sorts of negative emotions that guide Darth Vader’s actions, and following the advice of our emotions in these cases really can lead us to make unethical choices. The basic idea: it’s vitally important to get clear on the distinction between one’s feelings and one’s ethical beliefs *before* one finds oneself angry or enraged. If we don’t occasionally take the time to ask ourselves “I feel this is right. But do I really have reasons?” we might find ourselves headed down the path to the “Dark Side.”

Finally, villains such as Darth Vader also raise a tricky problem for the study of ethics: To what extent does studying ethics actually help make us better people? It seems unlikely, for example, that merely taking a class on ethics would convince Darth Vader that he ought to behave better. So, what should we do? It seems that we need to either convince Darth Vader that following ethical norms is in his self-interest or, failing that, forcibly prevent him from behaving in immoral ways. If Darth Vader were merely an ordinary criminal, this would be easy enough, since we could pass laws forbidding murder, and proscribe punishments for violating these laws. Since Darth Vader’s behavior is legal, however, this won’t work, at least until the rebels succeed in defeating the empire. Another strategy, however, might involve showing Vader what he is “missing out” on by ignoring ethical concerns. In particular, Vader’s decision to pursue power at the expense of everything else cuts him off from many of the things that most humans about life: connections to family and friends, the sense of a larger purpose, etc. In the end, it seems to be these sorts of reasons that convince to Vader to sacrifice his own life in order to save his son Luke, and kill the Emperor.

## What is the relationship between religion and Morality?

There is a close relationship between ethics and religion, at both the level of the individual and the larger social level. Religion influences people’s ethical beliefs about which food are which OK to eat, how much money should be donated to charity, whether it is OK to go to war, the appropriateness of certain business practices (such as lending money for interest), and many other areas. In turn, changing ethical standards have made huge differences to the sorts of religious practices that people adopt. For example, changing views about slavery, women’s rights, homosexuality, and many other things have all been reflected in changing religious practices. In many cases, it’s all but impossible to distinguish ethical changes from religious changes, or to figure out the causal relationship between the two. Religion continues to play a significant role in the ethical lives of many people by providing a space for ethical reflection, a motivation to do the right thing, and opportunities to “do good” with the help of like-minded individuals.

**What’s Wrong with “Because God Said So!” or “That’s Just What I Believe.”** Given the close relationship between religion and morality, it’s unsurprising that many people have thought ethics could be *identified* with religion. These people have adopted what philosophers call **divine command theory—**“It is God’s will (and nothing else!) that makes actions are morally OK (or not OK)”. While this theory seems both theoretically simple and easy to apply, it has a number of serious theoretical and practical problems. Because of these problems, most ethicists, including many who believe in God, have argued that divine command theory should be rejected. Some of the major problems include the following:

* **The Problem of Figuring Out God’s Commands.** In order to be of any practical use, divine command theory requires that those applying it somehow have reliable knowledge of what God commands. This requires that they know which religion is true, correctly interpret ambiguous passages in the religious texts, know how their own feelings about ethical issues relate to God’s will, and so on. This is very difficult, to say the least, and it’s unclear how a particular individual could know that they’ve correctly interpreted God’s intentions. Moreover, for many of the ethical issues that interest contemporary people—euthanasia, immigration, abortion, animal rights, heath care reform, tax rates, etc.—classical religious texts offer only limited explicit guidance. It’s important to note here that simply having faith that one has gotten it right can’t be enough: since ethics is a about how we treat *other people,* it’s important we are justified in treating them the way we do.
* **The Problem of Working With Others.** Many ethical problems in business, medicine, politics, and family life require reaching agreement with other people who have different beliefs from your own. Adopting divine command theory makes this very difficult, even if you are personally confident that you have the correct view. After all, people have a huge variety of beliefs about religious matters, and it is unrealistic (and unfair) to demand that others simply give up their most deeply held beliefs, and go along with yours. Instead, productive ethical conversation need to start from something *both parties agree on.* For example, statements like “It’s wrong to murder innocent people” is something you can safely agree that most people will agree with; by contrast, statements like “Your religious beliefs are wrong, and mine are right” are unlikely to be productive.
* **The “Euthyphro Problem.”** The ancient Greek philosopher **Plato** noted that the attempt to identify ethical actions with those God approved of ran into trouble when answering the following question: “Are actions good simply because God said so? Or does God say they are good because they are, in fact, good?” Logic tells that it has to be one or the other; it can’t be both. However, either answer raises problems. If we say that actions are good just because God says so, then it looks like God’s actions are entirely arbitrary, and that one can’t really claim that God really is “good” or “loving” or “trustworthy” (after all, on this solution, there is *literally no reason* for God not to say murder is OK tomorrow). On the other hand, saying that God approves of actions *because they are good* preserves God’s goodness and trustworthiness, but entails that what’s moral/immoral doesn’t have anything to do with what God wants. While there’s nothing wrong with this view (it’s probably the view of most religious ethicists), it does mean giving up on the divine command theory. It also means that religious people don’t have any special advantage over atheists when it comes to studying ethics.

**So, does this mean I should *never* bring up religion when thinking about ethics?** No! The important thing is to consider your purpose. If you are talking to people who share your religious beliefs (or your lack of religious beliefs), it might make sense to appeal to your shared beliefs. For similar reasons, arguments based on religion tend to work best on matters where there is wide agreement among religions about whatever it is you are talking about. For example, nearly *every* religion has against harming innocent people or lying to them, and rules that encourage generosity and compassion. (It’s worth noting that most secular ethical systems have these rules as well). By contrast, you should try to avoid appealing to highly specific religious claims when the truth of these claims might be in doubt (e.g., when you are talking to people with different beliefs, or when you are trying to examine your own beliefs about these issues). Finally, as was the case with cultural relativism, it’s worth noting there are more complex versions of religiously-based ethics that avoid some of the problems here. However, the resulting theories end up looking much more like the sorts of traditional ethical theories we’ll be looking at in future lessons.

## Case Study: The Religious Extremist as Villian

A number of movies, books, and TV shows feature a religious extremist as villain. This character does bad things *not* (merely) because of self interest, but because they genuinely believe that they are following the commands of their religion. For example:

* In Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible* several people are executed on charges of witchcraft (this was based partly on real events). While some of the accusers seem to acting on purely selfish motives, a good number of the villagers seem to genuinely believe that defendants are guilty.
* In the movie *Se7en,* a serial killer selects victims based on which of the “seven deadly sins” they have committed, and kills them in ways corresponding to this. In the more recent movie *Red State,* a group abducts and kills a person for homosexuality, and cite religion as justification.
* In the TV show *Homeland,* several characters cite religion (among other things) as a potential justification for acts of violence and terror.

One can, of course, easily find real life of examples of these sorts of behavior: religiously motivated violence has a long, dark history. Moreover, there seems to be little hope of convincing extremists that they’ve misinterpreted their religion. In many cases, they really can find passages to cite that seem to “justify” their behavior, at least considered in isolation. Of course, this isn’t to say any of this is normal: the vast majority of religious people strongly disagree with this behavior. However, this sort of extremism does have analogues in everyday ethical reasoning, whether or not it involves religion (not all extremists are religious!). Specifically, extremism makes evident the problem with assuming “I must be right,” and refusing to listen to arguments or reason. So, what might we learn from this?

First, while a person’s religious beliefs might in part explain their behavior, it can never *excuse* treating others poorly. The idea that people “have a right to their opinions” does not mean that these opinions are good or reasonable ones, or that people have the right to *act* on these opinions, at least when this involves harming others. Second, when considering our own ethics, we should strive to behave in ways that would be defensible to the people whose lives we affect, especially if they don’t share our general beliefs. This means being willing to set aside strong feelings of “I’m right!” or “They must be wrong!” in cases where we find we don’t actually have the reasons to back this up.

## Review Question

Your business is trying to decide whether to recall a product, after a number of customers have been harmed. The company’s product development team has given you a report concluding that these harms were very likely caused by your product. The other managers argue *against* recalling the product, using the following arguments:

1. “We aren’t legally liable for these sorts of harms. Therefore, we don’t have any reason to recall it.”
2. “My religious beliefs lead me to believe that bad things never happen to undeserving people. So, any customers who get harmed deserve it. We don’t need to do anything.”
3. “Most businesses wouldn’t recall a product in this sort of situation. So, we don’t need to either.”
4. “I haven’t looked that closely at the research, but my strong feeling is that anyone harmed by this product must have been misusing it somehow. I bet many of you feel the same way I do. I don’t think we need to recall it.”

Use the material you’ve learned in this lesson to describe the problems with each way of arguing. Then, consider how you might respond.