

## Descriptive Ethics

Descriptive ethics deals with what people believe (or are made to believe) to be right or wrong, and accordingly holds up the human actions that are acceptable or punishable under a custom or law.

However, customs and laws keep changing from time to time and from society to society. Societies have structured their moral principles as per changing times and have expected people to behave accordingly. Due to this, descriptive ethics is also called comparative ethics because it compares the ethics of the past and present; the ethics of one society and another. It also takes inputs from other disciplines such as anthropology, psychology, sociology, and history to explain moral right or wrong.

**Anthropology:** a study of the origin and development of human societies and cultures. Culture is the learned behavior of people, including their languages, belief systems, social structures, institutions, and material goods.

**Psychology:** The scientific study of the mind and the way that people behave.

**Sociology:** The study of human societies' social behavior.

**History:** all the events of the past.

## Normative Ethics

Normative Ethics deals with “norms” or a set of considerations about how one should act. Thus, it’s a *study of “ethical action”* and *sets out the rightness or wrongness* of the actions. It is also called **prescriptive ethics** because it rests on the principles which determine whether an action is right or wrong. The Golden rule of normative ethics is “*doing to others as we want them to do to us*”. Since we don’t want our neighbours to throw stones through our glass window, it will not be wise to first throw them through a neighbour’s window. Based on this reasoning, anything such as harassing, victimizing, abusing, or assaulting someone is wrong. Normative ethics also provides justification for punishing a person who disturbs social and moral order.

Aristotle’s **virtue ethics**, Kant’s **deontological ethics**, Mill’s **consequentialism (Utilitarianism)** and the Bhagwad Gita’s **Nishkam Karmayoga** are some of the theories in Normative Ethics.

### Virtue ethics

Virtue ethics focuses on one’s character and the virtues for determining or evaluating ethical behavior. Plato, Aristotle, and Thomas Aquinas were major advocates of Virtue ethics. Plato gave a scheme of four cardinal virtues viz. prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude

(*courage*). His disciple Aristotle categorized the virtues as moral and intellectual. He identified some of the moral virtues including “wisdom”.

### **Deontological ethics**

Deontological ethics or **duty ethics** focuses on the rightness and wrongness of the actions rather than the consequences of those actions. There are different deontological theories such as categorical imperative, moral absolutism, divine command theory etc.

First famous deontological theory is *Immanuel Kant's Categorical Imperative* or *Kantianism*. Kant said that the human beings occupy special place in creation and there is an ultimate commandment from which all duties and obligations derive. The moral rules, as per Kant, should follow two principles viz. universality and principle of reciprocity. By universality, he meant that a moral action must be possible to apply it to all people. By principle of reciprocity, he meant said “*do as you would be done by*”. Such premise of morality is found in all religious systems, including Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism etc.

Second famous deontological theory is **Moral absolutism**. It believes that there are absolute standards against which moral questions can be judged. Against these standards, certain actions are right while others are wrong **regardless of the context of the act**. For example, theft is wrong, regardless of context in which theft was carried out. It ignores that sometimes wrong act is done to reach out to right consequence.

Third deontological theory is *Divine command theory*. It says that an action is right if God has decreed it to be right. As per this theory, the rightness of any action depends upon that action being performed because it is a duty, not because of any good consequences arising from that action.

### **Consequentialism (Teleology)**

Consequentialism or **teleological ethics** says that the morality of an action is contingent on the outcome of that action. So, the *morally right action would produce a good outcome while the morally wrong action would produce a bad outcome*. Based on the outcome, there are several theories such as **Utilitarianism** {right action leads to the most happiness of the greatest number of people}, **Hedonism** {anything that maximizes pleasure is right}, **Egoism** {anything that maximizes the good for self is right}, **Asceticism** {abstinence from egoistic pleasures to achieve spiritual goals is right action}, **Altruism** {to live for others and not caring for self is right action}.

The core idea of consequentialism is that “*the ends justify the means* “. An action that might not be right in the light of moral absolutism may be right under teleology.

## Meta Ethics

Meta Ethics or “*analytical ethics*” deals with the origin of the ethical concepts themselves. It does not consider whether an action is good or bad, right or wrong. Rather, it questions – what goodness or rightness or morality itself is? It is basically a highly abstract way of thinking about ethics. The key theories in meta-ethics include *naturalism*, *non-naturalism*, *emotivism* and *prescriptivism*.

Naturalists and non-naturalists believe that moral language is cognitive and can be known to be true or false. Emotivists deny that moral utterances are cognitive, holding that they consist of emotional expressions of approval or disapproval and that the nature of moral reasoning and justification must be reinterpreted to take this essential characteristic of moral utterances into account. Prescriptivists take a somewhat similar approach, arguing that moral judgments are prescriptions or prohibitions of action, rather than statements of fact about the world.

## Applied Ethics

Applied ethics deals with the philosophical examination, from a moral standpoint, of particular issues in private and public life which are matters of moral judgment. This branch of ethics is most important for professionals in different walks of life including doctors, teachers, administrators, rulers and so on. There are six key domains of applied ethics viz. *Decision ethics* {ethical decision-making process}, *Professional ethics* {for good professionalism}, *Clinical Ethics* {good clinical practices}, *Business Ethics* {good business practices}, *Organizational ethics* {ethics within and among organizations} and *social ethics*.

It deals with the rightness or wrongness of social, economical, cultural, religious issues also. For example, euthanasia, child labour, abortion etc.