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**Ethics** or **moral philosophy** is the branch of [philosophy](/wiki/Philosophy) that involves systematizing, defending, and recommending concepts of right and wrong [conduct](/wiki/Action_(philosophy)).[[1]](#cite_note-1) The term *ethics* derives from the [Ancient Greek](/wiki/Ancient_Greek) word ἠθικός *ethikos*, which is derived from the word ἦθος [*ethos*](/wiki/Ethos) ([habit](/wiki/Habit), "custom"). The branch of philosophy [axiology](/wiki/Axiology) comprises the sub-branches of ethics and [aesthetics](/wiki/Aesthetics), each concerned with [values](/wiki/Value_(ethics)).[[2]](#cite_note-2) As a branch of philosophy, ethics investigates the questions "What is the best way for people to live?" and "What [actions](/wiki/Action_(philosophy)) are right or wrong in particular circumstances?" In practice, ethics seeks to resolve questions of human morality, by defining concepts such as [good and evil](/wiki/Good_and_evil), right and [wrong](/wiki/Wrong), [virtue](/wiki/Virtue) and [vice](/wiki/Vice), [justice](/wiki/Justice) and [crime](/wiki/Crime). As a field of intellectual enquiry, moral philosophy also is related to the fields of [moral psychology](/wiki/Moral_psychology), [descriptive ethics](/wiki/Descriptive_ethics), and [value theory](/wiki/Value_theory).

Three major areas of study within ethics recognised today are:[[1]](#cite_note-1)# [Meta-ethics](/wiki/Meta-ethics), concerning the theoretical meaning and reference of moral propositions, and how their [truth values](/wiki/Truth_value) (if any) can be determined

1. [Normative ethics](/wiki/Normative_ethics), concerning the practical means of determining a moral course of action
2. [Applied ethics](/wiki/Applied_ethics), concerning what a person is obligated (or permitted) to do in a specific situation or a particular domain of action[[1]](#cite_note-1)

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## Defining ethics[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=1)]

[Rushworth Kidder](/wiki/Rushworth_Kidder) states that "standard definitions of *ethics* have typically included such phrases as 'the science of the ideal human character' or 'the science of moral duty' ".[[3]](#cite_note-3) Richard William Paul and [Linda Elder](/wiki/Linda_Elder) define ethics as "a set of concepts and principles that guide us in determining what behavior helps or harms sentient creatures".[[4]](#cite_note-4) The [*Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*](/wiki/Cambridge_Dictionary_of_Philosophy) states that the word ethics is "commonly used interchangeably with '[morality'](/wiki/Morality) ... and sometimes it is used more narrowly to mean the moral principles of a particular tradition, group or individual."[[5]](#cite_note-5) Paul and Elder state that most people confuse ethics with behaving in accordance with social conventions, religious beliefs and the law and don't treat ethics as a stand-alone concept.[[4]](#cite_note-4) The word "ethics" in English refers to several things.[[6]](#cite_note-6) It can refer to philosophical ethics or moral philosophy—a project that attempts to use reason in order to answer various kinds of ethical questions. As the English philosopher [Bernard Williams](/wiki/Bernard_Williams) writes, attempting to explain moral philosophy: "What makes an inquiry a philosophical one is reflective generality and a style of argument that claims to be rationally persuasive."[[7]](#cite_note-7) And Williams describes the content of this area of inquiry as addressing the very broad question, "how one should live"[[8]](#cite_note-8) Ethics can also refer to a common human ability to think about ethical problems that is not particular to philosophy. As bioethicist Larry Churchill has written: "Ethics, understood as the capacity to think critically about moral values and direct our actions in terms of such values, is a generic human capacity."[[9]](#cite_note-9) Ethics can also be used to describe a particular person's own idiosyncratic principles or habits.[[10]](#cite_note-10) For example: "Joe has strange ethics."

The English word ethics is derived from an Ancient Greek word *êthikos*, which means "relating to one's character." The Ancient Greek adjective *êthikos* is itself derived from another Greek word, the noun *êthos* meaning "character, disposition."[[11]](#cite_note-11)

## Meta-ethics[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=2)]

[Template:Main](/wiki/Template:Main) Meta-ethics asks how we understand, know about, and what we mean when we talk about what is right and what is wrong.<ref name=bbc>[Template:Cite web](/wiki/Template:Cite_web)</ref> An ethical question fixed on some particular practical question—such as, "Should I eat this particular piece of chocolate cake?"—cannot be a meta-ethical question. A meta-ethical question is abstract and relates to a wide range of more specific practical questions. For example, "Is it ever possible to have secure knowledge of what is right and wrong?" would be a meta-ethical question.

Meta-ethics has always accompanied philosophical ethics. For example, Aristotle implies that less precise knowledge is possible in ethics than in other spheres of inquiry, and he regards ethical knowledge as depending upon habit and acculturation in a way that makes it distinctive from other kinds of knowledge. Meta-ethics is also important in [G.E. Moore's](/wiki/George_Edward_Moore) [*Principia Ethica*](/wiki/Principia_Ethica) from 1903. In it he first wrote about what he called *the* [*naturalistic fallacy*](/wiki/Naturalistic_fallacy). Moore was seen to reject [naturalism](/wiki/Ethical_naturalism) in ethics, in his [Open Question Argument](/wiki/Open_Question_Argument). This made thinkers look again at second order questions about ethics. Earlier, the Scottish [philosopher](/wiki/Philosopher) [David Hume](/wiki/David_Hume) had put forward a similar view on the difference between [facts and values](/wiki/Is-ought_problem).

Studies of how we know in ethics divide into [cognitivism](/wiki/Cognitivism_(ethics)) and [non-cognitivism](/wiki/Non-cognitivism); this is similar to the contrast between descriptivists and non-descriptivists. Non-cognitivism is the claim that when we judge something as right or wrong, this is neither true nor false. We may for example be only expressing our emotional feelings about these things.[[12]](#cite_note-12) The effort to actually program a machine or artificial agent to behave as though instilled with a sense of ethics requires new specificity in our normative theories, especially regarding aspects customarily considered common-sense. For example, machines, unlike humans, can support a wide selection of [learning algorithms](/wiki/List_of_machine_learning_algorithms), and controversy has arisen over the relative ethical merits of these options. This may reopen classic debates of normative ethics framed in new (highly technical) terms.

#### Military ethics[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=24)]

[Template:See also](/wiki/Template:See_also)

Military ethics are concerned with questions regarding the application of force and the ethos of the soldier and are often understood as applied professional ethics.[[51]](#cite_note-51) [Just war theory](/wiki/Just_war_theory) is generally seen to set the background terms of military ethics. However individual countries and traditions have different fields of attention.[[52]](#cite_note-52) Military ethics involves multiple subareas, including the following among others:

1. what, if any, should be the laws of war
2. justification for the initiation of military force
3. decisions about who may be targeted in warfare
4. decisions on choice of weaponry, and what collateral effects such weaponry may have
5. standards for handling military prisoners
6. methods of dealing with violations of the laws of war.

#### Political ethics[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=25)]

[Template:Main](/wiki/Template:Main) Political ethics (also known as political morality or public ethics) is the practice of making moral judgements about political action and political agents.[[53]](#cite_note-53)

#### Public sector ethics[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=26)]

[Template:Main](/wiki/Template:Main) Public sector ethics is a set of principles that guide public officials in their service to their constituents, including their decision-making on behalf of their constituents. Fundamental to the concept of public sector ethics is the notion that decisions and actions are based on what best serves the public's interests, as opposed to the official's personal interests (including financial interests) or self-serving political interests.[[54]](#cite_note-54)

#### Publication ethics[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=27)]

Publication ethics is the set of principles that guide the writing and publishing process for all professional publications. In order to follow the set of principles, authors should verify that the publication does not contain [plagiarism](/wiki/Plagiarism) or [publication bias](/wiki/Publication_bias).[[55]](#cite_note-55) As a way to avoid misconduct in research these principles can also be applied to experiments which are referenced or analyzed in publications by ensuring the data is recorded, honestly and accurately.[[56]](#cite_note-56) Plagiarism is the failure to give credit to another author’s work or ideas, when it is used in the publication.[[57]](#cite_note-57) It is the obligation of the editor of the journal to ensure the article does not contain any plagiarism before it is published.[[58]](#cite_note-58) If a publication which has already been published is proven to contain plagiarism, then the editor of the journal can proceed to have the article retracted.[[59]](#cite_note-59) Publication bias occurs when the publication is one-sided or "[prejudiced](/wiki/Prejudiced) against results".[[60]](#cite_note-60) In best practice, an author should try to include information from all parties involved, or affected by the topic. If an author is prejudiced against certain results, than it can "lead to erroneous conclusions being drawn.”[[61]](#cite_note-61) Misconduct in research can occur when information from an experiment is falsely recorded or altered.[[62]](#cite_note-62) Falsely recorded information occurs when the researcher "fakes" information or data, which was not used when conducting the actual experiment.[[62]](#cite_note-62) By faking the data, the researcher can alter the results from the experiment to better fit the hypothesis they originally predicted. When conducting medical research, it is important to honor the healthcare rights of a patient by protecting their [anonymity](/wiki/Anonymity) in the publication.[[55]](#cite_note-55)

#### Relational ethics[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=28)]

Relational ethics are related to an [ethics of care](/wiki/Ethics_of_care).[[63]](#cite_note-63)[Template:Rp](/wiki/Template:Rp) They are used in qualitative research, especially ethnography and autoethnography. Researchers who employ relational ethics value and respect the connection between themselves and the people they study, and "between researchers and the communities in which they live and work" (Ellis, 2007, p. 4).[[64]](#cite_note-64) Relational ethics also help researchers understand difficult issues such as conducting research on intimate others that have died and developing friendships with their participants.[[65]](#cite_note-65)[[66]](#cite_note-66) Relational ethics in close personal relationships form a central concept of [contextual therapy](/wiki/Ivan_Böszörményi-Nagy#Contextual_therapy).

## Moral psychology[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=29)]

[Template:Main](/wiki/Template:Main) **Moral psychology** is a field of study that began as an issue in [philosophy](/wiki/Philosophy) and that is now properly considered part of the discipline of [psychology](/wiki/Psychology). Some use the term "moral psychology" relatively narrowly to refer to the study of [moral development](/wiki/Moral_development).[[67]](#cite_note-67) However, others tend to use the term more broadly to include any topics at the intersection of ethics and psychology (and [philosophy of mind](/wiki/Philosophy_of_mind)).[[68]](#cite_note-68) Such topics are ones that involve the mind and are relevant to moral issues. Some of the main topics of the field are [moral responsibility](/wiki/Moral_responsibility), moral development, [moral character](/wiki/Moral_character) (especially as related to [virtue ethics](/wiki/Virtue_ethics)), [altruism](/wiki/Altruism), [psychological egoism](/wiki/Psychological_egoism), [moral luck](/wiki/Moral_luck), and moral disagreement.[[69]](#cite_note-69)

### Evolutionary ethics[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=30)]

[Template:Main](/wiki/Template:Main) [Template:See also](/wiki/Template:See_also) Evolutionary ethics concerns approaches to ethics (morality) based on the role of evolution in shaping human psychology and behavior. Such approaches may be based in scientific fields such as [evolutionary psychology](/wiki/Evolutionary_psychology) or [sociobiology](/wiki/Sociobiology), with a focus on understanding and explaining observed ethical preferences and choices.[[70]](#cite_note-70)

## Descriptive ethics[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=31)]

[Template:Main](/wiki/Template:Main) Descriptive ethics is on the less philosophical end of the spectrum, since it seeks to gather particular information about how people live and draw general conclusions based on observed patterns. Abstract and theoretical questions that are more clearly philosophical—such as, "Is ethical knowledge possible?"—are not central to descriptive ethics. Descriptive ethics offers a [value-free](/wiki/Value-neutral) approach to ethics, which defines it as a social science rather than [a humanity](/wiki/Humanities). Its examination of ethics doesn't start with a preconceived theory, but rather investigates [observations of actual choices](/wiki/Revealed_preference) made by moral agents in practice. Some philosophers rely on descriptive ethics and choices made and unchallenged by a [society](/wiki/Society) or [culture](/wiki/Culture) to derive categories, which typically vary by context. This can lead to [situational ethics](/wiki/Situational_ethics) and [situated ethics](/wiki/Situated_ethics). These philosophers often view [aesthetics](/wiki/Aesthetics), [etiquette](/wiki/Etiquette), and [arbitration](/wiki/Arbitration) as more fundamental, percolating "bottom up" to imply the existence of, rather than explicitly prescribe, theories of value or of conduct. The study of descriptive ethics may include examinations of the following:

* [Ethical codes](/wiki/Ethical_code) applied by various groups. Some consider aesthetics itself the basis of ethics– and a personal [moral core](/wiki/Moral_core) developed through art and storytelling as very influential in one's later ethical choices.
* Informal theories of etiquette that tend to be less rigorous and more situational. Some consider etiquette a simple negative ethics, i.e., where can one evade an uncomfortable truth without doing wrong? One notable advocate of this view is [Judith Martin](/wiki/Judith_Martin) ("Miss Manners"). According to this view, ethics is more a summary of [common sense](/wiki/Common_sense) social decisions.
* Practices in arbitration and [law](/wiki/Law), e.g., the claim that ethics itself is a matter of balancing "right versus right," i.e., putting priorities on two things that are both right, but that must be traded off carefully in each situation.
* [Observed choices](/wiki/Revealed_preference) made by ordinary people, without expert aid or advice, who [vote](/wiki/Voting), buy, and decide what is worth valuing. This is a major concern of sociology, [political science](/wiki/Political_science), and [economics](/wiki/Economics).

## See also[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=32)]

* [Contemporary ethics](/wiki/Contemporary_ethics)
* [Corporate social responsibility](/wiki/Corporate_social_responsibility)
* [Deductive reasoning](/wiki/Deductive_reasoning)
* [Descriptive ethics](/wiki/Descriptive_ethics)
* [Dharma](/wiki/Dharma)
* [Ethical movement](/wiki/Ethical_movement)
* [Ethics paper](/wiki/Ethics_paper)
* [Index of ethics articles](/wiki/Index_of_ethics_articles) *(alphabetical list of ethics-related articles)*
* [Moral psychology](/wiki/Moral_psychology)
* [Outline of ethics](/wiki/Outline_of_ethics) *(list of ethics-related articles, arranged by sub-topic)*
* [Practical philosophy](/wiki/Practical_philosophy)
* [Science of morality](/wiki/Science_of_morality)
* [Theory of justification](/wiki/Theory_of_justification)

## Notes[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=33)]

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* [Aristotle](/wiki/Aristotle), [*Nicomachean Ethics*](/wiki/Nicomachean_Ethics)
* The [London Philosophy Study Guide](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/philosophy/LPSG/) offers many suggestions on what to read, depending on the student's familiarity with the subject: [Ethics](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/philosophy/LPSG/Ethics.htm)
* [*Encyclopedia of Ethics*](/wiki/Encyclopedia_of_Ethics). Lawrence C. Becker and Charlotte B. Becker, editors. Second edition in three volumes. New York: Routledge, 2002. A scholarly encyclopedia with over 500 signed, [peer-reviewed](/wiki/Peer-review) articles, mostly on topics and figures of, or of special interest in, [Western philosophy](/wiki/Western_philosophy).
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## External links[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=36)]

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* [Template:InPho](/wiki/Template:InPho)
* [Template:Cite IEP](/wiki/Template:Cite_IEP)
* [An Introduction to Ethics](http://www.galilean-library.org/manuscript.php?postid=43789) by Paul Newall, aimed at beginners.
* [''Ethics](http://www.ditext.com/frankena/ethics.html)*, 2d ed., 1973. by* [*William Frankena*](/wiki/William_Frankena)
* [Ethics Bites](http://www.open2.net/ethicsbites/index.html), [Open University](/wiki/Open_University) podcast series podcast exploring ethical dilemmas in everyday life.
* [National Reference Center for Bioethics Literature](http://bioethics.georgetown.edu/nrc/) World's largest library for ethical issues in medicine and biomedical research
* [Ethics](http://www.utilitarian.net/singer/by/1985----.htm) entry in Encyclopædia Britannica by [Peter Singer](/wiki/Peter_Singer)
* [The Philosophy of Ethics](http://www.philosophyarchive.com/index.php?title=Philosophy_of_Ethics) on Philosophy Archive
* [Kirby Laing Institute for Christian Ethics](http://www.klice.co.uk/) Resources, events, and research on a range of ethical subjects from a Christian perspective.
* [International Association for Geoethics (IAGETH)](http://icog.es/iageth/)
* [International Association for Promoting Geoethics (IAPG)](http://www.geoethics.org)
* [Markkula Center for Applied Ethics at Santa Clara University](http://www.scu.edu/ethics/) Resources for analyzing real-world ethical issues and tools to address them.
* [What Is Ethics?](http://studybuddhism.com/en/buddhism-in-daily-life/what-is/what-is-ethics) by Matt Lindén on [Study Buddhism](http://studybuddhism.com)

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