**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. It’s 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 physical discrimination, 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 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 Meta ethics).

The basic questions asked in Ethics include:

What does it mean to be good? How can I differentiate good from evil? Are morals objective or subjective?

**Descriptive, Normative and Analytic Ethics**

Categorizing Ethics & Morality

The field of ethics is usually broken down into three different ways of thinking about ethics: descriptive, normative and analytic. It isn't unusual for disagreements in debates over ethics to arise because people are approaching the topic from a different one of these three categories. Thus, learning what they are and how to recognize them might save you some grief later.

**Descriptive Ethics**

What are our ethical values?

The category of descriptive ethics is the easiest to understand - it simply involves **describing** how 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?

Here are some examples of statements from Descriptive Ethics:

1. Most Americans think that racism is wrong.

2. Stanley Milgram's study found a great discrepancy between what people claimed and what they actually did.

**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 **should** do 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?

Here are some examples of statements from Normative Ethics:

1. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. (Golden Rule)

2. Act as if the maxim of your action was to become through your will a universal law of nature. (Kant's Categorical Imperative)

3. That which God wills is the Good.

**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. Nevertheless, it is discussed independently often enough that it deserves its own discussion here.

Basically, metaethics 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.

According to one view, called emotivism, the statement "murder is wrong" does not actually express an objective claim about the world. It is, instead, a negative emotional reaction to the act of murder - not entirely unlike a cry of pain. Such an expression might be characterized as appropriate or inappropriate, but it cannot be characterized as either true or false any more than a laugh can be true or false. Thus, when I say "X is immoral," I am not just expressing my emotional reaction to X, but I am also trying to get you to share that reaction with me.

The reason why some question whether or not metaethics should it be its own pursuit is because many feel that these questions should already have been discussed and debated as part of the development of the moral system in question. However, philosophers spend enough time discussing these questions independent of any specific moral system that this objection is not as strong as it seems.

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?

**Ethics: Descriptive, Normative and Analytic**

**Examples**

Here are a couple of examples which should help make the difference between descriptive, normative and analytic ethics even more clear.

1. Descriptive: Different societies have different moral standards.

2. Normative: This action **is** wrong in this society, but it **is right** in another.

3. Analytic: Morality is relative.

All of these statements are about ethical relativism, the idea that moral standards differ from person to person or from society to society. In *descriptive* ethics, it is simply observed that different societies have different standards - this is a true and factual statement which offers no judgments or conclusions. In *normative* ethics, a conclusion is drawn from the observation made above, namely that some action **is wrong** in one society and **is right** in another. This is a **normative** claim because it goes beyond simply observing that this action is **treated** as wrong in one place and **treated** as right in another. In *analytic* ethics, an even broader conclusion is drawn from the above, namely that the very nature of morality is that it is relative. This position argues that there are no moral standards independent of our social groups, and hence whatever a social group decides is right **is** right and whatever it decides is wrong **is** wrong - there is nothing "above" the group to which we can appeal in order to challenge those standards.

1. Descriptive: People tend to make decisions which bring pleasure or avoid pain.

2. Normative: The moral decision is that which enhances well-being and limits suffering.

3. Analytic: Morality is simply a system for helping humans stay happy and alive.

All of these statements refer to the moral philosophy commonly known as utilitarianism. The first, from *descriptive* ethics, simply makes the observation that when it comes to making moral choices, people have a tendency to go with whatever option makes them feel better or, at the very least, they avoid whichever option causes them problems or pain. This observation may or may not be true, but it does not attempt to derive any conclusions as to how people **should** behave.

The second statement, from *normative* ethics, does attempt to derive a normative conclusion - namely, that the most moral choices **are** those which tend to enhance our well-being, or at the very least limit our pain and suffering. This represents an attempt to create a moral standard, and as such, must be treated differently from the observation made previously.

The third statement, from *analytic* ethics, draws yet a further conclusion based upon the previous two, this one about the very nature of morality itself. Instead of arguing, as in the previous example, that morals are all relative, this one makes a claim about the purpose of morals - namely, that moral exist simply to keep us happy and alive.