

Dimensions of Ethics

Socrates as recorded in Plato's dialogues, is customarily regarded as the Father of Western Ethics. He asserted that people will naturally do what is good provided that they know what is right, and that evil or bad actions are purely the result of ignorance. "There is only one good, knowledge, and one evil, ignorance". He equated knowledge and wisdom with self-awareness (meaning to be aware of every fact relevant to a person's existence) and virtue and happiness. So, in essence, he considered self-knowledge and self-awareness to be the essential good, because the truly wise (i.e. self-aware) person will know what is right, do what is good, and therefore be happy. There are some approaches illustrating various dimensions of ethics-

A. Cynicism is an ancient doctrine best exemplified by the Greek philosopher Diogenes of Sinope. He taught that a life lived according to Nature was better than one that conformed to convention, and that a simple life is essential to virtue and happiness. As a moral teacher, Diogenes emphasized detachment from many of those things conventionally considered "good".

B. Hedonism posits that the principal of ethics is maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain. This may range from those advocating self-gratification, regardless of the pain and expense to others and with no thought for the future. Hedonism is a school of thought that argues that pleasure is the only intrinsic good. Ethical hedonism is the idea that all people have the right to do everything in their power to achieve the greatest amount of pleasure possible to them.

The Stoic philosopher Epictetus posited that the greatest good was contentment, serenity and peace of mind, which can be achieved by self-mastery over one's desires and emotions, and freedom from material attachments. In particular, sex and sexual desire are to be avoided as the greatest threat to integrity and equilibrium of a man's mind. According to Epictetus, difficult problems in life should not be avoided, rather embraced as spiritual exercises needed for the health of the spirit. **Epicureanism** is a more moderate approach (which still seeks to maximize happiness, but which defines happiness more as a state of tranquility than pleasure).

C. Pyrrhonia Skepticism taught that one cannot rationally decide that what is good and what is bad although, generally self-interest is the primary motive of human behavior and he was disinclined to rely upon sincerity, virtue or altruism as motivations. Pyrrho said that human senses neither transmits truths nor lie. Humanity can't know the inner substance of things, only how things appear.

D. Humanism, with its emphasis on the dignity and worth of all people and their ability to determine right and wrong purely by appeal to universal human qualities.

E. Normative Ethics

Normative Ethics (or Prescriptive Ethics) is the branch of ethics concerned with establishing how things should or ought to be, how to value them, which things are good or bad, and which actions are right or wrong. It attempts to develop a set of rules governing human conduct, or a set of norms for action.

Normative ethical theories are usually split into three main categories:

(I) **Consequentialism** (or **Teleological Ethics**) argues that the morality of an action is contingent with the actions outcome or result. Thus, a morally right action is one that produces a good outcome or consequence. Consequentialist theories must consider questions like- what sort of consequences count as good consequences?, Who is the primary beneficiary of moral action?, How are the consequences judged and who judges them?

(II) **Deontology** is an approach to ethics that focuses on the rightness or wrongness of actions themselves, as opposed to the rightness or wrongness of the consequences of those actions. It argues that decisions should be made considering the factors of one's duties and other's rights (the Greek 'Deon' means 'obligation' or 'duty'). Deontological ethics has also been called "duty" or "obligation" based ethics.

(III) **Virtue Ethics** focuses on the inherent character of a person rather than on the nature or consequences of specific actions performed. The system identifies virtues (those habits and behaviors that will allow a person to achieve "eudemonia", or well being or a good life), counsels practical wisdom to resolve any conflicts between virtues, and claims that a life-time of practicing these virtues leads to, or in effect constitutes happiness and the good life.

Ethics of Care was developed mainly by Feminist writers, and calls for a change in how we view morality and the virtues, shifting towards the more marginalized virtues exemplified by women, such as taking care of others, patience, the ability to nurture, self-sacrifice etc.

F. Meta-Ethics

Meta-Ethics is concerned primarily with the meaning of ethical judgments, and seeks to understand the nature of ethical properties, statements, attitudes, and how they may be supported or defended. A meta- ethical theory, unlike a normative ethical theory does not attempt to evaluate specific choices as being better, worse, good, bad or evil; rather it tries to define the essential meaning and nature of the problem being discussed. It concerns itself with second order questions, specifically the semantics, epistemology and ontology of ethics.

The major Meta ethical views are commonly divided into two variants:

1. **Moral Realism** (or **Moral Objectivism**) holds that there are objective moral values, so that evaluative statements are essentially factual claims, which are either true or false, and that their truth or falsity are independent of our beliefs, feelings or other attitudes towards the things being evaluated. It is a cognitivist view in that it holds that ethical sentences express valid propositions and are therefore truth-apt.
2. **Moral Anti-Realism** holds that there are no objective moral values, and comes in one of three forms, depending on whether ethical statements are believed to be subjective claims (Ethical Subjectivism), not genuine claims at all (Non-Cognitivism) or mistaken objective claims (Moral Nihilism or Moral Skepticism):

Ethical Subjectivism: which holds that there are no objective moral properties and that moral statements are made true or false by the attitudes and/or conventions of the observers, or that any ethical sentence merely implies an attitude, opinion, personal preference or feeling held by someone.

Moral nihilism or Skepticism: which holds that no one has any moral knowledge (or the stronger claim that no one can have any moral knowledge)? It is particularly opposed to Moral Realism.

An alternative division of meta-ethical views is between:

- a. **Moral Absolutism:** The ethical belief that there are absolute standards against which moral questions can be judged, and that certain actions are right or wrong, regardless of the context of the act.
- b. **Moral Universalism:** The meta-ethical position that there is a universal ethic which applies to all people, regardless of culture, race, sex, religion, nationality, sexuality or other distinguishing feature, and all the time.
- c. **Moral Relativism:** The position that moral or ethical propositions do not reflect objective and/or universal moral truths, but instead make claims relative to social, cultural, historical or personal circumstances.

G. Descriptive Ethics

Descriptive Ethics is a value-free approach to ethics which examines ethics from the perspective of observation of actual choices made by moral agents in practice. It is of people's beliefs about morality and value are conduct. It is not designed to provide guidance to people in making moral decisions, nor is it evaluate the reasonableness of moral norms

Descriptive Ethics is sometimes referred to as Comparative Ethics (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.

H. Applied Ethics

Applied Ethics is a discipline of philosophy that attempts to apply ethical theory to real-life situations. Strict, principle-based ethical approaches often result in solutions to specific problems that are not universally acceptable or impossible to implement. Applied Ethics is much more ready to include the insights of psychology, sociology and other relevant areas of knowledge in its deliberations. It is used in determining public policy.

The following would be questions of Applied Ethics: “Is getting an abortion immoral?”, “Is euthanasia immoral?”, “Is affirmative action right or wrong?”, “What are human rights, and how do we determine them?” and “Do animals have rights as well?”

Some topics falling within the Applied Ethics Include:

Medical Ethics: the study of moral values and judgments as they apply to medicine historically, Western medical ethics may be traced to guidelines on the duty of physicians in antiquity, such as the Hippocratic Oath (at its simplest, “to practice and prescribe the best of my ability for the good of my patients, and to try to avoid harming them). Six of the values that commonly apply to medical ethics discussions are: **Beneficence** (a practitioner should act in the best interest of the patient, **Non- maleficence** (“first, do no harm”), **Autonomy** (the patient has the right to refuse or choose their treatment), **Justice** (concerning the distribution of scarce health resources, and the decision of who gets what treatment), **Dignity** (both the patient and the practitioner have the right to dignity), **Honesty** (truthfulness and respect for the concept of informed consent).

Bioethics: concerns the ethical controversies brought about by advances in biology and medicine. Public attention was drawn to these questions by abuses of human subjects in biomedical experiments, especially during the Second World War, but with recent advances in bio-technology, bioethics has become a fast-growing academic and professional area of inquiry. Issues include consideration of cloning, stem cell research, transplant’ trade, genetically modified food, human genetic engineering, genomics, infertility treatment, etc, etc

Legal Ethics: an ethical code governing the conduct of people engaged in the practice of law. Model rules usually address the client-lawyer relationship, duties of a lawyer as advocate in adversary proceedings, dealings with persons other than clients, law firms and associations, public service, advertising and maintaining the integrity of the profession. Respect of client confidences, candor toward the tribunal, truthfulness in statements to others, and professional independence are some of the defining features of legal ethics.

Business Ethics: examines ethical principles and moral or ethical problems that can arise in a business environment. This includes Corporate Social Responsibility, a concept whereby organizations consider the interests of society by taking responsibility for the impact of their activities on customers, employees, shareholders, communities and the environment in all aspects of their operations, over and above the statutory obligation to comply with legislation.

Environmental Ethics: considers the ethical relationship between human beings and the natural environment. It addresses questions like “Should we continue to clear cut forests for the sake of human consumption?”, “Should we continue to make gasoline powered vehicles, depleting fossil fuel resources while the technology exists to create zero- emission vehicles?”, “What environmental obligations do we need to keep for future generations?”, “Is it right for humans to knowingly cause the extinction of a species for the (perceived or real) convenience of humanity?”

Information Ethics: investigates the ethical issues arising from the development and application of computers and information technologies. It is concerned with issues like the privacy of information, how one should behave in the info sphere, .and ownership and copyright problems arising from the creation, collection, recording, distribution, processing, etc, of information.