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What is Ethics?

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Ethics is based on well-founded standards of right and wrong that prescribe what humans ought to do, usually in terms of rights, obligations, benefits to society, fairness, or specific virtues.

Some years ago, sociologist Raymond Baumhart asked business people, "What does ethics mean to you?" Among their replies were the following:

"Ethics has to do with what my feelings tell me is right or wrong."
"Ethics has to do with my religious beliefs."
"Being ethical is doing what the law requires."
"Ethics consists of the standards of behavior our society accepts."
"I don't know what the word means."

These replies might be typical of our own. The meaning of "ethics" is hard to pin down, and the views many people have about ethics are shaky.

Like Baumhart's first respondent, many people tend to equate ethics with their feelings. But being ethical is clearly not a matter of following one's feelings. A person following his or her feelings may recoil from doing what is right. In fact, feelings frequently deviate from what is ethical.

Nor should one identify ethics with religion. Most religions, of course, advocate high ethical standards. Yet if ethics were confined to religion, then ethics would apply only to religious people. But ethics applies as much to the behavior of the atheist as to that of the devout religious person. Religion can set high ethical standards and can provide intense motivations for ethical behavior. Ethics, however, cannot be confined to religion nor is it the same as religion.

Being ethical is also not the same as following the law. The law often incorporates ethical standards to which most citizens subscribe. But laws, like feelings, can deviate from what is ethical. Our own pre-Civil War slavery laws and the old apartheid laws of present-day South Africa are grotesquely obvious examples of laws that deviate from what is ethical.

Finally, being ethical is not the same as doing "whatever society accepts." In any society, most people accept standards that are, in fact, ethical. But standards of behavior in society can deviate from what is ethical. An entire society can become ethically corrupt. Nazi Germany is a good example of a morally corrupt society.

Moreover, if being ethical were doing "whatever society accepts," then to find out what is ethical, one would have to find out what society accepts. To decide what I should think about abortion, for example, I would have to take a survey of American society and then conform my beliefs to whatever society accepts. But no one ever tries to decide an ethical issue by doing a survey. Further, the lack of social consensus on many issues makes it impossible to equate ethics with whatever society accepts. Some people accept abortion but many others do not. If being ethical were doing whatever society accepts, one would have to find an agreement on issues which does not, in fact, exist.

What, then, is ethics? Ethics is two things. First, ethics refers to well-founded standards of right and wrong that prescribe what humans ought to do, usually in terms of rights, obligations, benefits to society, fairness, or specific virtues. Ethics, for example, refers to those standards that impose the reasonable obligations to refrain from rape, stealing, murder, assault, slander, and fraud. Ethical standards also include those that enjoin virtues of honesty, compassion, and loyalty. And, ethical standards include standards relating to rights, such as the right to life, the right to freedom from injury, and the right to privacy. Such standards are adequate standards of ethics because they are supported by consistent and well-founded reasons.

Secondly, ethics refers to the study and development of one's ethical standards. As mentioned above, feelings, laws, and social norms can deviate from what is ethical. So it is necessary to constantly examine one's standards to ensure that they are reasonable and well-founded. Ethics also means, then, the continuous effort of studying our own moral beliefs and our moral conduct, and striving to ensure that we, and the institutions we help to shape, live up to standards that are reasonable and solidly-based.

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being a student of Social Ethcs, I find this article very instructive.
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Ethics is imposed.
Morality is personal.
You all make this way too complicated.

One is a personal opinion on values. The other is a set of impositions to force people into supporting values and standards, even if they do not personally agree with them. Hence, why there are ethical codes for clergymen, police, doctors, lawyers, etcetera.

Basically what happens when a man personally feels he does not have to serve cake to a gay couple. That's his moral belief. Ethics says he must, whether he likes it or not. I've also met plenty of people who think all cops are bad cops by virtue of being an inherent institutional evil. They'll also probably obey the law 99% of the time.

You might then argue that there is no way to objectively determine right or wrong. That's not a real problem. That's just the human condition. People disagree on what must be valued. This is normal and natural. Else all politics would already be a solved game.
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Ethics is the moral fiber that you carry and represent on a consistent day to day basis.
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Put it in simple words, Ethics is the study of what is morally right and what is not
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Andi Marquez • 10 months ago

This was well thought out, I enjoyed reading it, thank you.

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Artemus Quarrels • a month ago

As a philosopher, I'll point out that the authors get many things right, but are ultimately very confused.

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Ethics, philosophy, and psychology, oh my!
Let us begin by declaring that ethics relate to other learned things such as politics, psychology, sociology, philosophy, skilled trades, bakers, Doctors, lawyers, and the church (religion). They all have principles and precepts that are spoken very clearly in each perspective as code or, standards of how things are supposed to be done. Ethics are found in each of these learned things. Ethics is more than the do's and don'ts. In fact, before licensing any of these and a whole lot more of job standards. One must show competency in operating in these guide lines. Some have penalties that one could lose their licensing if they break these codes or laws.
Ethics according to, Ethics IIE V1 N1 (Fall 1987). Revised in 2010. Ethics is based on well-founded standards of right and wrong that prescribe what humans ought to do, usually in terms of rights, obligations, benefits to society, fairness, or specific virtues.

Pastor EI, EI OH, Ethics are connected to philosophy as accepted

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Wandile Chamane • 4 months ago • edited

When you cannot teach right and wrong. Ethics become the foundation of reason.

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