

Philosophy and Ethics

We all have beliefs and opinions that shape our lives. We often *do* philosophy when we question our assumptions and demand clear meanings, and we can do it without reference to grand theories or technical jargon. However, arguments often grind to a halt and become a contest of wills unless we look more closely at some of the ways people come to their opinions and link them to various conclusions.

WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY?

Philosophy is both an activity and a body of knowledge. Philosophers are rarely content to accept the status quo at face value. We want to know not so much how far we've gone in quantifiable terms, but instead whether we are on the right track. It would be wrong, though, to think that philosophers agonize over every decision and policy constantly—that would make everyday life impossible. However, we sometimes face serious issues, individually and as a society, when it is appropriate to take the time to reflect on what we are doing and why. Thankfully, many great thinkers have contributed to a body of knowledge that will help us sort out questions that vex us at this very fundamental level. Not everyone has to dedicate his or her life to philosophy, but it offers tools to help us confront and resolve some of life's most difficult problems—or to recognize more clearly what makes them so troublesome.

The discipline of philosophy is often associated with the seminal thinker Socrates (ca. 470–399 BCE). At one point, Socrates angered the city fathers of Athens so much that they put him on trial for his life on the charge of subverting the youth. According to the Plato's dialogue *The Apology*, Socrates' response was telling:

For if you kill me you will not easily find another like me, who, if I may use such a ludicrous figure of speech, am a sort of gadfly, given to the state by God; and the state is like a great and noble steed who is tardy in his motions owing to his very size, and requires to be stirred into life. I am that gadfly which God has given to the state and all day long and in all places am always fastening upon you, arousing and persuading and reproaching you.¹

¹Plato, *The Apology*, 30e

His point is that we can maintain the way things are, but there is value in revisiting our working beliefs. This is true especially when we face novel or difficult issues.

One function of philosophy, then, is to critically examine basic concepts and ideas, and their wider implications for everyday life. By providing us with the analytical framework to examine ideas and competing claims, philosophy allows us to see if they are valid and justified. For example, one theory of justice suggests that we should help those who are unable to benefit from the virtues of the “genetic lottery”—intelligence, health, aptitudes, and even the capacity to do hard work. In other words, the theory suggests we have a responsibility to help others who have, through no fault of their own, a more difficult struggle to survive and prosper. A contrasting theory, however, says that we are entitled to whatever we earn and we don’t owe anything to anyone else. By this reasoning, if we are able to use our genetic gifts to generate wealth, we *could* help others, but doing so remains our individual choice.

When we look at these sorts of claims more closely, we realize that there is more going on than a simple matter of arbitrarily choosing this or that theory. If we explore the basic assumptions people make, then we have the possibility of finding areas of agreement and at the same time testing whether our own intuitions lead clearly to the conclusions we draw. For instance, it might seem obvious at first that we are entitled to what we earn and should spend it how we wish, but it turns out that people disagree about notions of property, ownership, and the scope of personal choice. Engaging in open dialogue with others, analyzing their reasoning and evaluating our own, challenges us to explain and justify our views and perhaps revise them if our logic or basic beliefs are somehow faulty.

Philosophy may not give us the means to reach conclusive answers—in fact, it frequently raises more questions than it resolves. On the other hand, it raises the standard of justification from **assertion** to **argument**. An assertion declares something without any support or need for justification. An argument is a connected series of claims leading to a conclusion, and when we proceed to examine every step in the series, we find that each individual claim may be true or false, or the links between them may be invalid. In philosophy all assumptions are up for reexamination. For instance, if we talk about why we should keep our earnings, we have to consider what it means to have the right to property and if that comes about by virtue of the society in which we live. Additionally, we might consider our duties to others and whether our ability to earn has a consequent responsibility to help the less fortunate.

Philosophers contend that it is always worth reflecting on our foundational beliefs and the way they play out in our actions. As Socrates famously observed:

The life which is unexamined is not worth living.²

While this phrase can be read in many ways, it chides us to reflect on our purpose and goals in life. We can go along from day-to-day, but it suggests that perhaps the best life is one where we have taken the time and effort to think deeply about what we do and why. Philosophy as a discipline gives us structure and tools that will enable us to do that well.

These tools include **logic**, which enables us to examine our reasoning to ensure it is consistent and reaches valid conclusions; the **history of philosophy**, which allows us to look at the works of philosophers across ages and cultures so we don’t have to constantly reinvent material that has been refined through discussion and criticism over many years, sometimes centuries;

²Plato, *The Apology*, 38a

metaphysics, which deals with issues not readily addressed by science, such as whether we are minds and souls as well as bodies; **epistemology**, or the study of knowledge, which challenges us to defend that we really know what we claim to know.

WHAT IS ETHICS?

We can initially define **ethics** as the study of the origin and scope of the language of **morality**. **Morals** are the values that may derive from a theory or set of principles that concern good and bad, right and wrong, justice and fairness.

Ethics can be construed as theorizing about the proper regulating mechanisms for our behavior. It tells us what to aspire to and also constrains our actions. It is informed by psychological elements, for example, sympathy, generosity, compassion, kindness, concern for others, or even revenge or outrage. However, these traits can lead to confusing and sometimes conflicting impulses, and thus it is useful to codify them in some way. We can do that by using the power of reasoning to work out priorities, make our actions consistent and predictable, and communicate our ideas of right and wrong, and justice and fairness to others.

There are continuing debates about the origins and mix of our dispositions and reason: Some say that we can see the hand of the divine that allows us to rise above our animal nature, whereas others think that ethical practices are evidence of our evolution as a species. For the present we can put those debates aside and recognize that all human societies exhibit morality, for example, cooperation, child care, and the importance of keeping promises. Moreover, we not only have those traits but also are capable of critiquing and improving our behavior and perhaps that of others as well.

WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENT SENSES OF ETHICS?

In daily language we use the term **ethical** in a variety of ways. Sometimes when we talk about an ethical person or discuss others doing something ethical, the connotation is that a person is doing something unusual and praiseworthy. For example, we may use the term to refer to people who do deeds such as serving at a soup kitchen, as if their actions are somehow distinctly heroic or saintly. We might suspect they are content with either less material wealth or less free time than we are, or perhaps they were born with an exceptional disposition to serve others. The problem with this view is that it makes ethics remote and something which applies only to a select few, with the implication that the rest of us need not aspire to behave or act any better than we already do.

In contrast, we can consider a compelling alternative by treating moral decisions in a broad sense as just as much a part of our lives as any other choices. We are not born with a full-fledged sense of right and wrong, but we learn through trial and error as we mature, and even people who do admirable deeds have inevitably made mistakes along the way. Thus, it is not a matter of such people living in a different reality of personal martyrdom or misguided notions of happiness. Rather, some people simply put more weight on certain values than others. Morality, then, should not be seen as some sort of special state for some individual saints in special situations, but as a common dimension of the regular choices we all face routinely.

When we live day-to-day, we probably don't ordinarily distinguish moral questions from all others, deciding in each such case whether to be good or bad. More typically we judge people on their moral consistency in various situations and fault them if they adapt their values to changing circumstances around them. Thus rather than thinking of moral actions as things like

working in a soup kitchen, a more suitable model of morality might be to say that moral elements are mixed in with everything we do. We make choices all the time using a constellation of factors, one of which will be the morality of the issue. The moral aspect isn't always at the forefront and has to compete with other impulses and considerations.

Consider when you buy soap; it probably matters that it is effective, smells good, and is priced reasonably. The question of whether the manufacturer made animals suffer unnecessarily in testing the product may come into the decision, but it has to battle with the other considerations. Perhaps if the concern has been highlighted in the media, or you as the buyer are particularly sensitive to the issue, it will tip your purchasing decision. The point remains that for most of us morality is not a separate and isolated activity, but part and parcel of our regular existence and the various choices we make.

A narrower sense of *ethical* describes a set of rules or conventions within a specialized field. Thus some institutions or professions have “codes of ethics.” These codes tend to give specific rules about particular situations in which members might find themselves. For example, a doctor is prohibited by his or her professional organization from having a romantic relationship with a patient, or an accountant doing an audit cannot invest in a company when he or she has discovered insider information not available to the general public. Significantly, although the doctor/patient relationship is a special and privileged one in our society, it is important to realize that medical ethics is *not* a distinct morality with a completely different set of governing principles. Instead it operates as a special case that overlies a general backdrop of principled behavior, such as telling the truth or treating patients fairly. That is, we work from the very widest sense of common ethics first, and then narrow it down to deal with ever more special circumstances. Hence, it is important to begin by understanding the broad picture about the way individuals and communities have reasoned about the proper ways to treat one another.

Seeing ethics only in a narrow sense may lead to two important misunderstandings. The first suggests that we have different sets of behavior for the various compartments of our lives—business, friendship, romance, and so forth. Someone with this approach might claim that we should behave differently in particular situations—“all is fair in love and war” or “business is business,” where all morality depends on the situation. While this might be true in some limited spheres, it demands that the individual knows where the boundaries of each compartment are, and that everyone involved has a shared knowledge of the appropriate practices. Thus we expect to be fooled by a magician, perhaps, but in general we operate with background conditions of trust and honesty. In normal interpersonal dealings, we anticipate that we aren't routinely being lied to or constantly duped. As it turns out, moral infractions are dramatic in large part *because* they depart from the shared expectations we have and use in our everyday lives. To illustrate the point, imagine, for instance, what a world would be like where no one could ever be trusted and everything had to be policed constantly.

Second, a narrow view implies that ethics is an external set of rules that we are required to follow, and slavishly doing so discharges our moral responsibility. If this were true, then being ethical would just consist in knowing the rules and obeying them. It would not allow the individual to question values enshrined in the code. In contrast, most of us have significant freedom and discretion in the way we behave, and there is considerable latitude in the interpretation and application of the rules we live by. Even voluntarily joining a rule-oriented organization such as the military or a religious order involves initial assent by recruits, which represents their individual moral choice.

Taking an expansive view at the outset creates a baseline of mutual understandings which can then be refined or made more specific as necessary. Philosophy and ethics provide powerful resources for navigating both the more difficult fundamental questions and problems we face, and subsequently for those decisions we make in our regular activities, interactions, and relationships.

CAN ETHICS GIVE US ANSWERS?

A complaint about philosophy in general and especially ethics is that it does not provide us with answers. This suggests that the goal of ethics is to come up with a computer-style algorithm where we feed in the facts and issues and get a neat answer to our problems in return.

While this has considerable appeal, think about what it would be like if we had this ability. When faced with a value question, we would fill in some sort of questionnaire, feed it into some impersonal machine, and then follow its commands to the letter. Suppose, for example, we are puzzled about whether to use our limited resources to either provide medical care or install traffic lights at an intersection. Both have the potential to save some lives and the cost is roughly the same. We could vaccinate a large population and ensure that, say, five people would not get a deadly disease. Alternatively, we could install traffic signals likely to prevent most accidents in a location that has claimed roughly the same number of fatalities over the last few years. We go to our computerized program, respond to a series of prompts on a screen, and get the response to use the money for vaccinations.

But how does that make you feel? Would you be comfortable delegating your moral decisions to a third party? In effect, that is what we are asking if we demand a definitive answer for each case we encounter.

First, we might legitimately worry that all factors haven't been included in the decision: An automated questionnaire may fail to consider all the relevant factors. Perhaps the vaccine has its own associated risks, for instance, and these need to be brought into the deliberations. Or perhaps some people may feel that there is a morally relevant difference between acting and failing to act, although the results may be the same; these concerns would need to be factored in somehow. Indeed, however we structure the formulaic questions around a moral issue, there is always a nagging feeling that there is more to be asked to pin down the most important aspects of a case at hand.

Moreover, we might be concerned about the way the computer was programmed. What assumptions were made, or what approaches were chosen if there were two or more opposing viewpoints? A program might give more weight to some factors than others, or make logical links between issues that we might dismiss as unimportant. The software could, for example, give great importance to the fact that drivers have responsibility for their driving, whereas it is hard to blame someone for catching a virus. Still, such a link isn't completely self-evident and universally accepted. Even if the machine had flawless logic, we would still likely have some objections to the guiding principles it uses to reach its conclusions.

One recurring theme in ethical thinking is that you are ultimately responsible for your own moral decisions, and there is rarely someone else better suited to make them on your behalf. Consequently ethical theory does not do the work for you—it is a tool that gives an analytical framework to help make appropriate distinctions and discover some of the more subtle areas in a moral argument. Hence it won't, by itself, provide answers, and perhaps it is the process of thinking through a problem that emerges as the most valuable part of reaching a suitable answer.

Theory will help provide the critical questions about which factors ought to be considered in our decisions, what sort of principles ought to direct our behavior, and how we should act.

Summary

Ethical theory is tremendously helpful when we form our arguments and conclusions. Eventually we may adopt a specific theory completely, or we may choose to draw elements from several established theories, or we may combine some of their insights to create something new and unique. Whatever approach we take, studying ethics will enhance our thinking, giving us a theoretical conceptual apparatus with practical implications. Thus clarifying the questions and discovering what an adequate answer will look like are the least we can expect from studying philosophy. At its best, it can provide us with new perspectives and a richer understanding of the world and our place in it.

As we go through life, we will encounter moral issues. We will inevitably need to make choices or take stands one way or another. We are all individually responsible for choices we make and for the consequences of our personal philosophical views and actions. Good argument takes the time to lay out the groundwork and various positions involved, and experience suggests that it is therefore wise to give time to reflection and balanced consideration about what constitutes right and wrong before we make important decisions unreflectively in the heat of the moment.