

## A. The Three Main Branches of the Philosophical Study of Ethics

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1. *Meta-ethics*
2. *Normative Ethics*
3. *Applied Ethics*

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B. *Meta-ethics* consists in the attempt to answer the fundamental philosophical questions about the nature of ethical theory itself.

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Examples:

1. Are ethical statements such as "lying is wrong", or "friendship is good" true or false?
  - a) **cognitivism**: the view that moral judgments are capable of being true or false
  - b) **non-cognitivism**: the view that moral judgments are not capable of being true or false (instead they are like commands or interjections)
  - c) debate limited to statements like examples above  
NOT statements like "Most Catholics oppose abortion"

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B. *Meta-ethics* consists in the attempt to answer the fundamental philosophical questions about the nature of ethical theory itself.

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Examples:

2. Assuming there are truths of morality, what sorts of facts make them true?
  - a) **subjectivism**: the view that moral truths are subjective, i.e., dependent upon the subjective attitudes, values, desires and beliefs of individuals, not on anything external to these things.
  - b) **objectivism**: the view that moral truths are objective, i.e., based on facts that are independent of the attitudes, values, desires and beliefs of any individual.

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B. *Meta-ethics* consists in the attempt to answer the fundamental philosophical questions about the nature of ethical theory itself.

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Examples:

3. What makes ethical discourse meaningful?  
Is it different from what makes other sorts of discourse meaningful?
4. How do the rules of logic apply to ethical arguments and ethical reasoning?  
Is it possible to validly infer a moral conclusion based on non-moral premises?

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Examples:

5. Assuming we have any, what is the source of our *knowledge* of moral truths?  
Is it based on reason, intuition, scientific experimentation or something else?
6. What is the connection (if any) between morality and religion?  
If God exists, is God's will the basis of morality?  
Can there be morality if God doesn't exist?

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C. Normative ethics is the study of what makes actions right or wrong, what makes situations or events good or bad and what makes people virtuous or vicious.

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1. **Axiology**: the study of goodness and badness.  
Some theories:
  - a) **hedonism**: the theory that pleasure and the absence of pain are the only things that are good in and of themselves
  - b) **desire satisfactionism**: the theory that the satisfaction of someone's desire is the only sort of thing that is good in and of itself
  - c) **non-naturalism**: the theory that being good is a simple property that is irreducible or indefinable in terms of anything else

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C. Normative ethics is the study of what makes actions right or wrong, what makes situations or events good or bad and what makes people virtuous or vicious.

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2. **Normative ethics of behavior:** the study of right and wrong. Some theories:

a) **egoism:** the theory that an action is right if and only if it has the best consequences for the person doing it

b) **utilitarianism:** the theory that an action is right if and only if its consequences are optimal, i.e., it produces the best balance of goodness over badness for *everyone* involved

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C. Normative ethics is the study of what makes actions right or wrong, what makes situations or events good or bad and what makes people virtuous or vicious.

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2. **Normative ethics of behavior:** the study of right and wrong. Some theories:

c) **Kantian deontology:** the theory that an action is right if and only if the person performing the act could consistently will that the act become a universal law

d) there are many other theories in addition to these

3. **Virtue theory,** the study of what makes a person's character morally praiseworthy

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D. Applied ethics consists in the attempt to answer difficult moral questions actual people face in their lives.

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For example:

1. Is abortion always morally wrong?
2. Is euthanasia always morally wrong?
3. What about the death penalty?  
sex before marriage?  
so-called "white lies"?  
being gay or lesbian?  
fighting in a war?  
using rough interrogation tactics on criminals?  
eating meat?  
using illegal drugs? ETC.

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E. The difference between normative ethics and applied ethics:

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1. Normative ethics studies *what features make* an action right or wrong.  
Applied ethics attempts to figure out, in actual cases, whether or not certain acts have those features.
2. If we agree that slavery is wrong...  
but disagree about *what makes it wrong*...  
...then our disagreement is a matter of normative ethics.
3. If we agree that morality is whatever produces the best consequences...  
but disagree about whether the death penalty produces the best consequences...  
...then our disagreement is a matter of applied ethics.

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## F. The Goal of Axiology

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1. Axiology studies what makes things good (or have value) or bad (or have disvalue)
2. A distinction is made between:
  - Intrinsic good:** good in and of itself (inherently good)
  - Extrinsic good:** good because it can be used to obtain other things that are good (instrumentally good)
    - a) E.g., *having money* is extrinsically good
    - b) If money could not be used to obtain other things, money would have no value

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## F. The Goal of Axiology

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3. Much of axiology investigates what things are intrinsically good
  - a) Many believe that *pleasure* has intrinsic value
  - b) It is good whether or not it leads to anything else
  - c) Does anything else have intrinsic value?
    - knowledge?
    - friendship?
    - love?
  - d) Some things might be both intrinsically and extrinsically good

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## F. The Goal of Axiology

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4. A distinction can also be made between things that are intrinsically bad or extrinsically bad
  - a) pain is intrinsically bad
  - b) Drug use is probably only extrinsically bad; if it didn't have bad consequences it wouldn't be bad
5. Some things can be both intrinsically good but extrinsically bad  
(e.g., the pleasure taken in unprotected sex)
6. Other things can be both intrinsically bad but extrinsically good  
(e.g., pain from exercise)

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## F. The Goal of Axiology

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7. Related questions:
  - a) Is there a fact of the matter as to which is worse: my headache or your toothache?
  - b) Are certain kinds of pleasure better than others?
  - c) What is the relationship between goodness and badness?  
Is badness just the absence of goodness, or is it something distinct?

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## G. The Goal of the Normative Ethics of Behavior

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1. Primary question: What makes actions right or wrong?

2. An important distinction:

an **act type** is a category of actions

an **act token** is a specific action performed by a specific person on a specific occasion

a) *Jaywalking* is an act type

b) my act of *jaywalking across North Pleasant Street on my way to campus this morning at 10:37am* is an act token

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## G. The Goal of the Normative Ethics of Behavior

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c) Two different people can each perform actions of the same type

I can jaywalk at the same time that you jaywalk.

d) a given act token will be an instance of many different kinds of act types

The same act token can be an instance of:

(i) jaywalking

(ii) walking

(iii) crossing the street

(iv) doing something before noon

(v) doing something wearing pants

(vi) breaking the law, etc.

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## G. The Goal of the Normative Ethics of Behavior

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3. Most theories focus on the conditions under which an act token is morally right or morally wrong

a) The conditions may refer to what type or types the token is an instance of

b) However, focusing on tokens makes the theory more flexible:

At least it makes it *possible* to hold that one token of a certain type is right while others are wrong.

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## G. The Goal of the Normative Ethics of Behavior

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4. The primary words used are interconnected:

a) Our primary word is **right**:

An act token is right if and only if it is morally permissible, OK, allowable, "all right", or acceptable from the point of view of morality.

b) By definition, a morally **wrong** action is one that is not morally right.

c) By definition, a morally **obligatory** action is that it is morally wrong not to do.

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## G. The Goal of the Normative Ethics of Behavior

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5. Obligatory acts are ones that we *morally* should perform.

This notion of "should" must be distinguished from other notions of "should".

- a) things we *should* or are *obligated* to do by the law
- b) “ “ “ “ “ by etiquette
- c) “ “ “ “ “ by prudence
- d) “ “ “ “ “ by the rules or strategy of some game we play, etc.

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## G. The Goal of the Normative Ethics of Behavior

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6. N.E.B. looks for a ***criterion*** of moral rightness: something that is both a *necessary and sufficient* condition of a morally right act

- a) X is a **sufficient condition** of Y: this means that something or someone cannot be or do X without being or doing Y
  - being a thief is a sufficient condition for being a criminal (the reverse, however, is not true)
  - getting an A on all assignments and exams is a sufficient condition for passing the course

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## G. The Goal of the Normative Ethics of Behavior

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- b) X is a **necessary condition** of Y: this means that something cannot be or do Y without being/doing X
- being made in France is a necessary condition for being Champagne
  - being 35 years or older is a necessary condition of becoming US President
- c) we are looking for traits of an act that are both necessary and sufficient for it being right.

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## G. The Goal of the Normative Ethics of Behavior

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7. In other words, we are looking for something to fill in the blank in the following:

An act token x is morally right if and only if \_\_\_\_\_.

And not simply to fill in the blanks in one of these

An act token x is morally right if \_\_\_\_\_.  
(sufficient condition for moral rightness) OR

An act token x is morally right only if \_\_\_\_\_.  
(necessary condition for moral rightness)

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## G. The Goal of the Normative Ethics of Behavior

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8. Some example attempts to specify a criterion for rightness:

*10C:* An act is morally right if and only if it does not violate any of the ten commandments.

*GR:* An act is morally right if and only if the person performing it, by performing it, treats others as he/she would have others treat him/herself.

*GHP:* An act is morally right if and only if it leads to the greatest happiness for the greatest number.

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## G. The Goal of the Normative Ethics of Behavior

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9. Two possible ways a criterion may not be adequate:

a) The criterion may not be a sufficient condition for morality.

*An act may have the trait(s) in question and yet not be morally right.*

b) The criterion may not be a necessary condition for morality:

*An act may not have the trait(s) in question and still be morally right*

c) Either sort of problem is called a **counterexample**, an action that shows problems for a given criterion

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