

Ethics at a Glance

Ethics and Morality Defined

Although the words *ethics* and *morality* are often used interchangeably, **morality** is more precisely used to refer to the customs, principles of conduct and moral codes of an individual, group or society. **Ethics**, also termed moral philosophy or the science of morals, is the branch of philosophy that studies morality through the critical examination of right and wrong in human action.

The study of ethics falls into three main areas of focus: metaethics, normative ethics and applied ethics. **Metaethics** is concerned with the very nature of right and wrong, where and how ethical judgments originate, and what they mean in relation to human nature and conduct. For example, questions posed in metaethics include how to define the nature of a good act and whether or not morality exists independently of human beings.

Normative ethics seeks to define specific standards or principles to guide ethical conduct in answer to questions such as what is valuable and how are actions morally assessed and justified. Various normative ethical theories attempt to systematically formulate guidelines to answer the basic question of how one ideally ought to behave in a particular situation. A central challenge of normative ethics is that various theories disagree on the fundamental basis and criteria for ethical analysis and conduct.

Just as the conceptual assumptions of metaethics contribute to the formulation of normative ethics, normative ethics provide a basis for **applied ethics** when employed in the analysis of specific, practical issues. Finally, **descriptive ethics** simply describes the ethical beliefs, norms and behaviors of an individual or group as they actually exist, as opposed to how they ought to exist.

For more on definitions of ethics and morality see:

Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Ethics.
<http://www.iep.utm.edu/e/ethics.htm>