

Why Ethics Matters

Ethics is not simply the study of information or abstract ideas. It asks fundamental questions:

- What does it mean to be human?
- What does it mean to live well?
- How should we act?
- What is the purpose of life?

Because ethics concerns everyday living, it is central to the human experience rather than merely an academic discipline.

Common Misconceptions About Ethics

Ethics as Conflict

Many people avoid ethical discussions because they produce disagreement and tension, especially on controversial issues such as:

- Abortion
- Sexual ethics
- Politics
- End-of-life decisions

Ethics as Interesting Dilemmas

Others think ethics is primarily about difficult hypothetical situations, such as:

- The overloaded lifeboat
- The runaway trolley problem
- Life-support decisions

Dr. Biermann argues these are interesting but do not represent the heart of ethics.

Instead: Ethics is about learning how to live rightly every day.

What Is Ethics?

Ethics comes from the Greek word: **Ethos**: meaning custom, habit, way of living, i.e., the habitual pattern of a person's life.

Ethics and **Morals** (Latin, *mos*) are synonyms

Both refer to how people live and conduct themselves.

Ethics Within Philosophy

Ancient philosophy always included ethics because philosophy sought answers to life's biggest questions:

- Why do we exist?
- What is the purpose of life?
- What does it mean to be human?
- How should we live?

Thus, ethics is **practical** rather than merely theoretical.

Three Major Ethical Approaches

1. Deontological Ethics (Duty)

Greek root: **Deon** = **duty**

Focus: Rules, Commands, Obligations

Examples: Ten Commandments, Moral laws, Ethical codes

Question asked: “Did I do what was required?”

2. Teleological Ethics (Goal)

Greek root: **Telos** = **goal** or **end**

Focus: Results, Outcomes, Consequences

Question asked: “Did my actions produce the desired outcome?”

This approach often appears in **utilitarian ethics** (“the greatest good for the greatest number”).

3. Virtue Ethics

Rather than asking:

- What rule should I follow?
- What result should I achieve?

Virtue ethics asks: “What kind of person should I become?”

The emphasis is on **character** rather than isolated actions.

Aristotle's Four Cardinal Virtues

- 1. Justice:** Giving each person what is rightly due.
- 2. Courage:** The strength to do what is right despite difficulty. (Avoids: Cowardice & Recklessness)
- 3. Temperance:** Self-control. (Includes: Emotional discipline, Self-restraint, Mastery over desires)
- 4. Prudence:** Practical wisdom. (The ability to: Understand situations clearly, Discern the proper course of action, Exercise sound judgment.)

Christian Virtues

The medieval Church retained Aristotle's 4 cardinal virtues and added 3 theological virtues from Scripture:

- 1. Faith**
- 2. Hope**
- 3. Love**

Together they became the traditional **7 Virtues**.

The 7 Virtues and the 7 Deadly Sins developed separately and do not correspond 1-for-1.

Ethics concerns both: **Being** (character of the person) & **Doing** (actions that flow from character)

Healthy ethics cultivates **good people** who **naturally perform good actions**.

The Three Ethical Systems Work Together

Dr. Biermann argues these approaches are NOT mutually exclusive.

A complete ethical framework includes:

- **Duties** (deontology)
- **Goals** (teleology)
- **Character** (virtue)

Each contributes something valuable to moral reasoning.

The Importance of Telos

Every ethical system depends upon its understanding of the **ultimate goal** of human life.

If life's goal is:

- **Pleasure** → ethics will emphasize pleasure.
- **Success** → ethics will emphasize achievement.
- **Self-sacrifice** → ethics will emphasize service.

Therefore, ethics always depends on one's understanding of what it means to be fully human.

Every Community Has an Ethic

Every community develops norms for behavior e.g., Farming communities, Urban neighborhoods, Professional organizations, Families, Churches

Each community defines:

- **Acceptable behavior**
- **Rewards**
- **Consequences**

Ethics is **shaped** by one's community and worldview.

Why Ethical Disagreements Exist

People disagree about ethics because they disagree about deeper questions:

- What is humanity?
- What is life's purpose?
- What is the highest good?

Without agreement on these foundational issues, agreement on ethical behavior is unlikely.

A distinctly **Lutheran ethic** begins with a biblical understanding of what it means to be human.