

Lesson 2

What Is Ethics?

Why do we need to study ethics? What does it mean to be moral? Does culture alone determine what is right and wrong? Should I only do what serves my best self-interests? Can religion play a part in deciding my moral beliefs?

These questions are just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to ethics and morality. When we think about ethics, three thoughts come to mind. First, we understand that ethics are important because they give direction to people and societies who sense that they cannot flourish without being moral. Societies generally want to understand what it takes for our society to become productive. Looking through human history, we can see societies lacking moral direction; ultimately, those societies have failed. From Hitler to Pol Pot to the atrocities in Rwanda during its genocide, when people and societies feel a lack of moral direction, they will not flourish. Second, ethics are crucial because moral questions are at the heart of life's vital issues. We can talk about abortion, death, and war, but we can also look at those daily issues. We make moral decisions daily, sometimes without even thinking about it. But when it comes down to it, the problems we face will be challenged by moral questions. Third, morality is primarily concerned with questions of right and wrong, the ability to distinguish between them, and

the justification of that distinction.¹ There is a lot in that statement. When it comes to issues, many people want to talk about right and wrong and tell you which way it should be. They may say, "Abortion is right, or abortion is wrong." However, as ethics students, we cannot stop there; we must also distinguish between the two and answer why one is right and the other is wrong. It is not enough to say that it is right or wrong; one must justify and provide evidence for why that is so. We want to support our responses by providing the resources and documentation that accompany our answers throughout this course.

So, how do we define ethics? The term ethics has several meanings. It is often used to refer to a set of standards of right and wrong established by a particular group and imposed on its members to regulate and limit their behavior. The word 'ethics' derives from the Greek word *ethos*, meaning "cultural custom or habit." In Latin, 'moral' comes from 'moralis,' which means "custom." While some philosophers will use those two words interchangeably, the author of this text will use those two words differently with distinctive meanings. The term ethics refers to the process of determining right and wrong. In future lessons, we will discuss different ethical frameworks that may help us determine the best way to distinguish right from wrong. This is what we will call moral reasoning.

¹ Why Morality Matters: An Introduction to Ethics... | Zondervan Academic.
<https://zondervanacademic.com/blog/why-morality-matters-introduction-to-ethics-by-scott-rae>

On the other hand, morality refers to the actual content of right and wrong. This is what we will call moral knowledge. Ethics is the first step, while morality results from ethical deliberation.

C.S. Lewis describes the idea of morality in three parts.² He says that the first part is our external relationships. That is how our conduct and actions affect those around us. People say that what they do does not affect or hurt others. But our efforts will impact others around us. Think for a moment about Jean Valjean in *Les Misérables* and his stealing of the bread. Who was affected by that action? His sister, her kids, the bread maker, and possibly others. Our decisions do have an impact on others. Lewis says that, secondly, there is an internal portion to morality. That is what drives and motivates us. We might call these our character traits. In a later lesson, we will look at our virtue characteristics. Those are the internal faculties that motivate us to do what is right. He finishes by saying that morality is about serving proper goals and purposes. This is the overall direction for our lives. This is where moral authority and ethical framework will come into play. Each of these three parts will make up the decision-making process. There are two main subdivisions within the study of ethics: theoretical ethics (Metaethics) and normative ethics. Theoretical Ethics is concerned with assessing the logical foundations and internal consistency of ethical systems. This is the foundation we lay by studying different ethical frameworks.

² C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Harper Collins, 1952). 69-75

Theoretical Ethics can also be referred to as Metaethics. Meta means about or above, and helps us understand the language used in other frameworks. On the other hand, Normative Ethics gives us practical guidelines or behavioral norms. Normative Ethics is the practical side of ethics, or what we will refer to as our morality. It affects our lives at all levels: Personal, interpersonal, social, and environmental. In other words, theoretical or Metaethics is the 'why,' and normative ethics is the 'how.' For our study, Metaethics is the starting point; if we do not ground ourselves in understanding the ethical framework, then our discussion of morality will become arbitrary.

Within Metaethics, there are many different frameworks that we will discuss. The chart below breaks down those frameworks into two main areas: non-cognitive and cognitive.

Ethical Frameworks Table

Non-Cognitive	Cognitive	Cognitive
Emotivism	<u>Relativist Frameworks</u> Ethical Subjectivism Cultural Relativism Divine Command	<u>Universalist Frameworks</u> Ethical Egoism Utilitarianism Natural Law Deontology Virtue Ethics Rights Ethics

On the non-cognitive side, you notice only one framework called emotivism. Emotivism claims that there are no moral truths and that moral statements

are neither true nor false but simply expressions or outbursts of feelings. Because of this, we will not spend time on a framework that cannot express a moral truth. On the cognitive side, the chart is broken down into two subcategories: relativist and universalist. The relativist frameworks hold that morality differs from person to person. Still, universalist frameworks hold that there are moral truths that are true for all humans, regardless of their personal beliefs. This course will discuss the three relativist frameworks: ethical subjectivism, divine command, and cultural relativism. We will discuss ethical egoism, natural law, and virtue ethics from the universalist side.

Ethical frameworks do not stand on their own. Still, they are grounded in other philosophical assumptions about matters such as the role of humans in the universe, the existence of free will, and the nature of knowledge. This area is called metaphysics. Metaphysics studies the nature of reality, including what it means to be human. Our concept of human nature influences how we ought to live. We ask questions like, are we selfish? Do we have free will? Metaphysical assumptions about the nature of reality are not merely abstract frameworks; they profoundly affect both ethical frameworks and normative ethics. Metaphysics can be broken down into two areas: Metaphysical dualism and Metaphysical materialism.

Metaphysical dualism is the view that we are composed of two parts: a physical body and a spirit. According to most dualists, humans

express their nature through reason, the mind's activity. Only through reason can we understand moral truth and achieve a good life.

Dualists tend to support a hierarchical worldview and a morality that excludes some beings from the moral community, such as humans regarded as not entirely rational. Hierarchical systems like feudal systems in medieval times or even modern-day caste systems are examples of dualist systems. Gandhi is an example of someone who fought against the caste system in India. Today, North Korea is an example of a caste system in which the elites at the top view themselves as more moral than those at the bottom level. One of the main problems with dualism is explaining how two completely different substances, mind and body, can interact, especially casually. Because of the mind-body problem, many philosophers have rejected dualism.

Metaphysical materialism, on the other hand, states that we are made up of just the physical body. Materialists have a problem explaining things like consciousness and the intention of actions in this area. Sociobiology, a branch of biology based on materialism, explains that there is an evolutionary idea to our drives and that our basic desires and environment drive us like animals. Materialism is what we call determinism. Determinism holds that we lack free will, as unconscious forces and past events determine our actions.

Psychologists like Sigmund Freud noted that powerful unconscious

forces govern human behavior and that even our most noble accomplishments stem from prior events and instincts. Even behaviorists like B.F. Skinner believed that past events in our lives determine human behavior. Rather than being free, autonomous agents, we are the products of past conditioning and are elaborately programmed computers ready to run.

On the other hand, existentialism goes to the opposite end. Here, we are defined by our freedom and the responsibility to create the moral principles we act upon. As free beings, we are responsible for developing our principles, including choosing the moral principles we act upon. So, because we are free and not restricted by a fixed principle, we can be held entirely accountable for our actions and choices when we make a moral choice. The debate between determinism and free will has a significant implication in studying ethics. We hold people accountable for their actions, and the practice of making excuses for our actions is as old as time. Adam blamed Eve for his behavior, and Eve blamed the serpent.

Today, we have seen the relabeling of behaviors such as pedophilia as an illness or disability rather than a moral weakness. In his book, "The Abuse Excuse," "The legal tactic by which criminal defendants claim a history of abuse as an excuse for violent retaliation is quickly becoming a license to kill. More and more defense lawyers are employing this tactic, and more jurors are buying it. It is a dangerous trend, with serious and widespread

implications for the safety and liberty of every American."³ He adds, "On the surface, the abuse excuse affects only a handful of defendants who raise it and those most immediately impacted by an acquittal or reduced charge. But at a deeper level, the abuse excuse is a symptom of a general abdication of responsibility by individuals, families, groups and even nations."⁴ One of the characteristics shared by these defenses is that they often tend to be "politically correct," and reflect current trends of society.⁵ He states, "the basic fallacy underlying each of them is that the vast majority of people who have experienced abuses, whether it is sexual, racial, or anything else, do not commit violent crimes. Thus, the abuse excuse neither explains nor justifies the violence. A history of abuse is not a psychological or legal license to kill. In some instances, it may be relevant at sentencing, but certainly not always."⁶ Dershowitz discussed that when we use the word 'syndrome,' it is a medical term referring to a group of symptoms that all or most with the syndrome know are present.⁷ For example, people with AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome) will have common symptoms in the disease phase.

On the other hand, not all women who have experienced 'battered women syndrome' share common symptoms or attributes. It does try to give a

³ Alan Dershowitz, *The Abuse Excuse* (New York: Little, Brown and Company: 1994), 3.

⁴ Dershowitz, 4.

⁵ Dershowitz, 5.

⁶ Dershowitz, 5-6

⁷ Dershowitz, 12-14

reason why the killing of the abuser is justified. In his book, Dershowitz offers several examples of excuses used in criminal cases. Here are just a few examples (not all examples will have a detailed description):⁸

- Battered Persons Syndrome
- Black Rage Syndrome
- Chronic Lateness Syndrome: A former school district employee used as grounds for suing his former boss after being fired for consistently showing up late for work, and that arriving late is a psychological disorder rather than the product of an individual's carelessness.
- Distant Father Syndrome
- Everybody Does It Syndrome: This defense is often used by high-profile figures to excuse their behavior.
- Football Widow Syndrome: Was employed by a Florida woman who shot her husband after he changed the channel to watch a Sunday afternoon game; it is presumed to reflect the frustration that some wives feel when they never get to watch what they want on television.
- Nicotine Withdrawal Syndrome
- Pornography Defense Syndrome
- Twinkie Defense: This excuse was made famous by the Dan White case in San Francisco during the late 1970s. Mr. White, a former police

⁸ Dershowitz, 321-341. In the Glossary section Dershowitz list fifty-two different excuses. The ones listed are just a sample of those fifty-two.

officer, was found guilty of involuntary manslaughter, not first-degree murder, for the killing of San Francisco Mayor George Moscone and Supervisor Harvey Milk. The jury accepted White's claim that he had become mentally incapacitated at the time of the killings because of his consumption of junk foods.

Are we responsible for our actions? One extreme is the behaviorist, who says free will is an illusion. On the other hand, existentialists state that we are entirely responsible and that there are no excuses. Most philosophers and ethicists accept a position somewhere in the middle: we can be products of biology and environment, but also creators of our destiny.

That will teach us how our conscience makes ethical and moral decisions.

How would you describe your conscience? Some may say it is a voice that speaks to you when you do something right or wrong. Maybe an angel or demon sits on your shoulder like in the movies or cartoons. No matter what it is or how it sounds, our conscience plays a big part in how we make moral decisions. The study of ethics must consider relevant facts about human nature and behavior. We must realize that the primary reason for studying ethics is to make us better people, and we must understand the development and role our conscience plays in this process.

Conscience is the inner sense of what is right and wrong. The word comes from two Latin words: com, meaning "with," and scire, meaning "to know."

It is knowledge about what is right and wrong, but it also provides us with critical thinking and involves feelings.

In religious circles, people view conscience as divine guidance or the voice of God speaking through our hearts. In Islam, conscience is a "spiritual quality that differentiates between right and wrong." It would inspire us by making us feel good when we do the right thing. In Judaism, worship and following one's conscience are inseparable. In some Eastern Religions, consciousness is compared with light and energy. In some branches of Hinduism, it is ideas of meditation that help us connect with our consciousness. We understand that our conscience motivates us but also demands that we act according to it.

C.S. Lewis wrote in his book *Miracles*, "that we must believe that the conscience of man is not a product of nature." He also stated, "Human beings, all over the earth, have this curious idea that they ought to behave in a certain way and cannot get rid of it." Lewis describes it this way: "How do we decide what is good or evil? The usual answer is that we decide by conscience. But probably no one thinks now of conscience as a separate faculty, like one of the senses. Indeed, it cannot be so thought of. For an autonomous faculty, a sense cannot be argued with; you cannot argue a man into seeing green if he sees blue. But the conscience can be altered by argument...conscience means the whole man engaged in a particular subject matter. But even in this sense, conscience still has two meanings: first, the

pressure a man feels upon his will to do what he thinks is right and second, his judgment as to the content of right and wrong.⁹"

Plato defined consciousness as an activity of the soul that directs us toward the good. Acting in accordance with conscience or reason is thus essential to our functioning as human beings. A person without a conscience is not a person and lacks a moral standing in the community. In his book *The Republic*, Plato even suggested executing those people "whose souls are incurably evil."

Continuing the earlier discussion on determinism versus existentialism, the three primary forces shaping our conscience are heredity and biological factors, learning and environmental factors, and moral direction.

Determinism considers only heredity and biological factors, while existentialism also considers those and, more importantly, our conscience's moral direction.

Heredity and Biological Factors:

We tend to want to believe in the good in people. We have the idea that we might be willing to rush to save a child who is drowning without thinking about it or expecting a reward. We want to believe in the benevolence of others. Altruism is the idea of a selfless concern for the well-being of others. Aristotle believed that altruism is one of our "natural virtues." Others, though, think that we are born altruistic and

⁹ Spencer, James M. "C.S. Lewis and the Ordinary Man." (2004). <https://core.ac.uk/download/229365009.pdf>.

that it can be considered genetic. Psychologists have stated that sympathy is visible in another baby getting upset as early as ten months of age. Some believe that the capacity for sympathy is strong, while in others, it is weak or nonexistent. In studying our conscience, is something like altruism connected genetically, or is it something we are taught, or could it be both?

Learning or Environmental Factors:

Our conscience is shaped through everyday interactions from an early age and our environment, and this happens through things like our family, religion, conflict, and many other factors. While our culture is not the source of our fundamental moral sense, it helps establish the boundaries and guidelines within which our moral sentiments and principles express themselves. Our cultural norms can run contrary to the basic demands of morality, for example, slavery. Even before the Civil War and the end of slavery, people in the South began to sympathize with the struggle for freedom by the enslaved people and began to help them escape to freedom.

Behavioral psychologists in the early 1900s began to state that our conscience was solely the product of our environment, and it was seen as nothing more than conformity to social norms. Sigmund Freud saw our conscience, or our "superego," as a product of our environment. Today, though, most ethicists or psychologists no longer widely accept

the belief that our conscience, or morality, is wholly a product of our environment. However, many still believe it can play a role in its development.

Conscience Moral Direction

Determinism says there is no such thing as a conscious moral direction and that we are solely the product of our environment or genetics. On the other hand, existentialists believe that we have a moral responsibility to create our moral direction and the responsibility to follow through with it. Again, are we simply a product of our environment, or do we have free will to create our moral direction? We want to ask what our moral responsibility is in this situation. When we see or think through a situation. In extremely oppressive societies, the ability to determine our moral direction and follow through may come at extreme cost to our lives. Sometimes, our options are limited, especially in a marginalized group. But even though options are limited in some cases, it does not justify harming others or acts that we may commit. As human beings, we are free and embedded in society; we live under the constant tension of balancing our social nature and freedom. Again, we cannot deny society's role in shaping our conscience, but we must understand how it might shape us. In the end, we have moral responsibility above all else. That moral responsibility is both the praise and blame, reward or punishment for

an act or omission of an act, in accordance with one's moral obligations. Deciding what (if anything) counts as "morally obligatory" is a principal concern of ethics. Philosophers refer to people who have moral responsibility for an action as moral agents. Agents can reflect on their situation, form intentions about how they will act, and then carry them out. The notion of free will has become an essential issue in the debate on whether individuals are ever morally responsible for their actions and, if so, in what sense. Incompatibilists regard determinism as at odds with free will, whereas compatibilists think the two can coexist.

Moral responsibility does not necessarily equate to legal obligation. A person is legally responsible for an event when a legal system is liable to penalize that person for that event. Although it may often be that when a person is morally responsible for an act, they are also legally accountable for it, the two states do not always coincide.

Our conscience is broken down into two parts: Affective and Cognitive. We need both parts. This division of our conscience is artificial and is primarily a tool for better understanding how our conscience works. The affective component of our conscience helps us with emotions, while the cognitive side deals with reasoning. You have to be able to use both sides. Using only the affective side will lead to emotional decisions, and using only the cognitive side will lead to rigid decisions. There are various elements within

our conscience's cognitive and affective parts: moral knowledge, moral sentiments, sympathy, moral outrage, moral indignation, and guilt.

Moral Knowledge

The term moral knowledge is also referred to as the study of Epistemology. Epistemology deals with the limits of knowledge and how our knowledge and conscience can be validated. Throughout the years' moral knowledge has been called under different terms. David Hume called it our intuition, and Plato called it our reasons.

Moral Sentiments

We are emotional creatures, and our sentiments move us in the basic understanding of when we feel approval or disapproval in a specific situation. Sometimes, the term "higher helps," like in Christianity and Judaism, may be used when referring to the Holy Spirit.

Sympathy

Sympathy is the capacity to imagine the feelings of others. This is when we see someone crying over the loss of a loved one and can imagine what they might be going through. However, it is not the same as when we try to express an understanding of that person's emotions. We move beyond our world by feeling and connecting with others through sympathy. Without sympathy, having a genuine sense of community would be difficult. In a later lesson, we will discuss virtues, and many moral philosophers believe sympathy is one of the

greatest virtues we need. Sympathy is an aspect that must be developed from an early age.

Moral Outrage and Indignation

Outrage and Indignation are very closely related, and their ideas often get switched with each other. While moral sentiments and sympathy may make us feel warm and fuzzy, outrage and indignation will move us in the opposite direction. We will define outrage as what happens when we witness a violation or transgression of the boundaries of moral decency. We can also use the word resentment. Outrage develops early in life, and we notice it when we see others being mistreated or an injustice has occurred.

On the other hand, indignation is a step up, and we now add anger at the sight of others being harmed. There is no straightforward way to view outrage and indignation because each person and situation may move people in different directions. While someone may view an event and only feel outraged, another person viewing the same situation may be moved to indignation. That does not make one right and one wrong but should allow for meaningful discussion between people, allowing both to share their thoughts.

Guilt

Guilt is an internal feeling that arises when we violate a moral norm. Again, this should be developed at an early age. This comes when we

know we have broken a moral norm within our community. For example, when the child is told not to take a cookie and does so and then when asked by the mom, feels guilty for not listening. We can also refer to it later in life as shame, but guilt is associated with it now because others are aware of the violation. A student cheats on a paper in class and feels guilty about doing so, but now, when others in class find out, they will also experience shame. Guilt should motivate us to avoid harming ourselves and others. It demands that we accept moral responsibility for our actions and that we make reparation to those we have harmed and, if necessary, change ourselves to make a repeat of the harmful behavior less likely.

Throughout the 20th century, many psychologists have looked at children's moral development and reasoning. One of the first was Jean Piaget, who noticed that children develop through distinct stages in their moral development. Later, psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg, whom Piaget and Socrates influenced, Kant, and others developed Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development. He believed that these stages help us as we develop through life. While the higher stages come later than the lower stages in human development, the higher are not morally better. Kohlberg divided the stages into three levels, each having two distinct phases. Kohlberg also stated that less than 5% of adult Americans ever reach the post-conventional stage of moral reasoning.

Kohlberg Stages of Moral Development	
Stage	Description
Preconventional	
1. Punishment and obedience	Avoid punishment, submit to authority. Fear of punishment is the primary motive
2. Egoist	Satisfy one's own needs, only consider the needs of others if it benefits you: "you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours."
Conventional	
3. Good Boy/Nice Girl	Please and help others, concern for maintaining good relationships and earning other's approval, conformity to peer and group norms
4. Society Maintaining	Respect authority and social rules, maintain the existing social order.
Postconventional	
5. Social contract or legalistic	Obey useful, albeit arbitrary, social rules, appeal to social consensus and majority rule as long as minimal basic rights are safeguarded. The US Constitution is written using this stage of reasoning.
6. Conscience and universal principles	Autonomously recognize universal rules, such as justice and equality, that are rational and logically consistent and reflect a respect for equal human rights and the dignity of each individual.

Most studies have found that the stages of moral reasoning are positively correlated with moral behavior. Philosopher James Rest stated, "There is widespread agreement that morality has more components than moral judgment. However, the trick is to identify what else there is in morality and how all these pieces fit together."¹⁰ Rest identified four components of moral behavior: moral sensitivity, moral reasoning or judgments, moral motivation, and moral character.

Moral Components

Moral Sensitivity

Moral sensitivity is the awareness of how our actions affect others.

This usually occurs around 6-12 months and is an integral part of the cognitive process. Moral-sensitive people are more likely to extend a helping hand and engage in community service. They tend to be better students and feel guilty when others are harmed. People who are deficient may fail to act morally simply because it did not occur to

¹⁰ James Rest, *Moral Development in the Professions*, pg. 22

them. They may make offensive jokes not out of malice but because they are unaware of the effect of their comments on others. Moral sensitivity can be enhanced by experiences that provide opportunities to see the world from other people's perspectives.

Moral Reasoning or Judgment

Moral Reasoning is the application of logical analysis to moral issues.

Like conscience's affective and cognitive side, moral reasoning must be tied to moral sensitivity. If not, rigid and unfeeling behaviors will occur. People who are deficient in moral reasoning do not recognize the different moral values and principles involved in making moral decisions and tend to come up with simplistic ones. That would mean that people fail to see the repercussions of their choices and become easily baffled when presented with conflicting values. Those who are competent moral reasoners make more satisfactory moral decisions from their point of view and that of moral philosophy.

Moral Motivation

Sir Edmund Burke says, "The only thing necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing." Many people know what is right and wrong, but they lack the motivation to put this knowledge into action. The motivation to behave morally is intimately tied to how we define ourselves. Highly motivated people are more likely to act on their beliefs about what is right. They understand the difference between moral and nonmoral issues and values.

Moral Character

It is the integration of all three into one's personality. It is also related to the virtue of integrity, and moral character predisposes us to act morally.

In this lesson, we started to develop a foundation for our study of ethics.

This foundational building piece will help us move forward through the rest of the course.