



Especially in everyday language, the distinction between the terms ‘ethics’ and ‘morality’ is not always clear. Even in some philosophical texts both are used synonymously, while others seem to draw a clear distinction between them. Historically, the term ‘ethics’ comes from Greek *ethos* which means the customs, habits and mores of people. ‘Morality’ is derived from Latin *mos, moris* which denotes basically the same; it was introduced by Cicero as an equivalent to the Greek *ethos*.

For the sake of clarity we assume as a standard definition that morality means the customs, the special do-s and don't-s that are shared and widely accepted as standard in a society or community of people — accepted as a basis of life that doesn't have to be rationally questioned. Ethics on the other hand is the philosophical reflection upon these rules and ways of living together, the customs and habits of individuals, groups or mankind as such. This comes close to the conception of Aristotle.

In ancient Greek philosophy the question was to find how to act well and rightly and what personal/individual qualities are necessary to be able to do this. Ethics therefore encompasses the whole range of human action including personal preconditions. This is still true today, but for e.g. Aristotle ethics focused mainly on the pursuit of the ‘good (life)’, the *eudaimonia*. The aim was to identify and to practically realise ‘the (highest) good’ in life — which means that you have to evaluate what is ‘good’ as regards content: what life is a good life and what is not?

As opinions concerning the question what makes a good life differed more and more in modern times, ethics had and has to face the question how the resulting conflicts of interests and values could be solved peacefully and justly without taking the part of one side or the other. And this leads to the question of what is morally right; moral rightness and ‘good life’ become separate issues. Whereas

questions of ‘good life’ are tied to an evaluation of what is good and are answered in the form of recommendations how to achieve that goal, norms or principles of moral rightness generate imperatives.



Today it is common to separate ethics into three sub-branches: 1. descriptive ethics, 2. metaethics and 3. normative ethics:

1. Descriptive ethics aims at empirically and precisely mapping existing morality or moralities within communities and is therefore linked to the social sciences. Another aim is to explain the development of existing moralities from a historical perspective. No normative prescriptions are intended.

2. Metaethics is a relatively new discipline in the ethical arena and its definition is the most blurred of all. The Greek *meta* means *after* or *beyond* and indicates that the object of metaethical studies is morality *and* ethics itself. The aim is to better understand the logical, semantic and pragmatic structures of moral and ethical argumentation as such, their origin and meaning. Other fields of inquiry are e.g. whether morality exists independently of humans, and the underlying mental basis of human judgements and conduct.

3. Normative ethics means the methodological reflection upon morality tackling its critique and its rationale. Norms and standards for acting and conduct are being set up or tore down, and argued for or against. When “ethics” is talked about in a common sense then we are talking about this *general normative ethics*. When enquiry is directed towards the principles of moral judgement or the criteria for the ethical analysis of morality, then we talk about fundamental ethics.

Finally in the realm of normative ethics, there is *applied ethics*. Here normative theories are applied to *specific*, controversial moral issues like animal rights, abortion, euthanasia etc. – generating the classic so-called hyphen-ethics, e.g. bio-ethics, medical

☞ ethics, business-ethics, 📄 nano-ethics etc. Inversely, these special issues constantly challenge theory and demand improvements, changes and specifications.

Alongside hyphen-ethics it is also possible to distinguish between ethics that focuses on societal and institutional dimensions (social ethics) or on the individuum (individual ethics).

While we consider applied ethics to be a sub-branch of normative ethics, other moral philosophers treat it as a discipline on the same level as normative ethics, arguing that it

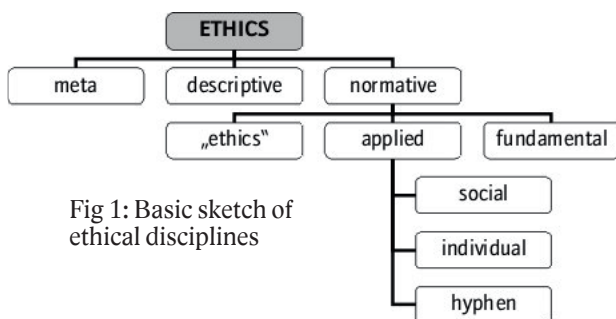


Fig 1: Basic sketch of ethical disciplines

uses normative elements but is independent otherwise.

In normative ethics there are different theories as to how criteria of moral conduct should be defined. The three main theories can be sketched as follows:

1. *Deontological*, i.e. duty theories locate the basis of morality on specific, foundational principles of duty and obligation. These principles are binding regardless of the consequences that acting on their basis might bring.

2. *Consequentialist* theories on the other hand determine the value of an action on the grounds of a cost-benefit analysis of its consequences. If the positive consequences outweigh the negative ones then the action is morally proper.

3. *Virtue* theories focus on a given set of rules like “do not steal” etc. But instead of defining them merely as obligatory duties, the emphasis lies on the individual to develop *good habits of character* based on these rules (and avoid *vices*). Thus virtue theory emphasises moral education.

Q: What are 📄 “codes of ethics/conduct” or what is “ethical research”? Shouldn’t that be called *moral*? **A:** By calling research or a code “ethical”, the authors want to point out that the moral rules they set up are based on rational deliberation and can be subject to critique.

Q: Looking at the definitions of ethics and morality – what is moral philosophy? **A:** It is mostly used as a synonym for ethics. Some, like the French philosopher Jean-Pierre Dupuy use it differently. For him ‘ethics’ stands for the effort to force everything into universal harmonized principles while ‘moral philosophy’ endures colliding or incompatible values or concepts in the discourse.

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📄 Links to other Portfolio sheets:

📄 Nano-Ethics 📄 Code of Conduct 📄 Soft Regulation

🕒 Literature: Print & WWW

- Frankena, W.: Ethics. Prentice Hall, 2/1973; <http://www.ditext.com/frankena/ethics.html>
 Dupuy, J.-P.: Complexity and Uncertainty. A Prudential Approach to Nanotechnology. UNESCO, 2005; <http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/files/20003/11272944951Dupuy2.pdf/Dupuy2.pdf>
 MacIntyre, A.: A Short History of Ethics - A History of Moral Philosophy from the Homeric Age to the Twentieth Century. Routledge, 2006.