

Defining ethics...

What is YOUR definition of ethics?

When reflecting this question, consider not only your **perspective** (and what shapes it – culture, family, education, etc) but also the **reasoning** behind this. Are we able to listen to/consider the justification behind the reasoning of others?

Ethics: deals with human thought and actions

Is comprised in part of consideration of our understanding and moral choice

Differs from other areas of knowledge in that in human sciences and history, for example, we examine how people are/were whereas ethics deals with how people **should** be.

At its simplest, ethics is a system of moral principles. Moral principles affect how people make decisions and lead their lives.

Ethics is concerned with what is good for individuals and society and is also described as moral philosophy.

The term is derived from the Greek word *ethos* which can mean custom, habit, character or disposition.

Ethics covers the following dilemmas:

- how to live a good life
- our rights and responsibilities
- the language of right and wrong
- moral decisions - what is good and bad?

Our concepts of ethics have been derived from religions, philosophies and cultures. They infuse debates on topics like abortion, human rights and professional conduct.

So, how do we distinguish between ethics and morality?

Morality is our **sense (perception)** of right and wrong; **ethics** is the **area of knowledge** concerning morality and our moral codes.

Questions to consider:

Why be moral?

How did you/we develop that sense of right or wrong?

ETHICS AND SHARED KNOWLEDGE

How much of your sense of right and wrong emerges from shared knowledge?

Ethics is not a singular individual pursuit.

Further, do keep in mind that there are experts in the field (so just as arts have critics who are learned in the application of criteria to assist our understanding of what is art) there are ethicists to whom we do turn to assist us. We base our decisions on the informed opinions of ethicists (including philosophers, religious leaders).

Ethics involves *moral choice*: what does this mean?

Simply put:

approval	moral
disapproval	immoral
neither	morally neutral

A moral choice is where you probably should do the right thing, but you don't want to. Or - more complex - where doing one thing might seem right to one moral perspective but wrong to another

Choices that are met with approval we call moral; choices met with disapproval; immoral)

Choices that are neither; where to go for lunch; what flavor ice cream are called amoral or morally neutral.

<http://www.bostonreview.net/books-ideas/morality-choice>

Of use: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/ethics/introduction/>

Within moral choices are levels of generality; consider them approaches to ethics

Philosophers nowadays tend to divide ethical theories into three areas: meta-ethics, normative ethics and applied ethics.

- Meta-ethics deals with the nature of moral judgement. It looks at the origins and meaning of ethical principles.
- Normative ethics is concerned with the content of moral judgements and the criteria for what is right or wrong.
- Applied ethics looks at controversial topics like war, animal rights and capital punishment

Meta ethics: Offers more questions than answers

Are ethical values independent from human beings or a result of human thought?

Are they God driven or manmade?

Is morality innate to us?

Are moral principles universal?

If so, we are dealing with ALL instead of SOME; is there moral principle you consider universal?

What is your understanding of human rights?

Universal Declaration of Human Rights; 1948

<http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/index.shtml#a1>

Article 1.

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

Article 2.

Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty.

Article 3.

Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.

Article 4.

No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.

Article 5.

No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

Article 6.

Everyone has the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law.

Meta-ethics are ethical values independent from human beings with a metaphysical existence OR are they products of human thought and construct.

Can robots have moral thoughts?

Do moral truths exist beyond us?

Ethical relativism:

that there is no such thing as right or wrong beyond particular individuals and societies;

that there is **moral variability** among us;

that there is an openness to **divergent thinking**

The weakness with ethical relativism is that if claims are relative to people or groups, so, too, is relativism. There cannot be **general moral judgment**; everything/anything goes.

Ethical absolutism (ethical objectivism):

That right and wrong **IS universally applicable** (the one right path for all)

Does not allow for any variance

Difficult to find such universal acceptance (and, in my opinion, somewhat anathema to the ideas of TOK)

Weakness, therefore, is its inflexibility.