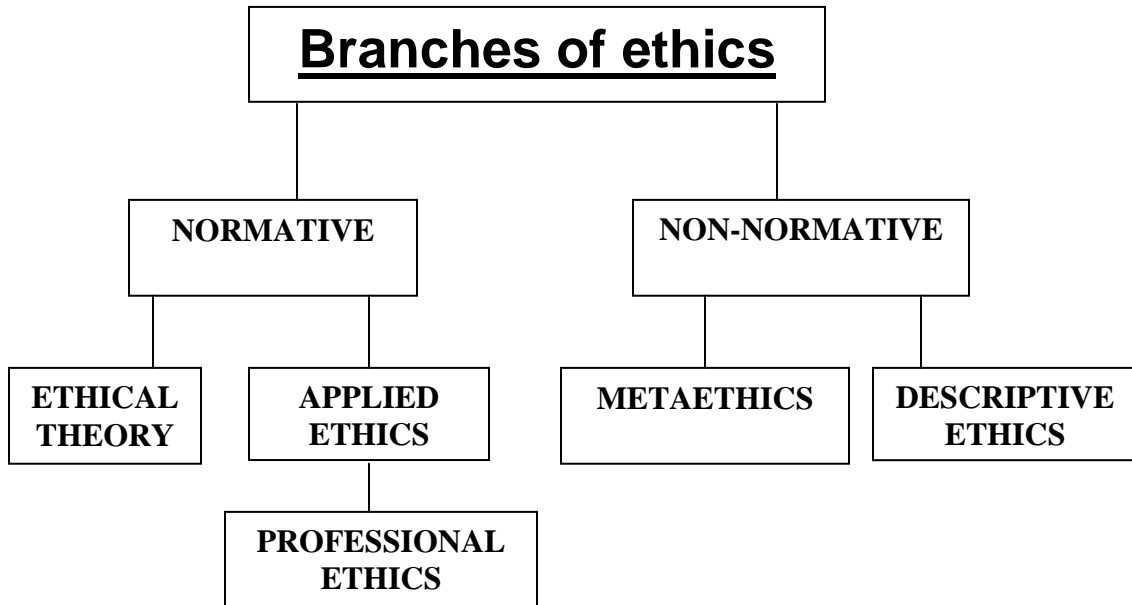


PHL 202: Introduction to Ethical Theory

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Definitions of terms:

- I. Normative:** A branch of ethics concerned with determining whether an action is right or wrong. Normative ethics attempts to develop a set of rules (or norms) governing human conduct. It deals with what people *should* believe to be right and wrong, unlike descriptive ethics, which deals with what people actually believe to be right and wrong. When most people use the terms “morality” or “ethics” they almost always mean “normative ethics” for it is this branch that is concerned with telling us how we ought to live our lives.
- A. Ethical Theory:** a broad term that refers to any philosophical attempt to classify actions into right and wrong/good and bad. Here are some examples of ethical theories:
- i. Ethical Subjectivism:** right and wrong are determined by what *I* believe
 - ii. Ethical Relativism:** right and wrong are determined by what my society believes
 - iii. Divine Command Theory:** right and wrong are determined by God
 - iv. Ethical Egoism:** a descriptive theory which states that people always act to maximize their self-interest
 - v. Utilitarianism or Consequentialism:** right and wrong are determined by the utility or consequences of an action; in most versions of this theory, actions are right if they produce happiness or reduce pain
 - vi. Deontological or Rights-Based Ethics (or Kantian Ethics):** right and wrong are determined by whether the action is consistent with duty and done from a motive of fulfilling one’s moral obligation; moral obligation is defined as respect for persons

- vii. **Virtue Ethics:** determines the virtuous action according to what an ideally virtuous person would do in a given situation
 - viii. **Theories of Justice:** determines just actions to be those that emerge from the correct use of principles that have been agreed to under conditions that are fair
 - B. Applied Ethics:** this branch of ethics tries to apply ethical theories to “real world” situations
 - i. **Professional Ethics:** generally a branch of applied ethics that focuses on the actions of people within a certain profession (nursing, engineering, teaching, etc.)
- II. Non-normative:** With non-normative ethics, there is no attempt to prescribe behavior or set down norms. Rather, the emphasis is on describing what people’s ethical beliefs are (descriptive ethics) or on analyzing ethics terms (metaethics)
- A. Metaethics:** the study of what ethical terms and theories actually refer to. Types of metaethical questions include:
 - i. What is the meaning of moral terms or judgments?
--e.g., "What do the words 'good', 'bad', 'right' and 'wrong' mean?"
 - ii. What is the nature of moral judgments?
--e.g., Are moral judgments objective or relative?
 - iii. How may moral judgments be supported or defended?
--e.g., how we can know if something is right or wrong, if at all.
 - B. Descriptive Ethics:** the study of people’s actual beliefs about ethics or morality. No attempt is made to assess or judge these beliefs.

Types of Ethical Questions

1. **Empirical**—concern factual matters and are descriptive, not normative (these are relevant to moral questions, but they are fundamentally different from ethical questions)
2. **Conceptual**—concern identifying and understanding the concepts involved in asking and answering ethical questions (e.g., equality, person, individual rights, etc.)
3. **Concrete Moral Issues**—focuses on the rightness or wrongness of particular actions (e.g., capital punishment, abortion)
4. **General Moral Principles**—focuses on what makes actions generally right/good or wrong/bad. This is usually referred to as normative ethics, which is the attempt to arrive at moral standards that regulate right and wrong conduct. This may involve articulating the good habits that we should acquire, the duties that we should follow, or the consequences of our behavior on others.
5. **Metaethical** (cognitivism v. non- cognitivism; objectivism v. relativism)-- investigates where our ethical principles come from, and what they mean. Are they merely social inventions? Do they involve more than expressions of our individual emotions? Metaethical answers to these questions focus on the issues of universal truths, the will of God, the role of reason in ethical judgments, and the meaning of ethical terms themselves.

Tools for Critical Thinking about Ethics

1. Values (and understanding them)

A. Values= those things we care about or that matter to us

B. Moral values= those values that voice our needs and legitimate expectations

•Three kinds of values:

1. goods (e.g., pleasure, happiness, absence from pain)

2. rights (e.g., liberty, equality, fairness, justice, dignity, respect for persons)

3. virtues (e.g., personal character, honesty, loyalty, charitability)

C. different people can attribute different weights to different values

2. Argument

Argument = a series of statements intended to support a further statement

• premises = the supporting statements of an argument

• conclusion = the statement supported by the premises

Two types of assumptions/inferences:

Descriptive statements/facts: statements that concern what *is* actually the case

Normative statements: statements that concern what *ought* to be the case
(whether or not it actually occurs)

3. Finding Facts

What facts are at issue? moral issues are sometimes merely factual disagreements;
resolve the factual issues, and you will resolve the moral disagreement

(E.g., We may disagree about the morality of capital punishment because I think it deters further murders and you don't think it's a deterrent. If we find clear evidence that it does not deter further murders—or vice versa--our moral disagreement is easily put to rest.)

Getting facts: use reputable sources

Making inferences and generalizations from facts: good inferences and generalizations use many clear and specific examples, and these examples are genuinely representative and well-accepted

4. Language

Definition: to have a useful debate, we must mean the same thing by the terms we use; otherwise, we cannot be talking about the same thing (e.g., define "equality," as in "all men are created equal"; do we all mean the same thing by this term?)

Loaded language: avoid using non-neutral, emotionally charged terms; your goal is to present ideas, concepts, facts, and arguments in clear, neutral, descriptive language (e.g., "Lizzy killed her parents" versus "Lizzy butchered her parents with an ax")

5. Debate

What to avoid: dogmatism, polarization, simple justifications (viz., don't underestimate the complexity of moral issues)

What to do: listen and engage in genuine argument