

Study Guide: Introduction to Ethics

The 3 Branches of Ethics:

1. Descriptive ethics: Describes the ethical standards of a person, community, culture, etc. Does NOT address whether these standards are the correct ones. This is done by historians, anthropologists, etc., but is of limited philosophical interest.
2. Normative ethics: Evaluates people's actions and their moral character. This goes beyond descriptive ethics because it tries to work out the CORRECT ethical standards.
3. Metaethics: This lays the groundwork for normative ethics. It can be broken down into three sub-tasks:
 - a. Defining moral terms.
 - b. Working out standards for testing moral theories.
 - c. Determining the boundaries of the moral realm. (I.e., what is a moral issue and what isn't.)

Types of Ethical Statements:

Moral Judgments: Evaluate a particular action. E.g., It was impermissible for Jane to lie to her brother yesterday.

Moral Rules: Evaluate (or provide a guideline regarding) a fairly narrow category of actions. E.g., It is impermissible to tell lies.

Moral Principles: Evaluate (or provide a guideline regarding) a broad category of actions. E.g., It is impermissible to cause harm.

What can be ethically evaluated?

Act evaluation: The evaluation of actions, deciding which are permissible, which are impermissible, etc. This tends to be the focus of most 20th & 21st century ethics in the Western world.

Agent evaluation: The evaluation of someone's moral character, determining whether one is virtuous, trustworthy, malicious, etc. This was the focus of ethical theories developed by the ancient Greeks, and is now being revived by some theorists.

Categories of Ethical Theories:

Cognitivist Theories: Theories that regard moral judgments as statements that are either true or false. (Virtually all of the theories discussed in this course fall into this category.)

Noncognitivist Theories: Theories that regard moral judgments as the wrong type of statements to be true or false. E.g., Emotivism regards moral judgments as expressions of emotion; prescriptivism regards moral judgments as instructions about how to behave.