

Ethics and Morality

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What is ethics?

Ethics is the body of principles used to decide what behaviors are right, good and proper. Such principles (ethics) do not always dictate a single "moral" course of action, but provide a means of evaluating and deciding among competing options.

Ethics is about putting principles into action. Consistency between what we say we value and what our actions say we value is a matter of integrity.

Ethics is also about self-restraint, i.e., what we should *not* do:

- Not doing what you have the power to do. An act isn't proper simply because it is permissible or you can get away with it.
- Not doing what you have the right to do. There is a big difference between what you have the right to do and what is right to do.
- Not doing what you want to do. In the well-worn turn of phrase, an ethical person often chooses to do more than the law requires and less than the law allows.

More simply put: Ethics is the rules for deciding correct conduct

Let's look at an example of making a decision ethically. You want to sit up in your neighbor's apple tree with a salt shaker and eat his apples. But you decide to put aside your selfish interest, and to not do what you want and have the power to do for the sake of respecting your neighbor's right to enjoy or benefit from his own apples. You stay out of your neighbor's tree. You have acted ethically.

Society or individuals: which needs ethics?

Society requires a code of ethics in order to provide for order, to prevent or minimize general or large-scale conflicts within society, to reduce strife between individuals, and to provide a basis for settling conflicts between competing values.

Individuals should have a code of ethics in order that the individual's behavior will be right, good, and proper. This can provide individuals with the following benefits:

- An inner benefit. Virtue is its own reward.
- A personal advantage. It is prudent to be ethical. It's good business.
- Approval. Being ethical leads to self-esteem, the admiration of loved ones, the respect of peers, and fewer conflicts with others.
- There is a growth benefit. Practicing ethics makes decisions easier for us as we progress through life.

- Possibly, a religious benefit. Good behavior can please or help serve a deity.

How to make ethical decisions

Ethical decision making does not occur by random chance, such as by throwing dice, but is guided by the orderly application of our ethical principles. Questions we might ask ourselves include: Would this behavior be honest? Would this behavior show respect for others? Would this behavior be consistent with my obligations of citizenship?

An individual doesn't have to feel lost at sea when confronted with a need to apply ethics in choosing a course of action. There are clear rules that can be adopted in advance that can help the individual to lead an ethical life. Here are some rules a person can adopt:

- I will think before I act.
- I will clarify and periodically review my goals.
- I will gather sufficient facts before I act.
- I will try to consider all reasonable options.
- I will consider the consequences of my actions and omissions.
- I will give consideration to the judgment of others.
- I will monitor and review the results of my actions.
- I will be honest in all my business dealings.
- I will be considerate of the environment.
- I will speak truthfully.

In addition to general rules, good for everyone, there may also be rules that an individual should adopt because of the particular situations of that person's life. For example, here are rules that a student in school might adopt and follow.

- All work I turn in will be my own (no cheating).
- I will root for and encourage the success of others.
- I will be tolerant of those who are different from me.

What is morality?

Morality is different than ethics.

For a society, morality is the generally accepted standards of behavior within the society at a point in time.

For an individual, morality is spoken of as either a set of personal standards that make up the individual's character, or the degree of the individual's attachment to the generally accepted standards of behavior held within a society at a particular point in time.

How are morality and ethics different?

Ethics is the rules for deciding proper conduct. While not absolutely timeless, ethical principles change very little through the ages. Morality is the standards for behavior that exist at some point in time. Compared to ethics, morality undergoes changes frequently. Compared with ethics, morality is more like a snapshot taken of something moving. Since the principles of ethics are more fundamental and stable, ethics is bigger than morality. Ethics is able to call morality - the existing standards for conduct - into question, and cause morality to change. As an example, consider slavery. Once it was considered moral to own slaves. Over time, ethics called the morality of slavery into question and the eventual result was that slavery was no longer considered moral.

Can a person become “more moral?”

A person can become "more moral" in the sense of his or her views regarding acceptable standards of behavior becoming closer to society's views. A person can also become "more moral" in the sense of developing personal standards of behavior which make that person's character "loftier" or more admired than it formerly was.

Can a people become “more moral?”

Can society become "more moral?" It would seem nice if a people, or society, could become more moral over time. Some people think this can and does happen. However, because whatever society holds as acceptable standards of behavior *defines* morality at that particular time, some people argue that society cannot become more moral. When the broad principles of ethics (or perhaps new religious ideas) are applied to morality, society's standards for acceptable behavior change - but the society stays *exactly* as moral as it was before. Rather than having become "more moral," the society's definition of morality has changed.

As an example of this way of thinking, consider a popular idea in American society today. In our day there are many people who believe that the solution to the problem of too much crime, too much drug abuse, or too many divorces and abortions, is to create a "more moral" society. Note the judgmental character of that idea; it contains within it a derogatory view of America's existing state of morality. Instead of saying that America needs to become "more moral," a better way of looking at it would be that America needs to change some of its ideas about morality, i.e. some of its standards for acceptable behavior. Perhaps the need is for a greater attention to ethics – the principles for deciding what behaviors are right, good, and proper. That might change our existing standards of acceptable behavior (the definition of morality), but changing our definition of morality does not make us, as a society, "more moral."

One might ask, "Why does the application of ethical principles suddenly cause the standards of acceptable behavior (morality) to change when those same ethical principles have been around for eons? Why didn't they produce the changes in morality sooner than they did?" The answer is that applying ethical principles to the standards for correct behavior (morality) is most likely to produce changes in those standards when conditions within society have undergone a significant change. Sometimes the change will be simply that the society has been exposed to a new religious idea, and the idea has attracted a large number of

adherents. At other times the change will involve new circumstances surrounding the people within the society which *require* people to relate to each other differently if peace is to be maintained.

The classic case addressed in ethics courses is that presented by, first, considering what the moral code would be on a large island with few people and abundant land and resources, and second, considering how that moral code would be affected by applying ethical principles to it after the island became overpopulated and extremely short of land and resources. Most students in ethics courses will predict that, after becoming overpopulated, applying ethical principles to the moral code would very likely result in the moral code changing in the direction of placing a higher value on some form or forms of collectivist behavior. This particular case is a good one for ethics courses because its basic outline is one that has been seen by anthropologists on multiple occasions. And, from the observations made by anthropologists, we know that the prediction made by most students is a good one.

More moral behavior or more ethical behavior?

An application to our society

What about *our* society? Does it need more moral behavior or more ethical behavior? To answer that question, let's consider a specific example, the behavior of our society's adolescents.

As many have learned, simply telling adolescents that their behavior needs to be "more moral" has little affect on their behavior. This really shouldn't be a big surprise. For one thing, adolescents see huge disparities between the moral codes presented them and the behavior of adults. As a result, they quickly learn that individuals have to decide for themselves what behaviors are right, good, and proper. This requires the application of ethics. What adolescents need most is to be shown how to use the principles for deciding proper conduct (ethics) in order that they will have some attachment to - and ownership in - a well-founded set of standards of behavior (morality) that will determine their character. So, in our society as well as any other, the best way to change moral standards - and behavior of people - is to encourage the use of sound ethical principles.