

Chapter 1

Approaching Ethics: What Is It and Why Should You Care?

In This Chapter

- ▶ Surveying fundamental ethical definitions and distinctions you need to know
 - ▶ Understanding why you should be ethical
 - ▶ Determining what's involved in making a commitment to an ethical life
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You probably wouldn't try to make a cake without ingredients, pots, and pans, right? Well the same goes for making a recipe for an ethical life. You have to know some things before you start cooking. And although living an ethical life isn't always easy, the basic tools are easy to master.

This chapter starts with some basics regarding ethics to help you get a better grasp of the subject. We help you by clarifying some basic distinctions that quickly emerge in your study of ethics. We also explain why being ethical is important. We finish the chapter with a discussion of what's involved in making a commitment to living an ethical life. Consider this chapter your jumping-off point into the wonderful world of ethics.

Knowing the Right Words: Ethical Vocabulary

Although ethics and morality are essential parts of human life, not many people understand how to talk about them. Good, evil, right, wrong, great, and bad: Who could possibly sort through all that mess? Getting a firm grasp on these words and distinctions is important so you don't fall into any misunderstandings later. The following sections explain important ethics vocabulary words and how to use them.

Focusing on should and ought

Fortunately you don't really need to sort through lots of different terms. In fact, most of ethics and morality can be boiled down to one simple concept that can be expressed using the words *should* and *ought*. "Good" or "right" actions are actions that you *ought* to do. "Bad" character traits are ones you *should* try not to develop. "Evil" traits are those you should *really* try to avoid. Isn't it cool how just these two words can unify so many ethical concepts?

To clearly understand what ethics means in terms of should and ought, consider this example: Most people are comfortable considering what science is about. Science tries to figure out the way the world is, was, or will be. The following are all scientific questions (some easier to answer than others):

- ✓ What will be the effect of detonating a nuclear weapon in a major city?
- ✓ What led to the extinction of the dodo bird?
- ✓ Is there a beer in the fridge?



Ethics isn't just about the way the world is. Sure, you have to know a lot about how the world works to answer ethical questions, but ethics is about something a little more ambitious than science. It's about the way the world *ought* to be or *should* be. Focusing on how the world should be gives ethical questions a different nature altogether. Ethical questions look more like this:

- ✓ Ought we to be detonating nuclear weapons around large numbers of people?
- ✓ Should endangered species be protected from human hunting?
- ✓ Should I really have that last beer in the fridge before driving home?



Lots of people miss the point about ethical discussions because they assume "ought" questions are really "is" questions. How many times have you heard someone defend his unjust actions by saying "Yeah, well, life isn't fair?" That person may be right about how the world works, but that doesn't mean it *should* continue to work that way. And in all likelihood, he's contributing to keeping the world in a way that it ought not to be. The world may not be fair, but it should be.

You probably have a big question dawning on you right about now: How do I find out what I ought to do? It's a great question; it's the subject of the rest of this book.

Avoiding the pitfall of separating ethics and morality

Although the terms *ethics* and *morality* have two different definitions in the dictionary, throughout this book we use them interchangeably and don't make any effort to distinguish between the ideas. The truth is that you can argue all day about whether something is immoral or just unethical, whether someone has ethics but no morals, or whether ethics is about society but morality is about you.



The reason these arguments don't go anywhere is that in the end, both ethics and morality are actually about the same: What you *ought* to be doing with your life. If it's true that an act is immoral, then you ought not to do it. The situation doesn't change if the act is unethical instead. It's still something you ought not to do.



"But wait!" you may say. "Ethics and morality can't be the same thing. Something can be unethical but still moral." Some people think, for instance, that Robin Hood's stealing to feed the poor was unethical but still moral. That thought may be true — we're not saying that words don't get used in that way. But in the end, what do you really want to know about Robin Hood? You want to know whether he *ought* to have been doing what he did. Ditto with something that seems immoral but may still be ethical, like selling goods at hugely inflated prices. If ethics and morality say different things, you need to find out what the relationship between you and your customers should be and how you *should* act, feel, and think toward them based on that relationship.

So, seriously, don't worry about the difference between ethics and morality. Your ethical conversations will make a lot more progress if you just concentrate on the "oughtiness" of things. Professional philosophers don't bother distinguishing between the two lots of the time, so you shouldn't either.

Putting law in its proper place

Even though you don't need to differentiate ethics and morality, you should distinguish between the concepts of ethics (or morality) and legality. If you don't, you may end up confusing the ethical thing to do with the legal thing to do. There's some overlap between ethics and the law, but they aren't always in line with one another. For example, consider speeding. Speeding is illegal, but that doesn't mean it's always unethical. It seems ethically acceptable to speed in order to get someone to the hospital for an emergency, for instance. You may still be punished according to the law, but that doesn't automatically make your act unethical.

The law also sometimes permits people to do unethical things. Cheating on your partner is usually ethically wrong, for instance. But breaking romantic commitments isn't typically illegal (and even where it is, laws against adultery aren't usually enforced).



Should all unethical things be illegal? Probably not, but it's worth noting that unless ethics and legality are separate concepts, it's not even possible to ask that question. The law may be inspired by ethical standards, but in many cases it's better not to make laws about unethical behaviors. People usually sort out these kinds of things on their own. Besides, it could simply be too expensive to enforce some laws. (Lying is usually unethical, but how full would prisons be if they had to hold all the liars in addition to the thieves, tax-cheats, murderers, and rapists?)



If ethics and legality were the same thing, all laws would be ethical, and all ethical acts would be permitted under the law. In other words, an unjust law couldn't exist. But this thinking seems to be false. If, for example, Congress passed a law that all brown-haired people had to wear polka-dotted pants on Thursdays or go to prison, this law would be terribly unjust. But it could only be labeled unjust if an independent ethical standard existed against which laws can be evaluated. Because ethical standards can actually be used to judge laws, ethics and legality must be separate concepts.

Perhaps the best historical example of an unjust law would be the slavery of blacks in the South before the Civil War. Whether or not people knew it then (and it's a fair bet they had some idea), by today's standards this law is seen as deeply flawed and immoral. But without the separation between ethics/morality and legality, such justification wouldn't be possible.

Requiring, forbidding, permitting: The most useful ethical vocabulary

Even when you know what ethics is, you still need a way of explaining your position on issues. Sure you can use words like "right," "wrong," "evil," "bad," "good," and so on, but they're not very precise. It's best to be as precise as you can in ethical matters, because they're hard enough to solve without confusing words.



The best vocabulary for classifying any position, action, or character trait is to put it one of three classes: "ethically required," "ethically permitted," and "ethically forbidden." These three classifications fill the gaps left by simple distinctions between good/bad, right/wrong, and so on. (Keep in mind that because ethics and morality are one and the same, we could have just as easily used

“morally” required, permitted, and forbidden. See the earlier section “Avoiding the pitfall of separating ethics and morality” for more information.)



Consider the ethical issue of capital punishment for murderers. People's positions vary, but usually they think it's either right or wrong. Those who think it's wrong don't have a difficult time making their point. They think people ought to be forbidden from performing capital punishment. But the crowd that thinks capital punishment is right has some explaining to do. "Right" could mean two different things that you have to disentangle.

- ✓ It can mean that society is ethically *required* to kill all murderers, which would be a strangely absolutist view.
- ✓ It also can mean that society is ethically *permitted* to kill some murderers for their crimes if the circumstances are awful enough. Most supporters of capital punishment hold this position.

Just using the term "right" can cause one to overlook the differences between these two conflicting positions.

Identifying Two Arguments for Being Ethical

During your studies of ethics, you probably have wondered about the most basic question of all: Why be ethical? Without an answer to this question, you don't have a lot of reason to continue reading this book! So this section looks at the two basic responses to help you get ethically motivated.

Why be ethical 101: It pays off!

People often ask, "Why should I be ethical?" And there's at least one answer that never seems to go out of style: Ethics can be in your self-interest. In other words, ethics pays off. In the real world, people tend to get annoyed when you steal their stuff, murder their friends, and cheat on them. As a consequence, they tend to do things like call the cops, try to murder you in return, or take your kids and move to Idaho. Things don't look so rosy when you fail to be ethical at least on a basic level.

Although some ethical rules and practices may put a serious damper on a good party, by and large people who follow those rules tend to live in harmony with those around them. Doing so creates a certain amount of happiness. So if, for example, you demonstrate that you can be trusted with wealth, you benefit materially.

The ethical life also can pay off in other ways. Barring some bad luck along the way, ethical people often have less stress in their lives than unethical people. They don't have to worry about the stress of hiding lies (or bodies!). Ethical people also seem capable of living happier, more fulfilled social lives. They even can develop much richer relationships with those around them because those people trust the ethical person to do what's right — and not to throw them under a bus whenever it may be more profitable.



If you don't believe us, consider the words that famous English philosopher Thomas Hobbes used to describe life where people hadn't come together to cooperate in an ethical manner: "Solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." Hobbes believed that choosing a sovereign to judge right from wrong allowed human beings to come out of that nasty and unwelcoming state in order to live together and create things. This arrangement would be much more in your self-interest than would living in the brutish state of nature. Refer to Chapter 9 for more on Hobbes.

Hobbes's point also leads to an additional reason to be ethical: Even if your own life doesn't fare particularly well by following ethical rules, some level of ethical behavior is necessary for having a cohesive society. By being ethical you contribute to that cohesiveness. And as Hobbes would be glad to point out, living in a cohesive society turns out to be much more beneficial to an individual than living in a culture of backstabbers and thieves.



So far in this section you've seen how ethics may be a benefit to you in *this* life. But some religions, particularly the Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam promise benefits after death to those who follow the right ethical path. If that promise doesn't get a religious person to be ethical (especially with the threat of hell hanging over her head when she isn't), it's difficult to see what would motivate such a person to be ethical at all.

Why be ethical 201: You'll live a life of integrity

When answering the question of why being ethical is important, consider the possibility that some compelling reasons for being ethical have nothing to do with payoff. Living with integrity is the most important of those reasons. Ethics is required if you want to live a life of integrity, and it simply allows you to do what's right. Lacking integrity, on the other hand, suggests a kind of cowardliness or weakness in one's life. In our discussion, two features of integrity stand out:

- ✓ **Integrity involves a state of wholeness or completeness.** This state of wholeness implies that when a person lacks integrity, that person lacks something that he should (as a self) have. We refer to this type as *internal* integrity. This type of integrity involves first having a strong sense of who you ought to be. It requires having a vision of your ideal self, and a strong conception of how a good life should be lived. You achieve internal integrity when the person you are right now matches the ideal sense of who you think you ought to be. You're whole, and what you do isn't in tension with what you think you ought to do, or how you ought to be.

Being able to compare your life to how you think you ought to live is a distinctively human activity. Dogs don't sit around asking themselves what type of life they ought to live and then bemoaning their lack of integrity when they fail to measure up. But you're not a dog, and without integrity your life would look, well, animal-like. The importance of living in this kind of way outstrips concerns about ethics "paying off."

- ✓ **Integrity includes the importance of commitment to living in accord with ethical principles, embodying ethical character, or performing ethical behaviors.** This type is *external* integrity, which points to the need of making sure that the principles, character traits, or behaviors that compose your ideal way of living are the right ones. The only way to figure that out is to engage with the ethical theories we outline in this book and see whether your conceptions about what is right are ethically justified, and if not, the book provides the tools you need in order to make the appropriate adjustments.

In fact, this need for external integrity highlights a central component of being motivated to be ethical: It's just right. Can't that be compelling on its own? It may be nice if morality and ethics pay off (and they often do). However, getting away from the fact that ethics can be compelling in and of itself is difficult. If murdering small children is wrong, it shouldn't matter whether it would pay to do otherwise.

Committing Yourself to the Ethical Life

In order to get your ethical life moving, you need to create an ethical life plan. Doing so is particularly important because making a commitment to being ethical is important. Of course, we realize that you may want to read this book just to discover the ins and outs about the theories, and if that's your goal, this book can meet your needs. However, all the authors of the theories in this book would hope that as you read along you think a bit more about the importance of *you* living the ethical life. The following sections walk you through the actions you can take to start down the ethical path.

Taking stock: Know thyself

When trying to figure out how you ought to live your life in the future, start off with a solid understanding of where you are now. The two central components of this exercise involve identifying your current customary practices and ethical intuitions. In order to take stock of yourself, do the following:



- ✓ **Determine your mindfulness.** Where you are now ethically requires what the Buddhists call *mindfulness*. A mindful person is one who's aware at all times. A mindful person pays close attention to what he normally does, to how he feels in response to certain situations, and to how he feels about certain actions. A mindful person is sensitive to his own thought patterns and is acutely aware of the beliefs and intuitions that form the moral core of who he is.

Keep a record of your actions, thoughts, and routines for a week. Are you friendly with others? More distant? Do you eat meat (we talk about it in our animal ethics discussion in Chapter 17)? Do you tend to focus on what's good about people or what's bad? Do you tend to find abortion wrong (see the bioethics discussion in Chapter 12)? Does the contemporary debate on torture evoke strong feelings in you (jump to the human rights discussion in Chapter 15)? Do you find that you tell white lies when you think it's appropriate? Do you think it's okay to treat others in ways you yourself may not appreciate (head to Chapter 10 for a discussion of the Golden Rule)? Do you recycle (check out our description of environmental ethics in Chapter 13)? Are you lazy or a hard worker? Are you abusive or sensitive with subordinates at work (read up on professional ethics in Chapter 14)?

In each of these cases, think about whether you consider your practices to be obligatory, forbidden, or perhaps just plain permissible. Think about whether your thoughts match up to what's ethically right. Being critical is important here, because building an ethical life plan is serious business. You need to know what you do, what you think, and how you ethically feel about things.

- ✓ **Identify what your moral intuitions are.** Identifying your intuitions and beliefs is important because they form your moral core. They form the basic value-based glue that holds you together. So know more about your core by asking yourself some questions: When you think of the death penalty, abortion, or being nice to others, do you find that you have strong intuitions about human rights (refer to Chapter 15), fetal rights, property rights, or human dignity (Kant is big on human dignity; see Chapter 8)? Note those intuitions. Is family important to you? Some virtue ethicists demand this (check out Chapter 6). Is it okay to cause unnecessary pain (see Chapter 7)? As you train yourself to be mindful about your intuitions regarding ethical value, you'll get better at homing in on them and seeing what they are.



You may notice that some of your practices and core intuitions conflict. Don't worry. It happens. To have internal integrity, you want to resolve those conflicts at some point, but at this early stage just be mindful that they exist. Eventually, your practices should flow from your moral core. If not, you're living out of sync with ethics, or at least out of sync with your own conception of what ethics is.

Building your moral framework

Although it's important to figure out where you are now (see the preceding section to find out how), you also want to realize that your current moral core could be ill-founded. Some of your moral intuitions could be all wrong. Figuring this out involves thinking more about ethical theories to see whether any frameworks agree with your own. It also requires criticizing your intuitions from the standpoint of opposing theories. Out of this engagement with the theories and their applications to different important issues and problems, you're sure to emerge with a stronger moral core.

This book is well designed to help you study your moral framework. As you read through each of the theories (which you can find mostly in Parts II and III), you encounter a different perspective on what's right and how to think about ethics. Be mindful of your intuitions and use them to identify the theory that most closely approximates your way of thinking. You may strongly identify with the core values proposed by one theory in particular. If so, try to understand that theory to the degree to which you can use it to really hone your intuitions. Building your moral framework requires serious work. In fact, it may even involve resisting some claims that your favorite theory makes, but that's the price of taking ethics seriously.



Even if you have a favorite theory, don't forget the others! Read through all these theories as a way of criticizing your way of conceptualizing what is right or good. Or just do it as a scholastic exercise, just to see which one has the best arguments. Take every theory seriously, and see each one as a worthy opponent. After all, those theories may have suggestions that will make you think, leading you to tweak your moral intuitions. When you dismiss claims or assumptions, make sure you can articulate why. All these theories have weak spots and criticisms that have been lodged against them. So even if you pick one as the best or strongest one, don't shy away from trying to pick away at solving some of the biggest attacks against it.

Seeing where you need to go

Solidifying your moral intuitions and coming up with a solid moral core are only two parts of the journey in developing an ethical life plan. In addition to making ethical judgments, you have to go and do things! Figure out what your moral intuitions call upon you to do. They may require you to do things that

you don't currently do. They may even make demands on you to reject some of your old habits. Don't complain: If ethics isn't difficult, then it's just not worth doing.



A real commitment to the ethical life isn't contained in your head. You also need to fashion a life of action out of your choices. If, for instance, your chosen principles or character traits call for relieving suffering wherever possible, you may determine that you need to give up eating meat. A person with a true commitment to ethics tries to avoid making excuses for herself when things get tough. If you're a utilitarian (see Chapter 7), meat eating is difficult to justify. So if you find utilitarianism to be the most similar to your way of thinking, don't ignore the glaring problem that there's a steak on your plate. You can't opt out of applying ethics to your life when it gets difficult. Figure out who you need to be, and then make sure that you follow through, assuring that your life plan and actions reflect your core intuitions and values. There's no other way to live ethically and to live with integrity. So get to it.

Making your own (piecemeal) moral theory

With the information in this chapter, you can construct your first "map" of your moral intuitions. This map is a simple form of moral theory in the form of a table. For each vertical column of the table, write in an issue or action that you have an ethical position on. Then put an X in the box to designate whether you believe it's ethically required, permissible, or forbidden. For instance, take a look at the following table.

Try it yourself! Make a table with as many ethical issues as you can think of and try to figure out which box you think the X goes in. Then, after you've read more of this book, come back and see whether any of the theories you studied give you a more systematic way of deciding where the X goes.

	Eating meat	Working on the Sabbath	Refraining from killing people
Ethically required			X
Ethically permissible		X	
Ethically forbidden	X		