

1

Ethics

What It Is, Does, and Isn't

Philosophical Ethics

Let me begin with two claims you will probably reject: ethics is something totally new to you; and your current ideas about right and wrong aren't nearly as clear or logical as you think they are.

I say that ethics is new to you because, although ideas of right and wrong have been part of your life since infancy, you are probably unfamiliar with a *philosophical* approach to ethics. Parents, teachers, preachers, friends, and associates try to shape our conduct and beliefs, but most of them don't use a philosophical approach. They cajole, coddle, argue, encourage, bribe, and sometimes even threaten us to agree with their ideas or, at a minimum, to get us to do what they want. They may try to reason with us, but most likely not especially well. Intense and disciplined thinking about right and wrong is something totally new to you because, at least in public discourse about ethical issues in our culture, it's usually rejected for more emotional, rhetorical, partisan, and ideological approaches.

You may feel comfortable with the way you approach ethics and see no need for a new way to look at things. You probably have deeply held beliefs about right and wrong, and you assume that everyone's entitled to his or her own ideas. And you probably think that's all ethics is about.

However, because your current approach to ethical dilemmas is based on a hodge-podge of beliefs, feelings, traditions, and convictions you've picked up throughout life, your ideas about ethics are much less clearly formulated, systematic, and consistent than you think they are. Some of your approach to ethics is emotional—you probably believe something is wrong if you feel guilty when you do it. Some ideas are based on something practical—you know you'll get in trouble with the law or some other authority if you get caught. Your decisions about how to act may also be affected by your wanting to please other people—you might want the approval or acceptance of your parents or friends. But precisely because this hodge-podge of ideas about ethics comes from so

many different sources, there's a good chance your thinking may be *inconsistent* and *contradictory*.

- You agree with the law says stealing is wrong. But when you're told to buy a very expensive textbook for a required class that you didn't want to take in the first place, you might decide your friends are right when they say that stealing textbooks isn't wrong because, as a "captive market," students are being taken advantage of.
- Perhaps the conflict is as simple as having one set of rules for ourselves and another set for others: "It's OK for me to cheat on the person I'm dating, but it'd be wrong if they did it to me."
- Maybe you believe what your religion says about right and wrong, and that you should feel guilty after doing something wrong. But you also know that you can feel really good after engaging in some pretty serious "sinning."
- It's also possible that at this point in your life, you've decided to engage in your own version of Socrates' "examined life." Maybe you're questioning what you were taught when you were younger as you meet people who think very differently. But if you're just starting that process, you don't have an overarching understanding of how you separate right from wrong.
- Or maybe you're at the other extreme and you've decided to reject any specific standards and leave your sense of morality to "gut feel"—even though you can't explain to other people very convincingly what you mean by right and wrong.

The goal of this book is to help you learn how to approach ethical dilemmas in a systematic, sophisticated, and consistent fashion so that you will understand ethical issues more fully and make better-informed decisions. In short, this book aims to make a philosopher out of you—someone who can slog through the confusion, put it in order, think about it clearly, understand why you believe what you do, explain your beliefs to others, and resolve ethical dilemmas in an intellectually sophisticated way. All it takes is patience and practice.

Ethics: What Is It?

The simplest way to describe what ethics does is to say that it *evaluates human actions*. It's a particular way of making *positive and negative judgments* about what we ourselves and other people do.

Obviously, *philosophical ethics* isn't alone in evaluating behavior. *Law* divides actions into "legal" and "illegal," and tells us that if we disobey, we'll go to jail, pay a fine, or lose some privilege. Most *religions* advise us what to believe and how to act if we want to please God, achieve everlasting happiness, or avoid eternal punishment. *Psychiatry* explains the difference between behavior that's

“normal,” “neurotic,” and “psychotic.” *Medicine* gives us a yardstick for deciding how “healthy” our behavior is. *Business* tells us how “profitable” something is.

But with so many different ways of measuring human behavior, how is ethics different? What is ethics? Does it have anything special to contribute apart from law and religion?

Ethics

Ethics (or *moral philosophy*) is a branch of philosophy that dates back two thousand years to Socrates (c. 470–399 BCE), the ancient Greek philosopher who spent his days in the Athenian marketplace encouraging people to think about how they lived. Two of Socrates’ most important ideas were: the unexamined life is not worth living, and vice harms the doer.¹ Socrates believed that his mission in life was to challenge his fellow citizens to live in a more self-reflective way and to act ethically. He would ask them, “Are you not ashamed of your eagerness to possess as much wealth, reputation, and honors as possible, while you do not care for nor give thought to wisdom and truth, or the best possible state of your soul?” (*Apology* 29 d–e). Socrates lived and died following the idea that “the most important thing is not life, but the good life” (*Crito* 48 b).

Socrates did nothing more than ask people to reflect on and study their behavior, and that’s essentially what ethics does. But, as we can learn from the original meanings of “ethical” and “moral,” this includes both *what* people do and *how* they do it.

The English words “ethics” and “morals” come to us from two words in ancient Greek and Latin, *ethos* and *mores*; both mean “character.”² When we ask if an action is ethical, we can think, “Is it the sort of thing somebody with a ‘good character’ would do?”

For example, when we say that Alex has a good character, we mean that we trust her *to do the right thing*—to keep her promises or be kind. But we’re also saying something about the *way* she does things. Alex keeps her word because it’s the right thing to do, not because she wants to impress people. She gives to charity out of generosity, not because it’s a tax deduction. We’re unimpressed if George keeps his promise only with people bigger than he is or if Dorothy is helpful only when there’s an audience around. Acting “ethically” is connected with both *what* a person does and *how* he or she does it.

1 “I say that it is the greatest good for a man to discuss virtue every day and those other things about which you hear me conversing and testing myself and others, for the unexamined life is not worth living for man”; “[O]ne must never do wrong willingly...[because] wrongdoing is in every way harmful and shameful to the wrongdoer.” Plato, *Apology*, in *The Trial and Death of Socrates*, translated by G. M. A. Grube (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1975), 38 a; *Crito*, 49 a–b.

2 Throughout this handbook, “ethical” and “moral” will be used interchangeably, although some authors distinguish between them.

In reflecting on what we and others do, however, precisely what do we mean when we say that an action is positive or negative from an *ethical* viewpoint? What standard does an ethically acceptable action meet? What does it mean to say that an ethically unacceptable one falls short? These are the basic questions in ethics. And because they are *so* important, the next chapter is devoted to them. Right now we'll look at what ethics *is*—its connection with philosophy—and then move on to what it *isn't*. In Chapter 2 we'll see what goes on when we evaluate the ethical character of an action, that is, when we make some judgment about how right or wrong an action is.

Ethics and Philosophy

Ethics is a part of philosophy. And like any branch of philosophy, it uses *reason*, *logic*, *concepts*, and *arguments* to analyze problems and find answers. Philosophical questions are abstract or conceptual, so the most important tool to use is your mind.

Of course, real-life ethical dilemmas do involve facts. And sometimes uncovering more facts will help clarify an issue. For example, to go back to one of the examples in the Introduction, if Sasha learns that Melissa and Ron don't have an exclusive relationship, she doesn't have a conflict about whether she should keep her promise to Crystal. On the other hand, if Melissa confides to her that she suspects Ron is cheating, and she would definitely want anyone who knew the truth to tell her, Sasha has a clearer path to say something like, "I can't tell you how I know this, but I can confirm your suspicions."

Even if digging up additional facts helps, it is only a preliminary step. What Sasha should do depends more on how those facts fit into the concepts of *promise keeping* and *one's duties to protect a friend*.

Similarly, the pronouncements of laws, sacred writings, or religious authorities may give us some relevant data on which to reflect, but they aren't the final word in a philosophical approach to an ethical issue. Some strictly illegal actions can be quite ethical (breaking the speed limit while rushing a sick friend to the hospital) and many immoral actions are perfectly legal (misleading someone about how you feel just to seduce them). A religious pronouncement about abortion may settle the issue for members of one particular church, but it doesn't make it wrong for members of other religions, agnostics, or atheists.

More important than facts, laws, or precepts, then, is what you do with them. Whenever you use a philosophical approach to ethics, you analyze actions and their consequences. You examine the relevant ethical concepts and see how they apply to the facts in the case. And when you come to some conclusion, you use your mind to craft an explanation or argument that lays out your analysis and explains your point of view. In ethics, what counts most is *what you think*.

There are two ways to understand the last sentence: "What counts most is what you *think*" and "What counts most is what *you* think." Each emphasis tells us something about what ethics *isn't*.

What Ethics Isn't

Ethics and Emotion—"What Counts Most Is What You *Think*"

The first way to look at this sentence is, "What counts most is what you *think*"—not what you *feel*, but what you *think*. Many people have gotten into the habit of using "I feel" to refer to both emotions and thoughts, as in "I feel happy" and "I feel that stealing is wrong." But there's a big difference between thinking and feeling, and it's especially important to keep this straight when talking about ethics.

Simply put, *feeling* statements describe our own internal, private, emotional, or physical states: "I feel happy"; "I feel angry"; "I feel depressed"; "I feel like I'm in love"; "I feel hot"; "I feel cold." If you tell me you feel unhappy, I must accept that as your description of what it feels like from the inside. I can't debate it. It is ridiculous for me to argue back, "No, you don't feel unhappy." And it's insulting to say, "You shouldn't feel unhappy." For whatever reason, you do feel unhappy, and that's all there is to it. If I care about you I might ask, "Why do you feel unhappy?" Maybe there's something I can do to cheer you up, or perhaps talking about your unhappiness will make you feel better. But I'm not asking you to defend why you're entitled to feel that way. Your feelings legitimately exist in and of themselves, and that's all that matters.

We really shouldn't use *feeling* statements to express our ethical convictions, then. Strictly speaking, if I say, "I *feel* that capital punishment is morally wrong," I'm saying that something about capital punishment makes me uneasy, unhappy, or distressed. What I should say instead is "Capital punishment makes me feel upset." But, of course, that kind of statement doesn't explain my moral evaluation of capital punishment very well. So if we want to say something's "wrong," we must change our language. We've got to use *thinking* statements.

Thinking statements are very different from *feeling* statements. They communicate a position we hold for specific *reasons*—reasons we should be willing to make public. If someone says to you, "I think it's OK for this company to give preference to a man for this particular job rather than a woman," you're entitled to ask "Why?," get an explanation, and decide whether it's an acceptable reason.

If it's "men are just better at business than women," you have good reason to reject it as prejudice. However, if it's "this job involves trying to sell men a supplement that promotes prostate health, and men will be more comfortable discussing that with another man than with a woman," more is going on than irrational bias.

Since the main tools of philosophical ethics are reason, logic, and arguments, this approach depends more on thinking than feeling. When you analyze an ethical problem this way, use your mind—not your heart. Be prepared to give reasons for your position, listen to someone who disagrees with you, consider the merits of what they say, and have an intelligent response.

Keep in mind that philosophical ethics is a public enterprise. We're all expected to state fully and clearly the reasons behind our convictions so that

others can scrutinize our arguments and either be convinced by us or show us our mistakes. It's like a scientist who runs an experiment. She publicly reports her findings so that her colleagues can either confirm the work or refute her. Inquiries after truth are public so that people can see what's going on and decide whether the facts are accurate and the arguments make sense.

For example, if I want to convince you that cheating on a test is morally wrong, I can't say just that it makes me upset when students cheat and leave it at that. If you hold the opposite view, there's no reason why my belief should make you change your mind. I must give you reasons that you find relevant and convincing. If both of us make our reasons public, we can scrutinize each other's evidence, and perhaps come to an agreement. But even if we continue to disagree, we'll at least understand each other better and not think that our respective positions are arbitrary, self-serving, or baseless—unless that's what our explanations reveal!

There are, after all, better and worse reasons for holding certain positions, and this is precisely what ethical analysis reveals. If I argue against cheating by pointing out that you would be gaining an unfair advantage over other students, I would be giving you an explanation worth considering. But if I say cheating is wrong because it lets too many students get high grades, I haven't given a reason for why it's *wrong*. My position, then, wouldn't be worthy of your respect. But going public with our explanations is the only way we'll find out.

The biggest problem with feeling statements is that we can't argue with them. Feelings simply have to be accepted. And if we can't argue about them, they won't get us very far in ethics. That's why "What counts most is what you *think*."

Also, people's emotions can change dramatically. On Monday we're in love with someone, on Tuesday we can't stand them, and on Wednesday we're back together. The first time we lie, we feel terribly guilty; the fifth time the guilt isn't so bad; and by the twentieth time we congratulate ourselves on how well we do it. How people feel about an action, particularly whether they feel guilty or not, typically doesn't contribute much to an ethical investigation.

We should also not be misled by how sincerely people hold their beliefs. In the past, some people thought it was a good thing to burn heretics and "witches." Terrorists who kill innocent people may sincerely believe they're doing the right thing. Sincerity is a wonderful human virtue, but it has absolutely nothing to do with proving that what you're doing is right.

This is not to say that emotions are less important than reason or that they have no place in our lives. Emotions evolved to play specific, crucial roles in our lives. Feelings give color to our lives. And in some parts of life, like friendships and intimate relationships, we should probably pay more attention to our emotions than to our rational ideas.

It's also important to note, however, that even though emotions aren't a fool-proof touchstone to knowing what the right thing to do is, they can be relevant

to an ethical analysis.³ If you feel that lying is wrong, examining your feelings may reveal some of your reasons. For example, your negative, emotional reaction to lying may be based on something specific and germane—like your concern that the person lied to is being manipulated.

Or someone's emotions may show us something relevant to an ethical analysis in another way. Imagine that Sasha's decision to respect Crystal's wishes is really the result of the fact that she used to date Ron, and she's angry at Melissa, who, in dating a friend's ex, violated the "Girl Code." Sasha decides to pay her back by letting her continue dating a cheater, knowing she'll ultimately be crushed when she finds out the truth about Ron. Under those circumstances, the fact that Sasha honors her promise to Crystal is hardly an ethically positive action.

Nonetheless, we need to be careful how much weight we put on how we feel emotionally when deciding how morally acceptable an action is. Our feelings may only cloud the issue, and we'll never get to the heart of the matter. A classic case of this is the way the abortion issue is handled in the United States. Abortion's foes use sensationalistic films and photos of fetuses; they denounce it as "murder"; proponents of a woman's choice make stirring appeals to individual liberty, and raise the scary specter of religions convincing governments to regulate the most private parts of our lives. But so much emotion is stirred up that no one bothers to talk seriously about the central questions: What does it take for something to be a person? And does a fetus meet those criteria? Since this is a case of an actual person (the woman) versus a potential person (the fetus), do the supposed rights of the latter trump those of the former, or vice versa?

So remember: In ethics, what counts most is what you *think*.

Ethics and Authority—“What Counts Most Is What *You* Think”

Now let's talk about the other way that sentence can be read: “What counts most is what *you* think.”

One of the most important characteristics of philosophy is that it grants total authority to us as rational individuals. In a philosophical discussion—one based on reason and logic—a position is recognized as legitimate only if we agree to it because the argument supporting it is reasonable and logical.

Imagine that I tell a friend I think it's OK to pay undocumented immigrants poor wages and work them long hours under bad conditions simply because they have no leverage against me, and I can get away with it. It doesn't matter if Socrates himself miraculously appears and tells me that I'm wrong. I shouldn't grant his point until he convinces me with a decent argument. He would give me his reasons, solicit my objections, consider them, and respond. And this process would go on until he showed me the mistakes in my thinking, and I freely admitted I was wrong. A philosophical approach to ethics works on discussion, dialogue, disagreement, debate, and the free assent of individuals.

³ In Chapter 5, we'll examine one approach to ethics that places considerable weight on emotions.

Obviously, not all debates about ethics are conducted with this kind of openness to dialogue. More often, people try to settle ethical questions simply by appealing to some sort of *authority*. Perhaps it's tradition ("For thousands of years, marriage has been only between a man and a woman, so that's the way it's supposed to be"). Maybe it's a personal authority ("I'm your father and as long as you live under my roof, my word is law"). Sometimes it's religious teachings ("The Bible teaches that blasphemy is a serious sin"). But in all of these cases, someone is simply telling you to accept some authority as the final word on the matter. That is, they aren't trying to convince you and elicit your free consent that their position is correct. As far as they're concerned, they have an authority to back them up, and that's all there is to it.

There are two major problems with appeals to authority. First, such appeals are regularly accompanied by threats of punishment if you disobey (ranging from being thrown out of the house to spending eternity being flame broiled) or promises of rewards if you go along (your friends' approval, your parents' continued love). Not only are these punishments and rewards completely irrelevant to the ethical issue at hand, but trying to manipulate one another by threatening retaliation or holding out rewards hardly counts as treating one another with respect.

Second, debates about ethics that rely on authorities can get dangerous when authorities disagree, as they invariably do. When you put together groups of people who are absolutely certain they're right but hold opposite positions, you have a tinderbox. Because these groups accept without question what some authority has told them, they will have little patience with anyone who sees things differently. Everyone will have a low frustration threshold, and they will have little interest in listening to, understanding, or appreciating a point of view that challenges their own. This makes for an explosive, potentially violent situation. As we read time and again in the pages of human history—not to mention the daily news feed—when people get tired of using words against each other, and yet are still convinced they're right, they don't leave each other alone. They reach for weapons instead.

Appeals to authority, threats, and coercion have no place in philosophical ethics. There is never a time in an ethical disagreement with someone when we can throw up our hands in disgust, yell that further talk is useless, and stomp away cursing that anyone who disagrees with us is just going to have to give in—or else! One of the great virtues of philosophical ethics is that there are always good reasons to keep talking. You might think of a new argument that will finally convince your adversary. You could be persuaded by her that you've been wrong all along. Or you may find some new common ground.

Ethics, Authority, and Religion

Religion is probably the authority that is cited most often in debates about right and wrong. One of the main functions of religion is to advise people how to live, so it's not surprising that religions make ethical pronouncements.

It is clear that religions are important to people who believe in them. Religions comfort and protect believers in a way that no government, school, business, or other institution can. In the face of human hatred, the threat of terrorism, war, poverty, natural disasters, a universe exploding headlong into infinity, and our own storm-tossed days, religions provide a sense that life isn't quite as bleak as it seems. The world becomes ordered and purposeful, and we have our own special, protected niche. The winds aren't quite so biting, the bumps less jarring.

However, for the sake of learning the skills associated with a philosophical analysis of ethical problems, we need to exclude a religious approach to ethics for a number of reasons.

- Religious ethics and philosophical ethics are two different enterprises. The one is spiritual, the other intellectual. Philosophical ethics is a decidedly secular enterprise.
- When religions make moral pronouncements, they use the language of authority, which puts their claims outside the realm of philosophical ethics.
- Some people believe that you can't be ethical unless you're religious, even though this is clearly not true.
- The contributions of particular religions to discussions of right and wrong remain mainly within the flock. Religions are built on faith, and if you don't accept certain fundamental teachings, you won't get much out of the ethical judgments offered by religious figures. Roman Catholic tradition gives considerable moral authority to the Pope, but if you're Lutheran, Jewish, or Buddhist, the Pope's opinion probably doesn't mean very much to you.
- Many religions also make the disturbing claim that someone may be judged to be unethical not because of their *behavior* (lying, cheating, stealing, being disrespectful to one another), but because of what they *believe*. There are far too many examples in the history of many religions of a willingness to punish (even execute) perfectly good and decent individuals because they subscribe to the wrong theology. From a philosophical perspective, this makes no sense.

As a rule, religion and philosophical ethics don't have much in common.⁴

Ethics, Authority, and the Law

Another authority that people regularly appeal to in discussions about ethics is the law. Many think that something is "wrong" only if the law prohibits it; conversely, if the law allows it, it's all right. However, we must reject this attitude because "legal" and "moral" are two different things.

⁴ This is not to say that religious perspectives have nothing to offer to a philosophical discussion. Examining a religion's teachings about our duty to help others in need, for example, may reveal some points that are actually rational and secular. And these are relevant to a philosophical discussion of an ethical dilemma. After all, every reason a spiritual leader gives isn't necessarily strictly theological. In fact, Chapter 6 (which focuses on why we should worry about the morality of what we do) includes a major discussion of one of the great teachers of the Christian Church, St Augustine.

There's good reason why people confuse "legal" and "moral." Law gives us a yardstick against which we can measure our actions, and it punishes people whose behavior falls short. And law *does* punish many actions that are morally wrong: murder, rape, theft, blackmail, and the like.

Law cannot work as the ultimate standard of right and wrong, however. Laws allow many actions that are morally offensive (manipulating people or lying to your friends). At the same time, they prohibit behavior that is morally neutral (most parking infractions) or even good (civil disobedience to advance human rights).

Laws are contradictory. The same action may be legal in one state or country and forbidden in another.

They are also changeable. For nearly two centuries the laws of the United States allowed atrocities to be done to black Americans. The laws first let them be owned, used, and abused as property. Even after emancipation, the laws still allowed discrimination. Today, the denial of fundamental human freedoms to the citizens of too many countries is performed in accordance with their laws. Furthermore, when laws change, what was permitted on Monday can be punishable on Tuesday. But it's nonsense to say that the same action done by the same people in the same way for the same reasons is "morally right" one day and "morally wrong" the next.

The coercive power of the law may be able to tell us what we can or can't do with impunity. But it cannot serve as a reliable guide to morality.

Ethical Relativism

The fact that there can be so much disagreement about right and wrong among religions and laws leads some people to argue in favor of ethical relativism. This is an outlook that denies the existence of universal, objective ethical principles, and asserts that ethical judgments are simply an expression of the limited perspective of individuals or societies. So, if we've rejected the authority of law and religion, doesn't that mean that ethics is essentially an arbitrary construct? Isn't it, then, ultimately "relative" to societies or individuals?

The great variety of ethical judgments that we find among individuals and cultures presents an important challenge to the idea that there can be an objective foundation to ethics. We need to think carefully, however, about what we conclude.

Cultural Relativism

One version of relativism argues that ethical standards are simply expressions of the customs of a particular community. These traditions have developed over the years, become part of a group's culture, and serve a purpose for this specific society. They are often an informal adjunct to law in organizing the community.

Unfortunately, we often see these norms used to enforce gender roles (“women should remain at home taking care of children”) and social divisions based on race or class (“in this family, we date only people of ‘our own kind’”). Often, ethical perspectives grounded in tradition seem to be based on fear of anything different (we see this, for example, in the violence against homosexuals in aggressively heterosexual cultures). Discrimination of all sorts is typically defended by an appeal to one or more cultural traditions. One of the most egregious examples of using cultural traditions to defend unethical behavior is the way slavery in the United States was described as “our peculiar institution” by slave-owners.

It is important to note that traditions like this often began when privileged groups in these communities simply had the raw power to impose their will on other people. In societies where slavery or discrimination were considered ethically defensible, this was surely not the opinion of their victims. Indeed, it is not unusual for such practices ultimately to be overturned when the power dynamic changed.

To put it simply, just because a practice has persisted for a number of years and is regarded as a “tradition,” this is no guarantee that it is ethically defensible.

Individual Relativism

Another sort of relativism leaves everything up to the individual. Each of us, then, becomes our own ultimate moral authority.

There is some obvious appeal to the perspective. After all, no one knows more than we do about exactly what’s going on in a particular situation. We understand the circumstances, our motivation, and the values we’re trying to respect in our actions.

Sadly, we also have an insurmountable conflict of interest because there’s no way we can be objective about our own situation. And if we’re brutally honest, most of us would admit that we rarely think that anything we do is wrong. We can always find a way to justify—or rationalize—our behavior.

This kind of ethical relativism also violates obvious ideas of equality. It elevates you above all the people around you. It lets you say that if something is good for you, then nobody else’s interests count. And such a presumption of personal superiority and authority doesn’t fit with a rational, philosophical approach. What happens to discussion, debate, and mutual agreement with this attitude?

Another problem with this approach is that it simply isn’t rationally defensible. As soon as you place sole moral authority with the individual, you open the door for some terrible things. If you say, “What’s right depends on what the individual believes is right,” you have absolutely no basis on which to condemn the actions of someone like Hitler. If a terrorist really believes that killing innocent people is right, how can you say that he’s doing something wrong? If it all depends on the individual, why should your opinion count for more than his?

Obviously, any system of ethics that can't condemn Hitler or terrorism leaves an enormous amount to be desired.

Making the individual the ultimate moral authority reduces ethical disagreements to nothing more than disputes about taste, likes, or dislikes. You may have heard the Latin expression, *de gustibus non est disputandum*—"there's no arguing about taste." If someone's taste is different from yours, you simply have to accept it. Arguing won't change it because taste isn't a rational, intellectual matter.

There are major problems, then, in giving the individual absolute and final authority in ethics.

Relativism: A Caveat

Despite the problems with ethical relativism, most of us remain torn. We recognize the importance of respecting other cultures, and we want to be able to accept customs different from our own. We recognize that honoring freedom and individuality means that we need to tolerate ideas or behaviors with which we disagree. And, particularly on personal moral issues, we want the autonomy to make decisions according to our most sincere beliefs, and we want other people to respect our judgments about what is right and wrong for us. However, although many of us may want to conclude on the basis of these desires that "ethics is relative," what we probably mean is something like "ethics is too complicated for simple, objective solutions." The fact that there can be such difference in ethical judgments among cultures and individuals, then, doesn't automatically mean that it's impossible to find some general moral principles that we might all agree on.

Studying different cultural and individual opinions of right and wrong may help us turn up information that is relevant to a philosophical inquiry. Why are varying practices accepted or condemned in this or that society? If you and I differ, what are our respective arguments? By looking into these things, perhaps we can find something relevant to a rational, philosophical approach to understanding and evaluating human conduct. In fact, many people argue that "ethics is relative" because they see dangerous implications to the belief that there are objective ethical standards. They fear that such standards can be used as a defense for forcing cultures that are doing things "wrong" to change their ways, punishing people simply because they don't follow a society's norms, or stigmatizing otherwise good and decent individuals just because they think for themselves. Notice, however, how such a defense of relativism is based on a belief in the fundamental importance of matters like freedom, autonomy, and personal choice. If defenders of ethical relativism say that it's wrong to punish someone for his or her beliefs, they're actually—without realizing it—making a case for objective ethical principles.

Conclusion

At this point you may think you know more about what ethics *isn't* than what it is. But you've also learned about some of the basic features of ethics.

- Ethics is a branch of philosophy concerned with making positive and negative judgments about human actions.
- Ethics works through making intellectual judgments on the basis of rational explanation and public discussion.
- The aim of an ethical argument is to get someone else to freely agree with you for good reasons.
- In a philosophical approach to ethics, neither emotions, laws, religious teachings, cultural traditions, or personal assessment of a particular action count as much as whether we can present a rational, logical, and persuasive argument that explains and defends our point of view.

Discussion Questions

- 1 Describe the similarities and differences among the following statements:
 - A “You can’t just punch someone who insults you. It’s against the law.”
 - B “Honor thy father and thy mother.”
 - C “We can’t charge so little for that product. It’ll put us in the red.”
 - D “I can’t go to bed with you. I’ll feel too guilty tomorrow.”
 - E “You shouldn’t take money from your roommate’s wallet without asking first. That’s wrong.”

- 2 Think of something you believe is a clear case of something *wrong*. Come up with a completely rational and secular argument to explain why.

- 3 Consider how effectively you could argue with the following people. What would you say to get them to change their minds? Would they change yours? What would your conversations be like? How would you feel in these situations?
 - A A friend who says, “I know I said I’d help you with your paper Saturday, but I just got invited to go to a really great party. Look, you’d do the same if you were in my shoes.”
 - B A fellow student who says, “Sure I stole that textbook from the bookstore. But tuition is so high at this school, I figured they owed it to me.”
 - C Someone who is passionately committed to a particular cause who says, “The only way my people are going to be free is if the world knows we’re serious. And they’ll understand that when we kill some innocent people to make our point. This is war. And some innocent people *always* die in a war.”

- D A devoutly religious person who believes in the Bible who claims, “God’s law is explicit. ‘Thou shalt not commit adultery.’ It’s clearly wrong. I think that we should make adultery illegal and punish any offenders severely. If we clamp down on adultery we’ll be saving the souls of some people who would otherwise commit this terrible sin.”
- 4 Are any of the following people doing anything *morally wrong*?
- A Luis is sitting at the red traffic light at 2 AM. There’s no traffic around, and he can see that no cars are coming from any direction. Luis drives through the red light.
 - B Ann’s parents forbid her from having a relationship with any boy of a different race. She disobeys them.
 - C Bill’s religion teaches that killing is wrong. He comes upon someone trying to rape his girlfriend. In a furious rage, he kills the attacker.
- 5 Go back to the three cases in the Introduction. Who’s doing something *right*? Who’s doing something *wrong*? What are the reasons for your judgment?