

#### 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

## Chapter **1**

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

**Y**ou probably wouldn't try to make a cake without ingredients, pots, and pans, right? Well, the same goes for preparing a recipe for an ethical life. You need to know some basic terms and concepts to get your materials ready. Luckily, although living an ethical life isn't always easy, learning those basic terms and concepts is easy to do.

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 terms and distinctions that will quickly emerge during 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: The Vocabulary of Ethics

Although ethics and morality are essential parts of human life, not many people understand how to talk about them. So many terms! 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 *really* ought to avoid. Isn't it cool how just these two words can unify so many ethical concepts?

One way to clearly understand how ethics uses the terms *should* and *ought* is by considering why science doesn't use those terms at all. The contrast between them helps you see what ethics is about. Consider the fact that science tries to figure out the way the world is, was, or will be, which means it aims to give the best *description* of how the world was, is, or will be. The following are all scientific questions (some easier to answer than others) that each have a descriptive answer.

- » 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?



REMEMBER

Whereas science focuses on the way the world was, is, or will be, ethics focuses on the way the world *ought* or *should* be. Ethics isn't trying to be descriptive; it's trying to be *prescriptive*. We'd say that makes ethics a bit more ambitious! Focusing on how the world *should* be gives ethical questions a different nature than science questions. Tweaking our last questions, ethical versions would look more like this:

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



WARNING

Lots of people miss the point about ethical discussions because they assume ethical “ought” questions are “is” questions, which would make them science questions. How many times have you heard someone defend their unjust actions by saying “Yeah, well, maybe life isn’t fair?” Maybe that person is right that the world is unfair, but that doesn’t mean it *should* be unfair. How the world is and how it should be are different issues.

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

The terms *ethics* and *morality* have two different dictionary definitions, but throughout this book we’ll use them interchangeably and won’t make any effort to distinguish between them. 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. *Ethical* is often used to describe societal ethics or universal codes, and *moral* is often used to describe a person’s own values.



REMEMBER

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



WARNING

“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’s true — we’re not saying that words don’t get used in that way. Robin Hood *stole* (broke an ethical code) to *help the poor* (advance a personal moral value, such as compassion).

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. The practice appears motivated by greed (a bad moral value for the seller) but it’s not necessarily unethical (in ethical theory) to have high prices. If ethics and morality say different things, you still need to find out as the storekeeper 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 "oughtness" of things. Professional philosophers don't bother distinguishing between the two a lot of the time, so you shouldn't either. Keep things simple so you can focus on what's most important.

## 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 confuse the ethical thing to do with the legal thing to do. There's some overlap between ethics and the law, but they also often come apart. For example, consider speeding. Speeding is illegal, but that doesn't mean it's always unethical. It's ethically acceptable to speed 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 ethically wrong, for instance. But breaking romantic commitments or failing to be faithful isn't typically illegal (and even where it is, laws against adultery aren't usually enforced). People who try to make more excuses for their behavior by asking, "There's no law against it, is there?" are wrongly suggesting that legal permissibility entails moral permissibility. They are confusing ethics and legality. Don't fall for it.



REMEMBER

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. After all, you don't want partners to be faithful because they worry about going to jail if they aren't. Instead, you want people to be faithful to one another out of love and because it's the morally right thing to do.

Besides, it could simply be too expensive to enforce some laws. Lying is usually considered unethical, but how full would prisons be if they had to incarcerate all the liars in addition to the thieves, tax-cheats, murderers, and rapists? Let's let people in the moral community deal with the liars by condemning their behavior. The prison population is too big already.



PONDER  
THIS

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 (*legal* but *unjust*) couldn't exist. But this thinking seems to be false. Congress could pass a law that all brown-haired people had to wear polka-dotted pants on Thursdays. 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 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 Black people 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. Slavery was legal, but morally wrong. But without the separation between ethics/morality and legality, criticizing that law from the standpoint of ethics wouldn't be possible.

Requiring, forbidding, permitting: Even when you know your ethics terms, you still need a way of explaining your position on issues. You can use words like *right*, *wrong*, *evil*, *bad*, or *good* to explain what ought to be done, or say what position should be taken, but your prescription still needs to be very precise.



REMEMBER

The best vocabulary for classifying any position, action, or character trait is to put it in 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.)



PONDER  
THIS

Consider the ethical issue of capital punishment for murderers. People's positions vary, but usually they think the practice is 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 further explaining to do because saying it is “right” could prescribe two different options that you need to disentangle.

- » It can mean that society is ethically *required* to kill all murderers, which would be a strangely extreme and absolutist view.
- » It also can mean that society is ethically *permitted* to kill murderers for their crimes if the circumstances are awful enough. This leaves the door open to not use capital punishment for other murders. Most supporters of capital punishment hold this position.

Just using the term *right* can cause one to overlook the differences between these two conflicting options and lead to a lot of unnecessary misunderstanding.

# 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! We want you to get to the end of the book, so this section looks at the two basic responses that will help you get ethically motivated.

## Why be ethical 101? It pays off!

People often ask, "Why should I be ethical?" One answer that never seems to go out of style is: 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, kill their friends, or cheat on them. Therefore, they tend to do things like call the cops, try to kill you in return, or take your kids and move to Idaho. Your life doesn't go so well when you fail to be ethical at a basic level.

In contrast, 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. Contributing to basic social order and stability through ethics creates a certain amount of happiness for individuals. Your own ethical conduct can have a clear return on investment (ROI) — if 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 can even 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.



WORDS OF  
WISDOM

Heck, even society gets an ROI from ethics. If you don't believe us, consider the words that famous English philosopher Thomas Hobbes used to describe life before people came together to cooperate in an ethical manner. He said life was "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." Hobbes believed that choosing a sovereign leader to judge and enforce right from wrong allowed human beings to leave that nasty and unwelcoming state in order to live together and create things. This arrangement is far better for everyone than living in the brutish state of nature. Refer to Chapter 7 for more on Hobbes.



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 religious people to be ethical, especially with the threat of hell hanging over their heads when they aren't, it's difficult to see what would motivate people to be ethical at all.

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

When answering the question “why be ethical?” 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. Having integrity means having and holding to an ethical system or code even when it is difficult and demanding. Lacking integrity, on the other hand, is not having an ethical code or not holding to it when things get difficult, which suggests a kind of cowardliness or weakness. In our discussion, two features of integrity stand out:

» **Internal integrity involves a state of wholeness or completeness.** This state of wholeness implies that the person you are right now matches the ideal moral 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 present life to how you think you ought to live is a distinctively human activity. Animals don't sit around asking themselves what type of life they ought to live and then bemoan their lack of integrity when they fail to measure up. Animals act on what instinct leads them to do, which is often the path with least discomfort. This is why lacking integrity looks animal-like, because in important situations discomfort leads such persons to abandon their principles

» **External integrity requires living in accord with ethical principles, embodying ethical character, or performing ethical behaviors.** Although attaining internal integrity is crucial, *external* integrity points to the additional need of making sure that the principles, character traits, or behaviors that compose your ideal way of living are the right ones. Think about it: A serial killer could attain *internal* integrity if their ideal moral self is a murderer. To avoid this, you want to make sure that your sense of who you ought to be lines up with what is ethically justified. If it isn't, this 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 reason 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 off 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 of 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. To do this, you need to start by identifying your ethical intuitions and beliefs. In order to take stock of yourself, do the following:

- » **Increase your mindfulness.** Determining where you are now ethically requires what the Buddhists call *mindfulness*. A mindful person is one who's aware at all times. Mindful people pay close attention to what they normally do, to how they feel in response to certain situations, and to how they feel about certain actions. Mindful people are sensitive to their own thought patterns and are acutely aware of the beliefs and intuitions that form the moral core of who they are. These skills situate a mindful person well to survey, criticize, and refine their moral core.
- » **Develop a mindfulness routine.** Keep a record of your feelings and thoughts about a range of ethical topics.
  - Is family important to you? (Check out Confucianism in Chapter 9.)
  - Do you think it is permissible to eat meat? (Our animal ethics discussion is in Chapter 12.)



TIP

- Do you think artificial intelligence (AI) systems should have rights? (Skip to the discussion on the ethics of AI in Chapter 13.)
- Do you think abortion is wrong? (See the bioethics discussion in Chapter 10.)
- Do you think it's okay to treat others in ways you yourself may not appreciate? (Head online to the bonus chapter on the Golden Rule: [www.dummies.com/go/ethicsfd2e](http://www.dummies.com/go/ethicsfd2e).)
- Do you believe in recycling? (See our description of environmental ethics in Chapter 11.)
- What do you think about the abuse of subordinates at work? (Read up on professional ethics in a bonus chapter located at [www.dummies.com/go/ethicsfd2e](http://www.dummies.com/go/ethicsfd2e).)
- Do you think social media companies are manipulating their users? (See Chapter 15)

There's a lot there to cover!

Take stock in how you tend to characterize your responses to such ethical issues. In each of these cases, think about whether you consider right actions to be obligatory, forbidden, or perhaps just plain permissible. For instance, maybe you think abortion is forbidden, or that it is permissible to pollute, or obligatory that we respect human rights.



REMEMBER

As you are doing all that work, you may notice that some of your practices and core intuitions conflict. In addition, perhaps some of your actions and customary habits do not line up with what you think is ethically right. Being self-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.

Don't worry too much about inconsistency at the start. It happens. Everyone spots these in themselves to different degrees. That said, to have internal integrity, you want to work on resolving those conflicts at some point, but at this early stage just be mindful that they exist. Eventually, your goal should be to align your practices so that they should flow from your moral core in a consistent way. 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 may realize that your current moral core is ill-founded. Some of your moral intuitions could be all wrong. Figuring this out

involves thinking more about ethical theories to see whether any of them are consistent with your moral intuitions. 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 Part 2), 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 rejecting some of your habitual practices, but that's the price of taking ethics seriously.



REMEMBER

When you identify your favorite theory, don't forget the others! Read through all of them as a way of criticizing your way of conceptualizing what is right or good. Or just do it as a scholastic exercise to see which one has the best arguments. Take every theory seriously and see each one as a worthy contender. 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 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. Your task is to align your current self with your ideal moral self and then act on it.



REMEMBER

A real commitment to the ethical life can't just be 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 5), 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. Integrity is crucial. Figure out who you need to be, and 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		

