



Introduction to ethics

Ethics gives us the capacity for argumentation, independent of the content of the arguments. An understanding and application of ethics take us a step closer to trust – trust in individuals, and trust in systems. Trust is an abstract concept, it that can be earned and built over time in a relationship – be it human, technological, or hybrid. It cannot be imposed by one party onto the other. Human-AI systems in Defence, for example, need to be trusted by users and operators, by commanders and support staff and by the military, government, and civilian population of a nation. Control within most systems, however, comes back to some human input as humans devise the programs. At some point, AI will do it by itself and be applying its own rules. At what point does this become nihilistic? Understanding how uncertainty is managed by AI is critical. These are important ethical issues. Taking this further, distrust can be understandable and indeed healthy, as it can be a powerful warning that more work together is needed. Levels of trust are a good indicator of how we perform in ethics and should not, and indeed cannot in sustainable ways, be artificially influenced by a 'marketing' of alleged trustworthiness.

Ever since Plato's Republic, 2,400 years ago, one of the main concerns of social philosophy has been to understand the moral nature of human beings, and to question whether people are naturally bad or good. Since Plato, many thinkers have believed in the inherently flawed, emotional, and selfish nature of humankind. Most Christian religious philosophers took the view that humans were sinful, even though they were capable of redemption. Nietzsche was among those most strongly convinced that people are bad by nature, whilst Adam Smith proposed a theory of economic behaviour based on the assumption that individual selfishness could be harnessed in service of the common good. At the other extreme, Rousseau was someone who truly believed in the moral goodness of humankind.

Morality and society are interdependent constituents. Taking a normative approach, morality refers to a code of conduct that any individual who meets distinct intellectual and volitional conditions would accept. It almost always includes the condition of being rational. Morality and ethics are embedded in each other. Ethics is the science that studies morals, while morals address the practice of ethics. Morals seek to collect and apply values and standards, while ethics seeks to study and encode these standards. Although morality is difficult to address, ethics codifies agreements based on moral foundations, thus making it reachable. Looking at the applications, morality assumes a common code of conduct, whilst ethics captures and formulates the code of conduct.

Metaethics

We can ask ourselves questions and raise issues about morality and moral judgement such as: Are there moral truths? Are there moral properties? These questions are abstract. They do not require the need to make a moral claim. Instead, when asking them, we are making a claim about moral claim – or about morality. These questions and issues are described as 'metaethical (or 'second-order').

In the context of the course, it is important to understand what metaethics are without necessarily entering this realm of social philosophy, which can be studied at a later stage. Decision-makers would benefit from learning about metaethics when thinking of complex problems.

Normative ethics

This section is essential to anyone who wants to learn about ethics.

Questions and issues in this category are general moral issues. What kind of actions are right or wrong? What kind of person should I be? What are moral virtues? What, broadly-speaking, has moral value? What does justice need? How should I live my life? By answering these questions, we are making a moral claim, or we are making a claim that has moral implications. The aim of **normative moral theory** is to help us to find answers to the broad moral questions that fall in this category. This category is called "first-order".

Moral principles and moral judgements are decided and made by everyone often, consciously, or not, about a broad range of issues. Moral principles are abstract philosophical propositions that define the characteristics upon which an action is deemed to be moral, immoral, or amoral. If we apply the principle of **deontology**, the moral status of an action becomes independent of whether it is consistent with moral norms. The validity of these norms is context-independent and always applies regardless of the circumstances. In contrast, the opposite principle of **utilitarianism** tells that the morality of an action is dependent on its outcome, with an emphasis on the overall well-being resulting from the action. According to the utilitarianism principle, the context around the action is critical as the degree of well-being may depend on the relationship between the action and the context. To summarise, deontology emphasises the context-independent norm, while utilitarianism emphasises the significance of the situation.

These two moral principles often suggest the same conclusion about the moral status of an action (for example, harming a person is immoral because it violates the moral norm that prohibits inflicting harm on another person, as it may reduce well-being). However, the two principles may lead to conflicting outcomes when the action violates a moral norm but increases overall well-being. According to utilitarian principle, harming a person is morally acceptable if it protects the lives of many others. By deontological standards, it is not.

An issue that was first the subject of moral judgement may evolve to become a **moral conviction** (when polarisation or stigmatisation are involved, for example). A moral conviction lies in an individual's subjective metacognitive belief that a particular attitude or value is intrinsic to his or her fundamental sense of rightness or wrongness.

Responding to moral dilemmas will often introduce ambiguities. How to balance the rights of the individual versus the greater good is a perennial question. Can we ignore a person's rights to increase the overall well-being of a larger number of people? The debatable nature of this issue is reflected in many contemporary examples, including debates about whether it is legitimate to cause harm to protect societies against threats.

Applied ethics

The application of moral principles to real life is conducted through applied ethics, which is an area of moral philosophy concerned with concrete moral issues - for example: abortion, capital punishment, drug use... It asks questions about right and wrong. Can war be just? Is euthanasia ever justifiable? These questions may appear distant from concrete issues of everyday significance, but anyone who tries to reflect on a practical problem must be able to apply ethical lenses to understand the questions asked.

Returning to new technologies, the environments in which they are located are institutionally complex and very dynamic. Applied ethics helps people to think about appropriate regulations and governance that can be applied while taking into consideration spaces of deep uncertainty and unpredictability.

Values and virtues

Ethics, rights, and democratic principles are entangled. Society will hold tight the values that are considered good and desirable. These values identify and define the purpose behind our actions. Conventions and covenants have been written to protect citizens against atrocities and to uphold their rights in a changing world to comply with an international order that is not premised on inequalities and exploitation. The laws of a society originate from its ethics turning societal norms into enforceable rules to meet democratic agreements. Values are integral to everything. They play an essential role in national and global governance consciously or unconsciously, explicitly, or implicitly. They are the substance of innovation and change. Values are the compass indicating what responsible, inclusive, and sustainable course we must steer as we are navigating our way into an uncertain future.

Guidelines are needed to ensure that responsible and desired behaviour are followed by individuals, institutions, business, and government, which is essential to securing transparency and accountability. Codes of ethics and codes of conduct are some of the tools available to society to develop and implement these guidelines for the highest degree of integrity to prevail.

Such codes of conduct and ethical structures seek to ensure that as a society we do the right things at the right time, that is to be virtuous in our behaviour and character. Virtues are those qualities that we consider desirable and to have high moral values to society. Taking the right action in each set of circumstances, having weighted up all the inputs and facts and considered them through the benefit of practical experience and wisdom informed by our societal values and ethical frameworks. It is the ultimate objective of Applied Ethics. Virtue ethics emphasises the moral virtue of our actions rather than acting to meet a given set of rules or expected consequences. At the heart of a functional society is the desire 'to do good' and minimise harm materialised by the decision make either in form through our laws and norms, or in function through our actions taken.

In conclusion, an ethical analysis is rarely about a single technology or an isolated institution, but almost always about the design of socio-technical systems, where an alignment of heterogeneous elements needs to be achieved to guarantee the benefit that could be engendered is realised. This is the point at which all elements of a system of ethics intersect. This course aims to demonstrate this point.