# 8

# Ethics: What Is Right?

The word ethics comes from the Greek word *ethos*, meaning custom. The Latin equivalent of this term is *mores* (customs), from which we derive our words moral and morality. Although for our purposes we can use the terms ethics and morality interchangeably, there are those philosophers who argue that the two terms have slightly different meanings. In general, morality usually refers to specific moral codes that different communities or societies impose upon their members to prevent harm to others or to promote group cohesion. The Amish, for example, have their own very unique moral code and this code would be dramatically different from that of, let's say, conservative Jews or Western European liberals. The moral codes of different groups or cultures typically develop over long periods of time, and rarely are subject to intellectual scrutiny or critical examination.

Ethics, on the other hand, begins with an attitude of skepticism. It examines all moral views, including those that are perceived as sacrosanct, with a critical eye. This critical reflection on the truth or validity of moral positions is the hallmark of all legitimate ethical inquiry.

The scope of ethics is vast, indeed. As it is commonly understood, ethics addresses questions about how we ought to live our lives, what the nature of the good life is, and what is the proper way to interact with our fellow human beings (and perhaps with non-humans as well). Needless to say, there is very little in the realm of human activity that is not included somehow in the scope of ethics.

Since it is important to define fields of study as precisely as possible at the onset of any intellectual journal, our definition of will have to be broad enough to encompass the vast scope of ethical inquiry, while at the same time maintaining the focus on skepticism as the hallmark of this endeavor. For our purposes, then, we can define ethics simply as *the critical and rational examination of questions of right and wrong in human action*.

## Getting Our Terms Straight

When the average person makes moral statements or judgments, they usually use certain terms interchangeably. For most people the terms *moral*, *right,* and *good* all refer to behavior that is judged to be acceptable or correct from their perspective, while *immoral*, *wrong* or *bad* refers to behavior that is judged to be unacceptable or incorrect. Although these terms carry more nuances than the person on the street may be aware of, for our purposes we can also use them interchangeably.

Quite often moral terms are used not only to describe behavior or action, but also to describe a person's character. Thus when we refer to someone as being a *moral person* we are making a judgment that his character is good or virtuous; conversely, when we refer to someone as being an *immoral person* we are claiming that his character is bad, wicked or evil.

There are two other terms that are often used in ethical discourse that should be kept in mind.

The term *amoral* means having no sense of right or wrong. Babies, small children, severely mentally handicapped individuals and sociopaths can be said to be amoral and, as such, are usually not deemed to be morally responsible for their actions. The word *non-moral* means outside the realm of morality. Fields of study, such as genetics and physics, or inanimate objects, such as guns or nuclear weapons are essentially non-moral. The old cliché, "Guns don't kill people, people do," therefore, is correct because guns themselves are neither moral nor immoral.

## Searching for Objective Criteria

There's more to ethics than simple making claims about what is right and wrong.   In philosophical ethics one must also provide an objective basis for determining which actions are right or wrong in different circumstances.  The reason for thois should be obvious:  If we don't have any objective criteria for moral decision-making, then there really is no legtimate reason for choosing cone course of action over another.  Our  choices in life then simply become a matter of preference, rather like to choice whether to have pizza or hamburgers for dinner.

Take the example of drug use, for instance.  It is not enough to say that drug use is wrong simply because one may find the practice personally repugnant or that it is morally acceptable simply because one enjoys recreational drug use. There has to be some kind of objective criteria that we can point to about the act that makes it right or wrong.

A moral theory will be objective if it is characterized by five essential criteria:

*1.  Rationality.*  Ethics is more than a matter of feeling, belief, or preference. If an ethical theory is to have any weight at all, it must be grounded in reasons that most sensible people would be willing to accept. Of course, it helps to have other rational people with whom to discuss and debate moral issues; otherwise ethical discourse becomes extremely difficult.

What does it mean to engage in rational moral discourse? In general, there are three essential steps involved in developing a rational argument: (1) Start from reasonable principles; (2) Argue logically from those principles; (3) Strive to be factually accurate.

In case you've forgotten, these ideas were developed in the chapter on Logic earlier in this text.  The same logical principles that all philosopher follow when making arguments will apply with equal force in the field of ethics.

*2.  Openness.* If the ethical theory that you espouse is truly rational, then you should be able to enter into moral arguments even with those who espouse views different from your own. You should also be open to the possibility that individuals with whom you are arguing may very well be able to persuade you of the merits of their theory and force you to abandon your own. Remember, our basic assumption is that other people are just as rational as you are. If we accept this assumption as true then we must acknowledge that we may be able to learn something about the moral life from our opponents. Even in those cases where someone else's moral theory may come into conflict with our own, at the very least, we must be open to the idea that his or her perspective can at least influence ours.

Unfortunately, most people enter into moral debates assuming that their own theory is

perfect and that they will be the ones to persuade others to change their moral perspectives. How many times have you had an argument with someone only to realize that he was simply not listening to what you were saying because his mind had already been made up on the issue being discussed? This kind of rigid and dogmatic attitude makes doing ethics extremely difficult, if not impossible. It also prevents individuals from attaining moral maturity by preventing their own ethical perspective from evolving.

*3. Universality.* Most ethicists would also maintain that a viable ethical theory should also be universal in scope. Ethical theories are almost always articulated in the form of general rules of behavior. These rules are usually expressed in the form of a statement like, "Everyone ought to do x." There is, of course, some legitimate debate about what the term "everyone" here means. Does the everyone referred to mean every human being who has ever lived, everyone currently living, everyone in a particular society, or just everyone in our social group? In order to prevent one's moral theory from becoming too provincial, however, it is usually best to try to interpret the "everyone" in question in the broadest possible way.

*4. Impartiality.* If a moral theory is truly universal, then it must apply impartially to everyone. The principle of impartiality forbids us from treating one person differently from another when there is no legitimate reason for doing so.

This principle has been stated by Henry Sidgwick in the following way: "It cannot be right for A to treat B in a manner in which it would be wrong for B to treat A, merely on the grounds that they are different individuals, and without there being any difference between the natures and circumstances of the two that can be stated as a reasonable ground for the difference" (380). Therefore, the same moral rules that we demand others follow should apply equally to ourselves and to those close to us. If it is wrong to lie, for example, then it is as wrong to lie in our business dealings as it would be to lie to our family members. This is not to say that our attempts at applying moral rules impartially will be easy or that we will always be successful. It simply means that the goal of treating all those we have dealings with impartially should guide our moral decision-making.

*5. Practicality.* A theory that is so rigid and extreme that it cannot be practically implemented by human beings is no good to anyone. This does not mean that our moral theories and principles can't be idealistic, challenging, and lofty; it only means that our moral idealism must always be balanced by a practical consideration: can real human beings actually live according to such principles?

When choosing which moral principles to follow then, it is extremely important to ask a crucial question: can a person with the highest moral standards live according to this principle? If it would be difficult even for an ethical giant to follow the principles you espouse, then it is reasonable to assume that you will have difficulty living according to them.

## The Big Theories

Although there are many different ethical theories that have been influential in Western thought, four are usually considered the "biggies" in the field of ethics—ethical egoism, utilitarianism, deontology, and virtue ethics. Most people's moral perspectives have been shaped by at least one of these theories, whether they recognize it or not.

***Ethical Egoism.*** (*"An act is morally right if, and only if, it produces the greatest happiness— or the best possible outcome—for oneself."*) Ethical egoism is a theory that focuses exclusively what best serves the interest of the individual committing the act—namely you. When deciding whether or not to perform a particular act, the ethical egoist never considers the effect of the act on others, because the good of others is fundamentally morally irrelevant. Instead, he only considers whether the act will benefit him in the long-run. If it does, the act is morally right; if it doesn't, the act is morally wrong.

***Utilitarianism.*** (*"An act is morally right if, and only if, it produces the greatest happiness— or the best possible outcome—for all those who are affected by the act."*) Unlike the ethical egoist, the utilitarian is concerned not just with his own good, but the good of all those who are potentially affected by his actions. Using a hedonist calculus, the utilitarian weighs the positive and negative outcomes of his action. If the act produces greater net happiness for those who are affected by it, the act is morally right; if it produces greater net unhappiness, the act is wrong.

***Deontology.*** (*"An act is morally right if, and only if, it accords with a universal rule that all can follow."*) Whereas the utilitarian looks exclusively to the consequences of his acts, the deontologist isn't interested in consequences at all. In fact, he considers the consequences of a given act to be morally irrelevant. Instead, he looks to intentions to determine if an act is right or wrong. If an act being considered can be universalized—that is, if it can be turned into a general rule that all can follow—then the act is right; if not, the act is wrong. According to this theory, acts like lying, cheating, stealing, or killing innocents can never be justified, because such actions can never be universalized.

***Virtue Ethics.*** (*"An act is morally right, if, and only if, it is performed by a person of virtuous moral character."*) Virtue ethics is unique among the big theories we are discussing in that the proponent of this theory is not particularly interested in acts themselves, but rather the character of the person who is performing the act. According to this theory, a person who embodies virtues, such courage, justice, self-control, honesty, and the like, doesn't have to worry about his particular actions, because he so well-trained in the life of virtue that he almost can't help but do the right things habitually.

In general, we can fit all these theories into two main categories: consequentialist theories and non-consequentialist theories. Consequentialist theories, such as ethical egoism and ultilitarianism look, not surprisingly, to the consequences of an act to determine if that act is right or wrong. Non-consequentialist theories, such as deontology and virtue ethics, maintain that the rightness or wrongness of an act have nothing to do with the consequences of the act, but rather have to do with something intrinsic to the act itself (i.e., whether it can be turned into a universal law or whether it accords with some kind of recognized virtue).

## Evaluating the Big Theories

So which of these big theories is the optimal one to follow? The answer is not quite so simple. In general, all of these theories have stood the test of time precisely because they provide clear and objective guidelines for moral actions. When you are involved in a situation where moral deliberation is required—for example, when you are trying to decide whether it would be morally justifiable to take office supplies from your place of employment for personal use—you can refer to any one of the moral theories that we've discussed for guidance. In doing so, you'll be far better off than the person, let's say, who based all of his moral decisions on gut-feeling, emotions, or blind obedience to some authority figure.

Of course, you won't get exactly the same sort of answers from these theories about what is the moral way to act in a given circumstance, precisely because they are all grounded in very

different rational principles. To use the example of whether you should take supplies from your office, an ethical egoist might tell you that it's fine to take the supplies, if it's in your interest to do so, provided there's no chance of getting caught; a utilitarian, focused on the greatest happiness for the greatest number, would probably tell you that it's wrong to steal because you are hurting the company's bottom line and, therefore, placing all your fellow employee's jobs in jeopardy; a deontologist, of course, would tell you that it's wrong to steal under any circumstances, because the rule for stealing can't be universalized; finally, the virtue ethicist would remind you that honesty is a virtue in almost all cultures, and, therefore, a honest person would never even think of taking something that doesn't belong to him or her without the prior permission of the item's owner. Notice that, even when the proponents of different theories are in relative agreement about the right way to act in specific situation, they often base their justification or rationale on completely different, and sometimes contradictory, principles.

So which is the best theory to follow? I'm afraid we'll have to leave that to you to decide. As you work your way through some of the selections in this section of the text, you may find that one theory strikes you as being more persuasive than some of the others. Or you may find yourself wanting to combine the best aspects of two or more theories—for instance, the ethical egoist's healthy regard for self-interest with the virtue ethicist's concern for character. Or you may just find that none of the great theories are morally persuasive to you at all, and then you'll be forced to come up with your own approach to ethics.

The thing to remember about moral theories is that they are not just theories: they are meant to be practiced and lived out in your everyday life. So try one theory on for size, and then try on another. See which one fits best on you, and then commit yourself to living according to the principle that you've selected as much as possible.