

Why Study Ethics?

If we have laws and religion, why do we need ethics?

Ethics is the study of right and wrong. Everyone makes decisions each day that are essentially choices. For some, choices are considered strictly personal and no one else's business: Should I have a strip of bacon with my eggs? But for some, even that simple choice has ethical ramifications: Should I eat meat? Is it anyone else's concern that I eat meat? Other choices confront us as the day progresses: Should I call in sick? Should I obey the speed laws as I drive to work? Should I answer a friend's question honestly or lie and potentially hurt her feelings? Should I be faithful to my spouse? How does one find answers to these questions? For some, laws and religion provide the answers. But for most, those two sources are insufficient.

Ethical Relativism

In the past for most people and even for many people today, an objective moral standard that is binding on all people for all times exists. While there might be disagreement on what the standard was, most acknowledged that there was a "right" choice. But in the last half-century, there has been considerable erosion in the idea that a standard exists or is even needed.

For many, decisions about what is right and wrong are complete personal and completely subjective: what is right for me may not be right for you. This is known as *ethical relativism*. It asserts that whatever an individual deems morally acceptable is acceptable for that person. To judge that is often considered unacceptably intolerant.

As relativism or situation ethics, as it was called by some, grew in the 1960s, some critics warned that an attitude of complete toleration would make it difficult, if not impossible to reasonably discuss ethical issues. If no one view is better than another, how can one distinguish civilized from uncivilized behavior, or good and evil. If ethical choices are essentially the same as aesthetic or taste choices, then pursuing one choice of action is essentially no different than preferring a work of art or an author or a singing group. It is all just a matter of taste and your taste is as good as mine.

One result of the growth of relativism is the reluctance of many to pass judgment on an individual or a deed. If the choice is between absolutism ("that is absolutely wrong" or relativism ("in some cases, for some individuals, that action may be wrong"), many opt for relativism as it seems more tolerant, more reasonable, less black-and-white.

Many civilizations in the past practiced human sacrifice in religious rituals. Is it right to judge that practice as wrong? After all, freedom of religion is a pillar of American beliefs. Should I judge another culture's practices even if I find it abhorrent? To cite a modern example, some cultures allow marriage of girls as young as 12 years old or a husband to have multiple wives. Are those issues that should be left up to a nation or people-group to decide or are there universal principles that apply? To get even more relevant to students living in American society, is it ok to download copyrighted music or movies? How about copying and pasting a paragraph from an Internet source such as Wikipedia into a paper? If I want to do that, isn't it my choice? Who are you to say it's wrong?

Ethics and Laws

One might wonder why we need ethics if we have laws? If we have a comprehensive set of laws that are consistently enforced, isn't that enough? Of course, we need to ask who makes

the laws and how do they decide whether a behavior is criminal. Consider sexual harassment. Because a legislator or even a number of them might say “I would never commit such an act” would not be enough reason to conclude that a law should be passed preventing others from committing that act.

From the perspective of an ethical relativist, no one has the right to criticize another’s actions. The only defensible reason for a law against sexual harassment is that the act is wrong, not just for me but for everyone. And sexual harassment was clearly wrong long before it was made illegal.

So laws are not possible without ethics. For a law to be passed, a person or a group of people have to make a decision about right and wrong. That has been the case from the start of human society, whether laws were determined by kings, religious leaders, or elected legislators. It does not mean that every law is morally right but every law starts with a concept of right and wrong.

In fact, laws change over times. New circumstances arise so that laws must be revised to fit them. New technologies developed the need for new laws. In addition, attitudes change over time. Women were not permitted to vote in national elections until 1920. The 18th Amendment legalized Prohibition in 1919. The 21st Amendment repealed it in 1933.

Ethics and Religion

Just as laws arise from ethics, ethics arise from religion. Religious thinkers have always spoken to the greater society on issues of moral concern. Sometimes they have assumed that their position is the only acceptable one, which hinders discussion and debate. Faith does not usually provide common ground to discuss ethical issues in a dispassionate or even-handed way. Many religious thinkers are absolutists and turn to an outside authority, God or the Bible or the Koran for their authority. Of course, to say the Bible says something suggests that it is a simple book easy for everyone to interpret. In fact, it is complex and subject to many different interpretations. This is why it is important to distinguish between religious *ethics* and religious *beliefs*. Religious ethics examines moral situations from a perspective, a set of principles. It is a starting point, not a defining “right or wrong” point.

Inquiries

1. Canada’s government proposed that color photographs of diseased hearts and cancerous lungs and lips be printed on the front and back panels of every pack of cigarettes sold in that country. Canada’s tobacco industry claimed the practice was illegal. What is the ethical issue in this case?
2. When a Michigan man was arrested for soliciting a prostitute, his car was impounded by the police. His wife, who co-owned the vehicle, claimed that the government’s action was improper because it punished her as well as her husband, even though she had no knowledge or part of his crime. Is her argument morally correct?
3. The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) allows colleges and universities to make millions of dollars each year from the sale of tickets and television rights to games. Yet the NCAA does not permit student athletes to be paid. Is the NCAA’s position morally justifiable?

4. A married couple, both drug addicts, is unable to care for their infant daughter. The court takes her from them and places her in a foster home for a number of years and she comes to view her foster parents as her real parents. When she is nine years old, her natural parents, now in drug recovery, ask the courts to return custody to them. The case is decided in their favor and the girl is returned to them, against her will. Does ethics support the court's decision?

5. A Milpitas, California, boy raped and then killed his girlfriend and dumped her body in a lovers' lane gully. Over the next few days, the killer boasted to his high school friends and the word quickly spread that the girl was dead and that her body was in the gully. Carload after carload of high school students visited the gully to see the body. Some students prodded it with sticks or kicked it; one girl ripped a decal from the dead girl's jeans. Only one boy reported the murder to the high school principal, and even after the police investigation was well under way, only two students would identify the killer or volunteer any information. Since failure to report a body or to volunteer to testify is not a crime, the students could not be charged legally. But was the behavior of any of the students morally acceptable? Why or why not?

Based on *Thinking Critically About Moral Issues* by Vincent Ruggiero