**Introduction to Ethics**

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The terms ethics and [*morality*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/morality) are closely related. It is now common to refer to [ethical](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ethical) judgments or to ethical principles where it once would have been more accurate to speak of moral judgments or moral principles. These applications are an extension of the meaning of ethics. In earlier usage, the term referred not to [morality](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/morality) itself but to the field of study, or branch of inquiry, that has morality as its subject matter. In this sense, ethics is equivalent to moral [philosophy](https://www.britannica.com/topic/philosophy).

Although ethics has always been viewed as a branch of philosophy, its all-embracing practical nature links it with many other areas of study, including [anthropology](https://www.britannica.com/science/anthropology), [biology](https://www.britannica.com/science/biology), [economics](https://www.britannica.com/topic/economics), [history](https://www.britannica.com/topic/historiography), [politics](https://www.britannica.com/topic/political-science), [sociology](https://www.britannica.com/topic/sociology), and [theology](https://www.britannica.com/topic/theology). Yet, ethics remains distinct from such [disciplines](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/disciplines) because it is not a matter of factual knowledge in the way that the sciences and other branches of inquiry are. Rather, it has to do with determining the nature of normative theories and applying these sets of principles to practical moral problems.

This article, then, will deal with ethics as a field of philosophy, especially as it has developed in the West. For coverage of religious [conceptions](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conceptions) of ethics and the ethical systems associated with world religions, *see* [Buddhism](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Buddhism); [Christianity](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Christianity); [Confucianism](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Confucianism); [Hinduism](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hinduism); [Jainism](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Jainism); [Judaism](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Judaism); [Sikhism](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Sikhism).

**The origins of ethics**

**Mythical accounts**

**Introduction of moral codes**

When did ethics begin and how did it originate? If one has in mind ethics proper—i.e., the systematic study of what is morally right and wrong—it is clear that ethics could have come into existence only when human beings started to reflect on the best way to live. This reflective stage emerged long after human societies had developed some kind of morality, usually in the form of customary standards of right and wrong [conduct](https://www.britannica.com/topic/conduct). The process of reflection tended to arise from such customs, even if in the end it may have found them wanting. Accordingly, ethics began with the introduction of the first [moral codes](https://www.britannica.com/topic/moral-code).

Virtually every human society has some form of [myth](https://www.britannica.com/topic/myth) to explain the origin of morality. In the Louvre in Paris there is a black Babylonian column with a relief showing the sun [god](https://www.britannica.com/topic/religion) Shamash presenting the code of laws to [Hammurabi](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Hammurabi) (died c. 1750 BCE), known as the [Code of Hammurabi](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Code-of-Hammurabi). The [Hebrew Bible](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hebrew-Bible) ([Old Testament](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hebrew-Bible)) account of God’s giving the [Ten Commandments](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Ten-Commandments) to [Moses](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Moses-Hebrew-prophet) (flourished 14th–13th century BCE) on [Mount Sinai](https://www.britannica.com/place/Mount-Sinai-mountain-Egypt) might be considered another example. In the [dialogue](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dialogue) *Protagoras* by [Plato](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Plato) (428/427–348/347 BCE), there is an avowedly mythical account of how [Zeus](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Zeus) took pity on the hapless humans, who were physically no match for the other beasts. To make up for these deficiencies, Zeus gave humans a moral sense and the capacity for [law](https://www.britannica.com/topic/law) and [justice](https://www.britannica.com/topic/justice-social-concept), so that they could live in larger [communities](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/communities) and cooperate with one another.

That morality should be invested with all the mystery and power of [divine](https://www.britannica.com/topic/sacred) origin is not surprising. Nothing else could provide such strong reasons for accepting the moral law. By attributing a divine origin to morality, the priesthood became its interpreter and guardian and thereby secured for itself a power that it would not readily relinquish. This link between morality and religion has been so firmly forged that it is still sometimes asserted that there can be no morality without religion. According to this view, ethics is not an independent field of study but rather a branch of theology (*see* [moral theology](https://www.britannica.com/topic/moral-theology)).

There is some difficulty, already known to Plato, with the view that morality was created by a divine power. In his dialogue *[Euthyphro](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Euthyphro)*, Plato considered the suggestion that it is divine approval that makes an action [good](https://www.britannica.com/topic/good-and-evil). Plato pointed out that, if this were the case, one could not say that the gods approve of such actions because they are good. Why then do they approve of them? Is their approval entirely arbitrary? Plato considered this impossible and so held that there must be some standards of right or wrong that are independent of the likes and dislikes of the gods. Modern philosophers have generally accepted Plato’s argument, because the [alternative](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/alternative) implies that if, for example, the gods had happened to approve of torturing children and to disapprove of helping one’s neighbours, then torture would have been good and neighbourliness bad.

# Problems of divine origin

A modern theist (see [theism](https://www.britannica.com/topic/theism)) might say that, since God is good, God could not possibly approve of torturing children nor disapprove of helping neighbours. In saying this, however, the theist would have tacitly admitted that there is a standard of goodness that is independent of God. Without an independent standard, it would be pointless to say that God is good; this could mean only that God is approved of by God. It seems therefore that, even for those who believe in the [existence of God](https://www.britannica.com/topic/existence-of-God), it is impossible to give a satisfactory account of the origin of [morality](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/morality) in terms of divine creation. A different account is needed.

There are other possible connections between religion and morality. It has been said that, even if standards of good and evil exist independently of God or the gods, divine [revelation](https://www.britannica.com/topic/revelation) is the only reliable means of finding out what these standards are. An obvious problem with this view is that those who receive divine revelations, or who consider themselves qualified to interpret them, do not always agree on what is good and what is evil. Without an accepted [criterion](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/criterion) for the authenticity of a revelation or an interpretation, people are no better off, so far as reaching [moral](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/moral) agreement is concerned, than they would be if they were to decide on good and evil themselves, with no assistance from religion.

Traditionally, a more important link between religion and [ethics](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ethics) was that religious teachings were thought to provide a reason for doing what is right. In its crudest form, the reason was that those who obey the moral [law](https://www.britannica.com/topic/law) will be rewarded by an eternity of bliss while everyone else roasts in hell. In more sophisticated versions, the motivation provided by religion was more inspirational and less blatantly self-interested. Whether in its crude or its sophisticated version, or something in between, religion does provide an answer to one of the great questions of ethics: “Why should I be moral?” (See below [Ethics and reasons for action](https://www.britannica.com/topic/ethics-philosophy/Moral-realism#ref252566).) As will be seen in the course of this article, however, the answer provided by religion is not the only one available.

**What is Ethics?**

Traditionally, ethics referred to the philosophical study of morality, the latter being a more or less systematic set of beliefs, usually held in common by a group, about how people should live. Ethics also referred to particular philosophical theories of morality. Later the term was applied to particular (and narrower) moral codes or value systems. Ethics and morality are now used almost interchangeably in many contexts, but the name of the philosophical study remains ethics.

**Why does Ethics Matter?**

Ethics matters because (1) it is part of how many groups define themselves and thus part of the identity of their individual members, (2) other-regarding values in most ethical systems both reflect and foster close human relationships and mutual respect and trust, and (3) it could be “rational” for a self-interested person to be moral, because his or her self-interest is arguably best served in the long run by reciprocating the moral behaviour of others.

**Is Ethics Social Science?**

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**Deontological ethics**, in [philosophy](https://www.britannica.com/topic/philosophy), [ethical](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ethical) theories that place special emphasis on the relationship between duty and the [morality](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/morality) of human actions. The term deontology is derived from the Greek deon, “duty,” and logos, “science.”

In deontological [ethics](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ethics) an action is considered morally good because of some characteristic of the action itself, not because the product of the action is good. Deontological ethics holds that at least some acts are morally obligatory regardless of their consequences for human welfare. Descriptive of such ethics are such expressions as “Duty for duty’s sake,” “Virtue is its own reward,” and “Let [justice](https://www.britannica.com/topic/justice-social-concept) be done though the heavens fall.”

By contrast, [teleological ethics](https://www.britannica.com/topic/teleological-ethics) (also called consequentialist ethics or [consequentialism](https://www.britannica.com/topic/consequentialism)) holds that the basic standard of morality is precisely the value of what an action brings into being. Deontological theories have been termed formalistic, because their central principle lies in the conformity of an action to some rule or [law](https://www.britannica.com/topic/law).

The first great philosopher to define deontological principles was [Immanuel Kant](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Immanuel-Kant), the 18th-century German founder of critical philosophy (see [Kantianism](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Kantianism)). Kant held that nothing is good without qualification except a good will, and a good will is one that wills to act in accord with the [moral](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/moral) law and out of respect for that law rather than out of natural inclinations. He saw the moral law as a [categorical imperative](https://www.britannica.com/topic/categorical-imperative)—i.e., an unconditional command—and believed that its content could be established by human [reason](https://www.britannica.com/topic/reason) alone. Thus, the supreme categorical [imperative](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/imperative) is: “Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.” Kant considered that formulation of the categorical imperative to be equivalent to: “So act that you treat humanity in your own person and in the person of everyone else always at the same time as an end and never merely as means.” The connection between those two formulations, however, has never been entirely clear. In any event, Kant’s critics questioned his view that all duties can be derived from a purely formal principle and argued that, in his preoccupation with rational consistency, he neglected the concrete content of moral obligation.

That objection was faced in the 20th century by the British moral philosopher [Sir David Ross](https://www.britannica.com/biography/David-Ross), who held that numerous “prima facie duties,” rather than a single formal principle for deriving them, are themselves immediately self-evident. Ross distinguished those prima facie duties (such as promise keeping, reparation, gratitude, and justice) from actual duties, for “any possible act has many sides to it which are relevant to its rightness or wrongness”; and those facets have to be weighed before “forming a judgment on the totality of its nature” as an actual obligation in the given circumstances. Ross’s attempt to argue that [intuition](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/intuition) is a source of moral knowledge was, however, heavily criticized, and by the end of the 20th century, Kantian ways of thinking—especially the prohibition on using a person as a means rather than an end—were again providing the basis for the deontological views that were most widely discussed among philosophers. At a popular level, the international emphasis on protecting [human rights](https://www.britannica.com/topic/human-rights)—and thus on the duty not to violate them—can also be seen as a triumph of deontological ethics.

**Comparative ethics**, also called **Descriptive Ethics**, the [empirical](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/empirical) (observational) study of the [moral](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/moral) beliefs and practices of different peoples and [cultures](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cultures) in various places and times. It aims not only to elaborate such beliefs and practices but also to understand them insofar as they are causally conditioned by social, economic, and geographic circumstances. Comparative [ethics](https://www.britannica.com/topic/ethics-philosophy), in contrast to [normative ethics](https://www.britannica.com/topic/normative-ethics), is thus the proper subject matter of the social sciences (e.g., [anthropology](https://www.britannica.com/science/anthropology), history, [sociology](https://www.britannica.com/topic/sociology), and psychology).

Empirical studies show that all societies have moral rules that prescribe or forbid certain classes of action and that these rules are accompanied by sanctions to ensure their enforcement. Of particular interest in comparative [ethics](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ethics) are the similarities and differences between the moral practices and beliefs of different people, as explained by physical and economic conditions, opportunities for cross-cultural contacts, and the force of inherited traditions facing new social or technological challenges. It has been observed, for example, that virtually every society has well-established norms dealing with such matters as family organization and individual duties, sexual activity, [property rights](https://www.britannica.com/topic/property-law), personal welfare, truth telling, and promise keeping, but not all societies have evolved the same norms for these various aspects of human conduct.

Some social scientists concentrate their attention on the universality of basic moral rules, such as those forbidding murder, theft, infidelity, and incest. Others are more concerned with the [diversity](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/diversity) of moral practices—e.g., monogamy versus polygamy; caring for the aged versus parricide; the forbidding of abortion versus voluntary feticide. The question then arises whether similarity or diversity is more fundamental, whether similarity supports the validity of the practice, and whether diversity supports a relativism and [skepticism](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/skepticism). Clearly a [consensus](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/consensus) of all peoples in a moral [opinion](https://www.britannica.com/topic/belief) does not of itself establish validity. On the other hand, widespread agreement may support the argument that [morality](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/morality) is rooted in [human nature](https://www.britannica.com/topic/human-nature), and, if human nature is fundamentally everywhere the same, it will also [manifest](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/manifest) this similarity in significant ways, including morality. Such questions are philosophical and lie beyond the scope of the social sciences, which are restricted to empirically verifiable generalizations.