

Basic Definitions and Distinctions

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Can ethics even be taught?

There are some who have doubts about teaching ethics. They might say, "You can't really teach ethics." But, what do they mean, and what is the evidence? Could they mean that ethics can not be taught at all. Young children aren't born with knowledge of right and wrong. They learn from their families, friends, and community about what is considered appropriate behavior. For example, when a young child takes a friend's toy home because they like it, mother or father quickly provides a sense of private property and how taking others' property is unacceptable. So, morality is learned in childhood. But perhaps those who have their doubts about teaching ethics mean that by the time they get to adulthood and graduate school, their character is set or well established. No doubt this is true in the sense that changing basic patterns of behavior and conduct are very difficult.

Before we go further, let's make a distinction between morality and ethics.

Morality -- Let's use the term "morality" to refer to the set of norms, standards, rules, or principles of what is right and wrong, appropriate and inappropriate in terms of our conduct. In this sense of the term, then, virtually every human has some moral code or has some morality. One group's code may come in conflict with another group's code, but all have some understanding of what is right and wrong. In this sense, a subculture such as an inner city gang has a moral code, even if it conflicts with the larger society. So, morality is a given, it is what people believe is right or wrong. One further point is to understand that morality has a personal and a social dimension. It probably makes sense to speak of one's personal moral code as well as the norms or standards of society. When one is properly socialized, society's moral code is internalized by the individual and becomes one's personal code. In this sense society precedes the individual or personal code. But sometimes individuals question society's code by appealing to a "higher" set of principles (e.g. that slavery is wrong because it is a violation of basic human rights). Thus, the personal and social may diverge.

Ethics -- While most of the time we might use the terms "ethical" and "moral" interchangeably, let's distinguish "ethics" as the study of morality or critical reflection about morality. Just as political science is the study of politics and political behavior, or the study of management is different from the practice of management, ethics can be distinguished from morality. Now there are even competing definitions of ethics by those who study and teach the subject. For example, another definition of ethics (by members of our Values Team) is "the discipline and practice of applying value to human behavior, resulting in meaningful conduct." Note that similar to the our first definition, there is a critical and reflective aspect to ethics. Ethics is generally reserved for the more systematic examinations of moral matters, but it can be thought of as simply the critical examination of any moral problem, e.g. exploring the moral principles involved in abortion. One more definition might be useful here. Business ethics might be thought of as an area of applied ethics, applying ethical analysis and reflection to moral issues in business, e.g. whether the monitoring of email in the workplace is morally acceptable.

Now let's briefly go back to our original question: Can ethics be taught?

Morality and one's understanding of morality is established early in childhood. Indeed, those who study the acquisition of morality by children point to at least three ways that children learn morality. One is by imitating the models around them, e.g. parents and peers (Social Learning Theory). Another is by developing the cognitive capacity to generalize rules and apply them to new situations (Cognitive Developmental Theory). Yet another theory focuses on the reinforcement patterns that are used in developing patterns of response to situations (Behaviorism). Prosocial behavior (cooperative and caring behavior) is emerging by age two, and by age 12 the

cognitive capacity to apply abstract rules is more fully developed. In an important sense, one's patterns of behavior and cognitive capacity are well developed by adolescence. It becomes more difficult to change such patterns, but certainly not impossible. Morality is well established by early adulthood.

But, our major purpose in Values in Action is not to teach morality, at least not to provide moral instruction as a parent or clergyman might about the "dos and don'ts" of business morality. Rather, it is to introduce students to different ethical frameworks for analyzing ethical or moral issues in business and to engage us all in discussions about more complex and ambiguous ethical situations. These issues and discussions include how managers should respond when there are competing and conflicting demands on them. In these discussions, we are not teaching morality but rather facilitating an environment where we can learn from one another in terms of the ethical analysis of business ethics situations.

You might look at one other response to the question that incorporates a bit of Kohlberg's theory:

<http://www.scu.edu/ethics/practicing/decision/canethicsbetaught.html>

Well, let's diagram where we are and move on to a few other basic concepts and distinctions.



Normative Ethics can be thought as approaches to ethics that answer questions of what is right or wrong, good or bad. Any solution that is action guiding or "prescriptive" is normative in character. Solutions that tell us what one "ought to do" are normative. Some have contended that normative ethics can be reduced to questions about the "right" and the "good." One approach focuses on finding a decision rule when confronting an ethical situation. Here the question is, "What is it right to do?" or "How should we decide the morally right course of action?" We will outline a couple of major and competing theories. One is the consequentialist approach, exemplified by utilitarianism. The other is a duty-based approach, typified by Immanuel Kant. Another major approach focuses on a different question, "What is it good to be?" Rather than looking for a rational decision rule, this approach (exemplified by Aristotle) looks for the understanding the qualities of a "good" person, including how to instill and foster these good qualities (virtues) in persons.

Behavioral Ethics can be thought of as the study of morality from a scientific point of view. The object of the study is to describe and explain moral behavior, not prescribe the right course of action. This has been a growing area of study in the last decade, especially in business ethics. Presuming that individuals don't always act in accordance with what they believe or know is the "right" course of action from a normative point of view, we might explore the factors that influence such behavior. For example, what are the factors that explain employees from one firm consistently misleading customers, while employees from a different firm are scrupulously honest and forthright. Are there differences in the individuals themselves, in the organizational structure and rewards, in the leadership of the firm. Presumably it is a mix of several of these factors, but the more managers understand about these factors, the more able they can create ethical organizations. One example of behavioral ethics is the work of Kohlberg, developing and testing a theory of individual cognitive moral development.

These are working definitions, subject of course to debate and discussion. They hopefully provide a useful framework for thinking about issues in ethics that we will be discussing.

Let's move on to a problem for you to consider.