CHAPTER 4
Ethics

The Philosophical Investigation of Morality

One of the most practical applications for the study of Philosophy is in the field of Ethics.

Definition: Ethics is the systematic philosophical study of morality.

But what is the difference between *ethics* and *morality*? Don't they mean the same thing? Not really. Given our definition we should be able to infer that *'ethics'* names a **field** of inquiry while *'morality'* names the **object** of that inquiry. Thus, we need to offer a definition of morality so we know what, exactly, is being studied in Ethics. Broadly speaking, we can define 'morality' as follows:

Definition: Morality is the normative *moral* code, or codes, of behavior acceptable/prohibited behavior within a particular group at a particular time.

It is important to note that there are several different kinds of *normative*, or behavioral, codes that are recognized within communities and we need to distinguish them from one another, even though they are related. First of all, there is the **law**. A legal code represents the minimum acceptable behavior of a particular group. Members of a society who are unwilling to abide by the law are sanctioned by the community as a whole (though sanctions vary in severity based on the perceived harm to the community). Secondly, there is the **moral code**. The moral code represents a much broader set of normative controls and is identifiable by the inverse proportion to the severity of the sanctions associated with the legal code. That is, societies tend to be more tolerant of moral violations than of violations of the law. We don't use economic sanctions or restrictions of liberty or life for those who act immorally. Thirdly, there is **etiquette** which represents the broadest possible set of behavioral expectations of a society. Those who violate the etiquette codes suffer the least serious sanctions of all. While one might insult a host or bring disgrace to Miss Manners, violations of politeness are not treated as harshly as either violations of the law or the moral code. What each of these codes have in common is their attempt to control the behavior of individuals within society. The distinction between each code seems to be located in the severity of the punishments associated with each kind of violation.
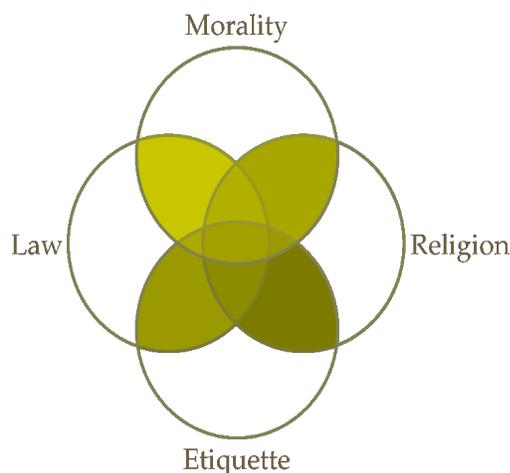
In addition to the three normative codes noted above there is another type of social normative system: **religion**. Like law, morality and etiquette, religion is a normative system, i.e., it tells people how to behave. Unlike the three systems mentioned above, it usually entails *non*-natural sanctions for violations of the code of conduct (i.e., reincarnation, heaven/hell, etc.).

One of the things that makes an analysis of morality difficult is the fact that these four different normative social systems overlap creating, in some cases, fuzzy boundaries. For example, while failing to pay your taxes is clearly a violation of the legal code, it does not seem to be rude, immoral, or impious. Murder, on the other hand, is not only a violation of the law, it is also generally considered to be impious, immoral, *and* rude! Thus, when we are thinking about morality, we must be careful to keep our analysis focused on the sphere of morality to avoid conflations of religious and legal questions. Attempting to draw the distinction between the legal and the moral, and to understand exactly what makes some social prescriptions part of the moral code as opposed to the legal or religious code, is in part, what some ethicists do. Thus, we can think of an ethicist (i.e., someone who *does* Ethics) as a philosopher who investigates the *nature of morality*. Ethicists are interested in the following kinds of questions:

1. What are the *grounds of morality* (i.e., why do people think one action is right and another wrong, and yet another permissible, but not obligatory), or the source of our moral intuitions?

2. Can we give a *systematic justification* of our moral intuitions (i.e., which actions really are right, wrong and permissible, and how can we *know* that they are)?

3. Are moral codes *objective* or *relative* (i.e., does right and wrong *vary* from place to place, time to time, or group to group)? and

4. How does the language of morality work (i.e., what do words like *'right'* and 'wrong' and *'permissible'* mean?)?

These four questions represent the foundation of ethical theory; they are the main problems ethicists try to resolve.

We should also note that a person may *study* Ethics without being moral, just as a person may be moral without knowing anything about Ethics. This should not be too surprising since we see many similar examples: an ornithologist studies birds without being one! However, what normally motivates the study of Ethics is a deep desire to know what is right and wrong and to be able to consistently apply that knowledge in all aspects of our lives. It would be frustrating, to say the least, to be condemned to go through life guessing at which actions are proper and which not. And yet, if one doesn't study Ethics, or at least put together some elementary ethical system, this is precisely what one must do. In fact, most people have some ethical system, some intellectual framework that guides their behavior. This is usually a patchwork system made of scraps taken from different sources. But if Ethics is given very little thought one is as likely as not to end up with an inconsistent set of beliefs which will collapse upon itself with only moderate external pressure, i.e., when we encounter a moral crisis. To avoid this, we need to apply philosophical scrutiny to our so-called *moral* behavior. Only then can we have some assurance that we are behaving as we ought.
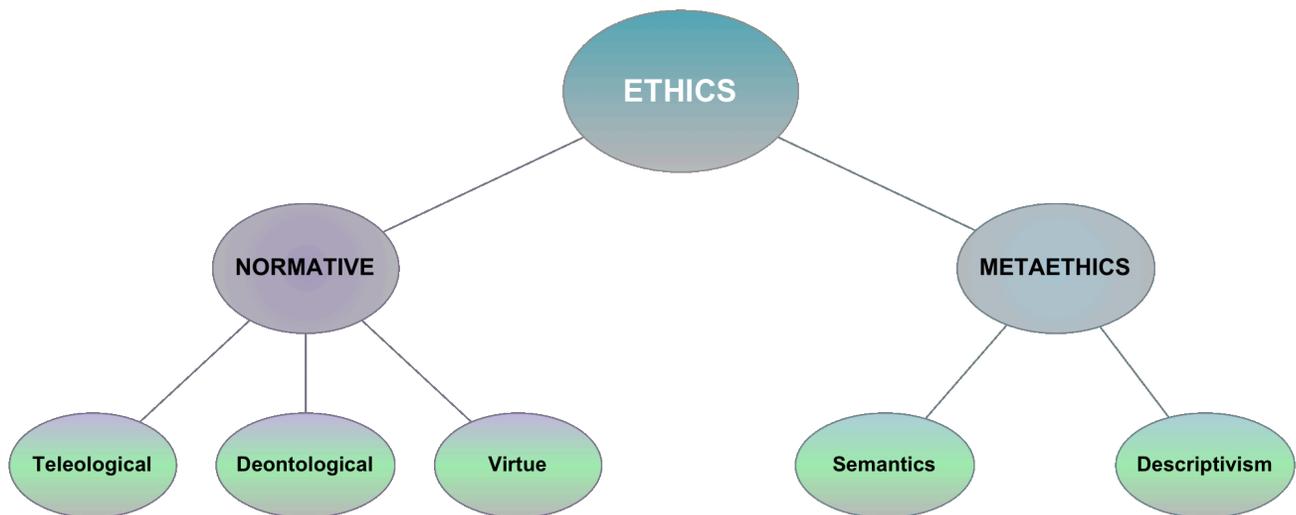
Where do we go from here?

As a subdiscipline of Philosophy, Ethics can be divided into two major parts, each part dealing

with two of the basic questions noted above. One part of Ethics deals with the first two questions about the origins and justifications of our moral intuitions; we call this part *Normative* Ethics. The term 'normative' broadly means "action guiding." Thus, Normative Ethics is that part of ethical theory which tells us what we ought to do (this is what most people think of when they think of Ethics).

Definition: **'Normative Ethics'** is that part of ethical theory which deals with the systematic articulation and justification of moral intuitions.

The second major part of ethical theory tells us **nothing** about *how to live* the moral life. Thus, it is best labeled 'Non-Normative' as it gives us no guidance. Non-Normative Ethics deals with the second pair of basic questions listed above: the nature of moral language (generally labeled **'Metaethics'**), and the objectivity of the codes articulated under the normative side of ethical theory. While I will offer a brief introduction to the problem of moral language, we will focus our attention on the more perplexing (and more interesting) problem of the objectivity of moral codes which is called **'Descriptivism'**.

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                        ETHICS

         NORMATIVE                    METAETHICS

  Teleological  Deontological  Virtue    Semantics   Descriptivism
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We're going to divide our investigation of Ethics according to the division between the Normative and Non-Normative parts of the theory: **first**, we will look at a general problem (or 'meta problem') for any ethical theory to consider - are moral systems objective features of the world, or are they the subjective creations of particular individuals, cultures, or species (sometimes called **Moral Relativism**)? This is part of what we've called 'Non-Normative Ethics'. **Second**, we'll investigate the normative side of Ethics and the three main types of theories that are part of this part of the ethical enquiry. We will accomplish this by reading representatives from each of the three normative families (Aristotle - Virtue Ethics, and Immanuel Kant - Deontology, and John S. Mill - Consequentialism).