

INTRODUCTION

Philosophy, as an academic discipline, is the systematic rational investigation of five major questions (which subdivide into numerous—perhaps even infinite—*sub*-questions): 1) What is the nature of reality?, 2) What is the nature of knowledge?, 3) What is the nature of value?, 4) What is the nature of reason?, and 5) What do these questions look like in their historical context. For convenience sake we can label these questions, “Metaphysics”, “Epistemology”, “Axiology”, “Logic”, and the “History of Philosophy” respectively.



These questions are not limited to the sphere of Philosophy, of course, and you

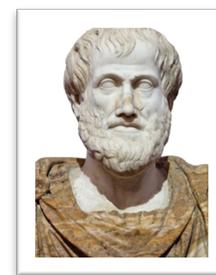
might encounter them in many academic and non-academic contexts alike. What makes the philosophical investigation of these questions distinct is the methodology that is used to investigate and propose answers to these complex and perennially perplexing questions. Just as the “hard” sciences (e.g., Physics, Chemistry, Biology, etc.,) have a common methodology—the scientific method—which allows us to organize them all under the general term ‘Science’, so too the various areas of philosophical inquiry are tied together by a common methodology making them all parts of ‘Philosophy’. The common methodology philosophers use is *reason*.

“But scientists use reason; everybody uses reason!” you might object. And, you would be correct. The word ‘reason’ can be used in both a broad and narrow context which changes the denotation of the word. In the academic world we use a more restrictive denotations (i.e., technical language) in order to distinguish what

we do in different academic disciplines. When philosophers talk about ‘reason’ as a methodology for investigating metaphysical or epistemological questions, they mean the explicit application of **inductive** and **deductive** reasoning to formulate arguments that conform to the rules of Logic. This is analogous to the way psychologists use Statistical Mathematics to analyze the data accumulated in their research. Thus, **Logic** is both a field of investigation *within* Philosophy, as well as *the* philosophical method.

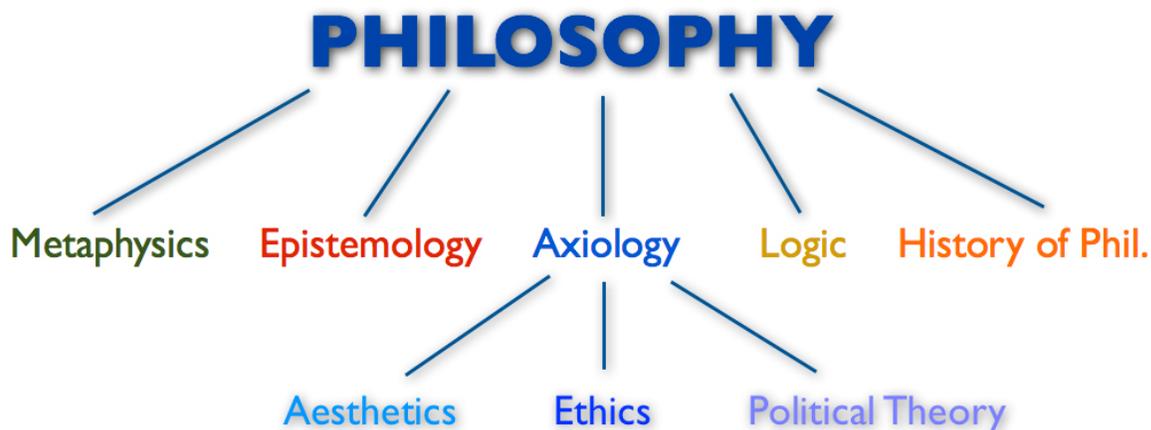
Now we can more clearly understand what I said above about Philosophy: it is the systematic rational (i.e., *logical*) investigation of five perennial questions. One of those questions, you will recall, is “What is the nature of value?” The label for this question, and all of the sub-questions that fall under it, is Axiology. Thus, we can define ‘axiology’ as the systematic rational investigation of *value*.

In the not too distant past it was commonly believed that humans alone engaged in value judgments. It was our awareness of and ability to think about right, beauty, and justice that led many thinkers to place humanity above the rest of the natural world. For some it was evidence of a god-like nature common to humans but missing from other animals; it was evidence of a soul (e.g., Plato). Other thinkers attributed this awareness to a distinctly human *faculty* which distinguished humans as rational animals (e.g., Aristotle).



Today we are suspicious of this anthropocentric tendency as we learn more and more about the behavior of non-human animals. But whether or not humans are alone in axiological awareness is not a question we will pursue. It is a fact that humans do indeed engage in making value judgments and thinking about the nature of these judgments and that will be the launching point of our investigation.

Axiology, as I have already stated, is the philosophical investigation of value. And, as a branch of academic Philosophy it divides into three major fields of investigation (or *sub-branches*): Aesthetics, Ethics, and Political Theory.

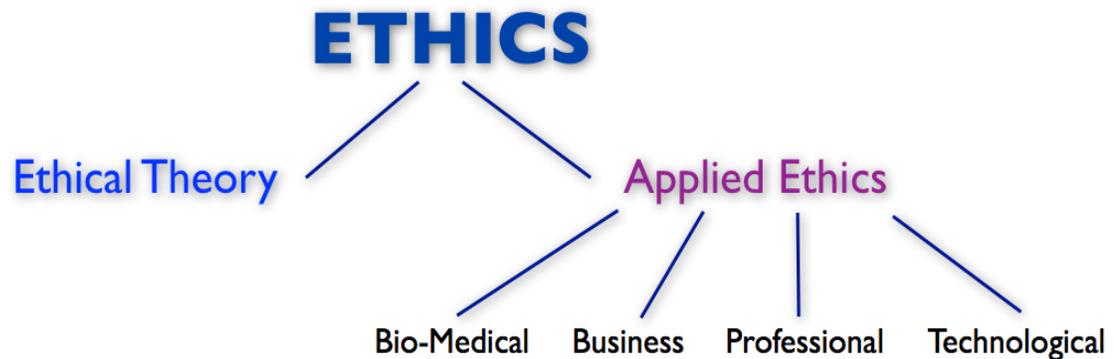


Aesthetics is the division of Axiology that investigates judgments rooted in *beauty*, Political Theory investigates judgments rooted in *justice*. Ethics, which is our focus, investigates judgments rooted in *goodness*.

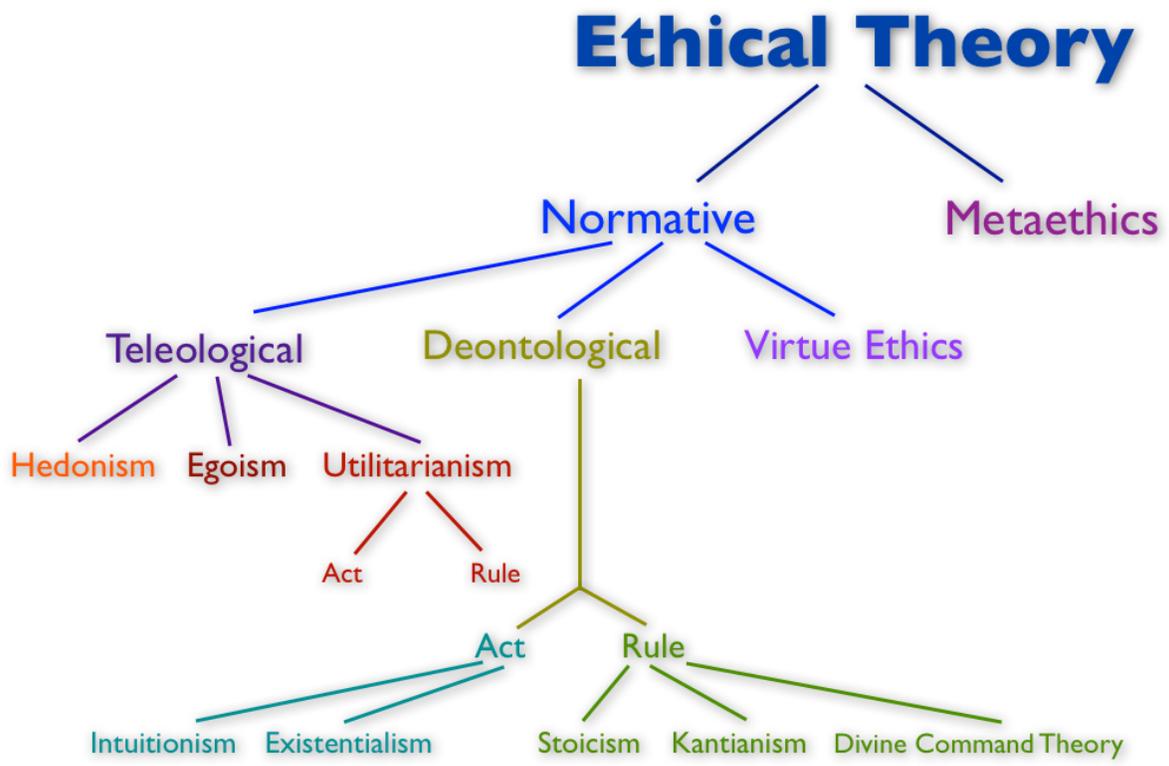
There are, of course, many different views or theories about goodness and we call a theory of goodness a *moral theory*. So, we can now give a technical definition of ‘ethics’ as follows: **Ethics** is the systematic rational investigation of morality. In ordinary discourse, outside the academic world, the terms ‘ethics’ and ‘morality’ are often used synonymously, but we can now more clearly see that ‘ethics’ refers to an investigation, or field of research, into the *subject of* morality (i.e., a theory of goodness). So just as botany is a sub-discipline of Biology, so a theory of morality (e.g., Consequentialism) is a sub-branch of Ethics.

Now, let us make a map of Ethics (as a field of research) so we can see in more detail exactly what it, as an academic enterprise, entails. First, Ethics divides into two main branches: Ethical Theory and Ethical Application. As should be obvious, the first deals with the content of various moral theories and the second explores how those theories can be applied in the context of human existence. The

Applied Ethics includes Business Ethics, Bio-Medical Ethics, Technological Ethics, Professional Ethics, and so on.

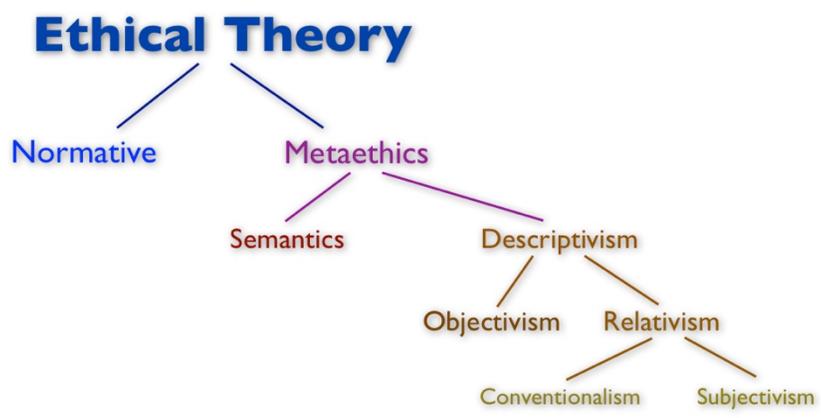


Ethical Theory, which is our focus, is the investigation of the competing moral theories that have been proposed by philosophers since the 7th Century BCE. It divides into two main sub-branches: Normative Ethics and Metaethics. The Normative (i.e., *action guiding*) branch investigates three distinct types of moral theories: 1) those that define ‘the good’ in terms of the consequences of our actions (i.e., Teleological Morality), 2) those that define ‘the good’ in terms of some intrinsic feature of actions or agents (i.e., Deontological Morality), and 3) those theories that define ‘the good’ in terms of certain dispositions of the character of moral agents, or *virtues* (i.e., Virtue Morality). Within each of these three main “families” of moral theories we will find a variety of distinct theories. For example, under Teleological Morality we find Utilitarianism, Egoism, and Hedonism, and multiple theories under Deontology as well.



The second major branch of Ethical Theory is Metaethics. As the name implies, Metaethics investigates a series of questions *about* the normative theories. For example, all Teleological theories define ‘the good’ in terms of some end or consequence of our actions (e.g., happiness for me, pleasure for me, happiness/pleasure for the greatest number of people, etc.). But what is the *nature* of this end? Are the consequences we use to define what is good *objective* features of the world, or are they

relative to individuals, cultures, historical epochs, or even species?



This investigation into the nature of the ‘the good’ as defined in the various moral theories of Normative Morality is called Descriptivism

Another set of questions about the various theories of Normative Morality regards the *meaning* of moral language. When, as a consequence of a particular moral theory, we label an action ‘right’ or an agent ‘bad’, when we say that we ‘ought’ or ‘ought not’ engage in some activity, what do these moral designators *mean*? They seem to have adjectival qualities because they modify nouns, but they also seem to be significantly different from standard descriptive adjectives (e.g., ‘large’, ‘blue’, ‘hot’ ‘sweet’, etc.). So, what’s going on when we use moral language?

One view, Cognitivism, holds that all moral designators (i.e., terms used in moral discourse) have cognitive content. That is to say, these linguistic symbols (i.e., terms) can be defined and translated across linguistic systems without loss of meaning. Now, if that is true, where does the meaning which supplies the cognitive content of the moral terms exist? Are these meanings natural facts of the material world as is the case with colors, or sounds or mass, or do these meanings exist in a non-natural (non-material) dimension of reality?

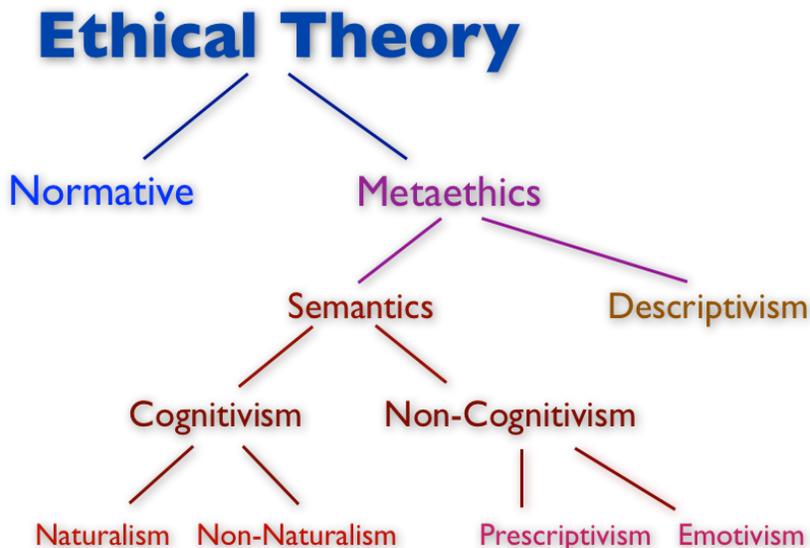
Opposing Cognitivism is, as you might guess, Non-Cognitivism which holds that moral designators *do not* have significant cognitive content. Emotivism, perhaps the most popular non-cognitivist theory of moral language holds that moral designators express emotional states relative to some action rather than meaningful content about that action. So, if someone says, “it’s wrong to drown puppies,” the moral designator ‘wrong’ does not express an objective meaning like, “that puppy is brown,” but rather is expressing my emotional discomfort with the thought of a drowning puppy. Emotivists think of moral language like other forms of verbal emoting: when I stub my toe I shout, “ouch!” But the word ‘ouch’ does

not convey meaning or cognitive content, it is a verbalization of the internal emotional state I experience when in pain.

All of this is an absurd over-simplification of the views found in

Normative morality and Metaethics, but it gives us a clear place to start. And, if it seems like there are an awful lot of technical terms being thrown around, you are right! But, as we proceed through our investigation of Ethical theory and place these various terms in their proper context, you will become proficient in their recognition and use.

One final note; it is not the intent of this text, or any decent introductory survey of Ethical theory for that matter, to tell you which of these theories is correct. The purpose of this text is to give you an introduction to, and overview of, some of the main moral theories that have emerged in the Western Philosophical tradition. I have organized the following readings chronologically in order to tell you the story of Ethical Theory as it has evolved for over two thousand years. It could just as well have been organized topically, but that would give us a very different emphasis. So as you read this text, keep in mind that you are sampling an *ongoing conversation* about morality, not looking into an instruction book on how to *be* moral. That is, this book is approaching Ethical Theory from the perspective of the History of Philosophy, not an attempt to promote any particular moral theory as the *correct* theory. It is my hope that you will find these readings both underscore—and at the same time challenge—moral intuitions you already hold.



Through that experience you should begin to become more aware of the *assumptions* you make about morality and perhaps also become more *critical* of those very same opinions. There is nothing I can add to Sokrates' most penetrating insight that, "the unexamined life is not worth living."¹

¹ Plato, The Apology of Sokrates, 38a5-6.