A Brief Introduction to Ethics

http://www.acfe.com/ethics-and-compliance.aspx

Elisabeth Hildt

A brief introduction to ethics

Morality

"The term 'morality' can be used either

- descriptively to refer to some codes of conduct put forward by
  - a society, or
  - some other group, such as a religion, or
  - accepted by an individual for her own behavior or
- normatively to refer to a code of conduct that, given specified conditions, would be put forward by all rational persons."

http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2012/entries/morality-definition/>

| Ethics | = | Moral Philosophy |

- Theoretical reflection on morality
- Branch of philosophy
- Reflects on what is right or wrong
- Seeks to find answers to the question „What are we to do?"

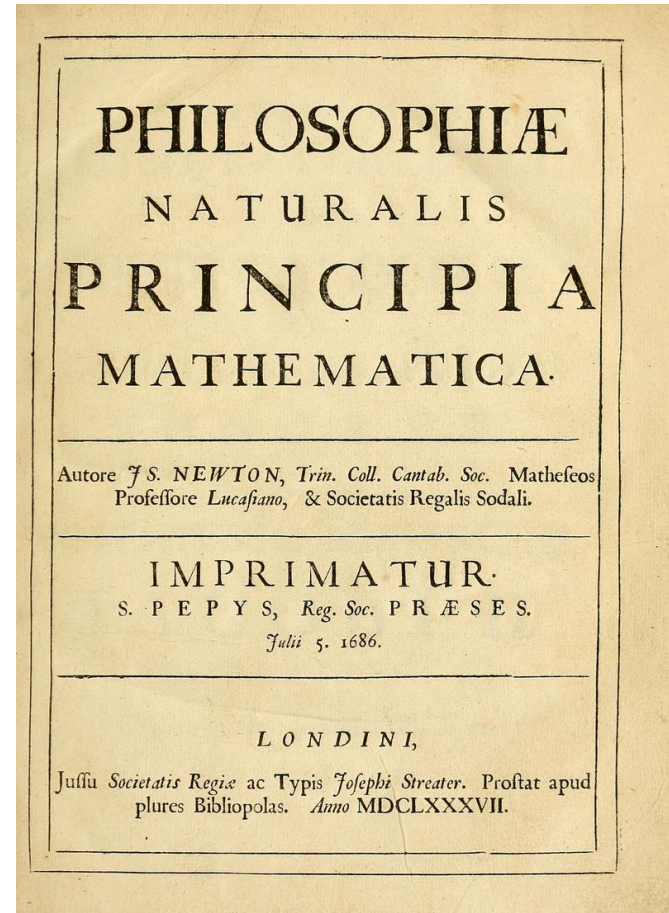⟶ **Normative ethics**

⟶ Descriptive ethics

⟶ Meta-ethics

Philosophy

- "Philo"   "sophia"   ⟶   "love of wisdom"

- Systematic and critical study of general and fundamental questions

- Until the 19th century: "natural philosophy" encompasses astronomy, medicine and physics

- Cambridge Dictionary:

"The use of reason in understanding such things as the nature of the real world and existence, the use and limits of knowledge, and the principles of moral judgment"

Isaac Newton:
Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy
(1687)

→ Physics

Philosophy – Areas of study

- Epistemology: Study of knowledge
  - What can we know? How do we know what we know?

- Metaphysics: Study of the nature of reality
  - What is a person? What is mind? Do people have free will? Is there a God?

- Logic: Study of the validity of patterns of inference
  - When is a claim conclusively supported by another claim? What is good reasoning?

- History of Philosophy

- Ethics
  - What is good? What are we to do? What is a good life?

- Political Philosophy: Study of concepts and values related to political matters
  - (Why) Do we have to obey the law?

| Ethics | = | Moral Philosophy |

- Theoretical reflection on morality
- Branch of philosophy
- Reflects on what is right or wrong
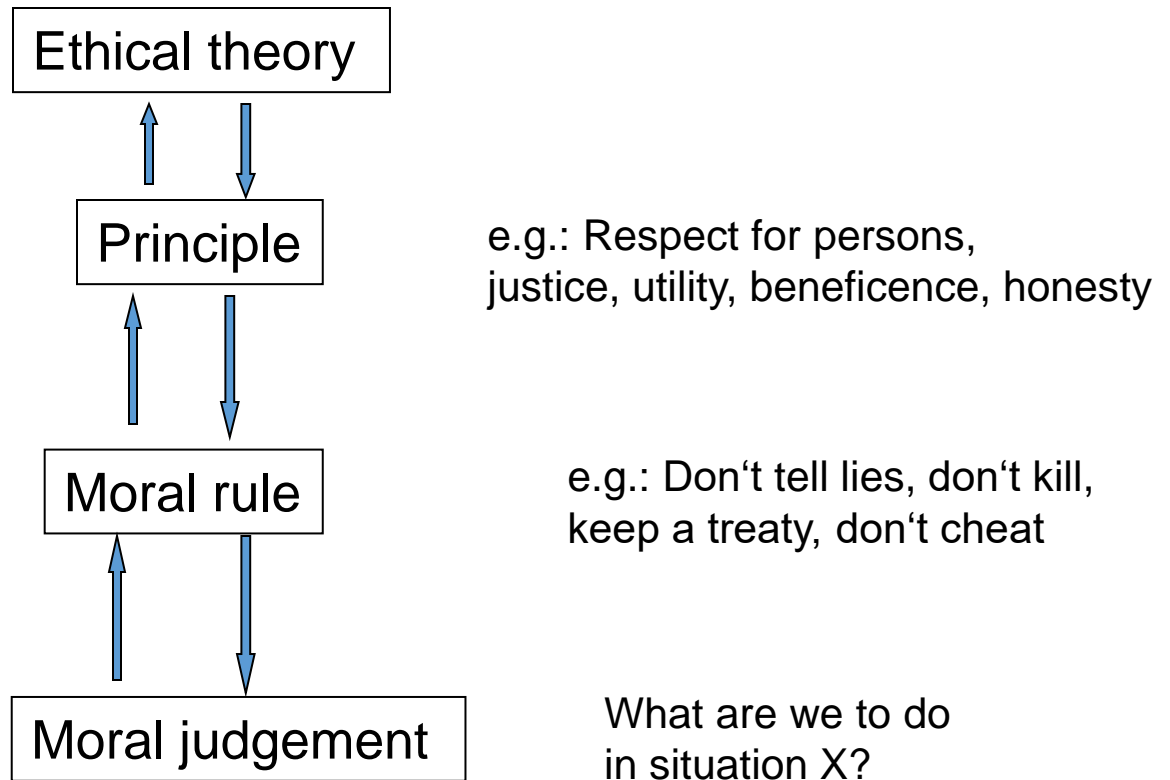- Seeks to find answers to the question „What are we to do?"

⟶ **Normative ethics**

⟶ Descriptive ethics

⟶ Meta-ethics

Ethical reasoning

Ethical theory

Principle

e.g.: Respect for persons, justice, utility, beneficence, honesty

Moral rule

e.g.: Don't tell lies, don't kill, keep a treaty, don't cheat

Moral judgement

What are we to do in situation X?

Ethical reasoning

Different types of ethical theory

a) Deontological Ethics

   Central: the nature of an action

b) Consequentialism

   Central: the consequences of an action

c) Virtue Ethics

   Central: the character of a moral agent

Deontological Ethics

- Central: the nature of an action; does the action adhere to rules?; are there duties linked to an action?

- Important representative: Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)

- Examples:
  - Respect for human dignity,
  - duty to keep promises,
  - don't lie,
  - prohibition against killing,
  - justice

- Golden rule:
  - "Treat others as you want to be treated"
  - "One should not treat others in ways that one would not like to be treated"
- Categorical imperative:

    "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law without contradiction."

Consequentialism

- Central: The consequences of an action

- A morally right action is an action that results in good consequences

- Criterion for rightness or wrongness: the non-moral value that is created by an action, e.g. the amount of happiness, financial gain, or health

- The proper course of action is the one the consequences of which maximize the non-moral value considered relevant

- „The ends justify the means"

Utilitarianism

- A variant of consequentialism

- Criterium for rightness or wrongness: Utility

- Utility: extent to which (human) needs and interests are fulfilled; promotion of happiness, reduction of suffering

- The proper course of action is the one that maximizes utility.

- „The greatest good of the greatest number"

- Relevant: the total amount of happiness that results in all of the persons affected by an action

- Representatives: J.S. Mill, Jeremy Bentham, Henry Sidgwick, Peter Singer

Virtue Ethics

- Virtue:
  - A person's character
  - Ideal to become a morally excellent person
  - Disposition to do the right things
  - Can be achieved by continuous exercise throughout life

- Four Cardinal Virtues:
  - Prudence
  - Justice
  - Temperance or Restraint
  - Fortitude or Courage

- Moral rightness or wrongness depends on the context and situation, i.e. there is no clear rule

- Representatives: Plato, Aristotle; Alasdair MacIntyre, G.E.M. Anscombe, Philippa Foot

Lifeboat Case

http://preparedcopy.com/2012/04/titanic-sinking-prepping-lessons/

- Imagine you are on a boat trip
- Following severe damage, the ship is about to sink
- There are 21 persons on board
- Lifeboat available for 20 persons
- What to do?

http://lifeboat.com/ex/main

Lifeboat Case

Action proposed	Moral principle / criterion	Ethical theory

Moral reasoning: an example

Lifeboat Case

Action proposed	Moral principle / criterion	Ethical theory