

# Glossary of Ethics

Many of these definitions are drawn, at least in part, from two generally available Internet sources. The first is from the University of San Diego (<http://ethics.sandiego.edu/LMH/E2/Glossary.asp>, Retrieved on April 2, 2009). The second is part of a site designed to meet the needs EDECEL Foundations' London Examinations re "Religion in Relation to Philosophy, Ethics and Morality" ([www.rsweb.org.uk/ethics/glossary.html](http://www.rsweb.org.uk/ethics/glossary.html) Paper 4, Unit D1). I have shortened or amplified some of these definitions. Others I have composed based on my own studies. Terms from certain other sources are indicated in the endnotes.

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*Distribution of the entire glossary or any part is permissible.*

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## Basic Approaches

There are many approaches to ethics, but we can group most of them under six different models.

**Duty Ethics.** This is often called "deontological ethics"—from Greek *deon*—that which is obligatory or a duty. Actions are right or wrong to the extent that they are fulfillment of duty. Duty theories differ as to where to find human duties defined—usually in God, in reason, or in history. A duty ethics considers actions as intrinsically right or wrong in themselves regardless of their consequences. This approach is nearly the opposite of Outcome Ethics. So you cannot torture spies even if the outcome is morally preferable, like the early ending of a war. Proponents include Immanuel Kant and Paul Ramsey.

**Outcomes Ethics.** Also called "teleological ethics," from *telos*, the end or the goal. Actions are judged to be morally good in light of expected outcomes.

**Goal Ethics.** An act *right* only if its *goal* is to produce the best available balance of good over bad. The goals approach abandons any claim to moral certainty. So you *can* torture spies if it promises to shorten a war. A leading proponent is John Stuart Mill. Critics fault goal ethics for its focus on people's good or bad *intentions*, without consideration of uncertainties about consequences.

**Consequentialist Ethics.** An outcomes theory that the rightness or wrongness of actions depends on their actual consequences. The action is made right or wrong *after* its performance. The end justifies the means. "All's well that ends well." Advocates include James Burtness. Critics find fault in the focus on outcomes for individuals, rather than the general population, and in the absence of criteria for determining what outcomes are *objectively* better.

**Utilitarian Ethics.** An outcomes theory that maintains that an action is right if it produces the greatest good for the greatest number. It points to pleasure and happiness as criteria for what is objectively better. Critics point out that it provides no justice for minorities and ignores the possibility of intrinsically bad acts like torturing babies. Leading proponents are Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill.

**Natural Law Ethics.** The natural order of things is good. People must not violate that order. The origins of Natural Law theory go back as far as the ancient Greeks (Sophocles' play, "Antigone," c. 442 BCE) but are famously developed by Thomas Aquinas (c. 1250 CE). The fundamental natural law is to protect oneself and the innocent. From these can be derived the rules about living, procreating, creating a civil society and worshiping God. The Roman Catholic Church is the prominent exponent of Natural Law Ethics today, manifested particularly in official documents opposing artificial contraception and abortion.

**Virtue Ethics.** Also called Character Ethics. Morality does not find its basis in the action but the actor. The focus is primarily on character, not conduct. Character ethics draw on Aristotle's understanding of the four primary virtues: prudence, justice, courage, and temperance. Proponents include Alasdair MacIntyre, Stanley Hauerwas, and Gilbert Meilaender. See <http://www.iep.utm.edu/v/virtue.htm>

**Situation Ethics.** An ethics based on the virtue of love in concrete situations. Joseph Fletcher proposed this view in the 1960s as an alternative to legalistic and natural-law codes of ethics that dominated Christian ethical thought. He argued that the morally right thing to do depended on many factors in specific situations but ultimately was that which was most loving in that particular situation. The love Fletcher meant was agape or unconditional love. The theory has been rejected by some Christian Churches, most notably the Roman Catholic.

**Relativist Ethics.** Relativism denies the possibility of universal moral norms.

**A descriptive ethical relativism** maintains simply that different cultures have differing ethical systems, without taking a position on objective better or worse—an approach exhibited in cultural anthropology, particularly in studies of religions as social phenomena.

**A normative ethical relativism** claims that each culture's beliefs or value system are right within that culture, and that it is impossible to validly judge another culture's values externally or objectively. As such there are no absolute moral norms. Proponents include J. L. Mackie and supporters of a "postmodern" ethics that reject universal norms.

**Critical Realist Ethics.** This is essentially a method in ethics, based on the work of Bernard Lonergan (d. 1984) and his "generalized empirical method." It relies on personal verification that all public moral norms originate in a compound of five norms proper to consciousness itself—being attentive, intelligent, reasonable, responsible, and in love. These drives contain their own criteria or norms for when they are successful. An analysis of the workings of these norms reveals certain biases and a core penchant for acting against our better judgment. This analysis, in turn, clarifies what sort of healing or redemption may be needed in concrete situations, whether religious or not. This method reveals the inner sources of the more familiar criteria of duty, outcomes, natural law, and virtue; it also opposes the relativist rejection of objective norms. See <http://www.iep.utm.edu/l/lonergan.htm>

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## **Basic Terms**

**Absolutism.** The belief that there is one and only one truth; those who espouse absolutism usually also believe that they *know* what this absolute truth is. In ethics, absolutism is often contrasted to relativism.

**Agape.** Greek word meaning "love" but distinct from erotic love and familial love. Technically, it refers to the love that *rests* in union with a beloved; it is distinguished from *eros*, which refers to love that *seeks* the beloved. *Agape* is important for Christians as it is that kind of unconditional love which they must show their neighbors. It is also important for Joseph Fletcher's Situation ethics which claims that moral

decision making must center around determining the most agape-loving thing to do in a situation

**Agnosticism.** The conviction that one simply does not know whether God exists or not; it is often accompanied with a further conviction that one need not care whether God exists or not.

**Altruism.** A selfless concern for other people purely for their own sake. Altruism is usually contrasted with selfishness or egoism.

**Antinomian.** An adjective meaning "anti-law." It is used for ethical theories that reject the idea of universal moral laws.

**Areté.** The Greek word for "excellence" or "virtue." For the Greeks, this was not limited to human beings. A guitar, for example, has its *areté* in producing harmonious music. So, too, the virtue of an Olympic swimmer is in swimming well, and the virtue of a national leader lies in motivating people to work for the common good.

**Atheism.** The belief that God does not exist. In the last two centuries, some of the most influential atheistic philosophers have been Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, Bertrand Russell, and Jean-Paul Sartre.

**Autonomy.** The ability to freely determine one's own course in life. Etymologically, it stems from Greek words for "self" and "law." This term is most strongly associated with Immanuel Kant, for whom it meant the ability to give the moral law to oneself. It is usually contrasted with "heteronomy" meaning the rule by other sources besides one's self. To believe people are autonomous is a position opposed to Determinism

**Blame.** An identification of parties whose behaviors caused damage. It is typically followed by training, by requiring compensation, by punishment, by social shaming, or by exclusion from decision-making. The term is more relevant to an Ethics of Law than an Ethics of Better (see Ethics-Normative, below).

**Casuistry.** The application of general, unchanging laws to specific "cases" (from the Latin, *casus*). In the ethics of Aristotle and Aquinas, this requires the cardinal virtue of prudence to make the appropriate application, and the practice of *epikeia* (below) to understand where exceptions from, or adaptations of, general laws are appropriate. However, casuistry takes a back seat in an ethics that recognizes that besides general, unchanging laws of human nature, there is also human historicity (below) that keeps on changing.

**Categorical Imperative.** An unconditional command. For Immanuel Kant, all of morality depended on a single categorical imperative. One version of that imperative is, "Always act in such a way that the maxim of your action can be willed as a universal law." Another is, "Never treat persons as nothing but means to an end and not also as an end in themselves."

**Common Good.** Refers to the "good" of society or community itself. Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics*) said, "Even if the good is the same for the individual and the city, the good of the city clearly is the greater and more perfect thing to attain and to safeguard....The good for one person alone is a source of satisfaction; to secure it for a nation and for cities is nobler and more divine." This view was reinforced by Thomas Aquinas and is strongly promoted among Christian ethicists. Recently, however, John Rawls (*Political Liberalism*) asserted that the idea of a common good "is no longer a political possibility for those who accept the constraints of liberty and toleration of democratic institutions."<sup>1</sup>

**Conscience.** Aquinas called it "the mind making moral judgments." It is variously understood as meaning the voice of God within us (Butler), our natural sense of moral right and wrong, or our super-ego enforcing the rules of behavior implanted within us when we were young (Freud). Ethical issues related to conscience include the conflict between state law or religious belief and individual conscience, the justification of conscience as a reason for moral behavior, and the difficulties in defining and relying on conscience as a guide for moral behavior. Cardinal Newman said "I toast the Pope, but I toast conscience first."

**Culpable.** Blameworthy.

**Deductive.** An argument whose conclusion follows necessarily from its premises. "All persons have a right to life. A fetus is a person. Therefore a fetus has a right to life." This contrasts to various kinds of inductive arguments, which make general statements based on a variety of individual experiences. "The horror of being raped leads many morally good women to seek abortion before the fetus become viable."

**Deism.** The belief that God created the universe but does not intervene in human affairs. God can be known by natural reason. The term may refer to a philosophy of life, but more often it refers to just a mindset of many people. It is opposed by Jewish, Christian, and Muslim religions.

**Divine Command Ethics.** A view that "good" applies to whatever God commands. So God can command Abraham to sacrifice his son, or

command the Israelites to invade a foreign country and slaughter its inhabitants. This view is criticized as subordinating reason to God's commands. See "Voluntarism."

**Double-Effect.** A theory used to justify a seemingly immoral act when the wrong involved was not directly intended. Thus the termination of a fetus may be acceptable if the intention is to save the life of the mother. (An example is ectopic pregnancies, where the fertilized ovum lodges itself in the Fallopian Tube. If the pregnancy continues the mother and fetus will die. The Double Effect theory justifies the removal of the Fallopian Tube because the intention is to save the mother's life even though the effect leads to the death of the fetus.)

**Emotivism.** The view that all moral assertions (like "X is wrong" and "Y acted wrongly") are nothing but expressions of emotions. They cannot be statements of objective reality.

**Enlightenment.** An intellectual movement in Europe from the sixteenth until the eighteenth centuries that believed in the power of human reason to understand the world and to guide human conduct. The term is also used by Buddhists to refer to a state of Enlightenment or *nirvana*, which is the goal of human existence.

**Epikeia.** A virtue by which persons who, because they understand the reasons behind certain laws, are able to apply them to circumstances not originally envisioned by the law. This allows breaking the letter of the law for the sake of its purpose—usually some higher or more universal good. (In Greek, *epikeia* = *unassignable*.) Thomas Aquinas provides the classic treatment of *epikeia* in his *Summa Theologica*. See <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/3120.htm>

**Ethics.** Ethics is from Greek *ethikos*, where *ethos* means character. Ethical Theory is subdivided into three:

**Normative ethics**, which asks whether actions are right or wrong (an Ethics of Law), better or worse (and Ethics of Better).

**Descriptive or comparative ethics**, which simply compares and describes differing ethical practices;

**Metaethics**, the study of methods in ethics and the meaning of ethical terms such as *good* and *right*.

*Practical or Applied Ethics* relies on ethical theories to resolve questions arising from concrete experience.

**Eudaimonistic** . An adjective denoting teleological types of ethics that have happiness as their goal. (Greek: *eudaimonia*=*happiness*.)

**Fundamental Option.** The notion that the specific choices we make manifest a fundamental "choice" about priorities. For example, a person's fundamental option may be for self-satisfaction, for group loyalty, for high moral ideals, or for the love of God. This choice may occur in a conscious experience of moral conversion or simply as an underlying pattern that shows in a thousand choices.

**Fideism.** The view that religious faith (*fides*) is distinct, and often opposed, to reason. There are many varieties of this view—for example, ethical systems based exclusively on God's commands, certain fundamentalist views of the bible as literally more "true" than science, and Kierkegaard's attitude of "fear and trembling" before a God we cannot fathom.

**Gnosticism.** This is a general term for the belief that authentic life is found only by living in the higher realm of knowledge, rather than the lower realm of visible, material reality. There were many gnostic movements in the early years of Christianity, which theologians confronted with the "true knowledge" of the Good News in Christ Jesus. A non-philosophical Gnosticism has always had its adherents throughout history, as we can see in popular literature on the "secret" of living well.

**Heteronomy.** For Kant, heteronomy is the opposite of autonomy. Whereas an autonomous person is one whose will is self-determined, a heteronomous person is one whose will is determined by something outside of the person, such as overwhelming social pressure. "Heteronomy" comes from the Greek words for "other" and "law."

**Historicity.** This refers to how history itself constitutes fundamental human characteristics in ways that are specific to times and places. Thus we have *modern* literature, *modern* science, *modern* economics, the *modern* state, *modern* technology, *modern* education, *modern* medicine, *modern* media, *modern* art, *modern* ideas of history, of philosophy, and theology. Some use the concept of historicity to replace natural law ethics, and some to complement it.

**Individualism.** Theories which center on the centrality of the individual as opposed to a "common good." Margaret Thatcher famously said "There is no such thing as society" to emphasize the importance of the individual in commerce. The United States embodies rights of the individual in its Constitution. In ethics the distinction between individual rights and a

common good are important in discussions on justice. Individualism is also an issue in religious and cultural studies. (Compare American Individualism with the Japanese Group ethos, or the Christian search for individual salvation and the Islamic concept of the rights of the community).

**Intrinsically Good.** "Good in itself." Discovered by an analysis of the action and its general relation to human nature and/or divine command, without reference to historicity (above), to consequences, and, in many cases, to a person's intention. The concept usually meets opposition from those who regard historical circumstances, consequences and intentions as essential parts of moral acts.

**Invincible Ignorance:** An unavoidable lack of sufficient knowledge about a situation to make a responsible moral judgment. This ignorance may be about applicable laws, the reasonable expectations of participants, or relevant moral standards. Because it is unavoidable, it diminishes culpability; in contrast, "vincible" ignorance is avoidable, which increases culpability. The distinction loses usefulness in the perspective of theories of human development, since much intellectual and moral ignorance is avoidable through education, which can be ongoing throughout one's life.

**Justice.** Aristotle is the person mainly responsible for introducing the term into ethics. He regarded justice as mainly a virtue in a well-ordered person that affects his or her relations with others. Thomas Aquinas, following Aristotle, regarded justice as a political virtue in a person concerned about the common good. Several related terms have since appeared:

***Commutative Justice*** regards exchanges between people. This meaning usually applies to exchanges of labor for wages.

***Distributive Justice*** regards the distribution of goods and services across society. The mainly applies to the economy, to obligations to participate in government, and to the problem of poverty.

***Legal Justice*** regards claims sanctioned by laws. It applies both to redressing wrongs (bringing criminals "to justice") and to developing laws to protect citizens.

**Kingdom of Ends.** This term was used by Kant to describe a world where everyone acted rationally: "A rational being belongs to the kingdom of ends as a member when he legislates in it universal laws



while also being himself subject to these laws. He belongs to it as sovereign, when as legislator he is himself subject to the will of no other."

**Logical Positivism.** The view that the only real things are those which are either empirically provable (we can test them) or logically necessary ( $1+1=2$ ). All religious, superstitious and supernatural statements are meaningless because their truth cannot be established by appeal to evidence. This philosophy was propagated by a group called the Vienna Circle and later came to be associated with A. J. Ayer and Emotivism (above).

**Love.** A key concept in Judeo-Christian Ethics where people must love God with their entire mind, heart, soul and strength, and must love their neighbor as themselves. It is also important for Situation Ethics (below).

**Manichaeism.** The view that the universe is controlled by two forces, one for good and one for evil. Many gnostic Christians (about 100-300 CE) held this view. It was energetically opposed by St. Augustine, taking a stand on the belief of Jews and Christians that the one God made everything, "and saw that it was good."

**Nihilism.** (Pronounced "neigh-alism") The belief that there is no value or truth. Literally, a belief in nothing (*nihil*). Most philosophical discussions of nihilism arise out of a consideration of Fredrich Nietzsche's remarks on nihilism, especially in *The Will to Power*.

**Pelagianism.** A theory which so stressed the essential goodness of humans (in opposition to the Manichaeans) that it assumed that perfection is available to humans without God's help. It eliminated the need for God's grace to do good. "You do your best; God will do the rest." Nearly all authoritative Christian doctrine on the matter stresses that we cannot even do anything good without God first giving us the "grace" to do it. Augustine himself marveled at how he could "will" his finger to move and it would move, but when he "willed" to leave his concubine, he was unable to do it on his own.

**Prima Facie.** (Latin: "at first glance") The term usually occurs in discussions of duties. A *prima facie* duty is one which appears binding but which may, upon closer inspection, turn out to be overridden by other, stronger duties, or be set aside by virtue of *epikeia* (see above).

**Probabilism.** A view that moral laws should be followed unless a more "provable" or "well-tested" reason showed otherwise, particularly the views of respected experts. The term comes from the Latin, *probare*, to

test. The view appeared in the 16<sup>th</sup> century to deal with moral matters where certainty was not available. It has the same significance as *epikeia*. In English, the term is quite misleading. "Probabilism" does *not* judge the rightness of acts on the "probability" they will occur, nor on the "probability" that one view is better than another. It could more clearly be called the "Defensible Exemption Theory."

**Proportionalism.**<sup>2</sup> Moral laws may be disregarded if there is a proportionate reason for doing so. There are times when it is better to break a promise, even to kill, when a far greater good is intended. To avoid a purely consequentialist view, proportionalism still considers certain acts as inviolable, based on natural law or deontological views—such as framing an innocent person, or killing noncombatants in order to end a war. The concept appears in Thomas Aquinas' consideration of the Just War theory. It is present in modern formulations of the just war theory and it questions actions like dropping atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in WW2. It is also found in the Roman Catholic teaching on euthanasia which holds that while "mercy killing" is wrong, the treatment of terminally ill patients may be a greater wrong if the pain caused by further treatment is disproportionate to shortening an inevitable death. Proportionalism is a relatively new theory which tries to bridge the gap between the traditional Christian Natural Law ethic and Situation Ethics.

**Rationalism.** A theory popular in the 17th and 18th centuries which holds that it is possible to determine what truly exists by reason alone, and that all things are explainable using reason. In more recent times it is associated with the rejection of religious faith or any belief system that is not based mainly on reason.

**Responsible.** In duty ethics (deontological), the term refers to persons whose decisions were in line with laws, promises, and/or role-based obligations. In outcomes ethics (consequentialist/utilitarian) the term is largely connected to blame (see above). In virtue ethics (character), it refers to an inner, normative demand that we choose what is objectively better as opposed to what is only better for oneself or one's group.

**Rights.** Historically, rights are entitlements to do something without interference from other people (*negative rights*) or entitlements that obligate others to do something positive to assist you (*positive rights*).

***Natural rights and human rights*** belong to everyone by nature or simply by virtue of being human.

**Legal rights** belong to people by virtue of their membership in a particular political state.

**Moral rights** are based in acceptance of a particular moral theory.

A critical realist ethics regards all notions of *rights* as claims on on the moral character of others. That is, they are expressions of what is objectively *right* as determined by persons being open to learning, to doing better, and to loving relationships.

**Sin.** A deliberate offense against God, or against God's commandments. There are generally three requirements to be met: (1) An act must be wrong; (2) one knows the act is wrong; and (3) one does the wrongful act despite this knowledge.

**Sins of Omission.** The idea that we can do wrong through *inaction*. If we refuse to save a drowning person when we are able, then we are doing wrong through omission. Proponents of global justice consider that rich Westerners are continually doing wrong by failing to save the lives of the poor around the world who are starving.

**Situation Ethics.** The idea that there are no universal, fixed laws that can be applied to actual situations yet there really is an objective right or wrong. The basic norms for all ethics arise within those participants in situations who count on love—particular the *agape* form of love found in Christ. This view was proposed by Joseph Fletcher in 1963 in his book, *Situation Ethics*. He aimed to avoid the extremes of purely legalistic ethics and a purely relativist ethics.

**Slippery Slope Argument.** This describes the dangers of allowing moral laws to be broken in certain circumstances. The idea is that once lesser moral laws are broken, greater ones will be broken, and ultimately all moral absolutes are abandoned. The argument is used against Situation Ethics as leaving the door open to abandon certain responsibilities. In Applied Ethics, some argue that to legalize euthanasia would eventually lead to removing a parent from life support so as to hasten an inheritance.

**Stoic Ethics.** This is based on the belief that all nature is a rationally ordered system. What distinguishes humans from the rest of nature is reason; hence the most orderly life is based on reason. The classical four cardinal virtues (prudence, justice, temperance, fortitude) are ultimately grounded on reason. The passions, in contrast, are irrational and contrary to human nature. They need not necessarily be suppressed altogether but

must be subordinate to reason. Moreover, Stoics regarded the “rationally ordered” aspect of all nature as under a law of necessity, without room for probability and chance—hence their emphasis on determinism or fate. If the desires of virtuous persons are not realized, they console themselves with the idea that “Everything happens for a reason.” (Hence the popular reference to having “a stoic attitude.”)

**Theodicy.** Philosophers and theologians who aim to justify belief in God despite the presence of evil develop a “theodicy” – from the Greek, *god-justification*. There is a logical problem of how a good God can make or allow evil. There is an ontological problem when we consider whether evil can have an existence of itself. There is a historical problem when it appears that God doesn’t lift a finger to stop the horrors humans do to one another. And there is an existential problem of how believers can still love God while recognizing how pervasive evil is.

**Voluntarism.** The view that reality is ultimately dependent on God’s will (*voluntas*) rather than God’s mind. The argument is that seeing God as intellectual makes God subject to reason, which makes reason the ultimate “God.” This approach supports using intelligence in practical affairs, but not in any way that might stand in judgment about God’s commands. Key proponents are Duns Scotus, William of Ockham, and Emmanuel Kant. See “Divine Command Ethics.”

*Updated April 29, 2010*

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<sup>1</sup> See David Hollenbach, S.J., *The Common Good and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge University Press, 2002). The quotations are from pages 3 and 9.

<sup>2</sup> See Charles E. Curran, *Catholic Moral Theology in the United States: A History* (Georgetown University Press, 2008), pp. 107-109.