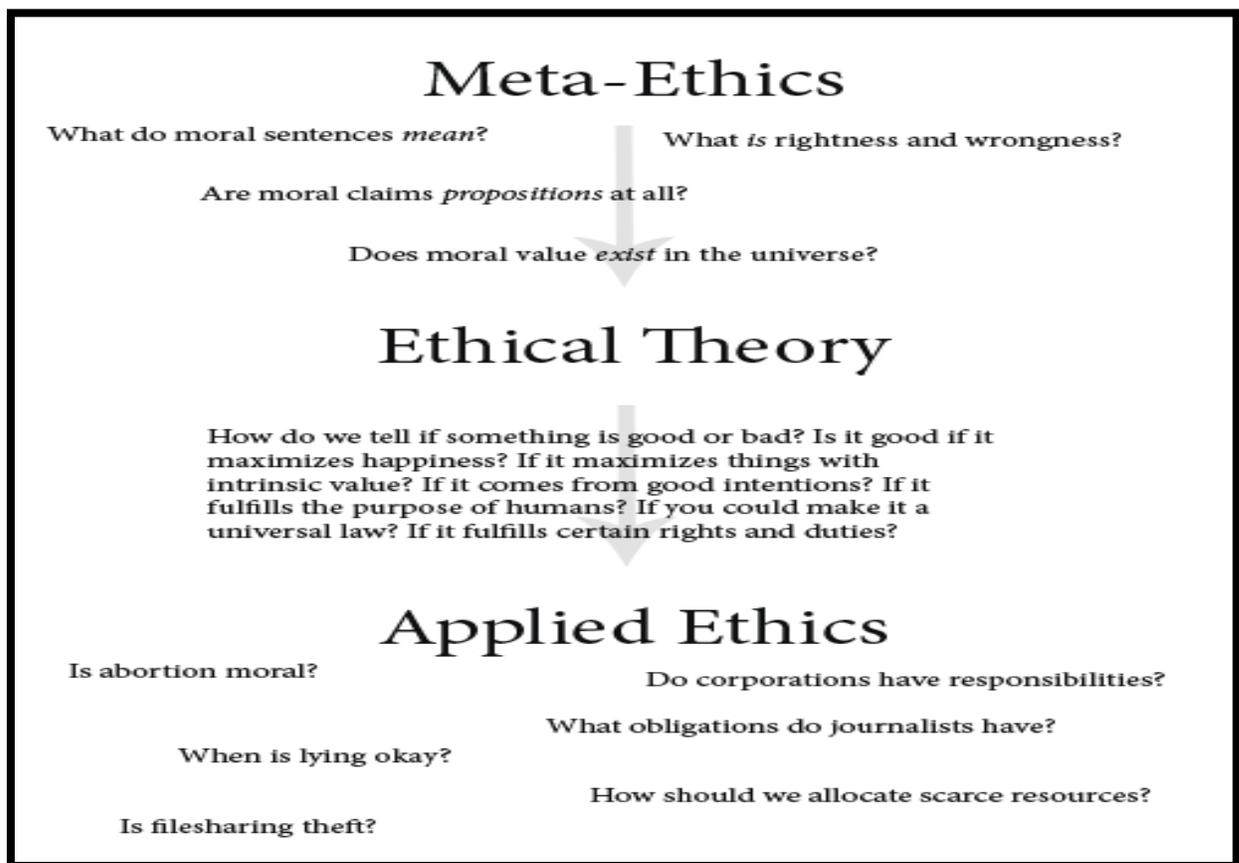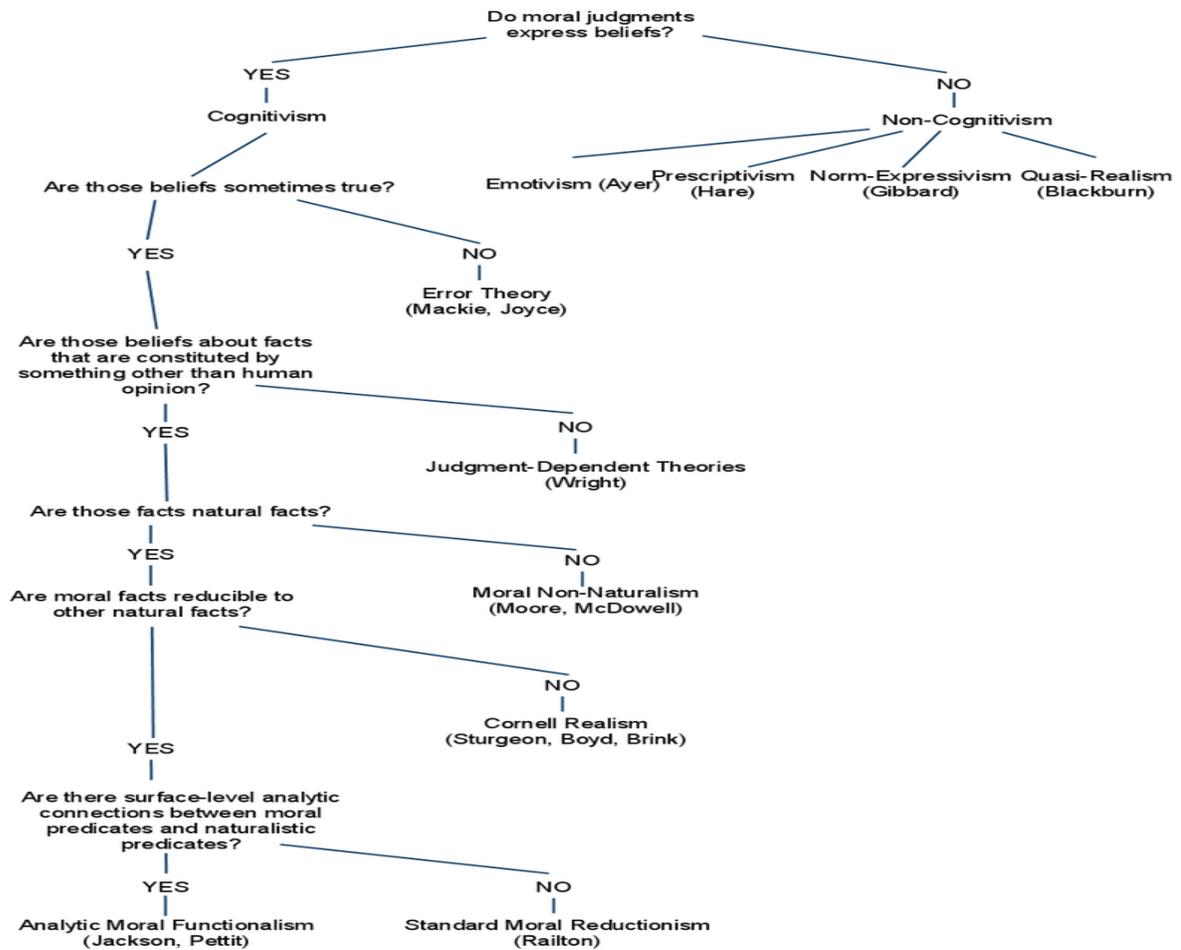# What Is Ethics? A Quick and Dirty Overview

What is ethics? That is a tricky question, since there are in reality different levels of ethics, each corresponding to different levels of abstraction. Beginning with the most concrete level, suppose you wanted to know whether you should do more to relieve poverty or whether you should stop eating meat. Whatever you conclude notice that practical questions like these are distinct from questions about what determines the rightness or wrongness of actions in general, or the still more abstract questions about whether there are any truths about morality (i.e. moral facts). Questions about poverty and meat-eating are questions for applied or **practical or applied ethics**. Questions about what determines, and indeed explains, the rightness or wrongness of actions in general are questions for **normative ethics**. Finally, questions such as 'are there any moral facts and, if so, where do they come from (Human Beings? God? Rationality? Forms? Nature?)' are questions for **meta-ethics**. Other questions for meta-ethics include, 'what do terms like *ought* mean? Is moral testimony ever authoritative? (Note: meta-ethics tends to be rather technical and we won't go into it in depth here).

Meta-Ethics

What do moral sentences *mean*?

What *is* rightness and wrongness?

Are moral claims *propositions* at all?

Does moral value *exist* in the universe?

Ethical Theory

How do we tell if something is good or bad? Is it good if it maximizes happiness? If it maximizes things with intrinsic value? If it comes from good intentions? If it fulfills the purpose of humans? If you could make it a universal law? If it fulfills certain rights and duties?

Applied Ethics

Is abortion moral?

Do corporations have responsibilities?

What obligations do journalists have?

When is lying okay?

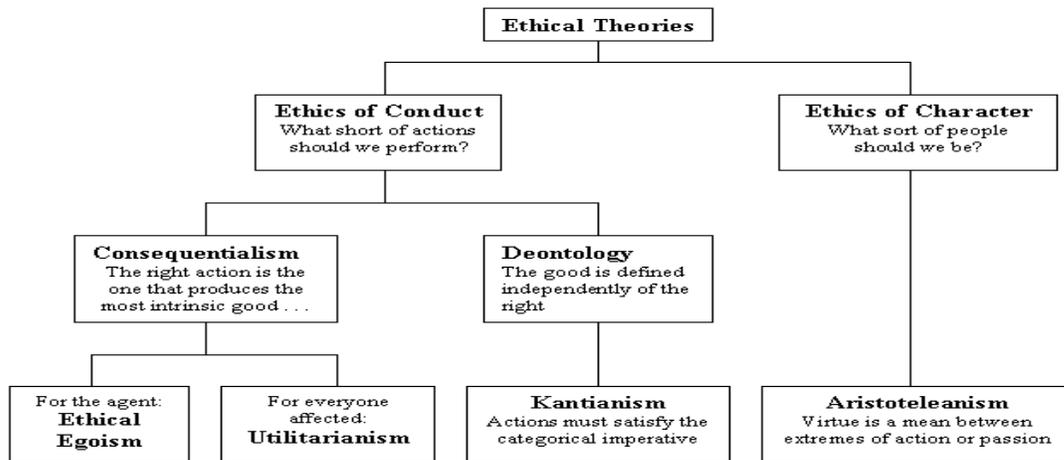How should we allocate scarce resources?

Is filesharing theft?

Of course there are other questions about ethics outside these levels. For instance, if one wanted to know how we *in fact* arrive at the moral judgments we do, or whether we all suffer from weakness of will, one might be interested in **moral psychology** – which isn't clearly captured by any of the above levels, but which, again, could overlap with them (Kantians, for instance, often care a lot about moral psychology). Also, while moral philosophers traditionally have been highly concerned about **wellbeing** or the good life, seeing this as central to ethics, it might not be obvious how this fits into our scheme. Here we might discuss utilitarianism and virtue ethics, which are highly concerned with wellbeing to explain the connection.

Incomplete Meta-Ethics Chart

A more complete & complicated chart is here http://filebox.vt.edu/users/faraci/metaethics.pdf but you won't need this

Do moral judgments express beliefs?

YES — Cognitivism

NO — Non-Cognitivism

Emotivism (Ayer) Prescriptivism (Hare) Norm-Expressivism (Gibbard) Quasi-Realism (Blackburn)

Are those beliefs sometimes true?

YES

NO — Error Theory (Mackie, Joyce)

Are those beliefs about facts that are constituted by something other than human opinion?

YES

NO — Judgment-Dependent Theories (Wright)

Are those facts natural facts?

YES

NO — Moral Non-Naturalism (Moore, McDowell)

Are moral facts reducible to other natural facts?

NO — Cornell Realism (Sturgeon, Boyd, Brink)

YES

Are there surface-level analytic connections between moral predicates and naturalistic predicates?

YES — Analytic Moral Functionalism (Jackson, Pettit)

NO — Standard Moral Reductionism (Railton)

Incomplete Normative Ethics Chart

Ethical Theories

Ethics of Conduct
What short of actions should we perform?

Ethics of Character
What sort of people should we be?

Consequentialism
The right action is the one that produces the most intrinsic good . . .

Deontology
The good is defined independently of the right

For the agent:
Ethical Egoism

For everyone affected:
Utilitarianism

Kantianism
Actions must satisfy the categorical imperative

Aristoteleanism
Virtue is a mean between extremes of action or passion

Two of the three main normative theories just mentioned, Kantianism and Consequentialism, are rather ambitious: they have traditionally sought to discover a supreme principle of morality – like the happiness principle or the categorical imperative. Other **normative theories** not mentioned above include Divine Command Theory, Natural Law Theory, Contractualism, Moral Pluralism, Moral Particularism. Theories of **wellbeing** include, Hedonism, Desire Satisfaction, Objective List, Life Satisfaction. Welfarists think that wellbeing is the only thing that matters in the end; that the whole point of morality is to make sentient beings better off. Finally, there are different versions of most of the above views; for instance, not all forms of consequentialism are maximizing in structure; not all forms or are focused on acts; and not all forms of hedonism are about having pleasurable mental states.

Applied or Practical Ethics

Applied ethicists don't always name their approaches or create flow charts; they do, however, sometimes debate whether we should seek to resolve practical disputes by applying (or plugging in) a moral theory from normative ethics. Many say no. Applied ethicists also often appeal to **mid-range** principles, such as the following.

Examples of Principles in Applied Ethics

The Sacrifice Principle. If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally to do it (From Peter Singer, 'Famine, Affluence and Morality,' 1972, *Philosophy and Public Affairs*).

Other principles and distinctions found in practical ethics include, Autonomy, Justice, Beneficence, Non-Maleficence, Killing vs. Letting Die.

Diverse Normative Perspectives

Secular Ethics vs. Theological Ethics (including covenantal ethics)

Traditionally Neglected Approaches
(Feminist Ethics, Race studies, LGBT approaches, Disability). Can you think of others?

Some Possible Questions

1) How independent are these levels?
2) How much meta-ethics should we have in different kinds of classes?
3) Can we teach theological ethics without first teaching theology?
4) What do you make of John Hare's claim that God is likely a consequentialist?
5) Are there any normative questions that are beyond the pale – i.e. that simply shouldn't be explored in class?
6) What if a student asks you for moral advice?
7) Should we expect superior moral behavior from ethicists than from non-ethicists?
8) Is there a conflict between happiness and ethics?

Further Resources

- A debate between a well-known theist and a well-known naturalist about whether objective morality requires God's existence (can be a helpful way of getting into meta-ethics and related issues). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SiJnCQuPiuo
- Links with more detail on various normative theories
  http://stanford.library.usyd.edu.au/entries/ethics-virtue/
  http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-moral/
  http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/consequentialism/
  http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/natural-law-theories/
  http://www.iep.utm.edu/divine-c/
- Sample syllabi (normative ethics, bioethics, gender & race, digital ethics, theological ethics), many of which include references to major works.
  http://philosophy.fas.nyu.edu/docs/IO/1179/topics_in_ethics.pdf
  http://summer.stanford.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/PHIL_63S_2013.pdf
  http://grst.wikispaces.umb.edu/GRST11
  http://www.uwo.ca/philosophy/undergraduate/2000_level_courses/Phil2078GDIGITAL%20ETHICS%20OUTLINE.pdf
  https://scethics.org/sites/scethics.org/files/resources/syllabi/2011/smith-ted-ethics-theological-perspective-syllabus.pdf
- Links to case studies http://www.bioethics.iastate.edu/classroom/case_studies.html
  http://dornsife.usc.edu/dilemmas-and-case-studies/
  http://www.scu.edu/ethics/practicing/focusareas/cases.cfm

Note: the charts above do not belong to me and I can't unfortunately remember who they belong to.