E specially in everyday language, the dis-
tinction between the terms ‘ethics’ and
‘morality’ is not always clear. Even in some
philosophical texts both are used synon-
ymously, while others seem to draw a clear
distinction between them. Historically, the
term ‘ethics’ comes from Greek *ethos* which
means the customs, habits and mores of peo-
ple. ‘Morality’ is derived from Latin *mos, mo-
ris* which denotes basically the same; it was
introduced by Cicero as an equivalent to the
Greek *ethos*.

For the sake of clarity we assume as a stan-
dard definition that morality means the cus-
toms, the special do-s and don’t-s that are
shared and widely accepted as standard in a
society or community of people — accepted
as a basis of life that doesn’t have to be rati-
onally questioned. Ethics on the other hand is
the philosophical reflection upon these rules
and ways of living together, the customs and
habits of individuals, groups or mankind as
such. This comes close to the conception
of Aristotle.

In ancient Greek philosophy the question
was to find how to act well and rightly and
what personal/individual qualities are ne-
necessary to be able to do this. Ethics therefore
encompasses the whole range of human action
including personal preconditions. This is
still true today, but for e.g. Aristotelian ethics
focused mainly on the pursuit of the ‘good (li-
fe)’, the *eudaimonia*. The aim was to identify
and to practically realise ‘the (highest) good’
in life — which means that you have to eva-
uate what is ‘good’ as regards content: what
life is a good life and what is not?

As opinions concerning the question what
makes a good life differed more and more in
modern times, ethics had and has to face the
question how the resulting conflicts of inter-
est and values could be solved peacefully
and justly without taking the part of one side
or the other. And this leads to the question of
what is morally right; moral rightness and
‘good life’ become separate issues. Whereas
questions of ‘good life’ are tied to an evaluati-
on of what is good and are answered in the
form of recommendations how to achieve
that goal, norms or principles of moral right-
ness generate imperatives.

Today it is common to separate ethics into
three sub-branches: 1. descriptive ethics, 2.
metaethics and 3. normative ethics:

1. Descriptive ethics aims at empirically
and precisely mapping existing morality or
morals within communities and is there-
fore linked to the social sciences. Another
aim is to explain the development of existing
morals from a historical perspective. No
normative prescriptions are intended.

2. Metaethics is a relatively new discipline
in the ethical arena and its definition is the
most blurred of all. The Greek *meta* means
*after or beyond* and indicates that the object
of metaethical studies is morality and ethics
itself. The aim is to better understand the lo-
gistical, semantic and pragmatic structures of
moral and ethical argumentation as such,
their origin and meaning. Other fields of in-
quiry are e.g. whether morality exists inde-
dependently of humans, and the underlying
mental basis of human judgements and con-
duct.

3. Normative ethics means the methodolo-
gical reflection upon morality tackling its cri-
tique and its rationale. Norms and standards
for acting and conduct are being set up or to-
re down, and argued for or against. When
“ethics” is talked about in a common sense
then we are talking about this general norma-
tive ethics. When enquiry is directed towards
the principles of moral judgement or the cri-
tera for the ethical analysis of morality, then
we talk about fundamental ethics.

Finally in the realm of normative ethics,
there is *applied ethics*. Here normative theo-
ries are applied to *specific*, controversial mo-
ral issues like animal rights, abortion,
euthanasia etc. — generating the classic so-
called hyphen-ethics, e.g. bio-ethics, medical
ethics, business-ethics, nano-ethics etc. Inversely, these special issues constantly challenge theory and demand improvements, changes and specifications.

Alongside hyphen-ethics it is also possible to distinguish between ethics that focuses on societal and institutional dimensions (social ethics) or on the individuum (individual ethics).

While we consider applied ethics to be a sub-branch of normative ethics, other moral philosophers treat it as a discipline on the same level as normative ethics, arguing that it

uses normative elements but is independent otherwise.

In normative ethics there are different theories as to how criteria of moral conduct should be defined. The three main theories can be sketched as follows:

1. **Deontological**, i.e. duty theories locate the basis of morality on specific, foundational principles of duty and obligation. These principles are binding regardless of the consequences that acting on their basis might bring.

2. **Consequentialist** theories on the other hand determine the value of an action on the grounds of a cost-benefit analysis of its consequences. If the positive consequences outweigh the negative ones then the action is morally proper.

3. **Virtue** theories focus on a given set of rules like “do not steal” etc. But instead of defining them merely as obligatory duties, the emphasis lies on the individual to develop good habits of character based on these rules (and avoid vices). Thus virtue theory emphasises moral education.

Q: What are “codes of ethics/conduct” or what is “ethical research”? Shouldn't that be called moral? A: By calling research or a code “ethical”, the authors want to point out that the moral rules they set up are based on rational deliberation and can be subject to critique.

Q: Looking at the definitions of ethics and morality – what is moral philosophy? A: It is mostly used as a synonym for ethics. Some, like the French philosopher Jean-Pierre Dupuy use it differently. For him ‘ethics’ stands for the effort to force everything into universal harmonized principles while ‘moral philosophy’ endures colliding or incompatible values or concepts in the discourse.

---

**Fig 1: Basic sketch of ethical disciplines**

---

**Links to other Portfolio sheets:**

Nano-Ethics  Code of Conduct  Soft Regulation

**Literature: Print & WWW**


---

The Ethics Portfolio - Technical University Darmstadt for NanoCap