

Ethics: Background Sources

1. *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*
<http://www.iep.utm.edu/e/ethics.htm#H3>
2. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*
<http://plato.stanford.edu/>
3. Singer, Peter. *Practical Ethics*, 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
This is a primary source on applied ethics.
4. We are grateful to Thomas Regelski for providing the following discussion of Ethical Theories:

Ethical Theories

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Formal ethical systems use reason alone in formulating principles to guide and judge actions. These systems are called *normative ethics*, but their theoretical stipulations of all-encompassing and absolute norms are typically challenged by the situated particulars of actual cases. *Applied* (or practical, or situation) ethics begin, instead, with typical cases and derive ethical criteria from or for such particulars (e.g., professional ethics). However, applied ethics typically draws from normative ethics¹ (as well as from philosophical, social, scientific, and other criteria), but as adjusted to the unique needs of a particular field. Three traditional theories of normative ethics are typically recognized.

Duty Ethics

Duty (deontological) theories stipulate *rules* for ethical conduct (e.g., The Golden Rule; Kant's "Categorical Imperatives"). Also central is the concept of *rights* (e.g., civil rights) and the ethical obligations such rights entail (e.g., students' rights). However, performing a duty can be considered ethical even if it produces negative consequences (e.g., teachers can assume their ethical duty is met just by offering instruction, even if results are negative). Thus other criteria apply: for example, the duty to "do no harm" (e.g., physical, psychological, etc.) and to be fair and just (e.g., all students deserve an effective education).

Consequentialism

Consequentialism focuses not on norms and rules but on *goals*, and thus the *discernible consequences* of an action determine its ethical virtue. Consequentialism is a version of the 18th century philosophy of *utilitarianism*: to be ethical, consequences should thus be *useful* (i.e., clearly consequential) for those affected by an action. Hence, teaching must actually be useful for students, not just supposedly "good for" them because the teacher or the curriculum says so. Finally, an ethical action produces "the greatest good for the

greatest number,” where “good” is understood not as “pleasure” but as “well-being” or “thriving” (i.e., in contrast to unpleasant or negative consequences).

Virtue Ethics

Virtue ethics stem in particular from Aristotle,² who distinguished two kinds of virtue: *ethical* and *intellectual*. The former stresses personal character traits, such as generosity, friendliness, and patience. Intellectual virtues entail three primary kinds of acquired knowledge and skill.

The first, *theoria*, involves speculative reason and entails contemplating truth and beauty. However, Aristotle regarded ethics as a matter of *practical reason* not of theoretical speculation or absolute rules. Thus ‘good’ or ethical actions are those that produce beneficial results for the practical needs at stake. Furthermore, those needs provide the tangible criteria for judging the virtue (‘rightness’ and ‘goodness’) of an action, thus avoiding ethical relativism or subjectivism. *Techne* refers to the skills used in the ‘excellent making’ of practical ‘things’. Since ‘things’ (not people) are at stake, mistakes typically carry no ethical liability. However, people are not ‘things’; each person has unique needs that are served by actions of ‘doing’ on their behalf, called *praxis*. Accordingly, *praxis* is concerned with the ethical criterion of promoting ‘right results’, as judged in terms of the specific pragmatic benefits that are contributed to the well-being (*eudaemonia*) of those for whom the action is undertaken – in teaching, the well-being of students. Such practical wisdom depends on the virtue of *caring* for those served and of being prudent or *care-full* in decisions and actions that affect their well-being. This “ethic of care”³ relies on Aristotle’s secondary intellectual virtues; these involve acquiring the competence for diagnosing individual needs and making proper decisions, and the flexibility needed to account successfully for differences between individuals and situations.

Ethics or Morals?

The Roman philosopher Cicero translated the Greek *ēthikos* into the Latin *moralis*, and both terms are often used interchangeably in philosophy, though some philosophers give each a distinct definition. However, in ordinary discourse, “morals” are often equated with religious injunctions against “immoral” behavior. Nonetheless, as ethicist Peter Singer notes, “ethics is not something intelligible only in the context of religion.” For example, he paraphrases Plato’s argument thusly: “if the gods approve of some actions it must be because those actions are good, in which case it cannot be the gods’ approval that makes them good. The alternative view makes divine approval entirely arbitrary.”⁴

¹ The term “ethics” is used in both the singular and plural, depending on context.

² *After Virtue 3rd ed.*, by Alasdair MacIntyre (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 2007) is a major updating of virtue ethics that reworks Aristotle’s ideas on character to include community influences.

³ Nel Noddings is widely associated with the “ethics of care” as a result of her books *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), and *The Challenge to Care in Schools* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2005).

⁴ Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics, 2nd ed.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). This is a primary source for information on applied ethics.