# **Topic: Moral Philosophy**

# Fact Sheet

* Moral philosophy is the branch of philosophy that contemplates what is right and wrong. It explores the nature of morality and examines how people should live their lives in relation to others.
* Moral philosophy has three branches:
* One branch, meta-ethics, investigates big picture questions such as, “What is morality?” “What is justice?” “Is there truth?” and “How can I justify my beliefs as better than conflicting beliefs held by others?”
* Another branch of moral philosophy is normative ethics. It answers the question of what we *ought* to do. Normative ethics focuses on providing a framework for deciding what is right and wrong. Three common frameworks are deontology (the normative ethical position that judges the morality of an action based on rules), utilitarianism (the doctrine that actions are right if they are useful or for the benefit of a majority), and virtue ethics (an approach to Ethics that emphasizes an individual's character as the key element of ethical thinking).
* The last branch is applied ethics. It addresses specific, practical issues of moral importance such as war and capital punishment. Applied ethics also tackles specific moral challenges that people face daily, such as whether they should lie to help a friend or co-worker.
* So, whether our moral focus is big picture questions, a practical framework, or applied to specific dilemmas, moral philosophy can provide the tools we need to examine and live an ethical life.

(Source: <http://ethicsunwrapped.utexas.edu/glossary/moral-philosophy>)

# 2. The relationship between cultural values and moral philosophy



(Source: https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s13162-012-0029-2)

# How to Apply Moral Philosophy to Business Ethics

Moral philosophy is the study of moral judgments or the value that is placed on decisions about what is right or wrong, good or bad or just and unjust, according to philosophy professors Brooke Noel Moore and Kenneth Bruder. Applying moral philosophy to business ethics is no simple task, especially in the global marketplace where notions of right and wrong mean different things for different cultures.

## **Organizational Culture**

Business ethics is simply the extension of moral philosophy into the practical questions it poses in the business world. Notions of right and wrong are endemic to all organizations in one way or another, but business owners can use these to define the organizational culture of their company by focusing on making employees aware of their moral obligation in their business dealings with outsiders and those within. In short, moral philosophy can be used to create a culture of honesty and ethical business practice by creating a code of ethics that the company uses to shape its workers and leaders.

**Discipline**

Moral philosophy can also be applied on a more practical level in determining how to discipline employees who may behave outside of the accepted norms of the organization's culture. With a code of ethics in place and an organizational emphasis upon ethical behaviour, employees will know how they should act when faced with various ethical dilemmas and they will know the consequences of their actions when they do not.

**Employee Relations**

How the organization relates to its employees and the terms and type of employment it offers is also another natural concern of business ethics. Moral philosophy can be used to help determine the ongoing relationship between managers and employees within the organization, both in terms of discipline and other ethical considerations, such as manager-employee relations outside the workplace.

**Public Perception**

Moral philosophy can also be applied in the realm of business ethics to help determine and define how the organization is viewed by the rest of the business community and the community in which the business is located. One of the major questions that has arisen in business ethics throughout the modern industrial era is whether or not a business can or should serve as a moral agent. In other words, business ethics is concerned with whether or not a business and, by extension, its owner, should be seen as a benefactor of the public. If so, then it must be determined to what extent this is true. Business owners can determine how to use their status within the community to benefit others through humanitarian efforts. These efforts can then, in turn, improve public perception of the business because of the way that it plays an important role in helping others.

*(Source:* [*http://smallbusiness.chron.com/apply-moral-philosophy-business-ethics-33340.html*](http://smallbusiness.chron.com/apply-moral-philosophy-business-ethics-33340.html)*)*

# Why moral education should involve moral philosophy

Ethics are increasingly a part of the school curriculum, and practical introductory classes in applied ethics are part of the training that nurses, scientists and soldiers undergo.

Ethical education is ubiquitous, even though it may not always involve complicated theoretical debates – but should it include a dose of philosophy? There are powerful reasons for looking to moral philosophy to learn about real-world ethical action – and of course, there are risks too.

**Why we can’t do without moral philosophy**

Moral education draws on the philosophical method. This method requires understanding concepts and distinctions, knowing what makes arguments valid, and attending to counter-arguments. Those skills are vital in the age-old business of moral argument, which involves considering moral principles, appealing to reasons, and comparing analogous cases. Because moral norms are not tangible or scientifically testable, we need conceptual clarity to avoid talking past each other. As well, being philosophically consistent can prevent us from making exceptions for ourselves (a common form of hypocrisy).

But why is moral argument itself a good thing? Moral argument allows us to keep engaging with others even when we disagree about values. Values are not simply “given”, but can turn out to be amenable to reasoned discussion.

Moral philosophy also helps us question unhelpful assumptions and informs us about the ways our values connect to our descriptive beliefs, such as scientific hypotheses about human psychology.

Notwithstanding all the endless debates – and some debates really have been going on for millennia – advances do occur. Natural rights theories were philosophical systems long before human rights laws protected people’s equal rights. Many would agree human rights constitute genuine moral progress. Moral philosophy stands as an enduring record of what we have learnt so far.

Moral philosophy empowers us through its method and substance to reflect upon and talk about challenging moral issues. Studying ethics can even propel a personal journey, where we learn about ourselves and the way we think. We might even learn that others think in different ways.

**The risks**

Moral philosophy tends to focus on areas of disagreement. Applied ethics classes explore disputed issues such as abortion and euthanasia, rather than discussing the many issues on which we all agree. Furthermore, moral philosophy explores our reasons for being moral. But often we can agree on the right thing to do even when we disagree on the underlying principles.

Jacques Maritain captured this theme during the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, when he summed up the UNESCO philosophy group’s thoughts by saying: “Yes, we agree about the rights, but on condition no-one asks us why”.

The further we follow the trail of breadcrumbs into philosophical rabbit-warrens, the more morality threatens to become the domain of experts. Once we move from basic moral argument to high theory, philosophy becomes hard – an elite domain for those with the mental aptitude and the time to master the extensive knowledge required.

When the philosophical going gets tough, those without this acquired expertise can easily feel out of their depth. For them, philosophical argument may seem as much a weapon of intimidation as a tool of mutual exploration.

Much moral philosophy involves studying comprehensive moral theories, such as those fashioned by Aristotle (virtue theory), Kant (deontology) and Mill (utilitarianism). Philosophers have good reasons to develop these complex systems. Theories provide systematic ways of explaining, describing and justifying moral action.

Simply put, we cannot do moral philosophy without moral theories.

But full-blown philosophical theorising harbours a darker side. Accepting one theory means rejecting all the others, and the unique insights they can offer. Further, because each theory’s advocates demand they have reason to believe their theory, they can become intolerant.

They might demand that their arguments must be answered and (if not demonstrated as false) accepted. They can be tempted to conclude that all non-believers are unreasonable dogmatists. Worse still, sometimes courses can expose students to just one type of moral theory, without learning about other alternatives. Far from expanding those students’ moral horizons, exposure to high theory narrows them.

**Where to?**

If moral education needs moral philosophy, and moral philosophy needs high theory, how should we proceed? I offer just one suggestion.

Most moral theories build on a core insight. Utilitarianism tells us consequences for others’ wellbeing matter. Deontology stresses that morality requires each person accepting they are duty-bound to act in certain ways towards other people. Virtue theory reminds us that character drives action, and that ethical life carries its own rewards. These insights all provide valuable perspectives on the larger mosaic of human moral life. Moral education is at its best when it introduces students to these different perspectives, and their unique insights.

For ordinary people trying to think through practical moral questions, it is the insights (and not the theories) that matter most.

*(Source:* [*https://theconversation.com/why-moral-education-should-involve-moral-philosophy-31675*](https://theconversation.com/why-moral-education-should-involve-moral-philosophy-31675)*)*

# 5. Questions

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| 1. Define ‘moral philosophy’, concisely summarising how it is divided.  |
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| 2. To what extent do cultural values influence moral philosophy and, in turn, ethical behaviour? |
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| 3. In business terms, what are the main areas that moral philosophy can be applied to? |
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| 4. Explain how the different branches of moral philosophy can be applied to ‘discipline’ within a business organization. Please provide an example scenario. |
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| 5. How can ‘high theory’ philosophy have a negative impact? |
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| 6. Why is it particularly important to understand concepts and distinctions within moral philosophy? Please make reference to your own decision making. |
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| 7. Moral education should involve moral philosophy. To what extent do you agree with this statement. |
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