

Dina Babushkina

University of Twente, Jan. 2022



# Ethics, Morality and the notion of Harm

---

Philosophical ethics: What is?

Starting point: people may believe all sort of things, incl. about moral questions. But that does not necessarily mean that they are right.

✓ **Banished for menstruating: the Indian women isolated while ...**

➤ <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2015/dec/22/india-menstruation-peri...>

Dec 22, 2015 · Banished for menstruating: the Indian women isolated while they bleed  
Women in parts of **India** are sent to basic huts outside their villages during their periods, as the stigma of **menstruation**...

✓ **There's an organization devoted to fighting for robot rights**

QZ <https://qz.com/1589768/theres-an-organization-devoted-to-fighting-for-robot-rights/>

At the moment, ASPCR lays out why **robots deserve rights**, but doesn't go further in its advocacy work. "I just made a humorous website based on an idea that might someday actually become relevant,"...

✓ **Who owns your medical data? Most likely not you.**

wp <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/who-owns-your-medical-data-...>

Nov 23, 2018 · Well, you don't. It's a good bet that the fine print of the consent form you signed before your latest test or operation said that all the **data** or tissue samples belong to the doctor or institution...

✓ **Opening the door for a woman, sexism or just being nice ...**

LR <https://www.radioiowa.com/2018/07/27/opening-the-door-for-a-woman-sexism-or-just-b...>

An Iowa State University study finds if a man opens the **door for a woman** while on their first date or offers to pay for dinner, some women admire that behavior, while others find it insulting....

So, how do we make sense out this?

PHILOSOPHY offers a critical reflection upon moral norms and practices from a rational standpoint.

The task of philosophy is to:

- **Question and evaluate reasons** that are used to justify various norms/rules/requirements:  
e.g. banning women from social life because they menstruate – is a bad reason  
prohibiting collecting of data without consent to prevent abuse – good reason (harm prevention)
- **Clarify concepts/ideas** (avoid misunderstanding; jump from one meaning of the term to another):  
e.g. Artificial Intelligence
- **Evaluate arguments for soundness** = valid/correct logical form + true premises (Philosophical subject of logic)
- **Determine principles** (=distinctive features of a phenomenon, necessary + sufficient conditions)  
e.g. find definition of transparency that will cover all case and only them (not just picking up examples when a system is transparent)

## ETHICS as a philosophical discipline = normative reflection on morality as a prescriptive system

Not like biology in relation to organism or physics to the natural world, but like logic in relation to reasoning practice

! Normative  
= about how things should be -> rules, norms, requirements, constraints on behaviour etc  
≠ descriptive (how things are) -> statements about facts

Main tasks of ethics:

- Defines various moral concepts (e.g. "wrongness"/"rightness", "obligatoriness", "virtue"; ness. + suff. conditions)  
e.g. when it comes to the concept of morality itself: what sets it apart from other normative systems?
- Evaluates moral reasoning/argumentation  
i.e. not enough to just demand (e.g., data protection) there should be a good reason supporting the demand
- Make implicit value assumptions explicit.

There are many different things that are usually called ethics but are not.  
A lot of confusion here too.



Ethics is not morality!

<b>MORALITY</b>  <b>DESCRIPTIVE domain</b>  <b>"Morality" refers to actual normative beliefs (about what actions are right and wrong/required/prohibited etc) and moral practices of people</b>	$\neq$	<b>ETHICS</b>  <b>NORMATIVE domain</b>  <b>Ethics asks which moral beliefs are worth having, what norms, requirements, and are well-justified</b>
Which actions are wrong/right?	vs	What makes any wrong action wrong?
What I am to do in my situation?	vs	What requirements are justifiable?
Will my algorithm violate privacy?	vs	Why privacy should be protected?
Is it wrong to kick a robot?	vs	Under what conditions kicking constitute a moral transgression? (when it is morally wrong?)
Should my robot be respectful elderly?	vs	What forms of respect are moral (i.e. what forms of respect are universalizable)?
Do I have an obligation to report someone illegally copying a software?	vs	What constitutes obligatoriness? How is it different from, for example, a suggestion?

- The **goal of morality** is to guide our actions (e.g., it is a prescriptive system)
- Make sure that we make decisions based on right reasons

The **goal of ethics** is to reflect upon morality and keep its reasoning in check.

There are different types of requirements.  
Which are ethical?

Since ethics is about rationally justified requirements,  
what are ethically relevant considerations of a requirement?

Universalizability | NB! Not universality

Considerations of rationality | justification in terms of good reasons

Objectivity | not a matter of opinion

Impartiality | independence of one's desires & interests (gain, profit etc.)

Appeal to non-commensurable, non-instrumental goods | dignity, well-being, health,  
meaningfulness

## Important:

In application to your specialization, "moral"/"ethical" = avoid **harm** -->

you have professional (& human) responsibility to prevent unnecessary (and mitigate necessary) harm.

## Types of harm:

- physical harm to an alive being (injury);
- harm to an inanimate object/environment (damage),
- physiological harm (abuse) that may include emotional harm, cognitive, psychological, harm to one's reputation, manipulation, and threat to one's integrity and dignity.

## Therefore:

- What drives certain decision and innovations (gain, profit, innovation for its own sake are not immune to harmful consequences!)
- Need to know who the stakeholders are, what vulnerabilities they have, how "costly" will a mistakes/bugs/malfunction/abuse of your device be to the user/beneficiary/others involved. You are under moral obligation to mitigate/minimise harm.

Ethical requirements are not the same as social requirements!

@Dina Babushkina 2021

Social requirements (social rules) = "A is required to do X because is how we do it here"; appeal to practices of people in a certain social unit

- Customs/tradition = "A is required to do X because this is how our forefathers have done/it has always been like that"; appeal to the past practice
  - Etiquette = "A is required to do X because it this is how a polite person normally behaves"
- 
- Cannot be universalized
  - Not impartial
  - Not objective – a matter of convention
  - Does not exclude harm
  - There are morally reprehensible social requirements and values

Ethical requirements are not the same as legal requirements!

Legal requirements (laws, regulations) = "A is required to do X because law prescribes A to X";  
appeal to conventions accepted by a country/union according to a valid procedure.

- regulations – conventions accepted by a certain institution
- Not universalizable
- Not necessarily impartial
- A matter of convention
- Does not exclude harm
- There are morally reprehensible legal requirements

Unique status of the ethical point of view

Due to its impartiality, universalizability and objective stance,

ethics has a supreme position to judge and evaluate any other prescriptive system:  
codes, professional ethics, etiquette, religious codes, laws, cultural moral norms.

This means, whenever someone

- feels discriminated
- feels unjustly treated within the law
- believes a social system is corrupt or overlooks a vulnerable group
- judges a tradition to be cruel etc

that someone takes an ethical stance.

# Core concepts

## Good/bad (adjective like in "Mike is good")

- Normally characterizes a person (describes him/her as a moral agent) or a thing/event
- Not often used to describe actions (outside religious context)

## Right/wrong

Normally is used to describe the moral quality of an action.

## Required/Prohibited/Permitted

Required action – something you must do (the right thing to do)

Prohibited action – something you must not do (the wrong action)

Permitted action – something you may do. (neither good nor bad action; morally neutral)

## Prescriptive -

= having an intent to alter behaviour

= enforcing a certain course of action

# Thank you!

Contact me: [d.babushkina@utwente.fi](mailto:d.babushkina@utwente.fi)

## **Optional sources for you:**

Ethics Unwrapped <https://ethicsunwrapped.utexas.edu/glossary>

Stanford Encl. of Philosophy <https://plato.stanford.edu>

Baggini, J., & Fosl, P.S. (2007). The Ethics Toolkit: A Compendium of Ethical Concepts and Methods.

Title picture is by  
Ramdlon at pixabay