

Defining Ethics

There is no universal definition of *ethics*. While several theorists and philosophers across history have attempted to capture the essence of how ethics should be defined, the complexity of its scope rendered defining it still elusive. There have been, however, varied suggested definitions and descriptions. Among these are the following:

- “Ethics is derived from the Greek term *ethos* which means character or custom.” Its equivalent term in Roman is the word *mores* from which the words morality, morals, and moral are derived (Castellano 2011).
- Ethics is sometimes referred to as the study of the morality of human actions (Moore 1903, 1).
- Ethics have also been juxtaposed with medicine. While the latter is concerned with the care for the body and question of facts (e.g., reliability of medical machine/equipment, and empirical data from medical research and experimentation); the former focuses on the care for the soul and question of value (e.g., the value of prolonging a patient’s life using a respirator/life-saving machine). (de Castro, et.al. 2003, 4-5)
- Ethics is also described as one of the more practical areas of philosophy, which, for Aristotle, deals with a human being’s pursuit of the “ultimate good or happiness.” (Albert and Denise, eds. 1984, 34)
- Ethics is also understood as the study and philosophy of human conduct, with emphasis on the determination of right and wrong. (Bonde, et.al 2013, 1)
- Ethics suggests the notion of “correct or incorrect practices relative to (various) concerns” (e.g., feminist ethics, research ethics, biomedical ethics, environmental ethics, and the like). (de Castro, et.al 2003, 4)

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Terms Associated with Ethics

Since ethics conjures various but interconnected definitions and descriptions, there are also several terms that are associated with the study and application of ethics. The following are some of the terms encountered in the study of ethics that could guide students in understanding its scope. The definitions/synonyms were taken from the *Webster Illustrated Contemporary Dictionary Encyclopedic Edition* (1982).

terms	definitions/synonyms
appropriate	suitable, fitting, proper, relevant (35)
autonomy	the power or right of self-government; independence, self-rule, freedom, self-determination (49)

bad	inadequate, defective, unpleasant, corrupt, wicked; not good in any manner or degree (53)
cause	that which produces an effect or result (113)
compulsion	an irresistible urge to perform some act without rational purpose (145)
determinism	the doctrine that man's decision and actions are determined not by free choice but by antecedent causes acting upon his character (194)
duty	something which one is legally or morally bound to pay, do or perform (221)
effect	an impression or reaction resulting from a cause (225)
expediency	the doing of what is politic or advantageous, regardless of justice or right (249)
freedom	exemption from obligations, ties, political restraint, or control (282)
good	the quality of being virtuous, worthy, and kind; benevolent, virtuous, desirable, proper (305)
happiness	the state of being joyous, blessed, or fortunately effective (323)
immoral	contrary to moral principles; not right or good (355)
improper	not fit or appropriate, unsuitable (358)
inappropriate	unsuitable, not fitting, improper, irrelevant (359)
injustice	the violation or denial of justice; rendering of what is not due or not merited (370)
justice	the quality of being just, fair, impartial, and evenhanded (392)
moral	of or pertaining to character or behavior from the point of view of right and wrong (471)
obligation	a duty or a promise by which one is bound; responsibility (498)
proper	conforming to a standard; suited, appropriate, right, fitting (582)
punishment	any pain or loss inflicted in response to wrongdoing (590)
responsibility	the state of being accountable in terms of duty or trust (623)
right	in accordance with some moral, just, or equitable law or standard; virtuous, upright (629)

utility	fitness for some desirable, practical purpose (814)
value	the desirability or worth of a thing (816)
virtue	general moral excellence, uprightness, and goodness (825)
wrong	not correct, mistaken, inappropriate (856)