

Basic Challenges in Ethics

1. No Single Standard or Ethical Theory

As human beings aim to pursue a good life, there arises the need for a guiding method, a standard, or a principle that could be employed in making good decisions and right choices. However, there is **no single standard or ethical theory** that defines what are good decisions, right choices or actions.

Example:

ChatGPT is an AI chatbot capable of answering queries in a conversational manner. Your best friend and classmate uses ChatGPT in doing assignments and answering take-home exams despite your teacher's warning not to use it for the above purposes. You, on the other hand, decided to heed your teacher's warning and continued to work on your assignments and take-home exams by religiously reading articles and referring to your notes in class. At the end of the semester, your best friend got a higher grade than you, and you felt bad about it.

Would you inform your teacher about your best friend's action? Would you talk to your friend and tell her how you felt about what happened? What would you do?

Several moral principles may be used in deciding what to do with the sample situation. For one, you could weigh the consequences of either (1) informing the teacher about your best friend's action; (2) talking to your best friend and telling them how you felt; or (3) doing both 1 and 2, among other options. Here, weighing the consequences means thinking about what would result to more happiness than pain, which is the focus of inquiry of a consequentialist theory called *utilitarianism*.

For another, you could evaluate the intention of doing 1, 2, or 3, regardless of happy or painful consequences, and adhere to deontological ethical theory. Either way, your decision may be questioned by yet another ethical theory that focuses neither on happy consequences nor intention, but on the character of the person doing the action, which is the focus of virtue theory.

Given the numerous standards or ethical theories that have been argued throughout history, the challenge lies in choosing which among these different ethical theories is to be followed. Furthermore, even after choosing one from among these theories, its moral justification may still be challenged.

2. Question on the Scope of Ethics

An ethical theory provides guidance for making moral choices. But how do individuals determine which among their choices are moral and which are not? How can we determine that choices/actions are morally significant/good or morally insignificant/bad? The challenge of the **scope of ethics** deals with these questions and tries to demarcate morality, grounding what it includes and what it excludes.

Example:

Consider the following scenarios:

Your teacher presented an artwork in class which is a replica of the original. The original costs PhP512,000.00 and it would be very costly for the academic unit or department to purchase. Although the intention is to teach the class more effectively using a replica, let us presume you still think it is bad to copy one's work of art.

Your teacher went on and discussed elements of the artwork such as color scheme, composition, etc. Let us presume that from your point of view, you consider the look of the artwork as a bad example of a work of art.

When you say it is **bad** to copy one's work of art and the artwork itself is an example of a **bad** work of art, are you talking about "**badness**" in the same context? Is the badness of copying one's work of art similar to the badness of the artwork's appearance? The scope of ethics differentiates questions of value from questions of fact. The former is concerned with ethical issues while the latter is concerned solely with verifiable facts.

3. Conflicting Ethical Obligations

Aside from being both rational and moral, human beings are also social and political beings. Because of this, they ought to act and do things in accordance with the dictates of society. This brings the dilemma of negotiating one's position in a society. Conflict arises when what an individual really desires to do is the reverse of what she ought to do as a member of society. As a result, **conflicting ethical obligations** to oneself and to society at large arises.

Example:

Consider the following scenario:

The COVID-19 pandemic caused a lot of problems and issues. There was a time you had to decide on whether to get vaccinated or not. Your decision is contingent on factors that need to be considered at the height of the pandemic. First, your medical condition limits your chance of getting vaccinated due to complications it might cause your health. Another is your religion prohibits you from receiving the vaccine. Furthermore, your country dictates that people of your age must be vaccinated. Lastly, your university requires you to be vaccinated before attending face-to-face classes.

In this case, you are clearly presented with several conflicting obligations: (1) to preserve your life; (2) to follow your religion; (3) to be a responsible citizen; and (4) to be a responsible student.