

Ethics Terminology

MORALITY --- Those standards of conduct everyone (that is, every rational person at his or her rational best) wants everyone else to follow even if everyone else's following them would mean having to follow them too.

e.g. "Don't kill", "Don't lie", "Keep your promises", "Help the needy".

Different people may have different reasons for favoring the same standard.

e.g. religious principle, rational grounds, self-interest

What is important is agreement on the standard, not that all individuals have exactly the same reasons.

Morality may be formulated as a series of rules, but these rules have *exceptions*.

e.g. for "Don't kill: except in self-defense

Morality may also be formulated as the imperative: Maintain a standard of reasonable care.

ACTUAL MORALITY --- Those moral standards that are commonly followed

MORAL IDEALS --- those moral standards that go beyond what morality requires so they are not followed often enough to count as common practice; they are standards to aspire to.

e.g. Enhancing human well being by generous giving

An act is *moral* (morally right) if it is right (all right) according to actual morality.

An act is immoral (morally wrong) if it is wrong (forbidden) according to actual morality

ETHICS --- The special standards of a group, e.g. a profession, that everyone in the group wants everyone else in the group to follow even if everyone's following them would mean having to follow them oneself.

LAW --- a standard of conduct applying to members of a group whether they want it to apply or not.

(Laws are rules in a system of law.)

"Law" in this sense includes customs not imposed by government, as well as standards that governments impose.

Since, by definition, law does not necessarily correspond to what people want, it must have other means of obtaining compliance; hence, the central place of force and punishment in our idea of law.

A Format for Ethical Decision Making

1. **State problem** (e.g. “Could this problem cause avoidable harm to people? or even “This makes me uncomfortable.”)
2. **Check facts** (some problems disappear upon closer examination of situation; others change, sometimes radically; sometimes problems multiply).
3. **Identify relevant factors**—people involved or affected, laws, professional code, and other practical constraints (e.g. under \$200, within a half-hour).
4. **Develop list of at least five options** (be imaginative, try to avoid “dilemma”—not “go” or “no go” but who to go to, what to say).
5. **Test options**, using such tests as the following:
 - **Harm test**—does this option do less harm than any alternative?
 - **Publicity test**—would I want my choice of this option published in the newspaper?
 - **Defensibility test**—could I defend my choice of this option before a Congressional committee, a committee of my peers, or my parents?
 - **Reversibility test**—would I still think the choice of this option good if I were one of those affected (adversely) by it?
 - **Virtue test**—what would I become if I choose this option *often*?
 - **Professional test**—what might my profession's ethics committee say about this option?
 - **Colleague test**—what *do* my colleagues say when I describe my problem and suggest this option as my solution?
 - **Organization test**—what *does* the organization's ethics officer or legal counsel say about this?
6. **Make a tentative choice** based on steps 1-5.
7. **Review steps 1-6 and ACT:** What could make it less likely you would have to make such a decision again?
 - What precautions can you take as individual (announce policy on question, change job, etc.)?
 - What can you do to have more support next time (e.g., seek future allies on this issue)?
 - What can you do to change organization (e.g., suggest policy change at next dept. meeting)?