

Bioethics *Outreach*



About Ethics

*Prepared by the Office of Biotechnology
Iowa State University*

Sometimes it can be difficult to discover the right thing to do in a particular situation, or to decide what view is correct in a public ethical debate. Philosophical ethics can provide resources that might be helpful in such cases. Other disciplines like sociology, psychology, and religious studies also study ethics and can provide different perspectives.

What Is Ethics?

Philosophical ethics emphasizes careful reasoning about moral questions. Questions that philosophical ethicists address include:

- What makes actions right or wrong?
- Why should we be ethical?
- Are ethical values universal?

“Bioethics” is a branch of ethics that is concerned with ethical issues in medicine or the life sciences, like whether it is ethical to use human embryonic stem cells for medical research, or whether it is ethical to develop and use transgenic plants or animals in agriculture.

These are very difficult questions. We cannot look up the answers to these questions in an encyclopedia or discover them in a scientific laboratory. So how do philosophical ethicists address these questions?

Ethical Arguments

Ethicists use *ethical arguments* to assess ethical problems. Here, the word “argument” does not mean a fight; it means a logical presentation of claims leading to a conclusion, like the arguments given by attorneys in a criminal trial. At the end of a trial, the judge asks for the attorneys’ closing arguments. Each attorney reviews the facts of the case and tries to convince the judge or jury that those facts support a conclusion about the innocence or guilt of the accused person.

All arguments have two parts: *premises* and a *conclusion*. Premises are statements that provide evidence for the conclusion, while the conclusion is the statement that the arguer wants to support.

An *ethical* argument has two kinds of premises: empirical claims and ethical claims.

Empirical Claims + Ethical Claims = Ethical Conclusion

1. Empirical claims are allegedly true statements about matters of fact. Statements about what something is made of or how something functions are empirical claims.
2. Ethical claims are allegedly true statements about values, such as “It is good to respect the rights of others,” or “It is wrong to ignore how your actions affect other people.” Ethical claims may be about what is good or bad to do in general, and are not necessarily addressing a specific case.
3. An ethical conclusion often identifies a particular action that should (or should not) be done, if the empirical and ethical claims are true.

In ethics, an argument is not a fight. It is a logical presentation of claims leading to a conclusion.

Here is an example of a simple ethical argument about genetic engineering:

An Ethical Argument About Genetic Engineering

| | | | |
|-------------------|---|--|--|
| Premises | { | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Moving genes between species is unnatural. <i>empirical claim</i>• Genetic engineering moves genes between species. <i>empirical claim</i>• We should never do anything unnatural. <i>ethical claim</i> | |
| Conclusion | | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• We should never do genetic engineering. <i>ethical conclusion</i> | |

This ethical argument used only two empirical claims and one ethical claim to support the conclusion. Using multiple empirical and ethical premises tends to strengthen an ethical argument. Assuming that the premises are true, a conclusion is more difficult to challenge if it is supported by several relevant empirical and ethical premises.

Evaluating Ethical Arguments

Let's evaluate this genetic engineering example. Here are three steps to take in evaluating an ethical argument:

1. Do the premises support the conclusion?
2. Are the premises true?
3. Are there alternative actions or other ethical values to consider?

1. Do the premises support the conclusion?

If the empirical and ethical premises are true, does that give us good reason to accept the conclusion that we should never do any genetic engineering? If it is true that doing unnatural things is unethical, and genetic engineering is an unnatural thing, then it must be true that genetic engineering is unethical. It's important to remember that in this step, we are only evaluating whether the premises logically support the conclusion— not whether the premises are, in fact, true.

2. Are the premises true?

If the premises are not true or at least reasonable based on what we already know, then the argument should not lead us to accept the conclusion. In our example, could the empirical premises be challenged? The description of genetic engineering is true, so it could not be successfully challenged. However, the claim that moving genes between species is unnatural could be challenged. A possible challenge might involve asking, “What is natural or unnatural? Viruses move genes between species ‘naturally.’ Human beings are a part of nature, so maybe everything we do is natural.” Could the ethical claim be challenged? A challenger could question the claim that we shouldn’t do unnatural things by asking, “Should we never drive cars, use penicillin, or do surgery? Should we never have bred plants and animals to suit our purposes?”

3. Are there alternative actions or other ethical values to consider?

Making an ethical decision should involve examining as many sides of an issue as possible before choosing a course of action. Are there values that might be relevant to the issue that are not considered in the argument you are evaluating? Does the argument leave out any empirical claims that are relevant to the issue? If so, you should consider these additional facts and values before making up your mind about the issue.

Disagreement About Ethics

The news is full of stories about ethical disagreement. Even ethicists often disagree about what is right and wrong. This leads many people to believe that ethics is just a matter of opinion that cannot be taught or discussed productively among people from different backgrounds.

It is true that ethics is not like arithmetic, where it can be demonstrated conclusively that propositions like $2 + 2 = 4$ are true, while others, like $2 + 2 = 8$, are false. On the other hand, ethics also is not like matters of taste, where, as the saying goes, there can be no argument: either you like pickled beets or you don’t, and I can’t convince you that you are “wrong” not to like them by explaining the good things about them. In other words, I could demonstrate that you must have made a mistake somewhere if you think that $2 + 2 = 8$, but it doesn’t make sense to say that you’ve made a mistake if you don’t like pickled beets.

Ethics is somewhere in between these two extremes: it is not always possible to prove that someone who disagrees with you about an ethical issue must have made a mistake, but unlike matters of taste, it can make sense to say that someone might make a mistake about ethics. For example, it is clear that early American slaveholders were making a mistake if they believed that it was ethically permissible for them to own other human beings.

Exercise

Pick an editorial about an ethical topic from your favorite newspaper. Follow these steps to evaluate the argument in the editorial:

4. Identify the conclusion of the editorial – that is, the statement that the author is trying to support.
5. Identify all the ethical and empirical premises that are used to support the conclusion.
6. Fill in any assumed but unstated premises.
7. Decide whether the premises logically support the conclusion.
8. If the premises logically support the conclusions, decide whether the premises are true, or at least reasonable and well supported by the available evidence.
9. Does the argument ignore any important facts or ethical values that are relevant to its conclusion?

Congratulations! You have evaluated an ethical argument.

Reflection:

How did this process influence your own views about the topic of the editorial? Did your views change? Would you justify your views differently than you did before?

Ethical principles that are agreed on by people from different cultural, religious, or ethnic backgrounds can form the basis of fruitful and honest discussions about many ethical issues.

If you and I discover that we have an ethical disagreement, we might be able to resolve our disagreement either by clearing up misunderstandings of relevant facts, or by deciding which ethical values are most relevant to the case. Suppose, for example, that you think I should give some of my money to charity, and I disagree with you. If you mistakenly believed that I am rich, but I explain to you that I don't even have enough money to feed myself, you will probably agree with me that it is permissible for me to keep my money rather than send it to charity and make things even worse for myself. However, suppose you are correct that I'm rich, and you point out that people ought to help those in need when we can do so without hardship to ourselves. If I agree that this principle is applicable to my situation, I may decide that I was wrong before, and decide accordingly that I should give some of my money to charity. In this way, it is entirely possible to resolve ethical disagreements through patient discussion – though this method probably would not convince you to like the taste of pickled beets!

While ethical disagreement makes for interesting news, there are in fact many ethical principles that very many people can and do agree about, despite coming from different backgrounds. Here are just a few examples:

- We should avoid harming others.
- We should respect people's rights.
- We should not take unfair advantage of other people.

While these principles are very general and subject to qualifications, they can form the basis of fruitful and honest discussions about many ethical issues. Even people from very different cultural, religious, or ethnic backgrounds can and often do agree on these and many other ethical principles. Using that kind of agreement as a basis for discussion can lead to productive ethical dialogue among people from different backgrounds. Even when people don't reach agreement, it can be helpful for people to realize how much they have in common when it comes to ethics, rather than emphasizing their differences.

For Further Reading

Print resources:

Comstock, Gary. *Life Science Ethics*. Iowa State Press: 2003.

Rachels, James. *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, 4th Ed. McGraw-Hill: 2003.

Online resources:

Iowa State University bioethics outreach program web page.
<http://www.bioethics.iastate.edu/outreach.html> (as of 2/05)

Varner, Gary E. *Ethical Reasoning*. Online lecture. Texas A&M University.
<http://www-phil.tamu.edu/~gary/bioethics/reasoning/index.html> (as of 2/05)

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