

Ethics and morals are two different things in philosophy. “Morals” are a set of ideas concerning what the definitions of “good” and “bad” are; when determining whether you think an action should or should not be done, morally speaking, you are looking for whether that action is consistent with your idea of what makes an action good and what makes an action bad. Looking at the world and the people in it, it is clear that there are many different notions about morality, since there are many different ideas of what makes an action good/bad. “This is good,” “That was the right thing to do,” “it is wrong to hurt people”; these are moral claims, since they are relying on some idea about good/bad and right/wrong.

“Ethics” is also known as “moral philosophy.” This means that ethics is the *study* of morality. Ethics, in part, is an attempt to determine whether the definitions that are being used for “good” and “bad” are the correct ones. This involves several different concerns:

*The status of moral facts:* Do morals actually change and vary across time and culture? Of course it at least looks like they do. By all accounts, different cultures seem to have different moral codes (though it has been argued by James Rachels that this isn’t actually the case), but just because cultures may disagree about right and wrong, does this mean that the actual *nature* of right and wrong is actually changing? People disagree about things all the time – does it follow from the fact that they disagree that there’s no right answer? We’re going to look at a position known as “moral relativism” which holds that the answer to this question is “yes,” but you have to decide whether you agree. Remember that relativism is more than just recognizing that cultures seem to disagree about morality; it is the claim that the right answers to moral questions are actually subject to change.

*The content of moral facts:* What are the right definitions for “good” and “bad”? How do we find them? How do we defend them? Here we’re asking a deeper question than “what kinds of things are good?” We’re asking what is it about the actions that we think are good that *makes* them good or bad? So if you think that stealing is bad, the question for an ethicist is “*why* is that bad?” What quality does the action of stealing possess that makes it bad, and how do we know that that quality is the determining feature for goodness or badness?

As we move through our focus on ethics, think about what is important to you. Think about how do go about determining whether an action is good or bad. Think about whether that is the right way to determine it. The philosophers that we are going to cover are all engaged in this same process. They each want to provide a definition of what makes an action good, explain why that is the right and only definition, and then explain how we need to act and what we need to do to most effectively secure that good.

Ethics is more than just what you happen to think about right and wrong. It’s a process of evaluating your own evaluations. There are many pressing ethical dilemmas in the medical field, and you want to make sure you are doing the right thing. If this is the case, which I hope it is, then you have a responsibility to yourself to make sure you’re making your decisions for the right reasons and with a definitions of “the good” that you can defend.