



Image from: [First page of William Paley's Moral... in The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Darwin and Evolutionary Thought](#)

Summary Article: **Ethics**  
From *The Social Science Jargon-Buster*

### Core definition

A branch of philosophy that investigates what guides us in deciding what is right and what is wrong.

### Longer explanation

Ethics is basically the study of what we ought to do. The question is how we know what we ought to be doing? What are the principles that guide us in deciding right from wrong? There are actually quite a few schools of thought here - some which see ethics as fundamental and others that see ethics as dependent on social and cultural realities. For example, should we always do what brings the greatest good for the greatest number (utilitarianism), or what brings us, personally, the greatest pleasure (hedonism)? Maybe we should act in accordance with the word of God - in the Bible, the Qu'ran, commandments (divine command theory). Or maybe what's right is what will get us into heaven (salvation theory). Do we have 'duties', such as to tell the truth and act justly (deontology), or should we act in ways that protect a citizen's inalienable rights, that is life and liberty (contract theory). But then again maybe it's all about survival of the fittest (social Darwinism) or maybe there really is no such thing as morality, or maybe ethics is just a political power game (nihilism).

### Debates and controversies

What's interesting about this list of ethical groundings is not just their diversity, but the contradictions, in both beliefs and behaviours, that can arise from this diversity. Not only do we have a world where people act in accordance with highly diverse ethical principles, these varied principles can lead to fundamental conflicts (i.e. certain religious tenets vs. basic human rights). No wonder we've never been a world at peace.

### Practical application

As a contemplative species, ethics grounds just about everything we do, so as a philosophical theory it's a fascinating area of study. But I think applied ethics, particularly in a time of massive technological, economic and environmental change, should be of interest to all social scientists. Hot ethical issues include abortion, euthanasia, criminal justice, globalization, development, genetic engineering (both crops and people), the environment, terrorism, animal rights, war, reality TV, surveillance societies as well as issues of equity related to gender, race, class and sexuality.

### Key figures

Key figures here include Kant, who believed that ethics should be based on categorical imperatives or rules of behaviour that would work as universal laws, Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, who were foundational in the articulation of utilitarianism, and John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, and more recently John Rawls, who explored the protection of rights in relation to contract theory.

*Ethics are nothing but reverence for life. That is what gives me the fundamental principle of morality, namely, that good consists in maintaining, promoting, and enhancing life, and that destroying, injuring, and limiting life are evil.*

Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965) French missionary - in *Kulturphilosophie* (1923)

## Recommended readings

Two good introductory works here are *Philosophical Ethics: An Introduction to Moral Philosophy* (Beauchamp 2001) and *The Moral of the Story: An Introduction to Ethics* (Rosenstand 2002). Another way into this area is through broad readers. I'd recommend *Ethics: Theory and Contemporary Issues* (MacKinnon 2003) and *Great Traditions in Ethics* (Denise et al. 2004). For those who want to delve into the work of classic theorists, try *The Moral Philosophers: An Introduction to Ethics* (Norman 1998).

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Ethics. (2007). In Z. O'Leary, *The social science jargon-buster*. London, UK: Sage UK. Retrieved from <https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/ethics>

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## Harvard

Ethics. (2007). In Z. O'Leary, *The social science jargon-buster*. [Online]. London: Sage UK. Available from: <https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/ethics> [Accessed 19 November 2019].

## MLA

"Ethics." *The Social Science Jargon-Buster*, Zina O'Leary, Sage UK, 1st edition, 2007. *Credo Reference*, <https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/ethics>. Accessed 19 Nov. 2019.