

Course Glossary

Please consult this glossary throughout the course for definitions of key terms related to our study of moral philosophy.¹

Absolute: A principle that is universally binding and may never be overridden by another principle.

Abusive Fallacy: A type of informal fallacy in which we attack an opponent's character rather than addressing his or her conclusion.

Act Utilitarianism: The theory that states "an act is right if and only if it results in as much good as any available alternative."

Agapeism: An ethical theory based on the principle of love. Sometimes this is based on the New Testament injunctions to love (Matt. 22:37-40, 1 Cor. 13, and 1 John 4:7-8).

Agent: In ethical discourse, the individual who acts with intention, responsibility, and effect.

Agnostic: In a religious context, designates a person who claims not to know whether God exists.

Altruism: As a descriptive category, designates acts that are in the interests of others at the expense of the agent's own interests. As a moral doctrine, the view that in certain circumstances one ought to sacrifice one's own interests for the interests of others. Unselfish regard or concern for others; disinterested, other-regarding action. Unselfish concern for the well-being of another.

Analysis: The process of critically examining our views and those of others using reason and logic.

Analytic Proposition: A proposition whose negation leads to a self-contradiction.

Anarchy: The social state of chaos produced by the collapse of civil authority.

Anthropocentrism: The perspective that sees reality only in terms of human interests.

Apologetic: An intellectual defense of a proposition, argument, or theory that is under attack.

Aretaic Ethics: The theory, first presented by Aristotle, that the basis of ethical assessment is character. Rather than seeing the heart of ethics in actions or duties, it focuses on the character and dispositions of the agent.

Arete: A Greek word appearing often in the works of Plato and Aristotle, usually translated as "virtue," but sometimes as "quality" or "excellence."

Argument: A type of reasoning composed of two or more propositions, one of which is claimed to follow logically from or be supported by others.

¹ This glossary is adapted from: Judith Boss, *Perspectives on Ethics*, 2nd Edition (McGraw-Hill, 2003); Donald Palmer, *Why It's Hard to Be Good: An Introduction to Ethical Theory*, (McGraw-Hill, 2006); Louis P. Pojman, *How Should We Live: An Introduction to Ethics*, (Wadsworth, 2005).

Atheist: A person who denies the existence of God or gods.

Autonomy: Self-directed freedom. The individual arrives at his or her moral judgments through reason rather than simple acceptance of authority.

Begging the Question: A circular kind of reasoning that presupposes in the premises of an argument that very conclusion that the argument is supposed to prove (e.g., to “prove” that murder is wrong, when the very word, “murder,” means wrongful killing). Also known as circular reasoning, a type of informal fallacy in which the premise and conclusion are simply different wordings of the same proposition.

Care Ethics: A type of ethics put forth by some feminists that focuses on particular personal relations rather than the universal application of rules.

Categorical Imperative: A term introduced by Immanuel Kant to describe moral injunctions that are unconditionally binding on us. A command to perform actions that are necessary of themselves without reference to other ends. There are several formulations of this demand, but its best-known expression is “Act only according to that maximum by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.”

Civil Disobedience: The nonviolent refusal, on moral grounds, to obey certain government laws, for the purpose of trying to bring about a change in legislation or government policy.

Conclusion: In logic, a proposition that is affirmed or denied on the basis of other propositions in an argument.

Consequentialism: A view motivating certain ethical theories, such as utilitarianism, according to which the moral worth of an act is determined primarily by the act’s results.

Cultural Relativism: The theory that morality is created collectively by groups of humans, and that morality therefore differs from society to society.

Deontological Ethics: Ethical systems that consider certain features in the moral act itself to have intrinsic value. For example, there is something right about truth telling, even when it may cause pain or harm, and there is something wrong about lying, even when it may produce good consequences.

Divine Command Theory: The theory holding that moral principles are defined in terms of God’s commands or that moral duties are logically dependent on God’s commands.

Doctrine of Double Effect: The principle within the Natural Law tradition that states one is permitted to do an act that has an evil effect if it also has at least one good effect and (1) the action is not intrinsically wrong, (2) the bad effect must not be intended by the agent, though it may be foreseen, and (3) the bad effect must not be proportionally greater than the good effect.

Emotivism: The moral theory that moral statements are neither true nor false but merely expressions of feelings.

Enlightenment: A philosophical movement of the eighteenth century characterized by belief in the power of reason to sweep away superstition, ignorance, and injustice. Human reason was seen as the arbiter of all truth.

Ethical Egoism: The theory that every person should do what is in his or her best self-interest above the interests of any other person, group, or thing.

Ethical Hedonism: The theory that pleasure is the only intrinsic positive value and that pain or “unpleasant consciousness” is the only negative intrinsic value (or intrinsic disvalue). All other values derive from these two.

Ethical Nihilism: The view that there are no valid moral principles or values. Nothing matters.

Ethical Relativism: Holds that the validity of moral judgments depends on cultural or individual acceptance.

Ethical Situationalism: States that objective and moral principles are to be applied differently in different contexts.

Ethical Subjectivism: A type of ethical relativism that claims that morality is relative to each individual person.

Euthyphro’s Dilemma: The puzzle set forth in Plato’s writing, in which Socrates asks whether the gods love the good because it is good or whether the good is good because the gods love it.

Feminism: The sociopolitical theory and practice that seeks to defend women’s dignity and rights against so-called patriarchal or otherwise male-dominated power structures perceived to have denied legal and social equality to women, and to have demeaned, marginalized, and constricted women throughout history.

Fidelity: The moral duty that stems from a commitment made in the past.

Genes: Transmittable units of organic matter carrying heredity traits, found at certain points on microscopic rod-shaped bodies called chromosomes, whose function is to carry these genetic units.

Golden Mean: The doctrine that moral virtues, in general, entail moderation or seeking the middle path.

Good Will: Always acts from a sense of duty and reverence for the moral law.

Habituation: A term used by Aristotle to describe the regular practice of virtuous behavior, much as one practices the piano or any other skill until it becomes second nature.

Hedon: (From the Greek meaning “pleasure”) Possessing a pleasurable quality. Sometimes stands for a quantity of pleasure.

Informal Fallacy: An argument that is psychologically or emotionally persuasive but logically incorrect.

Hypothetical Imperative: A command that enjoins actions because they help attain some end that one desires. It is formulated as an “if...then” hypothesis - “If you want X, do action A”: for example, “If you want to be healthy, *then* you should eat well.”

Immoralist: A person who is either incapable or unwilling to be bound by morality.

Imperfect Duty: Kant’s designation for a general obligation over which we have some discretion, such as giving to charity or developing our talents.

Inference: The process by which we move from the premise(s) of an argument to the conclusion.

Intrinsic Value: Something that has value or is good, in itself.

Intuitionism: The ethical theory that the good or the right thing to do can be known directly without the conscious use of reason. G.E. Moore and W.D. Ross hold different versions of this view.

Invisible Hand: Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations* claimed that in a free-market system, although all entrepreneurs work in their self-interest, this turns their selfishness into general utility.

Is/Ought Problem: The claim first articulated by the eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher David Hume that no proposition containing prescriptive language (language telling us what we should do) can be logically deduced from propositions containing only descriptive language (language describing features of the world.)

Justice: The moral duty to give each person equal consideration.

Laissez-Faire Capitalism: An economic system based on the pursuit of rational and prudent self-interest, individual freedom, and minimal government interference.

Legitimate Interests: Those interests that do not violate other people’s similar and equal interests.

Liberty (Negative) Right: The right to be left alone to pursue our legitimate interests without interference from the government or other people.

Logic: The branch of philosophy that studies the structure of valid inference; a purely formal discipline, interested in the structure of representation and argumentation rather than in its content.

Maxim: In Kantian ethics, designates a personally chosen rational policy or rule that can guide moral action.

Metaethics: A kind of ethical discourse whose function is not to articulate moral advice but to analyze the meaning and the logic of moral concepts, such as good, evil, right, wrong, obligation, and duty.

Moral Development: The theory that humans progress through a series of stages of moral reasoning.

Moral Law: A universal principle for which all rational beings are responsible for not violating.

Moral Objectivism: The view that moral principles have objective validity whether or not people recognize them as such; that is, moral rightness or wrongness does not depend on social approval but on such independent considerations as to whether the act or principle promotes human flourishing or ameliorates human suffering. This differs from Absolutism in allowing that some of our principles may be overridden in given situations.

Naturalism: The theory that ethical terms are defined through factual terms, in that ethical terms refer to natural properties. *Ethical hedonism* is one example.

Natural Law: The theory that an eternal, absolute Moral Law can be discovered by reason. First set forth by the Stoics but developed by Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth-century. Morality can be discovered even without an understanding of God, because God made it part of human nature and reason (Aquinas).

Natural Rights Ethics: The theory that moral rights stem from human nature and are self-evident.

Naturalistic Fallacy: An alleged logical error detected by the twentieth-century philosopher G.E. Moore. According to Moore, it is committed by anyone who attempts to define the word “good” in terms of natural features of the world, such as “The ‘good’ is pleasure.” The error is revealed by demonstrating the nonsensical conclusions implied by such definitions.

Necessary Condition: Describes X’s relation to Y if Y cannot exist in the absence of X (or, if X and Y are propositions, if Y cannot be true if X is false).

Necessary Connection: A logical relation between two sequential ideas or propositions “p” and “q” such that one cannot assert “p” and deny “q” without self-contradiction. Also called a relationship of “strict entailment.”

Nonconsequentialism: The belief that the moral value of an act is not primarily determined by the results of that act but resides in the act itself, or in the motivation or intention behind the act.

Non-Maleficence: The moral principle that we should do no harm.

Norm: A rule or authoritative standard.

Normative: What ought to be the case, the rules that should govern our behavior.

Normative Ethics: The study of the values and guidelines by which we live.

Noumenal World: In Kantian metaphysics, designates the ultimate reality that exists behind the world as it appears to us through the framework of time, space, and Causality. We humans are constitutionally ignorant of its structure and content.

Ontology: Theory of being. Having to do with the status or the category of being: for example, what is the status of reflections in a mirror and of rainbows? Are they real, or are they mere appearances?

Open Concept: A concept or idea that cannot be exhaustively defined, even though it can be generally understood; a concept whose necessary Conditions cannot be stated (e.g., game, love, art).

Opinion: A statement that is based only on feeling rather than fact or reason.

Oxymoron: A figure of speech containing components that are in direct conflict with each other, such as “hot ice,” or the “sweet sorrow” of Romeo and Juliet.

Paradox of Hedonism: The apparent contradiction that arises between two theses: (1) Pleasure is the only thing worth seeking, and whenever one seeks pleasure, it is not found; (2) pleasure normally accompanies the satisfaction of desire whenever one reaches a goal.

Perfect Duty: Kant’s designation of an obligation that is absolute and specific, such as not lying or breaking a promise.

Phenomenal World: In Kantian philosophy, the world as it appears to us through the framework of time, space, and causality - an objective world, but not equivalent to ultimate reality.

Philosophy of Science: That branch of philosophy that studies the key concepts of scientific discourse, as well as its methods, models, and practices, querying their meanings, implications, and the logical relations among them.

Pluralism: The view that reality is composed of a multiplicity of things or different kinds of things and that this multiplicity cannot be reduced to one category (monism) or two categories (dualism).

Political Philosophy: That branch of thought concerning itself with the legitimacy of government and the organization of humans governed by law.

Polytheism: The belief in many gods.

Popular Appeal: A type of informal fallacy in which the opinion of the majority is used as support for a conclusion.

Postmodernism: A term designating a contemporary posture of: skepticism concerning the concept of truth and the values of traditional philosophies and institutions, focus on the marginalized, prioritization of signs and images over substance and truth, reproduction over originality, and representation over reality.

Pragmatism: An American philosophy flourishing at the beginning of the twentieth century, claiming that the meaning of an idea or proposition can be established by determining what practical difference would be produced by believing the idea or proposition to be true and that the truth of the idea or proposition can be established by determining that belief in the idea or the proposition “works” – that it places the person who believes the idea or proposition in a more satisfactory relationship with the rest of her beliefs and experiences.

Praxis: The practice of a particular art or skill. In ethics, this entails informed social action.

Premise: A proposition that supports or gives reasons for accepting the conclusion of an argument.

Prescriptive Statement: Deals with values, and tells us what ought to be.

Prescriptivism: The noncognitivist theory set forth by R.M. Hare claiming that, although moral judgments do not have truth values, they are more than mere expressions of attitudes; moral judgments are universal obligations. For example, the judgment that Mary should lie implies that *anyone* in circumstances relevantly similar to Mary's should also lie.

Pre-Socratic Philosophers: The philosophers of early Greece who flourished before Socrates (469-399 B.C.E.) and who meditated on the ultimate nature of being, unlike Socrates who was more concerned with the world of human activity.

Prima Facie: It signifies an initial status of an idea or principle. In ethics, beginning with W.D. Ross, it stands for a duty that has a presumption in its favor but may be overridden by another duty.

Principle of Falsifiability: A criterion of scientific meaning set forth by Sir Karl Popper according to which a proposition or theory is scientific only if its wording would allow recognition of the kind of evidence that would refute or falsify the theory. The implication is that every true theory must rule out some possibilities; any alleged theory that is compatible with every possible state of affairs is no theory at all.

Principle of Reciprocity: We have a moral duty to treat others as we would wish to be treated ourselves (e.g., the Golden Rule as proposed by Jesus in the New Testament).

Principle of Uncertainty: A theory in quantum mechanics, created by the twentieth-century German physicist Werner Heisenberg, according to which the location, velocity, and direction of subatomic particles (electrons, neutrons, etc.) cannot all be known simultaneously. The implication is that the traditional theories of **causality** in physics must give way to statistical models.

Principle of Utility: The foundational concept, defended by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, according to which we should only perform acts that help achieve the goal of "the greatest amount of happiness for the greatest number of people."

Proposition: A statement, in logic, that expresses a complete thought and that can be true or false.

Psychological egoism: A descriptive theory about human motivation, holding that people always act to satisfy their perceived best interests.

Psychological hedonism: The theory that motivation must be explained exclusively through desire for pleasure and aversion to pain.

Quietism: The psychology or philosophy of inaction. Doing little or nothing is better than doing something. "Don't just do something; stand there!"

Rationalism: In the broadest sense, philosophies committed primarily to reason. More precisely, the epistemological view that true knowledge is derived primarily from reason (or exclusively from reason in

the purer strains.) Reason is conceived as the working of the mind on material provided by the mind itself. In most versions, this material has the form of innate ideas. Therefore, the purest type of knowledge is a priori.

Realism: The metaethical thesis that moral facts exist and are independent of our beliefs and attitudes about them. Also, the theory of language and meaning holding that the entities named by nouns, including abstract nouns, are real entities in the world that have essences.

Reductio ad Absurdum: Making a theory or proposition unacceptable by showing that its consequences are impossible or ridiculous.

Reductionism: The attempt to show that all objects and events distinguishable at one level of analysis can be broken down into simpler objects and events at a more basic level of analysis (e.g., the attempt to demonstrate that all physical objects can be analyzed in terms of molecular structures or that molecular structures can be analyzed in terms of atomic structures).

Reductionist Thesis: The proposal that all moral virtues can be reduced to principles.

Remainder Rule: A higher-order principle of multilevel utilitarianism: When no other rule applies or when enormous good is at stake, simply do what your best judgment deems to be the act that will maximize utility.

Reparation: The moral duty that requires us to make amends for past harms we have caused others.

Resistance: The use of immature defense mechanisms - such as anger, rationalization, denial, and distractions - as means of preventing our views from being analyzed.

Romantic Sentimentalism: A philosophy which emphasizes the inner person and the innate goodness of people.

Rule-Deontological Theory: A moral theory holding that our actions must be guided by following universal laws.

Rule Utilitarianism: An act is right if and only if it is required by a rule that is itself a member of a set of rules whose acceptance would lead to greater utility for society than any available alternative.

Semantics: Theory of meaning.

Sense Data: That which is perceived immediately by any one of the senses prior to interpretation by the mind, includes the perception of colors, sounds, tastes, odors, textures, pleasures and pains. Classical empiricism claimed that this is the source of all true knowledge.

Sentience: The ability to experience pain and pleasure.

Skepticism: The view that we can have no knowledge. The *universal or general form* holds that we cannot know anything at all, whereas the *local or particular form* holds that we are ignorant in

important realms (for example, Hume on metaphysics). The *moral form* holds that we cannot know whether any moral truth exists.

Slippery Slope: A type of informal fallacy in which a position or proposal is rejected, without sufficient evidence, on the grounds that it will set off a chain of events that will lead to a situation that is dangerous or undesirable.

Social Contract: An agreement between individuals and a governing power in which some freedoms are freely relinquished in return for the security and advantages of a well-organized society.

Social Darwinism: The theory that cultures, like species, evolve from more primitive to higher civilized cultures.

Sociobiology: A branch of biology that applies evolutionary theory to the social sciences.

Sociological Relativism: The observation that there is disagreement among cultures regarding moral values. Unlike cultural relativism, it draws no conclusion about the rightness or wrongness of these values.

Sociopath: A person suffering from a pathology that prevents interiorization of moral and social instruction, sometimes aggressively antisocial.

Soft Determinism: The view that determinism is true but is compatible with freedom and responsibility.

Solipsism: A person's view that only he or she exists; everyone else merely exists in that person's mind. The view that the only true knowledge that one can possess is the knowledge of one's own conscious states. According to this, there is no good reason to believe that anything exists other than oneself. The moral form of this is a person's view that only he or she is worthy of moral consideration; it is an extreme form of egoism.

Sophists: A group of philosophers - or more accurately, rhetoricians - contemporary with Socrates who traveled through ancient Greece teaching argumentative skills as the vehicle to political power. Philosophically, the sophists defended relativism, skepticism, and subjectivism.

Speciesism: The view that bestows one natural species (usually the human species) with moral and/or ontological qualities superior to those of other species.

Straw Man Argument: An argument attacking views falsely attributed to an opponent; an attack on views that no one actually holds.

Student Relativism: A term used by Stephen Satris to describe the relativism espoused by college students which, according to Satris, is not a genuine philosophical position but a way of avoiding analysis of their opinions.

Sufficient Condition: Describes P's relation to Q, if the presence of P guarantees the presence of Q (or, if P and Q are **propositions**, then if the truth of P guarantees the truth of Q).

Superego: In Freudian theory, the component of the psyche that counteracts antisocial desires and impulses of the id by attaching conscious and unconscious feelings of guilt to them.

Supererogatory: An act that is not required by moral principles but contains enormous value; it is beyond the call of duty, such as risking one's life to save a stranger. Although most moral systems allow for the possibility of such acts, some theories deny that such acts are possible.

Tautology: A repetitive or redundant proposition. For example, "A sister is a female sibling." Each side of the copula "is" constitutes the equivalent of the other side.

Teleology: The existence of purpose, intention, and design, or the study of the evidence for the existence of purpose, intention, and design in the universe. An explanation in terms of goals, purposes, and intentions, as contrasted with a causal explanation, which looks for mechanical relationships rather than purpose.

Telos: The Greek word for goal or end.

Teleological Ethics: This places the ultimate criterion of morality in some nonmoral value (for example, happiness or welfare) that results from acts, seeing only instrumental value in the acts but intrinsic value in their consequences. Both ethical egoism and utilitarianism fall into this category.

Truism: A self-evident truth; a platitude.

Universalizability: Found explicitly in Kant's and R.M. Hare's philosophy and implicitly in most ethicists' work, this principle states that, if some act is right (or wrong) for one person in a situation, then it is right (or wrong) for any relevantly similar person in that kind of situation. It is a principle of consistency that aims to eliminate irrelevant considerations from ethical assessment. A moral principle or a rule, or maxim, is such if it can be recommended to all individuals without producing a self-contradiction. It is a moral criterion in Kantian ethics and in Christian ethics ("Do unto others as you would have them do unto you").

Utilitarianism: The theory that the right action is the one that maximizes utility. Sometimes *utility* is defined in terms of *pleasure* (Jeremy Bentham), *happiness* (John Stuart Mill), *ideals* (G.E. Moore and H. Rashdall), or *interests* (R.B. Perry). Its motto, is "The greatest happiness for the greatest number."

Utopianism: Any political theory motivated by the belief that perfection is possible in the building of human societies.

Value: Worth, something good, desirable.

Virtue: A good character trait, typically involving disposition to feel, think, and act in certain morally good ways.

Virtue Ethics: A theory that emphasizes character and right being over right actions.

Welfare (Positive) Right: The right to receive basic social goods such as education, police protection, and basic health care.

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