

Common Sense Ethics

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Common Sense Ethics

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Preface

The course, "Ethics for Professional Engineers", was issued by Engineer Educators, Inc. in 2010. It discussed ethical theories in general terms and provided guidelines for ethical conduct for the practitioner engaged in engineering activities. This course, Common Sense Ethics, discusses ethical issues and ethical theories in greater detail and concludes with a chapter on principles which are needed to live an ethical life and build a desired professional reputation.

Section	Title
1.	Human Nature and Ethics
2.	Ethical Issues
3.	Ethical Theories
4.	Common Sense Ethics
5.	Course Exam

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Section 1

Human Nature and Ethics

One may ask the question: “What does human nature have to do with ethics?” Human nature is an inborn trait that defines the human being...kind of like a blueprint that lays out the basic framework that you have as the type of entity you are. Usually included in that framework is a trait that defines how human beings are more or less likely to react to situations in which they find themselves. Ethics is concerned not just with what is possible for you but also with how you respond to certain situations. Thus, the bond between ethics and human nature. Human nature determines possibilities and impossibilities and it can also make certain behaviors or responses toward situations more or less likely. Because ethics suggest that you should live a certain type of life that life has to be possible for you. You need to know whether or not your nature disposes you to society in an ethical way.

A. Ethics as a discipline

There are two fundamental points to the claim of ethics as a discipline. The first point says ethics suggest that you ought to do something. You ought to put yourself on a path toward an ethical lifestyle. It is your responsibility to make good choices and to engage in the sorts of specific behavior that ethics thinks you ought to do.

The second point in the general claim of ethics as a discipline regards specificity. Ethics does not just say “ought...” It also gives a very specific critical path for you to follow. While different ethical theories argue how to achieve an ethical lifestyle (see Section 3) they all agree that you should pursue the critical path. This means overcoming selfishness and embodying recognition of the value of others. Human nature can affect this aim and your thinking about how to get on that path in three significant ways.

- You could be naturally disposed toward what is ethical...you could be naturally selfless.
- You could be naturally disposed away from what is ethical, making you selfish.
- You could have no such disposition at all...human nature could be neutral to the critical path.

Each alternative response has significant implications regarding how to specifically engage in the path of being critical.

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B. Connecting Ethics and Freedom

Since ethics demands that we ought to pursue the right path in life it follows that we should be able to do it. In other words, ethics requires a nature that permits free will. The following three theories regarding human nature as it related to freedom and allow for the possibility of ethics in human life are briefly discussed.

1. Hard determinist

Hard determinists think that your basic nature as the kind of creature you are bars you from having free will. You may think that you are free, and you think you make choices but, according to hard determinists, you really do not. Whatever you “choose” was actually pre-determined and “fixed in stone”. Although a lot of different types of determinisms exist, they all share a basic belief that whatever happens is inevitable. Hard determinists knows that ethics, as a subject matter, requires free will and they believe that determinism rules out free will because your nature does not permit it. Accordingly, they see ethics as incoherent in a deterministic world.

2. Compatibilism

Compatibilism is the theory which holds that human nature makes deliberation possible and when your actions follow from deliberation...even the process is determined...you are fully free as a consequence. In other words, although compatibilists believe whatever happens is inevitable (determinism), they deny that this means you are not free to make choices, including those regarding ethical behavior.

3. Libertarianism

Libertarianism is the theory which denies that the universe is fully deterministic because human beings have a nature that permits the making of choices in a way that is free of the rigid determinism that governs behavior of other existing things in the universe. Libertarians think that behaviors are unpredictable, thus affirming free will by denying the truth of determinism. They argue that human nature is in a special universe because it contains a capacity to make decisions and choices in ways that exempt the person from the deterministic laws that govern everything else. In summary, libertarianism looks for a way that your human nature exempts your mind or your will from the basic deterministic laws of physics that govern virtually everything else, making freedom...and then ethics...possible.

C. Human Nature

Depending on whether a person’s nature is good, bad, or neutral determines how that person should direct his or her efforts towards living the ethical life.

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1. Human nature is directed to the good.

Many philosophers think human nature is innately good, meaning that humans have a built-in disposition toward what is seen as good by ethics. Although they differ about what exactly what it means to say that human nature is good, they agree that it generally means having a disposition, or tendency, that pushes a person toward what is ethical. Even though a person may have an intuitive desire for good, they need to enhance and grow their own moral development to actually live ethically.

2. Human nature disposes you to be bad.

While some philosophers think human nature is good, there are others who think it is innately bad. If human nature is bad, one has a built in disposition or orientation away from the concerns of ethics resulting in an egoistic selfish nature. Persons of this disposition have to make a conscious effort to live ethically using education and culture to shape themselves into something good. They need to develop self discipline sufficient to restrict or limit the effects of their bad nature.

3. Human nature is neither good nor bad.

Not surprisingly, some thinkers have taken a middle position and argue that humans have no natural predisposition to either good or bad. Accordingly, they have to make a choice about what constitutes ethical life. For persons in this middle category, the question is: how should you respond to the fact that your nature is neutral with respect to good and bad? For many philosophers the answer is clear: Don't give into your worst impulses. Direct yourself toward the feeling of good and develop them so that they eventually overpower the bad. Remember, if there is a nature to human beings at all, it would be in the fact that human beings are self creators. Humans must develop their ethical and moral direction based upon assessment standards that they have created.

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Section 2

Ethical Issues

Throughout history many critics have argued that traditional ethics, especially the kind that relies on the use of impersonal codes, rules or principles, forces you to suppress essential aspects of what you are, thereby threatening your basic integrity. This section first looks at what issues those critics have with ethics and describes how ethics actually threaten your integrity.

Criticisms of ethics can be reduced to three general types:

- Concerns about bias
- Worries about status or authority
- Threats to integrity

These will be briefly discussed hereinafter:

A. **Biased based arguments**

Some critics argue that ethics is actually fairly biased because it originates from and promotes the interests of certain groups while simultaneously marginalizing the interests of less powerful groups.

Biased based arguments are typically divided into three types:

1. **Race**

To say that our ethical system is race based would argue that it actually reflects the beliefs of a particular race while minimizing the experiences or beliefs of other races by presenting its own moral system as being superior.

2. **Class.**

Class based arguments focus on whether ethics serves the interest of those with more power, property and money. For example, Karl Marx argued that standard ethical theories promote ways of thinking that maintain the status quo.

3. **Gender.**

Gender based arguments state that traditional ethics is based in favor of men, reflecting masculine ways of thinking, goals and interest. Ethics may present itself as being gender neutral, but some argue that it represents the beliefs of a group of men who have mistaken what seems right to them as rights for humans in general.

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B. Status based arguments

A second criticism against ethics focuses on issues of status and authority. If ethics has objective status, then the claims that it makes will be true for everyone, resulting in a strong set of credentials and powerful authority. Conversely, if ethics has relativistic status, then its claims will be true only for certain groups of people and its authority weakened. Under this scenario, the implication is that no one can critique anyone else ethically, because ethics is not a code of truths but objectively applies to everyone equally. Some relativists argue that ethical truths are really subjective, which means that it is impossible that each individual person has his or her own ethical truths. Others argue that ethics is conventional, which would mean that ethical truths only apply to certain types of society.

C. Integrity based arguments

Critics who argue against traditional ethics from the standpoint of integrity think that the focus on impartial codes, rule and principles violates a persons' basic integrity because it negates free expression. Their argument is pretty basic. The impartial codes, rules and principles that traditional ethics uses are meant to apply to everyone equally, regardless of personality, individual nature, or circumstance. This means that that the way a person should act does not conform to to what is unique about them or their individual situation. In other words, the guidebook of ethics tells you to conform your way of acting to a standard that ignores your existence as a particular individual. This means failing to be whole and failing to live in a way that expresses integrity.

D. Threats to your integrity

1. The ethics of inner strength

Frederick Nietzsche, a 19th century philosopher, believed that a commitment to your own integrity requires living a life that aims to acquire power and express inner strength.

Doing so requires striving to live life your own way, spinning your own interpretation of life, and challenging even your own beliefs to cultivate a richer and more sophisticated model of how to live life.

According to Nietzsche, this life of the individual self creation leaves little room for traditional ethics. Instead of motivating people to find and create their own way of living, ethics encourages a herd mentality that rewards mediocrity and

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weakness by demanding that everyone conform to the same codes, rules and principles.. Nietzsche thought that living a life of integrity mean expressing your individuality through feats of self creation. He had a warrior type mentality that admired a spirited approach to living. In other words, continually challenge yourself and putting yourself on the line.

Nietzsche sees traditional ethics as too anti-warrior. It dictates from the outside how to interpret yourself and how to go about living your life. In stressing the use of universal rules and abstract principles, ethics tries to relieve you of the responsibility to continually interpret life on your own individual terms. In summary, Nietzsche ethics of inner strength would not have codes and rules that prescribe particular behaviors to everyone in all situations. Instead, it would state that your actions, whatever they are, must stem from the kind of inner strength that is associated with self creation.

2. **Responsible living**

Soren Kierkegaard was a 19th century Danish philosopher, who, like Nietzsche, believed that living as an individual is essential to living with integrity. In Kierkegaard's eyes, it means embracing who you are and living in a way that takes full responsibility for interpreting life on your own. This requires taking risks, making commitments, and being willing to stand alone in the way you look at yourself and your position in life. Kierkegaard believed that living in a way that takes full responsibility for interpreting life on your own is extremely difficult to the point it requires acknowledgment of one dependency on God, as a divine being. Kierkegaard thinks that you should live an ethical life of real integrity, because most of the time that is what God wants you to do. But loving God is primary to being who you are and sometimes loving God means ignoring what ethical codes tell you to do.

3. **Ethics isn't natural**

From the perspective of the Chinese tradition of Taoism, traditional theories of ethics, which come with rules, principles and virtues that need to be considered, are artificial and unnatural. To the Taoist, the obscure who you are and threaten your integrity. The Taoist believe that only if you can learn to control yourself from fixed ideas and conceptions...like those in traditional ethics...can you open yourself up to expressing your individual integrity.

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Many traditional theories of ethics suggest that a person should accumulate virtues and avoid or eliminate vices. Although not all ethical systems prize the cultivation of virtues (some focus on following rules and / or principles) they all stress over evil. Traditional ethics requires that you make strong judgments and believe that certain reflect badness (vices). From the Taoist point of view, it is unnatural to cultivate virtue and reduce vice. The Taoist encompasses all points of view and, as such, has no preferences. Traditional ethics fights Taoism equality because it sees human perspective as being superior.

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Section 3

Ethical Theories

Ethical Theories are ways of understanding what human beings ought to do or be. A total of five major ethical theories have been identified and will be briefly discussed in this section.

A. Virtue Ethics

According to virtue ethics, what is important to ethical life is the commitment to being a good and virtuous person. Virtue ethics is concerned more with character and less with actions and rules. To become a virtuous person you have to dedicate yourself to being an excellent human being. When you ethically focus on character, you hope that you and people around you have admirable character traits such as honesty, courage and loyalty. Virtue ethics stresses the fact that character, whether good or bad, defines a person. Clearly, some character traits are good and other others bad. Good character traits are called virtues and bad traits are called vices. The more virtuous traits you have, the more admirable you are as a person. Caring about developing the right character is a non-stop challenge at times... it is a way of life. The moral of the story in virtual ethics is that life has no ethical-free zones.

B Utilitarian ethics

Consequentialist theories stress the importance of focusing on the consequences of a person's actions. The most popular consequential theory is called utilitarianism which argues that, if you can increase overall happiness of the world in some way, then you should. Consequentialist ethical theories separate right from wrong actions by focusing on the degree of good (or bad) consequences the actions produce. Utilitarianism is the form of consequentialism that evaluates consequences by how much happiness, or conversely, how much suffering they contain. Think of utilitarianism as the consequentialist theory in which good consequences are defined in terms of happiness or suffering .

C. Kantianism – The Ethics of Principle

The 19th century philosopher, Immanuel Kant, laid out the framework for an ethical theory arguing that all answers to ethical questions can be found in principles determined by practical reason. He thought that one single, supreme underlying principle,

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which he called categorical imperative, gave rise to all other ethically important principles. He thought this underlying principle was accessible to everyone by the use of something called practical reason or rationality. This root on Kantian ethics, which Kant believed separates human beings from all other animal species. Since Kant's ethics are based on principles, it is important to differentiate principles from rules. Essentially, rules are a set of guidelines imposed by external authorities while principles are laws you apply to yourself or personally embrace. Kant believed that the principles you live by should be those forged by your own practical reason. So the defining struggle in an ethical life is the battle between two forces that motivate human actions.

1) Inclination.

Acting from inclination is when you are motivated by what you naturally want to do. Inclinations are your natural habits.

2) Duty.

Acting from duty is when you are motivated by the principles forged by practical reason. When your own rationality provides a source of motivation to act, you are doing something for the simple reason that it is the right thing to do. Kant calls this acting from the motive of duty.

D. Contract Theory

A type of ethics theory called contract theory attempts to base ethics on actual or hypothetical agreements between human beings. Essentially, the theory advocates that "the right thing to do" does not depend on consequences or principles or virtues but, instead, on agreements between people. In other words, ethics literally does not exist until people enter into certain agreements about what one person can do to another person. This way of thinking about ethics is called contract theory. The word "contract" can be confusing because what immediately enters people's mind is the signing of a piece of paper. However, in addition to written contracts there are verbal agreements. These verbal agreements are made with a handshake and, simply, a tacit understanding. Contract theorists take implicit contracts more as models of written contracts. At their essence, contracts are just agreements between people who act in certain ways. Most contract theorists do not care to model ethics on contracts people make, because these contracts may be exploitative. Rather, they focus on the contract people would make if they were thinking rationally. Ethics thus depends on the best contracts people could possibly make with one another.

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E. The Ethics of Care

Unlike traditional ethics, which puts issues of justice, rights, and impartiality at the forefront of moral consideration, care ethics puts the focus on close relationships. Care ethics stresses the importance of developing feelings and emotions, such as empathy and sympathy, and a heightened focus on the particular features of moral situations. What matters ethically in care ethics is how people respond to those individuals with which they find themselves in close relationships. With care ethics there seems to be a consensus as to the way men and women tend to think about the nature of self. Men tend to follow what is called the atomic model of selfhood, in which each self is naturally self contained from all other selves. Because each self is independent, each is seen as autonomous, or self ruling. Accordingly, relationships must be viewed carefully, because they are potentially threatening to one's self rule. Instead of thinking of selves as independent and autonomous, women tend to think of the self as relational. As a result, ethics involves fostering and protecting relationships. As a person motivated by care, you think in terms of helping others close to you. Care ethics sees relationships as primary, which means ethical life demands that you respond to the needs of those close to you in the right ways. The foundation of care ethics...that your primary human existence is defined by close relationship...is no doubt intuitive.

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Section 4

The Golden Rule: Common Sense Ethics

The Golden Rule, which advises you to do unto others as you would want others to do unto you, is widely known. Many people subscribe to the Golden Rule thinking because of its common sense foundation and the fact that it is cross cultural in nature. This section looks at how this ethical approach works and provides essential information regarding understanding of the concept.

A variety of cultures across history have embraced versions of the Golden Rule. It is difficult to find a culture or historical period that did not have its own version. Take a look at the results of some research that shows how many variations of the Golden Rule exist.

Christianity:	“Whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them”
Judaism:	“What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow man. This is the entire law: all the rest is commentary”
Islam:	“No one of you is a believer until he loves for his neighbor what he loves for himself.”
Confucianism:	“What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others.”
Buddhism:	“Hurt not others with that which pains yourself.”
Hinduism:	This is the sum of duty; do naught unto others what you would not have them do unto you.”

From those, as well as many other examples too numerous to mention, it is clear that the Golden Rule cuts across cultural and religious boundaries and is embraced by people from nearly every part of the world. It is the closest thing to a universal guideline for ethics that a person can find. It has endured throughout history because of its many redeeming qualities, as follows.

- It appeals to common sense
- It is short, clear and simple
- It builds on motivations and feelings that people already have
- It has an obvious and immediate practical importance.

There are really only two important points regarding ethics. The first is a standard to follow. The second is the will to follow it. The Josephson Institute of Ethics, a non partisan, non profit, organization that exist to improve ethical quality of society, says “ethics is about how we meet the challenge of doing the right thing when that costs more than we want to pay”. There are two aspects to ethics: the first involves the ability

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to discern right from wrong, good from evil and propriety from impropriety. The second involves the commitment to do what is right, good and proper.

People who desire to find a good honest standard of ethical behavior to live by can find it in the Golden Rule. It has endured for many centuries because of the following reasons.

- A. It is easy to learn and understand.**
Ethics can involve complicated reasoning, but the Golden Rule makes it easy to explain why an action is right or wrong.
- B. It makes sense.**
The Golden Rule has the advantage of being truly commonsensical to people regardless of their particular cultural, religious or historical background.
- C. It motivates people.**
Successful ethical approaches tend to succeed in building onto motivational structures and desires that people already possess.
- D. It helps maintain civilized society.**
If you want to live in an efficient and orderly society, widespread use of the Golden Rule is crucial. In fact, most actions leading to social unrest, chaos, or fear spring from a rejection of the Golden Rule's way of thinking.

Ethical theories can sometimes get really complicated. With the Golden Rule, all you need to do is view a situation from how someone else would see it before you act.

The Golden Rule really works. That's Ethics 101.

Section 5

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Course Examination

After you have completed answering all of the questions, go back and check your work. Make certain that you have marked only one answer for each question. There is only one correct answer to each question. Make certain that you have answered each question. Any question that is left blank will be counted as incorrect.

A score of 70% is required to complete the course. Failing to achieve a 70% score all your answers will be erased. You will have three opportunities to achieve a passing grade. Failing to score a passing grade on the third attempt will block you from further attempts and your course fee returned to you.

Once you have successfully completed exam you will be able to print out your completion certificate. We suggest you file it electronically or print it out should you be audited by your licensure board for compliance with continuing education requirements. At that time you will also be able to compare your answers to the school answers on questions you may have missed.

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1. A trait that defines how human beings are more or less likely to react to given situations is known as:
 - a. A behavior pattern
 - b. Human nature
 - c. An automatic response
 - d. A character anomaly

2. A basic belief that whatever happens is inevitable is known as:
 - a. Compatibilism
 - b. Free will
 - c. Hard determinism
 - d. Libitarianism

3. If a person's nature is neutral with respect to good and bad, they should:
 - a. Avoid giving into their worst impulses
 - b. Cultivate feelings of good
 - c. develop their ethical and moral direction
 - d. All of the above

4. The premise that ethics originates from and promotes the interest of certain groups while simultaneously marginalizing the interest of the less powerful is:
 - a. A biased based argument
 - b. A status based argument
 - c. An authority based argument
 - d. An integrity based argument

5. The premise that the guidebook of ethics requires you to conform your ways of acting to standards that ignore your existence as a particular individual is:
 - a. A conventional argument
 - b. A class based argument
 - c. A claim made by some relativists
 - d. An integrity based argument

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6. A life of individual self creation:
 - a. encourages ethical behavior
 - b. leaves little room for traditional ethics
 - c. mandates particular behaviors to everyone in all situations
 - d. Requires conformance to codes, standards, and principles

7. To the Taoist, traditional theories of ethics:
 - a. Are artificial and unnatural
 - b. Obscure who you are
 - c. Threaten your integrity
 - d. All of the above

8. Care ethics focuses on:
 - a. Impartial relationships
 - b. issues of rights
 - c. The protection of close relationships
 - d. Issues of justice

9. One of the redeeming qualities of the Golden Rule is:
 - a. It is easy to learn and understand
 - b. It makes sense
 - c. It has an obvious and immediate practical importance
 - d. It helps maintain civilized society

10. The Golden Rule has endured for many centuries because:
 - a. It motivates people
 - b. It makes it easy to discern right from wrong
 - c. It inspires a commitment to do what is right, good, and proper
 - d. All of the above