NYU Grossman School of Medicine

DIVISION OF MEDICAL ETHICS
HIGH SCHOOL BIOETHICS PROJECT

LESSON 1:

What is Ethics?

NYU Grossman School of Medicine

DIVISION OF MEDICAL ETHICS
HIGH SCHOOL BIOETHICS PROJECT

What is Ethics?

What is Ethics?

Things to Think About/Discuss Before Starting this Section:

- What comes to mind when you think of the word *ethics?*
- Where and in what context do you most often hear the word *ethics?*
- What types of people do you think study *ethics?*

When was the last time you turned to your best friend or a parent and asked: "Hey, can we chat about ethics?" Unless you are a rare exception to the rule, the answer to this question is *never*. This may be due, in large part, to the reputation of ethics. It is often regarded as an abstract topic of debate discussed in a religion or philosophy class. Furthermore, not many people seem to believe that a discussion of ethics has any practical value or relevance in our everyday lives.

Now, you readily admit that you don't invite friends to chat about ethics before a big game or around the lunch table. But what if you were told that, in fact, you do engage in ethical discussions every day? Would you be shocked if you were told that ethics is an unavoidable part of daily life and just as much a part of life as walking and breathing?

Let's take a closer look at this claim. Most people do not realize that ethics is interwoven into the fabric of daily existence. Debating ethics and making ethical decisions is part of what it means to be human. And most ethics encountered on a day-to-day basis stems from the asking and answering of one simple question:

"What ought I to do?" In fact, this question has been asked since the dawn of humankind, ranking ethics among the oldest topics of debate in human history.

So, in its simplest form, ethics is the age-old attempt by human beings to determine how they should act. Knowing this much about ethics is a good place to start, but much confusion about the word ethics and its various uses still remains. Ethics is slightly more complicated than you probably realize, and a few key distinctions should be understood before proceeding.

Ethics: Historical Background

Today, ethics is one of the main branches of philosophical study. It is a systematic, formal inquiry into the nature of right and wrong actions. The most common goal of ethics is to discover universal moral rules. In order to achieve this goal, ethicists (philosophers who study and apply ethics) often explore the nature of "the good" for human beings.

The word *ethics* is derived from the Greek word *ethos* which translates to "disposition" or "spirit of the community." With discoveries from ancient China, ancient India, and ancient Mesopotamia, it is clear that moral codes have existed at least as long as writing itself. But, the first formal ethical theories belong to Greek philosophers, such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. These ethical theories were the first attempts to establish standards of human conduct based on rational arguments. What set these theories apart from all those that came before, was that each tried to establish standards based on rational arguments, rather than faith, superstition, consensus, or convention. Since the time of the ancient Greek philosophers, ethics has assumed a very important role in philosophical study and many philosophers today still devote their careers to its study.

Activities

1. **Class Discussion**
    a. Think about the last 24 hours of your life. Identify at least one instance when you had to ask yourself: "What ought I to do?"
2. **Research**
    a. Review the list of trending hashtags on Instagram or Twitter and find one that deals with an ethical issue. You can also browse a current newspaper or magazine and find an article that deals with an ethical issue.

The Fact/Value Distinction

Things to Think About/Discuss Before Starting this Section:

- What is fact?
- What is value?
- How does a value differ from a fact?
- Can a fact and value ever be the same?

An important distinction in the study of ethics is between facts and values. This distinction is one made at the conceptual level. In other words, this distinction is made between types of ideas. Let's examine the nature of values first. Values are ideas about the way you want things to be or the way you think things should be. Values are attempts to

evaluate or determine worth. They reflect the desires, opinions, and feelings of those who hold them. Examples of values are the following ideas: People shouldn't chew with their mouths open; desiring money is wrong; Abraham Lincoln was the best president; there is only one god. Each of these ideas expresses a value, or an attempt to evaluate something. Values are often heated topics and debates and not easily agreed upon.

Facts attempt to describe the way things are. The following ideas are examples of facts: The sky is blue; traffic is heavy; I am hungry; male bluejays are bigger than female bluejays. Now you may be thinking: "The sky is not really blue" or "Female bluejays are bigger than males." And you would technically be correct in both cases. Confused? Don't be. The important point to see here is that facts don't have to be absolutely or universally true. They are just *attempts* at describing the way things exist. Facts are ideas that are generally agreed upon, so, even though you may know that the sky itself is not blue, no one is going to attack you when you make the statement that it is.

It may be obvious that facts and values are distinct, but let's make sure you understand the difference. Facts are descriptive ideas and values are prescriptive ideas. Facts, whether they are absolutely true or not, are value-neutral. This means that facts attempt to describe but never attempt to evaluate. So when you are in the realm of facts, there should be no attempts at evaluation. This last feature of the fact/value distinction is very important because it helps mark off the territory of ethics. Ethics is only concerned with values, with those ideas that attempt to prescribe the way things ought to be. Ethics has nothing to say about facts, or ideas such as: The sky is blue. Ethics is obviously much more concerned about prescriptive ideas, such as: Desiring money is wrong.

In the next section the various ways in which facts and values move from the realm of ideas into the realm of language will be examined.

Activities

1. **Class discussion:**
    a. Do facts actually exist? Can ideas ever reflect the reality they attempt to describe? Or are we bound to a world of values?
    b. From where do values originate? How do individuals and groups acquire values? From where have you acquired yours?
    c. Read the following and determine which express facts and which express values. Explain why you believe they express what they do.
        i. Universal healthcare is the best way to distribute medical resources to people.
        ii. People are currently allowed to refuse life support.
        iii. Animal testing is necessary in the medical industry.

The Is/Ought Distinction

Things to Think About/Discuss Before Starting this Section:

- What does the word *ought* mean?
- What does the word *is* mean?
- What is the difference between these two words?

The previous discussion of facts and values was done on a conceptual level— in terms of ideas. Now let's look at how facts and values are expressed in language, because that too is crucial to a study of ethics. But this should make sense—after all, it would be difficult to do an ethical study of mere thoughts. It is when thoughts, ideas, and concepts become captured in language that ethics has something in which to sink its teeth. And this section too will introduce another valuable distinction in the study of ethics.

Let's begin with the distinction. David Hume (1711–76 CE), an influential Scottish philosopher, made a distinction between two types of statements: *is*-statements and *ought*-statements. Hume believed that there was a fundamental difference between statements that claim something is a certain way and statements that claim something *ought* to be a certain way. Let's use an example to illustrate this distinction.

Consider the following statement: The death penalty is a form of punishment used in Florida. This may have a bit of an ethical ring to it, but, in fact, this statement merely describes a current reality, or a fact, in the state of Florida. The statement makes no attempt to comment on the moral nature of Florida's use of the death penalty. This type of statement is an *is*-statement. So, *is*-statements are descriptive statements that simply depict some fact in the world, without making a comment about its moral nature.

Now consider this statement: Florida should stop using the death penalty as a punishment. There is a subtle difference between this statement and the one in the preceding paragraph. In this statement there is an attempt to prescribe how a certain fact in the world *ought* to be. This statement does not merely describe Florida's use of the death penalty, but rather attempts to make a claim about whether Florida ought to use the death penalty. This type of statement is an *ought*-statement. So, ought-statements are prescriptive statements that express some value or set of values. They make an attempt to evaluate some fact or state of affairs.

A note of caution must be made here about *is*-statements and *ought*-statements. *Is*-statements do not necessarily contain the word *is* and *ought* statements do not necessarily contain the words ought or should. It is imperative that you understand that *is*-statements are any statements (spoken or written) which attempt to express facts and *ought*-statements are any statements (spoken or written) that attempt to express values regardless of wording.

It should now be apparent that ethics deals with values (prescriptive ideas) expressed through *ought*-statements. But let's take a brief look at exactly what kinds of *ought*-statements ethics studies and why it is that ethics studies them.

Can an Ought be Derived from an *Is?*

David Hume made the distinction between *ought*-statements and *is*-statements to illustrate a very important philosophical point. Hume often observed people trying to prove claims by using one *is*-statement followed by one *ought*-statement, with no further proof. But Hume had a problem with this. He believed that *ought*-statements could not be derived directly from *is*-statements. Let's use the two statements from this section to illustrate Hume's point.

First reread the two statements together:

- The death penalty is a form of punishment used in Florida.
- Florida should stop using the death penalty as a punishment.

Statement #2 cannot be derived directly from statement #1. In other words, to get from statement #1 to statement #2 something extra must be present that is not stated. And this should make sense to you: Just because Florida uses the death penalty does not necessarily mean that it should cease doing so. It is possible that Florida should cease using the death penalty, but this cannot be proved by merely stating that Flora uses the death penalty.

So what is hidden between the two statements here? How could someone get from statement #1 to statement #2? Hume believed that in trying to move directly from an *is*-statement to an *ought*-statement a writer or speaker injected values into the equation. What values are present, but not stated in this example? Clearly, the hidden ingredient is the value that the death penalty is immoral. If you added that claim to the argument it may be more transparent and satisfactory: The death penalty is a form of punishment used in Florida. The death penalty is immoral. Florida should stop using the death penalty as a punishment. You may not agree with this claim, but at least you are able to identify what is really being stated here.

It is a common task of philosophers and ethicists to dig beneath the surface of ought-statements to find the underlying values, because not everything that is meant is always stated explicitly. Ethics, in this way, can be a tricky business.

The Moral/Amoral Distinction

Ethics is not concerned with every *ought*-statement. Consider this statement: I should be King of the Universe. This is, in fact, an *ought*-statement, but it is not the kind that a formal study of ethics would consider. It does express values; it does make an attempt to evaluate or judge the worth of something; it does prescribe a certain way the world should exist. So why then it is out of ethical bounds?

Ethics is concerned only with *ought*-statements that attempt to judge the rightness and wrongness of human action or, in other words, have moral content.

The statement, I should be King of the Universe, lacks moral content. It only expresses my values in terms of my own wants and desires. So, other than painting me as an egomaniac, this statement does not go beyond itself—it has no implications about human action in general.

These types of *ought*-statements, as well as all *is*-statements, are labeled amoral. Amoral statements are statements that do not attempt to make a claim about the acceptability of human action. It is important to note that these types of statements have no implications beyond themselves. They do not make claims about all human actions or even a category or type of human action. And because these statements lack moral content, or are amoral, they are not the focus of ethics.

Ethics chooses to focus its energies on *ought*-statements that go well beyond themselves by prescribing moral standards of right and wrong to a group or universally to all human beings. The next section will explore another fundamental problem with statements such as, I should be King of the Universe, while introducing the final important distinction essential to your study of ethics.

Moral Relativism

Moral relativism is the belief that there are no universal moral rules, but rather various moral codes, each applying to a particular culture or situation. Let's use an example to illustrate this. First, take two seemingly conflicting moral rules. Let's use the current moral rule in 2008 in the United States that it is immoral to kill innocent human beings and the pre-Columbian Aztec rule that human sacrifice of innocent people was moral. A moral relativist would not see any conflict between these two moral rules, even though they make polar opposite claims! He would claim that if you were an Aztec living in pre-Columbian Central America then human sacrifice of innocent human beings was moral and if you are currently living in the United States the killing of innocent human beings is immoral.

If you pressed a moral relativist and demanded to know whether killing innocent people was right or wrong, he would respond: It all depends on who you are, where you are, and when you are there. He would not admit to a universal rule concerning the killing of innocent human beings because he either believes that none can be proven or that none exist.

Now this may appear to defeat your current foray into ethics. But ethicists are not disheartened by these claims. They continue to search for universal moral rules despite the possibility that none exist. Ethicists are not prepared to concede at this point in history that we will never discover universal rules or that they do not exist. So, ethics pushes on.

Activities

1. **Class Discussion**
    a. Read the following and discuss the moral content, if any, of each.
        i. *I am a blood donor.*
        ii. *I like being a blood donor.*
        iii. *Being a blood donor is different from being an organ donor.*
        iv. *Being a blood donor is better than being an organ donor.*
        v. *More people should become blood donors.*
        vi. *A law should be passed requiring all eligible blood donors over 18 to give blood every year.*

The Argument/Option/Ideology Distinction

Things to Think About/Discuss Before Starting this Section:

- What comes to mind when you hear the word ideology?
- What comes to mind when you hear the word *argument?*
- Do these words have negative or positive connotations?

There is one further distinction that must be examined in order to see the “big picture” of ethical inquiry. This final distinction concerns the ways in which *ought*-statements are supported and proven. There are three main ways in which *ought*-statements can be supported, and only one of these will be suitable for ethics.

Before examining the three methods of support, consider this question: Why do ought-statements even need support? To answer this question look at the example statement from the previous section: I should be King of the Universe. In just rereading this statement you should know why *ought*-statements need justification! If someone were to say this to you, your reply to them would be, “So what?” You would, if you were being

Kind or bored, demand to know exactly why they should be King of the Universe*. Ought*-statements, because they express values are not agreed upon, need justification. Others need to be convinced of the truth of the *ought*-statement in order to agree with it or even take it seriously. This can only be done through the support of other statements.

Let's look at the first, most common way of supporting an *ought*-statement: Opinion or preference.

The quickest and easiest way people choose to support *ought*-statements is with the reply: "Because I said so" or "Because that's the way I want it." Even though these types of statements are called support, they do very little in way of justification. They only claim that the *ought*—statement is a matter of the speaker's opinion or preference. It is very difficult to make a convincing ethical argument by appealing only to your own preference. Imagine this ethical argument: Abortion is immoral, because I don't like it very much and I want it outlawed. Did that convince you?

Let's examine the second way people attempt to support arguments: Ideology. The word *ideology* is quite difficult to define, but here it will refer to a set of beliefs that bases its authority on faith, power and/or group membership. The beliefs of most religions and political organizations are examples of ideologies. So for example many Democrats will agree with Democratic positions simply because they are Democratic; and many Christians will agree with Christian positions simply because they are Christian. The key in both of these examples is that the beliefs are held by the believer based on faith or group membership. With ideologies there is often an appeal to tradition as well. So, for example, Muslims may justify an *ought*-statement about their religion by claiming that that is the way things have always been done. In ideologies very little effort is made to appeal to reasons outside of the belief system—the belief system is used as its own justification.

So the previous abortion-statement if supported by ideology might sound like this:

"Abortion is immoral because my church and my political party believe it is wrong. No attempt is made to give reasons outside of the belief system to justify that abortion is wrong."

In this statement, it is claimed that abortion must be wrong because of the speaker or writer's faith and group membership. A stronger case is made by appealing to ideology, but is this the best case that can be made?

There is a chance that this is the best that can be done. There is a chance that no justification beyond religious belief is necessary or even possible. Many people are satisfied with ideological support of their moral beliefs and ethicists respect this fact. Nevertheless, it has become the task of many ethicists to see if standards of human behavior can be established independent of all ideologies and apply to all people—encompassing all political parties and all religions.

Rational argumentation is the final of the three methods of support or justification for *ought*-statements. The term *rational argument* is often thrown around, but do you actually know what a rational argument entails? Let's take it apart one term at a time. *Rational* does not mean: That which makes sense to you. So often people claim that their opinions are rational and those of their opponents irrational. But rationality is not quite that simple. Philosophers, beginning with Aristotle (384–322 BCE) in ancient Greece, formulated rules for rational argumentation that are today known as formal logic. The rules of formal logic govern the ways in which the human power of rationality can be molded into groups of statements known as arguments.

Arguments in ethics are not the same as the fight with your parents over the use of the family car. *Argument* is the official, formal term for a group of statements. An argument is not just any random grouping of statements, but takes a definite form in which one or more of statements (premises) support a conclusion. The conclusion is always an *ought*-statement. Premises can take the form of *ought*-statements and/or *is*-statements and are the reasons given by the speaker or writer as to why that particular conclusion must be true.

Let's revise the abortion claim one final time and frame it as a logical or rational argument:

"Fetuses are innocent human beings. It is unethical to kill innocent human beings. Therefore, abortion, or the killing of fetuses, is unethical."

That is an attempt at a rational argument. Many rational arguments sound convincing, so how are you to judge which are good and which are bad?

Often you will hear rational arguments on opposite sides of a debate that make sense and seem well-formulated. There is good news and there is bad news about this. The bad news is: it can be overwhelming at times. The good news is: it is largely up to you to decide which arguments are convincing and which are not. In the abortion argument above, the argument hinges on one premise: Fetuses are innocent human beings. Of course you assume fetuses are innocent, but are they human beings? If you believe they are, then this is a convincing argument; if you believe they are not, then it is an unconvincing argument. And so goes much of ethics.

Activities

1. **Research**
    a. Look at a newspaper or magazine online and find an article that presents an argument. Read the article carefully and attempt to identify the author's conclusion and major premises. (*HINT:* Editorials are a great place to start your search.)

Conclusion

Reading such abstract and philosophical material in this chapter may lead you to ask: "Who cares?" or "Why study ethics at all?" The answer to this question will become clear as you progress through these lesson plans, but here is a glimpse at the answer.

Ethicists seek to create or discover universal moral rules. Imagine if they were to succeed or simply improve upon the moral rules that we currently use. Moral rules underlie all religions, political systems, educational institutions, and all other social constructions. So the positive contributions of ethicists have implications in all the important aspects of daily life. For this reason, ethics is considered an applied philosophy. It is not studied for its own sake, but its theories are developed for use in real life situations. Improvements in ethical theory can translate into improvements in quality of life for people. That's why it is useful to think of ethics as the science of morality. Science attempts to make life better and so does ethics.

What have you learned about ethics thus far? Here is the condensed version:

- Ethics, in its simplest form, is a part of daily life, but often you do not take notice of its presence
- Ethics is the formal study of the standards of human conduct or moral rules.
- Ethics seeks to examine values expressed throguh *ought*-statements that have moral content and are supported in rational arguments.
- Ethics is an applied philosophy that has far reaching implications and is undertaken with the goal of improving human existence.

The work of philosophers and ethicists over the past few thousand years can help you in your study of a wide variety of subjects. Believe it or not, over those thousands of years only a few major ethical or conceptual frameworks have stood the test of time. These conceptual frameworks can help you ask the right questions in an ethical debate and ultimately find an answer. There are two major ethical frameworks: utilitarianism and deontology. Others include principlism, divine command, casuistry, virtue ethics, and feminist ethics.

Note of Acknowledgement

We wish to acknowledge the Dana Foundation for the content from which this lesson plan was adapted. Maya Grunschlag updated the content in July 2021, and Ayden Eilmus in August 2024, under the supervision of Lisa Kearns.

DIVISION OF MEDICAL ETHICS
HIGH SCHOOL BIOETHICS PROJECT