

# Branches of Ethics

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## WHAT'S COVERED

In this tutorial we will be looking at how ethics divides into several disciplines to address different kinds of ethical considerations. Our discussion will break down like this:

1. [Branches of Ethics](#)
2. [Different Kinds of Ethical Questions](#)
3. [Branches of Ethics in Practice](#)

## 1. Branches of Ethics

To begin with, recall that ethics is the branch of philosophy that analyzes and defends concepts of value and thereby seeks to determine right and wrong. Different sets of ethical standards or frameworks determine in general which actions are right or wrong. This is actually just one branch of the study of ethics, called **normative ethics**.

What we learn about right and wrong in normative ethics can then be used to make decisions about the morality of specific actions in the world. This is called **applied ethics**.

These two branches are closely related since they both think about the morality of action, just on two different levels: at the general level and the specific level. Another branch of ethics asks how we can talk about right and wrong in the first place, even before we get started analyzing actions. Investigating the source and possibility of value judgments (such as right and wrong, good and bad, etc.) is the job of **metaethics**.

The final branch of ethics to be discussed departs from the previous ones, which all make it their job to determine the truth about values or how we are to properly use them. Instead, this branch just asks what attitudes and opinions people happen to have about value. This is called **descriptive ethics**.



### TERMS TO KNOW

#### Normative Ethics

The branch of ethics that analyzes which actions are right and wrong.

#### Applied Ethics

The branch of ethics that uses normative ethical theories to evaluate and prescribe actions in specific situations and contexts.

#### Metaethics

The branch of ethics that analyzes the nature of value-based discourse.

#### Descriptive Ethics

The branch of ethics that analyzes people's beliefs about value.

## 2. Different Kinds of Ethical Questions

Now that you have the different branches of ethics in view, consider the following questions and how they relate to the specific branch of ethics.

Branch of Ethics	Questions	Relation to Branch
Normative Ethics	Is it right to take a human life?  Is it morally acceptable to lie?  Should torture be allowed?	These questions come under normative ethics because they ask which kinds of actions are right or wrong.
Applied Ethics	Should doctors assist with suicide?  Should I give insincere compliments?  Should the military use any means to get information?	These questions come under applied ethics because they ask about the morality of specific actions in the world.

Metaethics	<p>Are there moral truths?</p> <p>If there are, can we know what these truths are?</p> <p>Are moral judgements just a matter of taste?</p>	These questions come under metaethics because they ask about the sources and nature of values.
Descriptive Ethics	<p>Do most people think war is morally justified?</p> <p>What ethical views do Americans have of abortion?</p> <p>When did equality become a popular ethical ideal?</p>	These questions come under descriptive ethics because they ask what people actually think or believe about value.

As you can see, the branch an ethical question will come under depends on the kind of thing the question is investigating.

### 3. Branches of Ethics in Practice

These different branches of ethics can be brought to bear on the same situation.



Consider the situation of abortion. What kinds of questions do you think could be proposed by the different branches of ethics? There are many questions that could be addressed in this situation, but here are some examples from each branch of ethics.



#### SUMMARY

We started this tutorial by distinguishing the different **branches of ethics** in terms of the things they analyze: the morality of actions (normative ethics), making moral judgments of specific actions (applied ethics), the source and nature of value (metaethics), and people's attitudes and beliefs about value (descriptive ethics).

Then the **different kinds of ethical questions** associated with each branch were examined. Finally, we looked at different **branches of ethics in practice** by seeing how they respond to a specific situation.

#### TERMS TO KNOW

**Applied Ethics**

The branch of ethics that uses normative ethical theories to evaluate and prescribe actions in specific situations and contexts.

**Descriptive Ethics**

The branch of ethics that analyzes people's beliefs about value.

**Metaethics**

The branch of ethics that analyzes the nature of value-based discourse.

**Normative Ethics**

The branch of ethics that analyzes which actions are right and wrong.