

Ethical and Non-Ethical Topics

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this tutorial we will be looking at how ethics is distinguished from other ways of evaluating human action and behavior. Our discussion will break down like this:

1. The Role 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.

There are other practices in our lives that appear to be doing something similar to ethics, but in fact have different roles in society. Law, social convention (or etiquette), and religion all offer perspectives from which to judge people's actions and behaviors. The illustration bellow distinguishes these from ethics.



These different practices are often confused. For instance, commentators and public personalities often express disapproval of people that have alternative lifestyles. Although this may be presented as moral judgment, it is usually just disapproval of anyone who doesn't follow social convention.

This confusion of social convention with morality can cloud our understanding of ethics.

➔ **EXAMPLE** It was once widely believed to be wrong for women to vote. In the United States, for instance, it was not until the 19th amendment (ratified on August 18, 1920) that women finally won the right to vote.

Many may have thought that it was morally wrong for women to vote. But this was just an attachment to social convention. Once social convention is challenged, important social change can occur.

2. Ethics and Other Practices

It is not always easy to distinguish the aims of ethics from other practices. One reason for this is that there is sometimes overlap between them. For instance, consider the following examples where ethics is in agreement with law. But also pay attention to where disagreement arises.

	Ethics	Law
Agree	It is morally wrong to kill.	It is illegal to kill.
	It is morally wrong to steal.	It is illegal to steal.
Disagree	It is morally wrong to betray a friend's trust.	It is not illegal to betray a friend's trust.
	It is morally wrong to neglect your parents in old age.	It is not illegal to neglect your parents in old age.

Similarly, consider the agreement and disagreement between ethics and social convention.

	Ethics	Social Convention
Agree	It is moral to protect your children from danger.	It is conventional for parents to protect their children.
	It is moral to respect others' privacy.	It is conventional to respect others' privacy.
Disagree	It is not morally wrong for a man to wear a dress.	It is against convention for a man to wear a dress.
	It is morally wrong to profit from others' misfortune.	It is conventional to profit from foreclosure.

Finally, compare ethics and religion in terms of the agreement and disagreement they reveal on certain issues.

	Ethics	Religion
Agree	It is morally wrong to commit adultery.	Many religions forbid adultery.
	It is moral to help strangers in need.	Religions encourage helping strangers.
	It is not a moral obligation to love God.	To love God is often a religious demand.

3. Further Distinguishing Ethics and Non-Ethics

As we have seen, different situations or actions receive different treatment by ethics, law, social convention, and religion. Whatever action or behavior we want to evaluate will be addressed differently depending upon which perspective we approach it from.

Consider the issue of alcohol consumption for instance. You can find below some of the different questions or considerations that will be raised by ethics, law, social convention, and religion.



SUMMARY

We started this tutorial by looking at **the role of ethics** in society and how it differs from other practices. Then we went into more detail about the differences between **ethics and other practices**, namely law, social convention, and religion. Finally, we ended by **further distinguishing ethics and non-ethics** through a comparison of the various considerations that the question of alcohol consumption raises.