Introduction to Philosophical Ethics

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this tutorial we will begin with a review of philosophy, before seeing how ethics is a philosophical pursuit, and considering how we are to be ethical in our lives. Our discussion will break down like this:

1. Review of Philosophy
2. Ethics and Philosophy
3. Ethics and Everyday Life

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1. Review of Philosophy

To begin with, recall that philosophy is the pursuit of truth. This means philosophy is not just the collection of information. Rather, it places the highest importance on how we go about discovering whether or not something is true.

Here are some of the ways philosophy typically attempts to secure truth:

1. Using reasoning and logical arguments

2. Maintaining consistency between our actions and beliefs

3. Consistently applying our standards of judgment or evaluation

4. Guarding against the biasing influence of our passions

It is not just the way of pursuing truth that distinguishes philosophy. It is also the type of truths it pursues that makes it different from other disciplines (such as science). Philosophy helps us understand things that we cannot know just by looking at the physical world.

⤷ **EXAMPLE** You are reading or listening to this tutorial. A scientist could explain the way your body (e.g. your eyes, ears, etc.) enables you to do this. But philosophy will approach this in a different way: it will ask "what are your reasons for doing this?". In other words, it will ask for the ideals or goals that motivate your actions (e.g. self-improvement, pursuit of knowledge, etc.).

Thinking about the reasons we have for doing things, and questioning whether or not we think they are good reasons, requires us to go beyond mere observation and instead use arguments and critical thinking.

⭐ **BIG IDEA**

As you can see, this supports our definition of philosophy as the pursuit of truths that cannot be determined wholly empirically.

2. Ethics and Philosophy

As a branch of philosophy, ethics shares the pursuit of truth and the methods of doing so with philosophy. In particular, **ethics** wants to find out what values we should have through rigorous investigation and logical argument.

You can see clearly how ethics is a philosophical inquiry by asking some of the most basic ethical questions.

IN CONTEXT

If someone asked you "what is the good?", where in the world would you find "the good"? It is not something you can pick up or put under a microscope. The best you could do empirically would be to point to something that you believe is an instance of the good, say someone giving to charity.

But there are many ways of being good, and giving to charity would only be one. What we wanted to know is what the good is, not one instance of it.

In this context, not only would you have failed to determine the good, but you would also have assumed what the good is in the first place. How else could you have picked out an instance of the good if you didn't already have a conception of the good? In order to know if you really did pick out an instance of the good you would need to first use reason to determine what counts as the good.

Ethics

The branch of philosophy that analyzes and defends concepts of value and thereby seeks to determine right and wrong.

3. Ethics and Everyday Life

Ethics is a philosophical inquiry, but it is also essential to our everyday lives. For instance, if we didn't generally assume that everyone in our society accepts some basic moral idea, then it would be very difficult to live.

⟶ EXAMPLE Imagine people didn't generally think unjustified violence was wrong. People would be more inclined to hit others for little or no reason. In this case you would need to be much more cautious and less trusting.
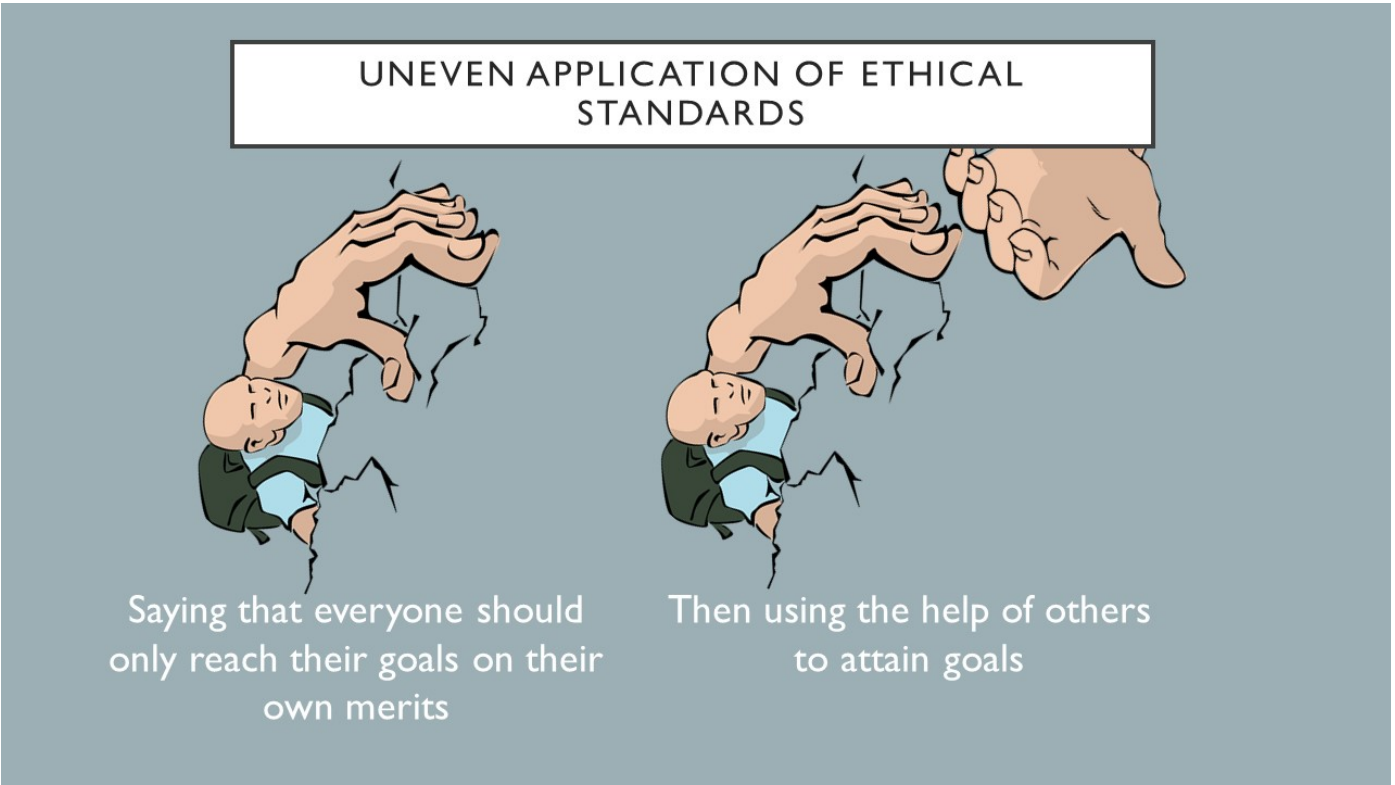
Keep in mind that ethics is primarily supposed to be a guide for our actions. This means that it is supposed to help us be better persons; not to give our past behaviors or beliefs the appearance of being good.

This is part of a more general point about ethics: it is supposed to guide our actions for the better, not to offer an excuse for our own interests. One way that ethics can be misused is when someone claims that happiness is best in one situation, but then claims that human flourishing is best in another situation.

⟶ EXAMPLE Say you have a child at school and you don't want to drive them every day. You tell them you will get them a car because it will make them happy to have independence. But this independence leads them to neglect their studies. You then say that they should work harder because they will develop better skills, even though they won't be having as much fun.

In this example two different ethical frameworks have been used to achieve self-interested results: happiness was held up as a standard to get one result, and flourishing was held up as a standard to get another result.

This can be avoided if you pursue ethics systematically. That is, you can guard against self-interestedly distorting ethics if you stick to a single framework and apply it consistently. This is also achieved through making sure you apply an ethical standard in the same way, in every case. Here is an example of not applying a standard in the same way in order to serve self-interest.

UNEVEN APPLICATION OF ETHICAL STANDARDS

Saying that everyone should only reach their goals on their own merits

Then using the help of others to attain goals

SUMMARY

We started this tutorial with a **review of philosophy**, considering some of the core characteristics of philosophical inquiry. Then we looked at the shared goals and methods of **ethics and philosophy**.

Finally, we saw the relationship between **ethics and everyday life** by emphasizing that ethics is intended to guide our action for moral ends, not our self-interest.

📄 TERMS TO KNOW

Ethics

The branch of philosophy that analyzes and defends concepts of value and thereby seeks to determine right and wrong.