

# ETHICS & MORAL PHILOSOPHY

Emrah BOZKURT



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## INTRODUCTION

Humans have a value system that they adopt, whether consciously or unconsciously, in their relationships with other humans, nature, or God. This value system is referred to as ethics or morality. The purpose of this philosophical inquiry is not to form any judgments or direct towards what should be, but rather to delineate the existing concepts, and strive to present them as wholes. It should be noted that one of the greatest functions of philosophy is to draw the boundaries of existing concepts or attempt to do so. Therefore, we will examine what ethics and morality are and what they are not. The question of why these concepts are important may arise. Their importance stems from the fact that they shape the systems that guide the lives of all individuals, and many philosophers relate the establishment of these systems to the creation of institutions. Since the majority experiences this guidance unconsciously, they are not fully aware of the extent to which these concepts are important.

Although they may remain within the realm of everyday habits without fully grasping their essence. What is truly important here is that these concepts can be consciously or unconsciously applied by individuals who have the power to change the system. When these concepts and methods are known, it becomes possible to direct the system that guides your life more consciously towards its purpose. Therefore, many philosophers, who can be called ethicists, have created or attempted to create ethical systems. This task is not only carried out by philosophers; cultures encompass it as a whole in the form of customs throughout historical processes, or religions incorporate this system within themselves. The fundamental purpose of all of these is to direct human beings towards a purpose. Aristotle represents a break from the past in terms of ethics, while Kant changes the purpose of the Aristotelian system, Nietzsche takes on a different form, and Ayn Rand's philosophy of Objectivism brings a completely different perspective. Overall, this work encompasses the historical status of ethics, one of the fundamental subjects that philosophy examines, and the philosophical perspectives of the philosophers that have caused this change. In general, apart from Nietzsche's nihilistic attitude, it is possible to divide the others into two groups: one that places reason at the center and advocates that the priority of the individual is oneself, which can be referred to as selfishness, as defined by objectivists, and the other that is primarily based on conscience, which the opposing side characterizes as "*self-sacrifice*". Of course, these are two opposite extremes, and there are many structures consisting of various shades of gray in between. Now, let us begin this long philosophical journey by defining ethics and morality.

## **Ethics and Morality**

First, let us examine the current perception of these concepts: the difference between these two concepts may not be immediately apparent at first glance, and it may even be considered unnecessary to make such a distinction. However, when looking at questions and issues related to human beings and life, the importance of this distinction becomes evident. In daily life, it is observed that the concept of morality is not sufficiently clear, its content is not given enough attention, and it is not thoroughly contemplated when considering both the thoughts or judgments expressed by individuals and the actions they take. Generally, morality is understood as a set of evaluative criteria or rules and principles that are contingent upon a particular community, place, and time. Actions or individuals are deemed moral or immoral, ethical or unethical, based on the prevailing criteria. In this perception, ethics and morality are seen as the same thing. However, upon delving into the subject, it becomes apparent that this is not the case. Therefore, the term "*ethics*" is used where "*morality*" should be used, and even in the context of professions, codes of ethics have been established. Here, there is a misuse of terminology; professions cannot have ethics, but they can have morality.

Let's take a look at the etymology of Ethics and Morality. "*It is worth mentioning that the term morality is also used interchangeably with ethics. The word ethics comes from the Greek ethos, and the word morality comes from the Latin mores/mos. Both ethos and mores/mos refer to customs, traditions, habits, established emotional states, character, disposition, and so on. The term morality in our language, which corresponds to the English term morals, also derives from the Arabic root hulk, which encompasses notions of customs, traditions, habits, character, and disposition*".<sup>1</sup> From an etymological perspective, ethics and morality may seem to be the same thing. However, as we mentioned earlier, they are not the same. The distinction between them is not an etymological distinction but a philosophical one; ethics is philosophically distinct from morality.

Let's look at some definitions of morality. You should be aware that these definitions vary greatly, so we will provide a few examples:

*"Morality is a way of life regulated by individual, personal, or collective tendencies, thoughts, beliefs, customs, habits, traditions, etc. specific to a historical period, and it encompasses values, commands, norms, and prohibitions that have become established and institutionalized."*

*"Morality is a lifestyle and set of rules that have been imposed, even by coercion or force, by an authority such as religion, the state, or a community, without critical examination or questioning, and it is based on the conviction or enforcement of certain ways of living and rules."*

*"Morality is a collection of consciously chosen or unconsciously adopted values, aims, and designs in life."*

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<sup>1</sup> Doğan Özlem, *Etik: Ahlak Felsefesi*, Istanbul 2013, p.175.

*"Morality is a domain of evaluations that vary in scope and content from one nation to another, from one era to another, and from one world of life to another."*

*"Morality is a collection of attitudes, tendencies, or actions that constitute the solidity of one's character."*

*"Morality is the innate nature, temperament, disposition that is primarily binding in the realization of values in life."<sup>2</sup>*

You are probably familiar with these definitions of morality or similar ones. You may have noticed that they are fundamentally rooted in historicism, as they refer to a sequence of values that emerge in a particular historical process and are embedded within culture, even playing a fundamental role in shaping culture itself.

Let us not overlook the truth stated by Karl Marx in the formation of culture: *the base determines the superstructure*; that is, the mode of production determines culture. Here, production is generally understood as material production, but this is not entirely accurate. As you can imagine, it also encompasses the production of thought, and fundamentally, all these moral structures are the outcomes of thought production. The appropriation of these structural networks begins from birth, and individuals find themselves within them, obliged to embrace these structures individually and collectively. As one begins to reflect on these matters, one may enter the stage of choice and step outside of this structure. However, this is not always possible and often challenging. After all, as you would agree, birds born in cages consider flying a sickness. To avoid any confusion and since it is not directly relevant, let us conclude the discussion on the foundation of culture.

Let us return to our main topic, and based on these definitions, I would like to draw your attention to something: we have two types of morality, individual and social morality. Individual morality refers to a morality that individuals develop and adhere to based on their own choices, preferences, and inclinations. However, even if we say that individuals develop it themselves, it is not possible to claim that it is independent of or unaffected by the social dimension. In other words, while you can construct and develop your own morality, it is not possible to exclude conscious or unconscious elements of social morality from this framework, nor does it imply that you entirely construct it from it. Similarly, it would not be accurate to claim that you consciously shape the entire structure of your moral framework; the shaping process also involves semi-conscious or unconscious attachments. On the other hand, social morality encompasses stability and is the reason why thinkers and politicians often adhere to existing social morality. Their existence is largely dependent on this stability. Social morality, as a set of values, rules, and customs that regulate the relationships between individuals living in a society, plays a crucial role in establishing and maintaining social order. It is an essential element for stability and continuity in society.

As a social phenomenon, morality, as stated in one of the definitions, varies from nation to nation, from period to period, and from culture to culture, and it changes within the historical

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<sup>2</sup> See loc., pp. 175-177.

process. To put it more clearly, it is not possible for morality to be supranational, transcultural, or transhistorical. You may have thought, "*What do you mean there can't be a universal morality?*" Let us answer without causing you doubt: no, there cannot be. This may surprise you, so let us provide further clarification. Universal principles may exist, but the existence of a universal morality is not possible. Even if the principles are the same, their application varies from period to period and from society to society. This is because, as we have emphasized before, it is shaped by the elements that constitute society. We are talking about a morality that resides within culture, and since cultures cannot be supranational, morality cannot surpass them.

You may be finding it difficult to grasp this point, so let us elaborate a bit more: our current understanding of justice is not the same as that of an individual in Ottoman society. The same applies within institutions. Normally, justice is a principle that should be present everywhere, and morality reflects this attitude. Something we consider unjust in our society may not be seen as such in other societies. Likewise, something we currently label as immoral may not be seen as such in another society or even in the Ottoman society of a different era. We hope you can grasp the point we are trying to emphasize, but let us solidify it with an example: today, a woman wearing a mini skirt in our society would not be considered immoral, but in the Ottoman society, it would be quite the opposite. Wearing such attire would not be accepted from the beginning.

Let us also emphasize relativism without getting into conflicts. Just as there are segments of society that do not perceive a woman wearing a mini skirt as immoral, there can be another segment in the same place and time that sees it as immoral. This is indeed an observed reality. As you can foresee, there is also a generational conflict at play here. We can provide many examples like this, and you can observe and discover them through thought. Regarding the issue of history, we need to mention a few things. We stated that morality is embedded within culture, and culture is in a state of motion, evolving through historical processes. It encompasses many elements, and within these elements, morality can shape itself. Therefore, it cannot exist beyond history; it derives its source from history. You might ask, "*Does this apply to religions as well?*" Let's differentiate between those that are heavenly and those that are not. Non-heavenly religions are purely moral teachings, and you may have heard them referred to as moral religions in a general sense. Heavenly religions, on the other hand, not only include morality but also encompass it with the purpose of instilling a specific moral structure.<sup>3</sup> However, none of these are independent of historical processes. The teachings brought by heavenly religions also encompass historical progression, and their application, as we mentioned before, varies from society to society. It is not difficult to observe this. Taking Islam as an example, examining the difference in the application of the same moral teachings within two Muslim communities will suffice. When we say "*not independent of historical processes,*" we are not implying that religions themselves are historical. Let's distinguish between the two. There is indeed a current of thought that assumes this, but when we say "*not independent of historical processes,*" we refer to their application, not their formation. Understanding this subtle nuance may not be immediately possible, and we will not attempt to

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<sup>3</sup> For detailed information on the lifestyle and ethical dimension of religion and the concept of religion, see: Emrah Bozkurt, "Din Kavramı," *Havâss*, Year: 1, 2017, Issue: 1, pp. 34-55.

explain it now as it requires much contemplation and writing. Since it is beyond the scope of our current topic, we leave it to you to ponder. Now let us continue with ethical definitions.

*"While morality is a phenomenon that is experienced on an individual or societal level, ethics is the field where a comprehensive philosophical examination of this phenomenon is conducted. In this sense, ethics can also be referred to as moral philosophy. Ethical philosophy is the philosophical discipline that makes morality and the plurality of individual moralities the subject of theoretical investigation and criticism as a phenomenon belonging to the domain of praxis. Defending a particular moral understanding falls within the realm of morality. On the other hand, developing an impartial and objective mode of thinking about moralities and moral understandings, describing moralities in terms of their characteristics, is one of the main tasks of ethics. In this respect, ethics can be called descriptive ethics."*<sup>4</sup>

Ethics does not provide moral judgments; it analyzes what is meant by these judgments. In this regard, ethics also appears as a *"logic of moral judgments"*. Morality establishes rules and norms; ethics, on the other hand, is critical. In this aspect, it is also referred to as *"critical ethics"*. Although there is not as much diversity in ethical definitions as there is in moral definitions, there is still some variation. As you can understand from the definitions, ethics is a philosophical discipline that goes beyond thinking about morality as individual moralities or moral teachings. It primarily undertakes the task of analyzing the meanings of concepts such as good, evil, happiness, friendship, utility, pleasure, will, virtue, duty, obligation, value, responsibility, freedom, justice, equality, obligation, necessity at the most general level. Although we say at a general level, based on the example of Aristotle, who is both an ethicist and a moralist, we can also say that it delves into much detail. Aristotle thoroughly examines the concepts we mentioned earlier and more in his ethical works; his goal is to achieve *"happiness"*. He believed that achieving happiness is possible through finding the mean in a proportional manner, which he considered to be virtue.

Let us try to help you understand what is meant by providing a few quotes from Aristotle on this topic. Aristotle disagrees with Socrates regarding the source of happiness and criticizes him, and we believe that he is right in his criticism. Aristotle says, *"Now, Socrates thought that the goal is to know virtue, and he investigated what justice is, what courage is, in short, he inquired about each part of virtue. It was appropriate for him to do so because he believed that virtue is knowledge and, therefore, if one knows what justice is, one will be just at the same time. Indeed, when we learn geometry or architecture, we become a geometrician or an architect. That is why he was investigating what virtue is, not how it is formed or what it depends on. However, this method is valid in theoretical sciences. Indeed, the purpose of astronomy, natural science, and geometry is nothing more than to know and examine the nature of the objects that are the subject of these sciences - of course, there is no obstacle to them being beneficial in a practical sense in many necessary aspects for us"*.<sup>5</sup>

Did it catch your attention? It is stated that Socrates' idea of *"becoming through knowledge"* is valid only in theoretical sciences. As Aristotle says, the natural sciences are

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<sup>4</sup> Doğan Özlem, pp.178-179.

<sup>5</sup> Aristoteles, Eudemos'a Etik, trans. Saffet Babur, Ankara 2015, pp.15.

theoretical; their existence is sustained not by being true but by being valid, and when their validity ends, they are bound to change. Theoretical sciences continue their function through their validity and evolve by changing; as science progresses, theories have to undergo changes. Aristotle does not desire knowledge of objects; he thinks that the role of knowing them in attaining happiness is not very significant. He traces the path of being able to become: "... So, surely it is a fine thing to know each of the fine things, but, as regards virtue, to know what it is and how it comes to be, rather than how it is defined, is the more important thing. Because what we want is not just to know what virtue is, but to be virtuous; not just to know what justice is, but to be just; just as we want, not just to know what health is, but to be healthy, and, not just to know what fitness is, but to be fit."<sup>6</sup> You probably agree with Aristotle's logic, as it is the way it should be. As we can observe from ourselves or our surroundings, knowing something and actually being that thing are not the same. After all, knowing loses its significance if one cannot embody it. It merely results in behavior that pretends to be so. Let's set Aristotle aside for now and continue with the concept of ethics. Ethics is a sub-discipline of philosophy created to examine moral values. As we mentioned before, its philosophical dimension is structured in this way.

Although etymologically synonymous with morality, from a philosophical perspective, it is morality itself; the philosophy of morality. Morality and ethics are distinct from each other; while one is given from an individual standpoint, the other defines two separate stances or domains that are to be constructed. Morality is both an independent field from philosophy and forms the foundation of one of philosophy's main disciplines. What we mean by morality as an independent field is a system of rules; it is an array of action rules, norms, and value systems created to regulate human behavior and relationships with one another, as we mentioned earlier. Let's reiterate the source of morality: it is the result of evolving and dynamic rules in the historical process. Here, you should be aware of two sources: religions and social contracts. They are either a set of rules regulating actions among individuals brought about by divine intervention or the rules created by individuals themselves, which we refer to as social contracts.

As you have understood, morality encompasses all the elements of norms and rules that an individual encounters, with the individual being the perceiver in this context. Morality is largely local, meaning it expresses the values and rules developed by the individual's community or society, the wisdom of life. From this perspective, morality and moral behavior are factual and historically experienced, specific practices. Ethics, on the other hand, is the theory of this practice. Ethics is the philosophical discipline that discusses and examines this moral life, aiming at the values and ideals of morality in question. Morality is the practice of action, while ethics is its theory; in this sense, morality is local while ethics is universal. Ethics also has an influential role in developing morality: it not only integrates existing values and rules into life but also presents them intellectually by discussing, questioning, and providing foundations for them. Thus, we have delineated the boundaries between morality and ethics. Now, let us briefly focus on the moralist and ethicist.

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<sup>6</sup> See loc., pp.15.

The confusion between the concepts of ethics and morality is also present here, and it is not easy to distinguish the ethicist from the moralist. To better understand this situation, we will first separate them from each other and then explain why they cannot be separated. We are aware that this sentence may appear contradictory. However, we assure you that when our discussion on this topic is completed, the sentence that seems contradictory will reveal its true meaning. An ethicist refers to the person who engages in moral philosophy. They examine and criticize practical moral systems, striving to determine what they are and what they are not. One thing to note here is the critical approach and the distinction between what is and what ought to be. The ethicist, as we mentioned earlier, focuses more on the values within the moral system as a whole. On the other hand, a moralist is defined as the person who forms or aims to form the systems that the ethicist examines. In other words, the moralist is the one who constructs the morality framework, presents a goal to humanity, and designs the ways to achieve that goal.

As we mentioned, we have distinguished these two types from each other. Now let's understand the true meaning of our seemingly contradictory sentence. An ethicist approaching an existing moral system questions whether it is as it should be. In this process of inquiry, they draw upon various sources such as history, customs, religion, and also include human values such as reason and conscience. During this inquiry, they bring criticisms to the structures and make distinctions between what is and what ought to be. The ethicist who enters into this process suddenly finds themselves in the position of a moralist. Normally, an ethicist cannot engage in the distinction between what is and what ought to be; they should only examine what exists. However, achieving this is not very possible. As soon as they offer criticisms, they step outside of that realm and present their own views. Naturally, they have entered the endeavor of constructing their own moral system. Therefore, the ethicist and the moralist become intertwined. Hence, it seems difficult to separate these two types from each other.

Among the examples embodying this character are philosophers such as Aristotle, Kant, and Kierkegaard. These philosophers, in addition to being ethicists and examining existing moral systems, have sought to construct their own moral systems by aiming for an ideal. You must have noticed the distinction between what is and what ought to be. These philosophers, while examining and criticizing what exists, have presented what ought to be based on them. At the core of all these moral teachings, ethicists/moralists emphasize the importance of education. Of course, it should be noted that education here is not limited to external influences. As Krishnamurti also emphasized, "*Education is not merely learning about scientific subjects; it is self-education*".<sup>7</sup> We can tell you the well-known truth about education: Virtue, which is almost universally regarded as the central goal, can only be attained through this process. However, it is the individual's own effort that leads to the acquisition of virtue. An individual who has attained virtue to the highest degree is virtuous but not necessarily the best among the virtuous; the determining factor of being the best is what we refer to as external virtue, or luck.

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<sup>7</sup> Jiddu Krishnamurti, *Eğitim Üzerine Mektuplar*, trans. Buket Dilden, Istanbul 1994, pp.18.

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