Ethics or Morality?

Many authors use the terms ethical and moral interchangeably, either unaware or dismissive of different connotations carried by the words.[1] The Latin "moral" was coined by Cicero to translate "ethical" from Greek philosophy so that at the start the two words were equivalent. But after two thousand years of history in classical and modern languages there is likely to be divergence in their connotations. What follows is based on historical facts and some speculation on the connotations carried by the words today.

The first thing to note is that the two words share a mix-up in their origins. Hannah Arendt says that the fact we use "ethical" and "moral" to address questions of right/wrong, good/bad is indicative of our confusion in this area.[2] What she is referring to is that etymologically ethical and moral simply refer to customs or habits. "Ethical" was used in a phrase referring to *excellence* in habits or customs. Similarly, the Latin derived "moral" was the modifier of a word meaning *virtue* or strength. Ironically, the subordinate words, ethical and moral, were retained for articulating a code of right and wrong while the important ideas of excellence and strength were eclipsed.

A further problem is then reflected in the fact that we have lost the difference between two kinds of excellence/virtue: intellectual and moral. Aristotle notes that "intellectual virtue owes both its inception and its growth chiefly to instruction, and for this reason needs time and experience. Moral goodness, on the other hand, is the result of habit, from which it actually got its name, being a slight modification of the word *ethos*."[3] Intellectual virtue should give direction to moral virtue. Naming issues of good/bad, right/wrong as ethical or moral had the effect of practically eliminating intellectual excellence/virtue, a problem that still haunts us.

The most important influence on our contemporary meaning of "moral" was a long incubation in the Christian religion. "Moral" still touches a religious nerve for many people and carries some of the meaning that Christian theology gave to moral virtue. In contrast, the most important influence on "ethical" was modern enlightenment's attempt to find a foundation for judgments of right or wrong outside Christianity. Although the term ethical is closely associated with the work of Aristotle, modern ethics was more profoundly connected to Socrates. Ethics was an attempt to recover the intellectual or rational basis of action that was obscured by a Christian morality.

The word ethical had disappeared in Latin and western languages until the late middle ages. There were no treatises on ethics in the Christian medieval period. There is some logic, therefore, in the fact that histories of ethics often jump from ancient Greece to the seventeenth century with little discussion of the centuries in between. Henry Sidgwick's 1892 *Outlines of the History of Ethics* has one chapter on "Christianity and Medieval Ethics" in which the term "ethics" hardly appears. John Dewey's history of ethics has three pages to cover the period from the Romans to the Renaissance. Alasdair McIntyre's 1966 book, *A Short History of Ethics*, has one ten-page chapter entitled "Christianity."[4] Historians looking in the Middle Ages for ethics do not find it and they may dismiss medieval morality as part of theology. The problem is that secular ethics in modern times cannot be well understood without grasping the influence of Christian moral teaching.

In English, "moral" remained the more prominent term up to the nineteenth century. In David Hume's 1751 book, *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals,* reason is described as the slave of passions.[5] Much of modern ethics is an attempt to escape from that bind. Can ethical reasoning be so developed as to keep passion in a subordinate role? "Ethics" became the ascendant term in the latter half of the nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century.

In today's language, differences by class, religion, and age are a residue of this ethical/moral history. In regard to class, every modern profession has a code of *ethics*, a body of ideals and general principles that are supposed to guide the professional. In contrast, the laboring class have codes of *moral conduct* that are much more specific about laborers showing up for work, following the rules on the job, and being paid for what they actually do.

Concerning religious differences, Jews became comfortable with "ethics" as an alternative to Christian moral theology. In the twentieth century, Protestant Christianity constructed an academic field called "Christian Ethics." Roman Catholics, at least until the Second Vatican Council, continued to have a moral code based on moral theology. Thus, Christian Ethics did not include Catholics; moral theology did not include Protestants. That sharp division has been blurred in the last few decades but differences remain in the way Protestants and Catholics use "ethical" and "moral."

As for differences by age, ethical and moral differ in application to children and adults. Children are thought to be in need of moral rules and moral training. Explanation of the rules may or may not be available but the rules must be followed. The gradual understanding of these moral rules was named moral development. The psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg practically owned the term "moral development" for several decades. Kohlberg hardly ever used the term ethics.[6] He was following a path laid out by Emil Durkheim's 1900 book, *Moral Education* and Jean Piaget's 1932 book, *The Moral Judgment of the Child*. A child develops morally; if successful in that development, he or she becomes an ethical adult.

Ethics today is the name of an academic subject taught in philosophy departments and professional schools of the university. Until the nineteenth century, colleges offered a course on moral philosophy; it was often the capstone of the curriculum and taught by the college's president. Today the term moral is likely to appear in the university only in the psychology department or in the school of education.

The adjectives moral and ethical seem close in meaning. Differences quickly emerge with other forms of the words. Most people would recognize a difference between "moralist" and "ethicist." By the twentieth century, moralist had connotations of someone commenting, often with disapproval, about the way things are. An ethicist, in contrast, is someone laying claim to a philosophical or scientific system of right and wrong. A contrast is even stronger with the verb moralize. There is no parallel term ethicize. Moralizing and moralistic are spoken of with condescension by the intellectual class. Erik Erikson, who distinguishes between moral rules based on fear and ethical rules based on ideals, says at one point apologetically: "It does not seem easy to speak of ethical subjects without indulging in some moralizing."[7]

The word that would seem to correspond to the noun "ethics" would be "morals." Until the nineteenth century, morals had some academic standing and there were philosophical treatises on morals. Today, "morals" has a pinched meaning similar to "moralize" and is often restricted to a sexual connotation. A politician caught selling influence will be accused of an ethics violation. If he is caught with a prostitute, he might be brought up on a morals charge.

The subordinate position of the "moral" partially explains the frequent dismissal of moral concerns in international relations and foreign policy. Morals, it is assumed, are fixed rules for private individuals and not to be imposed from the outside on the tough decisions of government leaders. The ethical, as principles to think about, is occasionally entertained politically. George Kennan, the foremost U. S. diplomat for many decades, explicitly linked morality with religion.[8] He found himself in a bind because, while disavowing the moral in foreign policies, he was still offended by anyone saying that he was "advocating an amoral or even immoral foreign policy."[9] A distinction between ethical and moral might have helped.

Terry Nardin, editor of *Traditions of International Ethics*, says in his introduction "we should be particularly careful to avoid defining ethics as moral philosophy." He writes that "for the sake of clarity I will use 'ethics' to refer to a wide range of considerations affecting choice and action, and 'moral' for the more limited realm of proper conduct." The institution of morality, he says, is concerned with rules, the ethical with ideas and ends, and "especially with the outcomes of action."[10] Nardin's problem seems to be with "moral philosophy" rather than "moral" but he uses the terms as equivalent. He rightly says that international problems cannot be solved by philosophers and he wants the conversation to include people whose judgments of right and wrong do not derive from Greek philosophy. The concern is admirable but "ethics" is derived from Greek philosophy." And concern with "outcomes of action" is linked to morality at least as closely as it is to ethics.

For describing the possibility of nonviolent living, a dialectical interplay of ethical and moral, with their slight difference in meaning, might be helpful. If one accepts the difference in meaning by age, then one can say that an adult needs to bring together the morality of childhood chastened by the emergence of ethical criticism in adolescence and beyond. Persons and institutions need to act ethically, that is, as agents trying to do their best. But they should not dismiss rules of morality as too simplistic because they derive from tradition, religion or childhood training.

In chapter three I will employ this distinction of ethical and moral in relation to violence. My argument briefly stated is that the first *ethical* imperative is: Do violence to no one. This ethical imperative does not have any built-in limits. The "no one" refers to all human beings in their settlements, to nonhuman animals that can suffer, and to every other living being. The intention is to avoid directly and indirectly causing harm to any being in the world of the living. An ethical prohibition of violence ought to be absolute.

In contrast to this absolute ethical principle, the first *moral* imperative is: Personal actions should be nonviolent and directed toward a more peaceful world. This moral imperative has to work with degrees of success in a world of surrounding violence. Care for human settlements inevitably does harm to members of other species. And trying one's best to do good for some

humans is more often than not at odds with the good of other humans. In both cases, negotiations are needed to reduce if not totally avoid violence.

An immediate corollary of this first moral imperative is the need for confession, apology, and forgiveness. These practices do not usually show up in ethics textbooks and perhaps do not belong there. But for moral actions that result in unintended harm, humans need a way to deal with their sense of guilt and failure. Both natural persons and artificial persons (nations, churches, and business organizations) need rituals for asking forgiveness and receiving a response from the injured party. Our main ritual is found in the court system but it is an inadequate venue for many moral failings.

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[1] Henry Sidgwick says in his classic nineteenth-century work *Outlines of the History of Ethics* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1988), 11: "I may observe that the term 'moral' is commonly used as synonym with 'ethical' (*moralis* being the Latin translation of *ethikos*) and I shall so use in the following pages."

[2] Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind: Thinking* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), 5.

[3] Aristotle, *Ethics* 1103a14.

[4] Sidgwick, *Outlines of the History of Ethics*, 109-57; Alasdair McIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics* (New York: Collier Books, 1966), 110-20; John Dewey, *Ethics*, rev. ed. (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1932), 142-45.

[5] David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), sec. 134.

[6] Lawrence Kohlberg, *The Psychology of Moral Development* (San Francisco: Harpercollins, 1984).

[7] Erik Erikson, *Insight and Responsibility: Lectures on the Ethical Implications of Psychoanalytical Insight* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1964), 243.

[8] George Kennan, "Morality and Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs,* 64 (1985/86), 217.

[9] Kennan, "Morality and Foreign Policy," 205.

[10] Terry Nardin and David Mapel, eds., *Traditions of International Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 2-4.