

3.2: What Is Ethics?

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Explain how both individuals and institutions can be viewed as ethical or unethical.
- Explain how law and ethics are different, and why a good reputation can be more important than legal compliance.

Most of those who write about ethics do not make a clear distinction between ethics and morality. The question of what is “right” or “morally correct” or “ethically correct” or “morally desirable” in any situation is variously phrased, but all of the words and phrases are after the same thing: what act is “better” in a moral or ethical sense than some other act? People sometimes speak of morality as something personal but view ethics as having wider social implications. Others see morality as the subject of a field of study, that field being ethics. Ethics would be morality as applied to any number of subjects, including journalistic ethics, business ethics, or the ethics of professionals such as doctors, attorneys, and accountants. We will venture a definition of *ethics*, but for our purposes, *ethics* and *morality* will be used as equivalent terms.

People often speak about the ethics or morality of individuals and also about the morality or ethics of corporations and nations. There are clearly differences in the kind of moral responsibility that we can fairly ascribe to corporations and nations; we tend to see individuals as having a soul, or at least a conscience, but there is no general agreement that nations or corporations have either. Still, our ordinary use of language does point to something significant: if we say that some nations are “evil” and others are “corrupt,” then we make moral judgments about the quality of actions undertaken by the governments or people of that nation. For example, if North Korea is characterized by the US president as part of an “axis of evil,” or if we conclude that WorldCom or Enron acted “unethically” in certain respects, then we are making judgments that their collective actions are morally deficient.

In talking about morality, we often use the word *good*; but that word can be confusing. If we say that Microsoft is a “good company,” we may be making a statement about the investment potential of Microsoft stock, or their preeminence in the market, or their ability to win lawsuits or appeals or to influence administrative agencies. Less likely, though possibly, we may be making a statement about the civic virtue and corporate social responsibility of Microsoft. In the first set of judgments, we use the word *good* but mean something other than ethical or moral; only in the second instance are we using the word *good* in its ethical or moral sense.

A word such as *good* can embrace ethical or moral values but also nonethical values. If I like Daniel and try to convince you what a “good guy” he is, you may ask all sorts of questions: Is he good-looking? Well-off? Fun to be with? Humorous? Athletic? Smart? I could answer all of those questions with a yes, yet you would still not know any of his moral qualities. But if I said that he was honest, caring, forthright, and diligent, volunteered in local soup kitchens, or tithed to the church, many people would see Daniel as having certain ethical or moral qualities. If I said that he keeps the Golden Rule as well as anyone I know, you could conclude that he is an ethical person. But if I said that he is “always in control” or “always at the top of his game,” you would probably not make inferences or assumptions about his character or ethics.

There are three key points here:

1. Although morals and ethics are not precisely measurable, people generally have similar reactions about what actions or conduct can rightly be called ethical or moral.
2. As humans, we need and value ethical people and want to be around them.
3. Saying that someone or some organization is law-abiding does not mean the same as saying a person or company is ethical.

Here is a cautionary note: for individuals, it is far from easy to recognize an ethical problem, have a clear and usable decision-making process to deal it, and then have the moral courage to do what’s right. All of that is even more difficult within a business organization, where corporate employees vary in their motivations, loyalties, commitments, and character. There is no universally accepted way for developing an organization where employees feel valued, respected, and free to openly disagree; where the actions of top management are crystal clear; and where all the employees feel loyal and accountable to one another.

Before talking about how ethics relates to law, we can conclude that ethics is the study of morality—“right” and “wrong”—in the context of everyday life, organizational behaviors, and even how society operates and is governed.

How Do Law and Ethics Differ?

There is a difference between legal compliance and moral excellence. Few would choose a professional service, health care or otherwise, because the provider had a record of perfect legal compliance, or always following the letter of the law. There are many professional ethics codes, primarily because people realize that law prescribes only a minimum of morality and does not provide purpose or goals that can mean excellent service to customers, clients, or patients.

Business ethicists have talked for years about the intersection of law and ethics. Simply put, what is legal is not necessarily ethical. Conversely, what is ethical is not necessarily legal. There are lots of legal maneuvers that are not all that ethical; the well-used phrase “legal loophole” suggests as much.

Here are two propositions about business and ethics. Consider whether they strike you as true or whether you would need to know more in order to make a judgment.

- Individuals and organizations have reputations. (For an individual, moral reputation is most often tied to others’ perceptions of his or her character: is the individual honest, diligent, reliable, fair, and caring? The reputation of an organization is built on the goodwill that suppliers, customers, the community, and employees feel toward it. Although an organization is not a person in the usual sense, the goodwill that people feel about the organization is based on their perception of its better qualities by a variety of stakeholders: customers or clients, suppliers, investors, employees, government officials).
- The goodwill of an organization is to a great extent based on the actions it takes and on whether the actions are favorably viewed. (This goodwill is usually specifically counted in the sale of a business as an asset that the buyer pays for. While it is difficult to place a monetary value on goodwill, a firm’s good reputation will generally call for a higher evaluation in the final accounting before the sale. Legal troubles or a reputation for having legal troubles will only lessen the price for a business and will even lessen the value of the company’s stock as bad legal news comes to the public’s attention.)

Another reason to think about ethics in connection with law is that the laws themselves are meant to express some moral view. If there are legal prohibitions against cheating the Medicare program, it is because people (legislators or their agents) have collectively decided that cheating Medicare is wrong. If there are legal prohibitions against assisting someone to commit suicide, it is because there has been a group decision that doing so is immoral. Thus the law provides some important cues as to what society regards as right or wrong.

Finally, important policy issues that face society are often resolved through law, but it is important to understand the moral perspectives that underlie public debate—as, for example, in the continuing controversies over stem-cell research, medical use of marijuana, and abortion. Some ethical perspectives focus on rights, some on social utility, some on virtue or character, and some on social justice. People consciously (or, more often, unconsciously) adopt one or more of these perspectives, and even if they completely agree on the facts with an opponent, they will not change their views. Fundamentally, the difference comes down to incompatible moral perspectives, a clash of basic values. These are hot-button issues because society is divided, not so much over facts, but over basic values. Understanding the varied moral perspectives and values in public policy debates is a clarifying benefit in following or participating in these important discussions.

Why Should an Individual or a Business Entity Be Ethical?

The usual answer is that good ethics is good business. In the long run, businesses that pay attention to ethics as well as law do better; they are viewed more favorably by customers. But this is a difficult claim to measure scientifically, because “the long run” is an indistinct period of time and because there are as yet no generally accepted criteria by which ethical excellence can be measured. In addition, life is still lived in the short run, and there are many occasions when something short of perfect conduct is a lot more profitable.

Some years ago, Royal Dutch/Shell (one of the world’s largest companies) found that it was in deep trouble with the public for its apparent carelessness with the environment and human rights. Consumers were boycotting and investors were getting frightened, so the company took a long, hard look at its ethic of short-term profit maximization. Since then, changes have been made. The CEO told one group of business ethicists that the uproar had taken them by surprise; they thought they had done everything right, but it seemed there was a “ghost in the machine.” That ghost was consumers, NGOs, and the media, all of whom objected to the company’s seeming lack of moral sensitivity.

The market does respond to unethical behavior. In Section 2.4, you will read about the Sears Auto Centers case. The loss of goodwill toward Sears Auto Centers was real, even though the total amount of money lost cannot be clearly accounted for. Years

later, there are people who will not go near a Sears Auto Center; the customers who lost trust in the company will never return, and many of their children may avoid Sears Auto Centers as well.

The Arthur Andersen story is even more dramatic. A major accounting firm, Andersen worked closely with Enron in hiding its various losses through creative accounting measures. Suspiciously, Andersen's Houston office also did some shredding around the clock, appearing to cover up what it was doing for Enron. A criminal case based on this shredding resulted in a conviction, later overturned by the Supreme Court. But it was too late. Even before the conviction, many clients had found other accounting firms that were not under suspicion, and the Supreme Court's reversal came too late to save the company. Even without the conviction, Andersen would have lost significant market share.

The irony of Andersen as a poster child for overly aggressive accounting practices is that the man who founded the firm built it on integrity and straightforward practices. "Think straight, talk straight" was the company's motto. Andersen established the company's reputation for integrity over a hundred years ago by refusing to play numbers games for a potentially lucrative client.

Maximizing profits while being legally compliant is not a very inspiring goal for a business. People in an organization need some quality or excellence to strive for. By focusing on pushing the edge of what is legal, by looking for loopholes in the law that would help create short-term financial gain, companies have often learned that in the long term they are not actually satisfying the market, the shareholders, the suppliers, or the community generally.

Key Takeaway

Legal compliance is not the same as acting ethically. Your reputation, individually or corporately, depends on how others regard your actions. Goodwill is hard to measure or quantify, but it is real nonetheless and can best be protected by acting ethically.

Exercises

1. Think of a person who did something morally wrong, at least to your way of thinking. What was it? Explain to a friend of yours—or a classmate—why you think it was wrong. Does your friend agree? Why or why not? What is the basic principle that forms the basis for your judgment that it was wrong?
2. Think of a person who did something morally right, at least to your way of thinking. (This is not a matter of finding something they did well, like efficiently changing a tire, but something good.) What was it? Explain to a friend of yours—or a classmate—why you think it was right. Does your friend agree? Why or why not? What is the basic principle that forms the basis for your judgment that it was right?
3. Think of an action by a business organization (sole proprietor, partnership, or corporation) that was legal but still strikes you as wrong. What was it? Why do you think it was wrong?
4. Think of an act by an individual or a corporation that is ethical but not legal. Compare your answer with those of your classmates: were you more likely to find an example from individual action or corporate action? Do you have any thoughts as to why?

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