6
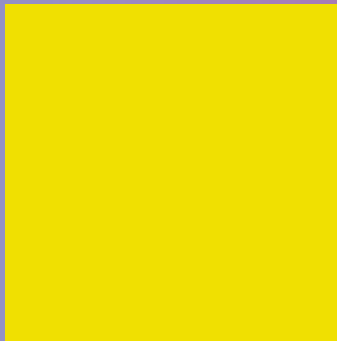
ETHICS

ETHICS

Please write down five things that come to mind when you think of "ethics"?

Figure 6.1
Ethics Compass
Source: ©Zerbor /
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6.1 A LETTER FROM IRIS: LEADING AN ETHICAL LIFE

Hello! My name is Iris. Ethics forms the basis of my daily conduct and my orientation in the world. The word "ethics" comes from the Greek word "ēthikós" or "êthos" and refers to our moral character, that is to the persons we are or aspire to be. Ethics investigates which things are valuable, important, meaningful. And it guides me on how to act and behave. It is a part of my everyday life.

When I am with my friends and schoolmates, I try to treat everybody else as I would like to be treated by them. This certainly makes sense. I learned in an ethics class that this is called the Golden rule and that it is very ancient, present in all cultures. It means showing respect for others and caring about each other. In my school class we have also written down a code of ethics in which I took a great part and which I am enthusiastic about following. It unites us together as a class, importantly, each and every one of us needed to accept it. I am always trying to be fair, caring, and cooperative. I also strive to obey laws and rules and to improve myself.

When I am playing football with my friends, we all aim to play fair. Of course, there are football rules. But these rules are not enough for a fun game that everybody would enjoy. Fair-play or good sportsmanship means showing respect for others in the game, cooperation and fellowship, having a team spirit and not focusing on winning for the sake of winning or ridiculing the side that loses. You have to play the game fair. Just following the rules of the game or the decisions of the referees is not enough. I don't like it when somebody cheats or fakes a foul, and the referee does not see this. What is important is that we shake hands at the end of each game.

Fairness is not important only in sports, but it is the basis of how we live together as a society. This is what is called justice. Our common institutions and practices must be just. A court, for example, should treat everybody the same, since we are all equal before the law. This last thought comes from the Chinese tradition and Athenian democracy tradition. In present times it is most often a part of the constitution or the basic legal document for a state. There the most fundamental rights of every citizen are written. Human rights are related to what is called dignity. Dignity is a fundamental value of an individual and the absolute status that belongs to all humans. The dignity of each individual protects against interference and all forms of unworthy treatment, like for example, torture and humiliation, and it speaks against human circumstances such as slavery and extreme poverty.

Figure 6.2
Poverty
Source: © Milan Rout / Pexels

Last month in our school, we learned about children rights written in *The Convention on the Rights of the Child.* We made large colourful posters and described each right in our own words. My task was to present the right to food, clothing, and a safe home. Many kids do not have access to such basic things, and it is our duty to

try to help them. I read some of their stories. The difficulties they are facing and the conditions they are living in made me sad and angry. And our society here lives in affluence, so we take some things for granted. My grandmother is a retired theatre actress and she grew up in great poverty. Our family thus decided to organize and stage a theatre play in the local park, and the money collected went for famine relief charity. I forgot some of my lines, but we all laughed. We also handed out leaflets through the entire town about ways to give. All members of my family helped me with this and we made some new friends in our neighbourhood.

My mother is a medical doctor and researcher. She tells me that each time she wants to study a disease, she needs the permission of an ethics committee. That is important since such a committee is there for the protection of the most vulnerable ones and to guard their rights. In my boy scout group, we have a similar committee. At meetings, we sometimes decide how to solve disputes and whether one acted in a way contrary to being brave, noble, and caring. We vote and each member has the same say as any other, even though some leaders are older and more experienced. It is always important to vote and decide as you think is right.

I like holidays, especially Christmas and New Year season holidays. All the family comes together and we enjoy a shared meal, play games and tell stories. We exchange gifts. My grandfather always tells how giving and receiving is the most universal activity and how it is important that we are humble, generous and thankful. It is a ritual of a sort. And it is a bond with family and friends. I am most thankful that the whole family is together.

What I most look forward in school to is the Nature and environment week celebrating Charles Darwin day. We pack our things and go camping somewhere, learning about the surrounding nature and its importance. Last year we camped at the riverbank, and every day we walked for hours picking up the trash from the river and its surroundings. At the end, we collected more than a ton of trash. The river area looked completely different, more beautiful and healthier. We saw fish, bees, butterflies, dragonflies, turtles, and even otters. On the last day we together created a charter of the rights of animals. We wrote down what would they expect from us and how they can be preserved for future generations.

And I can now sum up, what I think is the most important for leading an ethical life. Ethics is not just following customs or the law, and it is not just about following one's feelings. Something is not good or right just because we like it, and if we disapprove of something, that does not mean that it is wrong. Ethics means thinking carefully about what is right and what is wrong and acting accordingly. And it extends beyond us humans and includes taking into consideration other fellow beings and the Earth as a whole, not merely because it sustains our life, but because it is valuable as such.

6.2 WHAT IS ETHICS?

6.2.1 INTRODUCTION

As you read the following pages and complete the assignments that they contain, you will get to know the field of ethics. Ethics will be presented in four ways. First, we will take a look at the definition of ethics and see what it includes. Second, basic ethical concepts and associated elements of ethical thinking will be presented. In the third section, you will get to know some of the thinkers that enriched our understanding of ethics, and you will get to see how the basic ethical concepts were developed or used by them. And lastly, the chapter includes the text of the scenario from the video presentation of ethics, where you can read again how ethics figures in our everyday lives. There are five assignments for you to complete.

6.2.2 WHAT IS ETHICS?

The term "ethics" comes from the Greek word "ēthikós" or "êthos" and refers to our moral character, that is to the persons who we are or aspire to be. Ethics deals with questions about what is good, what we ought to do, how our actions affect others and why is this important, who and what (e.g., nature) gets affected by our actions, how we can tell the difference between good and evil, etc. Ethics is the part of philosophy that deals with good and evil. Another word for ethics is morality as in when we say that somebody did something morally right or morally good. Ethics is the basis of our relationship with the world around us and to ourselves. It enables us to live together. Learning about ethics can thus also be understood as learning to live together peacefully; therefore, it includes learning about each other. Ethics is the basis of forming respectful, caring, and loving relationships.

Although ethics tries to formulate ethical principles and rules, ethics is not simply obeying particular rules, customs, or the law; and, it is not just about following one's feelings. Something is not good or right just because we like it, and if we disapprove of something, that does not mean that it is wrong. Ethics always includes thinking critically and carefully about what is right and what is wrong and only then acting accordingly.

It also emphasizes building our character. Each of us is different from everyone else, has one's own personal characteristics, ways of thinking and feeling. This gets reflected in what we do, in our actions. That is why it is important to cultivate our character.

Figure 6.3
Parthenon
Source: © Pixabay /
Pexels.com

Ethics is thus a joint effort of all of us to preserve common humanity. Our common humanity and human dignity also provide a basis for human rights that each and every one of us possesses. But ethics extends beyond humanity and includes taking into consideration other fellow beings and the Earth as a whole, not merely because it sustains our life, but because it is valuable as such. Think about the following example that concerns animals. So-called animal ethics deals with questions about the moral status of animals and our treatment of them, for example, if is it morally permissible to raise animals in very contained spaces and use them for food as meat. Animal ethics looks for reasons for our practices involving animals and the need to change them. For example, one such reason would be that animals can feel pain just as we do.

6.3 BASIC ETHICAL CONCEPTS

In this section, several basic ethical concepts will be presented. There are also assignments for you to complete.

6.3.1 GOOD, BAD, AND VALUES

The concepts of good and bad are generally used when we evaluate things and situations or persons and their characters. Such evaluations are at the heart of ethics since they determine what our lives should be focused on (what we should strive to achieve and what to avoid or prevent). When we say that something is good or bad, we ascribe value to such a thing. In ethics, there is an important difference between things that are good in themselves (things that are intrinsically valuable) and things that are merely instrumentally good. Things that are instrumentally good merely have value as an instrument or means to achieving something that is intrinsically valuable. For example, money is only instrumentally valuable, while the pleasure of listening to a song or the fun experienced on a roller-coaster ride is intrinsically valuable. We must always be careful in judging what is really valuable. The Greek philosopher Aristotle claimed that happiness is the ultimate value that all human beings aspire after. Another important aspect when we speak about something being good or having value is the notion of a common or social good, since humans are social beings and we live in communities. The common good exceeds the sum of interests of all individuals in society and is a benefit for society as a whole. A practical example of this would be facilities like public parks, healthcare systems, or a clean environment.

Figure 6.4
Gratitude
Source: © sosiukin / Adobe Stock

6.3.2 ASSIGNMENT 1

Part1: Think about what you really value in your life, that is, which are the values that matter to you. Write what you think of down and then rank these values by positioning them into the pyramid below, with the most important value being at the top. It might be hard to decide on some of them, but try to give it a go.

Figure 6.5
Value Pyramid

6.3.3 RIGHT, WRONG, AND DUTY

When we think about the ethical status of actions, we use the terms right and wrong, as when we say that what someone did was right or that a certain act was wrong. We use these terms to evaluate actions. Actions that are right and that we have an obligation to implement are called duties. To have a certain duty means, in the most direct sense, to be bound by a binding ethical requirement. Sometimes it may happen that we have more than one duty and if we do not have a clear answer on what to do, that is which duty is more important, we face a moral dilemma. Being ethical is not always easy. What can help us are ethical principles and rules. Ethical principles are usually more general (e.g., "Respect the freedom, autonomy, and equality of people"), and moral rules are more specific (e.g., "Don't lie"). Both help us, first, determine what is right and wrong, and, second, decide what we must do in a particular situation.

Figure 6.6
Dimensions of Ethics
Source: © N.Savranska /
Adobe Stock

6.3.4 VIRTUES, VICES AND IDEALS

Virtues are morally valuable qualities of our characters, that is, of us as persons. For example, honesty, kindness, compassion, civility, fairness, generosity, and courage are usually regarded as virtues. The opposite of virtues are flaws or vices, for example, arrogance, cowardice, greed, laziness, narcissism, envy, and vanity. Virtues and vices are parts of our character, in particular, those parts that we have some control over. We can cultivate virtues and try to get rid of vices. Virtues are formed through moral upbringing. Since there is no specific list of rules or instructions on how to be virtuous and behave virtuously, it is often the case that we can begin by following an example of a role model. Role models (real persons or even fictional ones) help us, first, in seeing what kind of persons we want to be, and, second, as we work to become such persons. In this sense, role models represent ideals. An ideal is a certain perfection or model of excellence that helps us think and act ethically. An ideal can also be a broader model as when we think of what an ideal society would be, e.g., one fully governed by justice, respect, care, and sustainability.

Figure 6.7
Source: © Pixabay /
Pexels.com

6.3.5 ASSIGNMENT 2

Think of who is or could be a role model for you to become more ethical and virtuous. Write down at least five such persons in the spaces provided below. Next to them write down the reasons for your choices.

Role model	Reason(s)
1:	
2:	
3:	
4:	
5:	

6.3.5 DIGNITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Dignity is a basic, inherent, and inalienable value that all people have on the basis of their humanity. It is often regarded as the basis for basic entitlements and human rights of each individual. Dignity is therefore associated with an inalienable status that belongs to all human beings, regardless of their characteristics and circumstances. The dignity of each individual protects against interferences or types of improper treatment that would interfere with their dignity (e.g., degrading treatment, torture, etc.) or situations in which he may find himself (e.g., extreme poverty, slavery, etc.). Human dignity in the modern world is often understood as a civilizational and ethical foundation of legal norms, especially human rights. Human rights (e.g., the right to life and liberty, right to privacy, right to fair trial, freedom of religion, etc.) are the minimum conditions for the protection of individuals and communities. Dignity is also a common concept in the most important legal documents. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN 1948) begins with the following statement: "Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world" and its Article 1 states: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood." Children are protected by the Declaration of the Rights of the Child (1959) and Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which recognize that children and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance.

Figure 6.8
Human Rights
Source: © STOATPHOTO / Adobe Stock

6.4 PHILOSOPHERS

Throughout history, various philosophers and other thinkers importantly enriched our understanding of ethics. In this section, you will get to know some of them and the ideas they endorsed.

Socrates, a Greek philosopher from ancient Athens, is famous for his words that *"the unexamined life is not worth living."* Socrates emphasized that being ethical does not mean merely following the laws or customs, but that one must think and reflect on what is right. One must challenge conventions, and Socrates was known to stroll the streets of Athens, discussing various issues with others and challenging their views. It is important to listen to the voice of our moral conscience, to what we truly think is right. Doing this will also promote our own happiness.

Figure 6.9
Statue of Socrates
Source: © anastasios71 /
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6.4.1 ASSIGNMENT 1

In the space below, write down how you understand or how you would interpret the claim that *"the unexamined life is not worth living."*

Socrates successors, **Plato** and **Aristotle**, understood ethics as related to virtues or our character, e.g., our being just, courageous, humble, and moderate. Plato rejected the claim that ethics is relative or dictated by the powerful. Ethics is objective, which means independent of particular interests or desires. He discussed a famous legend about the ring of Gyges. Gyges had the ring that rendered the one who wore it invisible. Others challenged Plato that if someone would be in possession of such a ring, one would not behave ethically, since one could get away with anything. Plato claimed that the person that is really ethical and truly knows what is good would not misuse the ring. Aristotle is famous for his doctrine of the Golden mean or middle. Virtue is the mean between two opposite extremes, e.g., courage is the mean between cowardice and foolhardiness, and generosity is the mean between stinginess and wastefulness. In order to live ethically, one must live virtuously, and the best way to becoming such a person is through education and the following of role models.

Figure 6.10
Source: © Min An / Pexels.com

Now let's jump several centuries forward into the era of the Enlightenment. **Immanuel Kant** was a German philosopher who was known for being very punctual. Every day at 3.30 pm, he was seen taking a walk, seven times up and down the Lindenallee in the Prussian city of Königsberg. Kant emphasized the universality of ethics. This means that the moral law applies to all of us equally. He proposed the following ethical principle – "act only in a way which you can at the same time understand as a universal law". ". In more practical terms, this means acting in a way that you also expect others to act towards you. For example, if you give a promise with the intention of keeping it only if it suits your needs, then you will not act ethically. If everybody acted in this way, this would undermine the very practice of promise giving.

Kant also emphasized the importance of human dignity and full humanity. Another variation of his supreme moral principle claims that we should not treat the humanity of the other or of ourselves as merely a means (for our own goals or purposes) but always also as an end or goal. This means that we must regard others as equal human beings that merit certain respect in virtue of this. For example, when we make a promise to someone without the intention of keeping it, we are treating the other only as a means.

6.4.2 ASSIGNMENT 2

Dignity is an important ethical concept that represents the foundation of human rights. *United Nations also accepted Convention on the Rights of the Child.* In the animated video it was explained that a child is entitled to special rights. Write down how you understand child's rights on the left being connected with dignity.

The right to life and development	
The right to a name and a nationality	
The right to education	
The right to well-being	
The right to freedom of opinion and expression	
The right to the protection of your privacy	

Shortly after Kant, **John Stuart Mill** focused on happiness or well-being as the main value. For Mill, happiness or well-being can roughly be understood as the excess of pleasure over pain. His theory is called utilitarianism, and it states that we act ethically when our actions produce the most good or most value. His predecessor **Jeremy Bentham** used this ethical framework to defend a more humane treatment of animals. He said that it is not important if animals cannot talk or cannot reason, but they can certainly feel pain and suffering. And in light of these, we should abstain from actions that cause them needless pain and suffering. What counts as ethical is the well-being of human beings and also animals to the extent that they can feel pain and pleasure.

Figure 6.11
Chicken Transport
Source: © Patrick Poendl/
Adobe Stock

6.4.3 ASSIGNMENT 3   Do you agree that animals deserve to be treated in a way that takes into consideration their pain and suffering? Think of at least three ways in which we, as a society, could reduce animal suffering.

We will end our journey through the history of ethics in the 20th century with the philosopher and novelist **Iris Murdoch.** She emphasized that becoming a better person begins with seeing in light of the idea of good. This means seeing persons or situations justly, humbly, and lovingly, since perception governs actions. For example, if you see somebody that is different from you as dangerous or alien because of your own fear, this can lead you to treat this person in an unethical way.

6.5 GLOSSARY

Categorical Imperative: a supreme principle of morality according to Kant, which requires that we act only in ways that could be accepted as general rules for all, and we treat people with respect. Deontology/deontological ethics: an ethical theory that takes the notion of a duty as a fundamental ethical concept.

Dignity: the basic and inalienable value that all people have on the basis of their humanity. It is often regarded as the foundation for the basic entitlements and human rights of each individual.

Duty: an action that is morally required, that is the action that we ought to do.

Ethics: a system of values, principles, virtues, and ideals that shape our lives and determine the basis for the relationships that we form with others, with ourselves and the world.

Human rights: basic rights that belong to every human individual (or a group of individuals) solely on the basis of being human. They protect their basic interests and safeguard the possibility of leading a good and meaningful life (e.g., right to life and liberty, right to privacy, right to a fair trial, freedom of religion, etc.).

Moral principle/rule: a statement that determines which actions are right (e.g., "Be respectful.") or wrong (e.g., "Do not steal.") or which things are good (e.g., "Knowledge is valuable.") or bad (e.g., "Suffering is bad.").

Utilitarianism: a moral theory that claims that the right action (or our duty) is the action that brings about the most utility or value, that is the action that has the best consequences for the happiness and well-being of people.

Value/worth: what represents the goodness and badness of things (e.g., happiness is good and pain is bad), persons (e.g., Irena Sendler, a nurse who saved several hundreds of Jews, mostly women and children from the hands of Nazis, was a good person, and Adolf Hitler was a bad person) or aspects of a person's character (e.g., honesty is good and cowardice is bad).

Values: are important, deep-rooted, pervasive and lasting beliefs, attitudes, ideals, and attachments which are usually shared by the members of a given community and concern what is good or bad (e.g., freedom, beauty, autonomy, friendship, creativity, love, wisdom, etc.).

Virtues and vices: a virtue is a praiseworthy or commendable character trait of a person such as courage, benevolence, charity, and humility. As the opposite, vices are blameworthy character traits of persons such as dishonesty, cowardice, vanity, cruelty, chauvinism, etc.

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